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Beannachtaí na Nollag Christmas Blessings by Mary McSweeney

Yuletide: the season for reflection and anticipation

By Maureen Forry Sorrell

As we approach the Christmas season and the final days of 2025, I find myself reflecting with equal parts gratitude, amusement, and awe at the year we've just lived through together. Boston's Irish community – vibrant, resilient, and endlessly creative – has once again filled our city with music, history, debate, and celebration. As associate publisher of *Boston Irish Magazine*, it's a joy for me to look back on the moments that defined us while looking ahead with hope to the year that's about to begin.

First, though, the holidays. There's something about Boston at Christmastime that just feels like home. Maybe it's the neighborhoods lighting up their streets with cheerful defiance against the early sunsets. Maybe it's the gatherings: family reunited around crowded tables, communities coming together at parish concerts or pub sessions, and friends lingering a little longer over cups of tea or pints of Guinness, or finding a perfect gift at the Irish Pastoral Center's Christmas Craft Fair. Whatever it is, it reminds me that this season has always been about connection. After a year like 2025, we need that more than ever.

One of the brightest moments of the year was our Boston Irish Honors celebration this fall. Every year, we set out to recognize individuals and families whose stories reflect the very best of the Irish experience in Boston – stories of emigration and opportunity, of service, culture, faith, and perseverance. This year's honorees – UMass President Marty Meehan, former US Ambassador to Ireland Claire Cronin, and Boston's street attending physician, Dr. Jim O'Connell – inspired us with their generosity and grit. Standing in that room, listening to the applause and the laughter, I felt a renewed sense of purpose about the role our magazine, together with the Forry Foundation for Community Journalism, plays in documenting the lives and achievements of our community. If you were there, you know the energy was palpable; if you couldn't make it, I hope you'll join us in 2026.

Speaking of energy, the Irish cultural calendar in Greater Boston was bursting at the seams this year. The Seisun Festival at Suffolk Downs was one of the great successes of 2025—a sprawling, joyful celebration that brought together musicians, dancers, and families. What made it special wasn't just the talent onstage, though there was plenty of that; it was the way the event brought people from different corners of the Irish and Irish American experience together in one place.

Enjoying the Irish Pastoral Centre's Christmas Fair are Régine LaFond, IPC board member Della Costello, and Ryan Denham Deveney, with her children George, Jr. & Julie. *Linda Dorcena Forry photo*

The Boston Celtic Music Festival also delivered its usual magic, reminding us once again what happens when artistry meets tradition. Year after year, BCMFest feels less like an event and more like a gathering of kindred spirits. Whether you were listening to an intimate ballad, clapping along to a late-night session at Club Passim, or discovering a young performer who you are absolutely certain is about to become famous, the weekend was a testament to the thriving Celtic arts community here.

Of course, 2025 was not without its challenges. The government shutdown, one of the defining political crises of the year, left families anxious, workers without paychecks, and many in our community frustrated by the gridlock. But as always, the Irish community stepped up. Local nonprofits, parishes, and neighborhood organizations mobilized quickly to support furloughed workers and families caught in the uncertainty. It was a reminder of something we've always known: When the government falters, the community fills the gap.

And on the global stage, the end of President Michael D. Higgins's tenure in Ireland was nothing short of historic. For many of us, he has been a symbol of dignity, intellect, compassion, and cultural curiosity—a president who carried poetry in his pocket and humanity in his politics. Watching Ireland transition to new leadership stirred emotions across Boston's Irish community. While we say farewell to President Higgins's remarkable era, we also look ahead with interest and optimism as Ireland steps into a new chapter with President Catherine Connolly.

Here at Boston Irish Magazine, 2025 was a year of storytelling and growth. We continued to shine a light on people shaping our neighborhoods, the artists and musicians pushing culture forward, the innovators and advocates making Boston more vibrant and inclusive. And we couldn't have done it without our advertisers, whose support allows us to bring these stories to life. Special thanks to Aer Lingus (check out their airfares if you're planning a trip back to Ireland!) and Tourism Ireland, whose incredible work keeps us connected to the island, inspiring visits, experiences, and memories that last a lifetime.

Looking to 2026, we're excited. You'll see us expanding coverage, deepening event partnerships, and bringing more of the Irish Boston story to your doorstep, both in print and online. The Irish experience has always been one of reinvention, and next year we hope to reflect that spirit with fresh ideas, new contributors, and storytelling that honors both tradition and forward momentum.

But before we get ahead of ourselves: it's Christmas. It's time to slow down, to take stock, to gather the people we love, to remember those who are no longer with us, and to celebrate the comforts of ritual, community, and shared joy.

On behalf of all of us at Boston Irish, thank you: for reading, supporting, attending, engaging, and cheering us on. We wish you a joyful Christmas season, a peaceful end to 2025, and a bright, hopeful, music-filled start to the new year.

Warmly,
Maureen

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Beannachtaí na Nollag

Christmas Blessings by Mary McSweeney

We are delighted to once again publish on our cover a beautiful work by Mary McSweeney, at right. A native of Killarney, Mary's enchanting paintings of Ireland celebrate Ireland's lush landscapes, everyday moments and its people.

With a career spanning decades and numerous awards to her name, Mary's art is a heartfelt expression of her passion, talent, and deep connection to her homeland.

Now living in Florida, she says, "I return to Ireland frequently to sketch and paint. All of my paintings reflect a love of my homeland and respect for my country men and women. All of us who are Irish or simply love Ireland are bound together by that love for this land of soft green hills and valleys, of windswept rocky coastlines, and for the welcoming smoke that rises from the hearth of an Irish home."

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Plumbing the legacy of the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement

Irish PM and Garrett Fitgerald and British PM Margaret Thatcher sign on the bottom line in 1986.

Last month, on Nov. 11, a 40th anniversary conference of the Anglo-Irish Agreement (AIA) was held at Queens University Belfast. Sponsored by the John and Pat Hume Foundation and the George J. Mitchell Institute for Peace, the event explored the context and genesis of the agreement, its outworkings, and its legacy.

The accord should be evaluated in the context of its moment and of its predecessor (the 1973 Sunningdale Agreement), and its successors (the 1998 Good Friday Agreement and the 2006 Amendment Act at St. Andrews). While each agreement had its failings, most observers agree that each one built on its forerunner.

From 1922 to 1968, Northern Ireland was a hermetically sealed Orange apartheid state. For generations, Catholic nationalists had been viewed as a "disloyal minority" excluded from political power or equal opportunity. Irish diplomats commented that it was easier for the Irish government to get information about Nairobi or Kathmandu than about Belfast or Derry.

The urgency to negotiate the Sunningdale Agreement in 1973 was driven by the violence started in 1969 by loyalists in response to Catholic civil rights movement, British atrocities (vividly symbolized by Bloody Sunday), and the mass internment of Catholics. These draconian measures led to the reanimation of the then-moribund Irish Republican Party (IRA). Of these developments, John Hume said, "When you are reacting to a reaction, you lose judgement."

AN URGENCY TO "DO SOMETHING"

Television brought the UK's sectarian repression to a global audience. The Sunningdale Agreement also coincided with the UK and the Republic of Ireland's simultaneous admission to the European Economic Community. In 1973, the North of Ireland was the only site of conflict in any member state. While in 1973, the UK and Irish governments felt European pressure to "do something," in 1985, the pressure on British Prime Minister Margeret Thatcher and the Republic's leader, Garret Fitzgerald, was coming from the United States, where the horrors of Northern Ireland were better known than in Britain or Ireland because of the state-controlled media censorship north and south of the border.

John Hume proved tireless in his efforts to garner US support for peace from the four horsemen, led by Tip O'Neill and Ted Kennedy, who influenced Presidents Carter and Reagan to engage in Northern Irish affairs. White House intervention in Ireland was started by Carter in 1977, when he refused to export weapons to the UK that might be used by the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) or British army in Northern Ireland. With open warfare in the streets and the hunger strikes of 1981 still a fresh wound, Thatcher was persuaded to act in 1985 by her friend and ideological ally, Ronald Reagan.

In addition to the US pressure, Taoiseach Fitzgerald had two domestic concerns that drove him to act on Northern Ireland: the state of the Republic's economy – it was grim, with near 20 percent unemployment, empty government coffers and sustained emigration – and the threat of violence spilling over from the North.

For Thatcher, her side's reputation was being damaged internationally while armed Irish republican resistance was gaining popular support both in the community and at the ballot box in the UK. Again, something had to be done, or at the very least, something had to be seen as having been attempted. After 18 months of intense negotiations, they produced the Anglo-Irish Agreement.

NEGOTIATOR "RAGE" RECALLED

During last month's conference, Dick Spring and other surviving members of the AIA talks provided first-hand accounts of the fraught negotiations. It is almost humorous how often the term "incandescent with rage" is used to describe various negotiators over the years.

On the face of it, the Anglo-Irish agreement looks like another flop: never fully implemented, and followed by an enormous rise in killings of Catholics by loyalist paramilitaries, it was abandoned three years after it was signed, with Thatcher saying, that 'the Americans made me do it.' Even the political goal to undercut the growing support for Sinn Fein by leaving the party out of the negotiation failed. Sinn Fein won 10.1 percent of the vote before the agreement and 10 percent afterward.

The push to reduce violence also failed. In 1987, less than two years after signatures, large numbers of arms were being shipped from Libya to the Irish Republican Army.

It would be easy to point to the AIA agreement as another fiasco, but it did advance the thesis of John Hume that three strands of cooperation had to be established: first, power sharing inside Northern Ireland (cross community) founded on the notions of parity of esteem and consent. Second, the involvement of the Republic of Ireland in the affairs of Northern Ireland (North-South), and third, cooperation between London and Dublin (east-west) be maintained.

The late Seamus Mallon famously called the 1998 Good Friday Agreement "Sunningdale for slow learners." Sunningdale was an attempt to establish power sharing within Northern Ireland and a cross-border Council of Ireland. Unionist boycotts, a general strike, and widespread violence collapsed that agreement in months.

Unionist participants at the conference commented, somewhat churlishly, that Unionists were "not the only slow learners." They asserted that the fatal flaw of both the Sunningdale and the Anglo-Irish agreements was that Articles 2 and 3 of the Irish Constitution, which maintained the territorial claim to Northern Ireland, were not removed. In 1998, they were removed for the Good Friday Agreement, subject to referendums north and south of the border.

The AIA was condemned by former Taoiseach Charlie Haughey as "a sellout"' of Republicanism and by the North's Ian Paisley as a "republican takeover." It was neither, but the AIA did move the parties toward a framework that viewed both unionist and nationalist traditions and aspirations of equal esteem. The AIA also convinced Unionist parties that to hold onto power, they needed to be prepared to negotiate and not simply to boycott.

An anniversary event can feel a bit like a victory lap for yesteryear's movers and shakers telling insider anecdotes and, in fairness, there was some of that. But there were also other urgent voices heard – from trade unionists and women's groups who feel that their voices were ignored during the Sunningdale and the Anglo-Irish talks, listened to a bit more during the Good Friday Agreement negotiations, but in the end excluded from airings at the decision makers' table. 'If you do not have a seat at the table, then "ou are on the menu" was a consistent theme.

To reassure Unionists in 1985, Thatcher said that "when I have a twanging harp, I will look down [from heaven was the implication] on Northern Ireland." Many might disagree on Thatcher's vantage point in 2025, but her words have proved accurate, though the Iron Lady's wisdom had its limitations: During the AIA negotiations, she suggested forcibly moving all Catholics in Ulster to three counties and all Protestants to the other three counties, an ethnic cleansing plan worthy of Benjamin Netanyahu or Andrew Jackson.

In a world afflicted by wars, genocide, and climate collapse disasters, it is rational to ask how, after all this time, Northern Ireland's conflicts and the peace process could still be unresolved. History is never truly settled, especially in Ireland, and in some respects, Northern Ireland is as ungovernable in 2025 as it was in 1985. Segregation and pockets of stubborn deprivation are still a fact of life in the North. Integration of schools was 7 percent in 1998 and is now 7.1 percent. Peace walls and sectarian July 12 bonfires get taller every year. The Stormont power-sharing executive has been closed as often as it has functioned since it was first formed. Studying Irish history can feel like walking the Stations of the Cross. But, and it is a meaningful "but," at least the killing has stopped… and stayed stopped. Compared to other conflicts, the peace process in the North of Ireland is still a success story.

In the last decade, two foundational assumptions of all the agreements have disappeared. First, EU membership for both Ireland and the United Kingdom was taken for granted. From 1973 until 2016, membership as equals resulted in friendships between the Irish and British delegations, removed the big country/small country dynamic, and led both jurisdictions to greater convergence on everything from fishing rights to human rights. Brexit has scrapped that.

Secondly, support from the United States of America was once considered immutable. This is no longer the case. As Ted Kennedy staffer Nancy Soderbergh (who participated in the conference by video link) related, the knowledge and network in Irish affairs from Kennedy's office was brought to Bill Clinton's campaign and to the White House. The Trump White House does not know or care to know anything about Ireland other than Trump's golf course in Co. Clare. He supported Brexit's principal co-conspirators, Boris Johnson and Nigel Farage, and is too busy sending an aircraft carrier to intimidate Venezuela, casually threatening to attack African countries, and bombing Iran at Netanyahu's direction to give the peace process in Northern Ireland a thought.

On this side of the pond, the UK is in real fiscal, economic and political difficulty. Just as the US reverted to Trump after the temporary respite of Biden, the UK might elect the far-right Farage as prime minister. His one of the lads, cigarette-smoking, immigrant-hating charm is strangely seductive to many voters. Dangerous idiots can gain power. Should the UK continue to implode, further cuts by "little Englanders" will affect Northern Ireland, particularly in the Health Service. Another moment may arrive soon when Ireland, north and south, feel compelled to "do something."

(Continued on page 5)

The election of President Connolly ... more turbulence in Irish/US relations … enjoying Christmas at home

On this page in the autumn edition of *Boston Irish Magazine*, I previewed the race to succeed Michael D. Higgins as president of Ireland. As I suggested, it turned out to be a fascinating contest, the eventual contours and result of which took many of us who closely monitor politics on this island by surprise.

The campaign was, to put it bluntly, an unmitigated disaster for the two parties in government, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. Heather Humphreys, the latter's standard bearer, was widely seen as "presidential" and installed early on as a favorite. The Presbyterian from Co. Monaghan failed to impress in vitally important media interviews and debates and wound up finishing a very distant second.

Fianna Fáil, at the instigation of An Taoiseach Micheál Martin, nominated Jim Gavin, a retired member of the Irish Defence Forces and former Dublin GAA manager. Martin is a shrewd operator who has led his party since 2011. It became clear swiftly, however, that his sponsoring of Gavin and his using the position he occupies to ensure a majority of colleagues got on board was a dreadful error of political judgment.

Gavin, a talented individual with a strong track record of accomplishment, was not suited to making a bid for high office. Even though his name appeared on the ballot, he had actually abandoned his pursuit of the presidency beforehand in the wake of revelations of an unpaid debt to a tenant in a property he owned.

When Sinn Féin's leader, Mary Lou McDonald TD, announced that her party was not putting forward their own candidate and was instead supporting Catherine Connolly TD, a Galwegian, a passionate champion of the Irish language, and an unapologetic leftist, it may have been dismissed as false advertising at the time, but it truly was the "game changer" she claimed it would to be.

This endorsement was the icing on the cake for Connolly, whom other progressive parties, groupings and individuals had already rallied around. Connolly also had luck and timing on her side. The left united behind her; her opponents weren't up to the task; her inner circle of advisers used social media to brilliant effect, attracting lots of young people to her cause; and she won a landslide victory on Oct. 24.

Three further points are worth noting in the aftermath: 1) There is considerable anger across the spectrum at the "establishment" in Ireland, and Connolly benefitted from that growing sense of alienation; 2) There was an enormous number of "spoiled" ballots and much of the impetus for this protest emanated from the political right, particularly over the issue of immigration; 3) How sustainable is a demonstrably potent alliance of the Irish left? Despite this being what's typically referred to as a second order election for a largely symbolic role, watch these spaces.

There is no shortage of conjecture now about what type of presidency Connolly's will be. Michael D. Higgins was outspoken and occasionally controversial on a host of topics. Plenty who adore Michael D. and share his socialist world view, want Catherine Connolly to similarly speak truth to power, as they see it. Indeed, she has made disparaging comments, which she has declined to withdraw, regarding key allies, France, Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States among them. Suffice it to say that the civil servants in the Department of Foreign Affairs, terrified by the mere prospect of a diplomatic incident, are hoping Connolly will disappoint her ideological fellow travellers on this front.

From US, a downbeat animus toward Ireland

Returning to this regrettably bumpy moment in US/Irish relations, Robert O'Brien, a national security adviser in the first Trump administration, wrote a damning piece in the *Wall Street Journal* in November. It makes for sobering reading for all of us to whom the bond between our two countries is equally sacred and mutually beneficial.

O'Brien starts by saying that Ireland is a nation that reaps "the benefits of America's economic strength and military protection while pursuing foreign policies that undermine American interests." He continues: "Tensions between Washington and Dublin are set to heighten" … "Ireland's president-elect embodies antagonism toward American interests" … "Ireland's historic neutrality is no excuse for its pitiful investment in defence – roughly 0.2 percent of gross domestic product" (the same sentiment is oft-voiced in Brussels). He concludes in chilling fashion: "Ireland can no longer have a free ride at America's expense."

This is the latest salvo in what has been a steady drumbeat of negative animus directed at Ireland, the likes of which is arguably unprecedented. To be certain, O'Brien's diatribe and others are aptly criticized for playing "fast and loose" with the facts. Irish Ambassador to the US Geraldine Byrne Nason gently upbraided O'Brien in a responsive letter to the editor. Also, the fact that many of the attacks are coming from those in President Trump's orbit with a staunch America First and anti-Europe perspective is telling.

Still, whether on foreign direct investment, military spending, or the Middle East, there are many on the Irish left intoxicated by the thoughts of a fight with Uncle Sam. More worryingly, some in the political centre broadly seem to have an "ah sure, it'll be grand" attitude toward what we are increasingly hearing and reading stateside. Collectively, they are quite foolish.

Ireland overwhelmingly (and correctly) rejects Donald Trump and Trumpism, but Irish citizens don't get to choose who lives in the White House and they must accept the reality that most Americans do want their leaders to focus on solving problems at home above all. In that context, and given how reliant our economy, and hence, our society, are upon US multinational corporations, caution is appropriate.

That absolutely does not mean bending the knee or compromising our values. It means adapting adroitly to a fast changing global climate and, crucially, not shooting ourselves in the foot unnecessarily when we are under pressure. And make no mistake, we are feeling less love than we are accustomed to from the US and Europe in 2025.

Catherine Connolly, Ireland's new president.

• • •

This year, my family and I are staying here throughout the lengthy Christmas break. We hugely enjoy being back in Boston for the week after the big day and through the new year, but there is something nice about not having to deal with the crowds at Dublin Airport during one of its busiest periods to embark on the six-hour transatlantic crossing.

It will be wonderful to decompress – then to have a fantastic feast and a lovely couple of days with my sister-in-law and her crew in the picture perfect village of Laragh, Co. Wicklow, surrounded by the beauty of Glendalough. As many rounds as the weather permits with Larry Óg at our favorite spot on the planet, Wicklow Golf Club, are on the agenda, too.

To top it off, my brother, his wife ,and their son are making the trek from East Milton. We'll eat nice meals, drink a few pints ,and watch the two not-so-young-anymore Donnelly cousins bond. A trip to Galway to take in the sights and sounds of the world's second best city and get together with our Irish relations is also on the cards. I can't wait.

I hope all of you have a Merry Christmas and a happy, healthy 2025.

Larry Donnelly is a Boston born and educated attorney, a Law Lecturer at the University of Galway and a regular media contributor on politics, current affair,s and law in Ireland and the US. Twitter/X: @ LarryPDonnelly

Plumbing the legacy of the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement

TALK OF IRISH UNITY IS IN THE AIR

In November, the Dail passed a Sinn Fein motion to plan and prepare for Irish unity. The idea is to avoid a poorly planned referendum as happened with Brexit. Ireland's new president, Catherine Connolly, has called a united Ireland "inevitable." In a break from recent tradition, Labor Party Head Ivana Bacik spoke of the importance of building a Connolly-ite (James Connolly the revolutionary, not Catherine) united Irish Republic, stating, "I am calling now on the Irish and British governments to set a clear timeline for the holding of a unity referendum." Retired Fine Gael Taoiseach Leo Varadkar has written about his desire for a united Ireland. For its part, Fianna Fail, while calling itself the "Republican Party," has been the most timid of the parties on the subject but political calculations may have shifted in the Republic.

Is a Unity Referendum in the offing? No. Will it come soon? Not necessarily. On the list of kitchen table priorities for citizens north and south of the border, the aspiration of a United Ireland falls behind basic safety, housing, cost of living, employment, healthcare, infrastructure, and education. A united Ireland would likely help on all those issues but maintaining a status quo is easier than effecting real and exciting change.

Fintan O'Toole has observed that the reasons for the partition of Ireland a century ago are no longer valid. The backward, agrarian, Catholic theocracy that unionists feared is gone. In its place is a thriving, modern, secular, republic. The six counties' advantage from being part of the Empire has also vanished. It is the Republic of Ireland that is a member of the world's largest trading block, that has record budget surpluses, and that is admired the world over.

As post- Brexit Britain chokes on the vomit of its own racism and dwindling importance, Ireland is building an inclusive, prosperous republic. With the demographic and economic reasons to justify partition removed, the most compelling argument to "leave well enough alone" is the threat of loyalist violence. A stark statistic revealed in Sam McBride and O'Toole's new book, "For and Against a United Ireland," is that there are twice as many loyalist paramilitaries than there are soldiers in the armed forces of the Republic of Ireland. Could a united Ireland govern a disgruntled and heavily armed minority? Think January 6.

At the end of the conference, the assembled academics and political leaders were asked" "Will you see a united Ireland in your lifetime?" The best answer I heard was: "It depends how long I live."

‘Standing on the Shoulders of Giants’

The Catherine Shannon Award and the Future of Irish Studies

By Amy Donohoe
for the Charitable Irish Society

In Boston, there are only a select few in the Irish community whose names are spoken with admiration, gratitude, and a touch of awe. Professor Catherine Shannon is one of them.

For decades, Shannon has been a steady presence in the world of Irish history—a champion of peace and education, and a dedicated servant to Boston’s civic and cultural life. She is, as many will tell you, the quiet backbone of Irish scholarship in New England.

Shannon pursued a four-decade teaching career at Westfield State University, where she began in 1967. Over that time, she developed an innovative, multidisciplinary Irish American Studies Program that introduced students to Irish music, literature, the Irish language, and Irish and British history.

As a study-abroad advisor, she strengthened the university’s connection to Irish Studies by arranging for many Westfield students to study or complete teaching internships in Ireland. Beginning in 1982, she organized the Symposium on Northern Ireland at the John F. Kennedy Library in Boston. These events, which brought Irish and British representatives together to discuss contemporary political issues, deepened her relationship with the Charitable Irish Society (CIS). She later became its first-ever female president and has been an active member since 1985.

Now, the annual Catherine Shannon Award, created through a collaboration between the Charitable Irish Society and the American Conference for Irish Studies (ACIS), stands as a tribute to her legacy—supporting the next generation of scholars just as she has done throughout her remarkable career.

This award, which was announced on October 29 at the Annual Silver Key reception of the Charitable Irish Society represents an exciting investment in the future of Irish studies and in the emerging scholars who are asking new questions, exploring new archives, and expanding conversations across disciplines and communities.

The vision was the idea of CIS President Jim Foley. His advocacy for new scholars and dedication to celebrating Irish culture shines through in every part of this initiative. With the help of CIS and ACIS, it has become a reality.

President Foley said that having an award named after Catherine Shannon seemed like a “no brainer.” He admitted that he “can’t take all the credit. I need to thank people like Tom Mackey, Shamus Hyland from the Éire Society, Kathy Williams, and Prof. Mary Murphy from Boston College.”

Within Boston’s Irish American community, Shannon’s name carries weight. Those who have worked with her speak with admiration of her intellect, generosity, and lifelong commitment to public service. Although small in physical stature, her influence has been described as towering.

Tom Mackey, President of the Éire Society, said: “Listening to Catherine Shannon tell her stories about Ireland and Irish-American history, as president of this organization and a proud and active participant in the Irish-American community, I really stand on the shoulders of giants. And though she stands perhaps five foot in heels, physically, spiritually she’s nothing short of 10 feet tall — just incredible.

“Every time the Éire Society has a committee or a planning group, she’s one of the first to raise her hand to contribute. I’ve only relatively recently become president of this organization and now I’m having a hard time keeping up, and she’s decades in and still up and at ’em “If anyone took the time to briefly look over her contributions and work, it’d be hard not to be amazed. She’s been heavily involved with things dating back to the Sixties up to this day.

“When the Éire Society and the Charitable Irish Society were exploring other things to collaborate on and Shannon’s name came up, I thought, what else can we give the woman? She’s won every award in the city and some back in Ireland. A brilliant call was to support her legacy in a meaningful way — by supporting independent scholarship and the study of Irish culture and history.

Former US Ambassador Nicholas Burns and Catherine Shannon at a recent Charitable Irish Society event.

“Catherine Shannon embodies the Éire Society’s mission to promote Irish history and culture. Nobody encapsulates that mission better.”

Shannon’s academic path took her from the University of Toronto to University College Dublin and UMass Amherst before she joined Westfield State in 1967. She remained there for more than forty years, building one of the earliest multidisciplinary Irish Studies programs in the United States. Her teaching included Irish history, medieval history, Irish language, and Irish American culture, and she helped to establish the university’s Honors Program in 1987.

Her work extended far beyond the classroom. Beginning in 1982, she organized a landmark series of symposiums on Northern Ireland at the John F. Kennedy Library, offering American audiences rare opportunities to hear Irish and British representatives discuss the conflict at the height of the Troubles. She later supported conferences on women in Northern Irish politics, helping to amplify the role of women’s activism in the peace process.

Catherine Shannon entered academia at a time when women faced significant barriers. As a student at University College Dublin, she encountered departments dominated almost entirely by men and saw highly educated women relegated to clerical roles because universities would not hire them as academics.

She recalled: “There were very few women doing graduate degrees at UCD. When I first started teaching at Westfield, the department was predominantly men. I got along with them — I had three brothers so I kind of knew how to manage in that situation.

“Toward the end of my teaching career, more women were brought in. For a long time, it was just two of us from 1967 through the late ’80s or early ’90s. It was a long time, but it was okay.

“When I was in UCD, I would’ve loved to stay when I finished, but the job prospects for women were absolutely nil. I saw competent, educated women who should have been teaching, but they were secretaries. What is so great is to see how that has changed in Ireland today.”

At Boston College—where Irish Studies is an influential and well-established program—Shannon is regarded with the same respect and affection.

Guy Beiner, Professor of History and Director of Irish Studies at Boston College, said: “She’s very generous with everybody; she’ll sit and talk to anyone. She’s modest, too.

“In academia, people have huge egos, but Catherine is always this small little woman. She’s a giant in terms of intellect and activism, but she’s tiny physically and very humble and self-effacing.

“Catherine has had an incredible career as a scholar, an activist, and a pioneer. The joke we have in Irish Studies is that she’s the Forrest Gump of Irish Studies — she’s been everywhere and met everybody.

“She’s a great supporter of Boston College Irish Studies. Quite remarkably, she would drive at her age to an event all the way from Scituate by herself in the dark. You don’t find many people half her age doing that. She’s indomitable.”

Shannon has inspired not only students but also colleague academics. Beiner noted that a recent collection of essays published in her honor brought together leading Irish and American historians — with an unusually high number of female contributors.

“We launched a book in her honor at Boston College — a collection of essays — and when you look at it, there’s a list of top scholars in Ireland and America. Each one pays tribute to Catherine. Out of the 22 contributors, 10 are female, which is a very different balance for Irish Studies. In the past you would have had mainly men and one token female — that was the world Catherine emerged in.

Shannon’s interest in history is inseparable from her own family story. All four of her grandparents were born in Ireland before emigrating to the United States. Her father’s parents were survivors of the Great Hunger.

“My father’s father came from Cork. He and my father’s mother were survivors of An Gorta Mór. My grandfather was five years old in 1847 — he would have seen a lot of really troubling things,” Shannon said.

“He immigrated as a teenager after losing his parents and came to New York. He did well in business; he became a butcher and eventually had a slaughterhouse of his own.

“My father’s mother came from Tipperary. Their family — nine children and two parents — came over in three separate ships about six months apart. She was about two years old. She was raised American and wouldn’t have had many memories of Ireland. She and my grandfather met in New York and had 13 children, 10 of whom lived.

“My mother’s family were natives of County Mayo. Her father first went to England, then to Boston, where he worked as a chief gardener for the Webster family. They were very much working-class people and had 10 children.

The Catherine Shannon Award is designed to support those following in her footsteps — particularly scholars who face the same challenges she encountered early in her own career.

“It’s always hard at the beginning of your career to break through,” Shannon said. “And particularly for independent scholars.”

The award provides essential support to those who need it most and recognizes the importance of keeping Irish Studies accessible, inclusive, and dynamic.

From her work on the Northern Ireland peace process to her decades of teaching, from her leadership in the Charitable Irish Society to her influence on women in academia, Catherine Shannon has shaped Irish Studies in New England and beyond. Her contribution is felt in lecture halls, community meetings, peace conferences, and in the countless scholars who credit her with opening doors for them.

The award that bears her name ensures that this legacy continues — not as a memorial, but as a living, active force shaping the future of the field.

The Catherine Shannon Prize, funded by a generous donation from the Charitable Irish Society, awards $500 each year to an ACIS member to help offset the cost of attending the annual national conference.

To apply, candidates can submit a current CV and a two-page letter explaining their current and past academic research, how their proposed presentation fits within their larger project, and what they hope to gain in terms of feedback or professional development from attending the conference.

RIAN IMMIGRATION CENTER Q&A

About USCIS, work permit applications

Q. *How can I find out how long it will take USCIS to approve my work permit application?*

A. The first step is to make sure that you have a physical or virtual copy of your work permit application receipt notice handy. That document will say "Form I-765, Application for Employment Authorization" on it, and will list the receipt number, which begins with three letters.

Once you have that in front of you, go to the USCIS case processing times webpage, which is at https://egov.uscis.gov/processing-times/. The webpage will instruct you to input the form, form category, and office that is processing your case. Select "Form I-765" from the "Form" drop down menu. Next, go to the "category" drop down menu and select the appropriate category. The "category" means the basis which makes you eligible to apply for a work permit. If you don't remember the category, you can find that information on your receipt notice, in the section where it says "Class requested."

The notice will list the regulatory code that describes the appropriate class. For example, if you applied for a work permit based upon your pending Form I-485, Application for Adjustment of Status, your work permit "class requested" will be (c)(9). In the drop-down menu, you would then choose the option that says "Based on a pending I-485 adjustment application, [c][9]."

Finally, go to the "office" drop down menu and select the office which is adjudicating your application. Right now USCIS only lists two different options: Service Center Operations (SCOPS) and the National Benefits Center. If your Receipt Notice comes from any service center (like the Vermont Service Center, California Service Center, Nebraska Service Center, or the Texas Service Center) then SCOPS is the right option. If it comes from the National Benefits Center, then that is the correct option.

Once you complete all three of these fields, the webpage will provide an estimated processing time. The estimate is based upon how long it took USCIS to process 80 percent of the work permit application cases in your category over the past six months. I hope that this information is helpful!

NUI-Dublin awards an honorary degree to BC's Irish Studies scholar Savage

The National University of Ireland cited Robert Savage, a member of the Boston College History and Irish Studies faculty and a distinguished scholar of Irish and British history, with an honorary Doctor of Literature degree at a ceremony held on Nov. 6 at NUI in Dublin. Savage, a Milton resident, of Milton, has focused his research and his six books on a wide range of topics, most recently 2022's "Northern Ireland, the BBC and Censorship in Thatcher's Britain, 1979-1992, "which NUI-Dublin praised as "notable for their extensive and original use of previously unseen archival material." A BC faculty member for 35 years, Savage has been a valued contributor to the Irish Studies program, for which he has served as director and co-director, noted NUI, adding that Savage also has frequently collaborated with colleagues in NUI institutions.

Professor Robert Savage, a Milton MA resident, has been a History & Irish Studies faculty member at Boston College for 35 years.

"It is an honor to be recognized by the National University of Ireland, but it's also essential to recognize the commitment the University has made to Irish Studies," said Savage. "This has enabled faculty to thrive as part of a vibrant interdisciplinary community of scholars."

Introducing Kelturas Vacations: Born as Crystal Travel & Tours, firm is still run by the Kelly family

By Cassidy McNeeley
Boston Irish Staff

When it comes to traveling matters, one thing was crystal clear to Jim and Teresa Kelly: It shouldn't be hard. In 1985, they founded Crystal Travel & Tours in Boston, embarking on a journey that over the next 40 years would see them helping tens of thousands of travelers make their way to Ireland and a multitude of other destinations.

The notion of family remains at the core of the company, which greatly misses Teresa, who passed away in September 2024. It is now in the hands of her and Jim's sons, Kevin and Sean, and certain aspects of the travel agency have evolved. One is that as part of its 40th anniversary, the company has unveiled a rebranding: Effective Dec. 9, Crystal Travel & Tours will operate under the name Kelturas Vacations.

"This has been a multi-month project that we have been working on," said Kevin. "When my parents opened the business originally, they chose the word Crystal because they used to attend dances and met at a place called the Crystal Ballroom. I think at the time it was the right decision; however, there are many other businesses that use the name. It's generic and doesn't tell you anything about what we do."

Jim Kelly with a group of travel agents.
Photo from the Kelly family files

Over the last four decades, Crystal has grown from a small local agency to a custom travel brand, but during that time the Kellys often faced "instances of mistaken identity," said Josephine Keenan, Crystal's product manager and travel designer, who is based in Newry, Northern Ireland. She noted that "there was another similarly named company, and they didn't have the best reputation, and people would get confused."

It took the team a while to land on the new name, because, said Kevin, being a family business means "we involved everybody in the company, even down to interns, to help us select one."

The first half of "Kelturas," "Kel," is a nod to the Kelly name (in Celtic lore, one meaning is "warrior"), while the second half, "turas," is an Irish word for journey, the latter perhaps a nod to Teresa, who left Galway in 1959 at age 16 to take up life in Boston, where, four years later, she met Jim.

Sean, the younger son, was just seven when his parents established the business. He said the company has been successful from the start because they prioritized customer service.

"While we have grown over the years and we have become a bigger company, we're in an industry where there are a lot of large companies and players," he told Boston Irish.

"It's not strictly just competing on price; you have to compete on service," he added. "We have a pretty high percentage of repeat clients and referrals we get. That's been something that has persisted; people have come back to us."

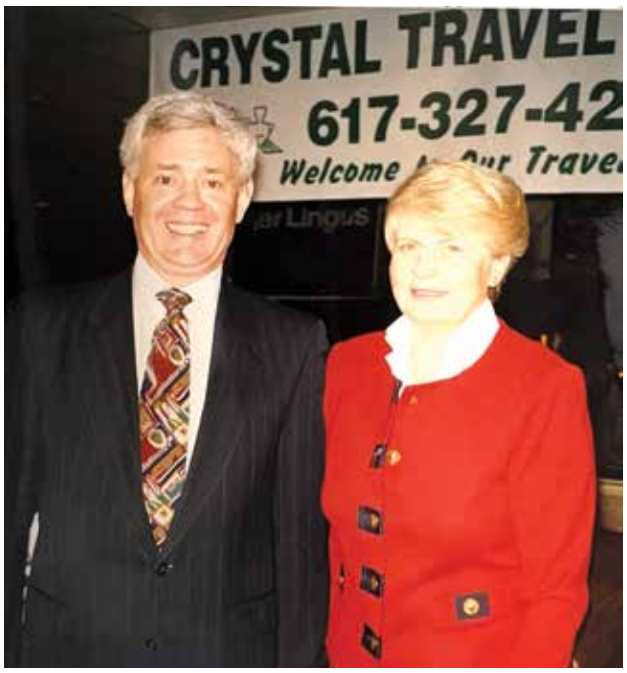
It's those clients who have helped make the business survive turbulent travel times like recessions, 9/11, wars, and Covid.

"While it's been up and down," Sean noted, "we've been thankful to get through it, partly because we have a very loyal client base, because we have delivered on the customer service promised." He added that choosing to travel with Crystal leaves the work to the "experts. While you're on the trip, you're able to enjoy the trip, you're not necessarily worrying about logistics."

Keenan agrees that the company's Irish roots make it the best option. "Jim and Teresa, who started the company, are Irish, and then Kevin and Sean are their sons. Everybody else who works within the company is either first-generation Irish or second. We know what we are selling."

She added, "When our clients contact us originally, a lot of the time it's through email. When they get through to us, and they actually hear an Irish accent and that we actually live here, it's an easier sell. They feel a lot more content and comfortable booking it because they know we are legit."

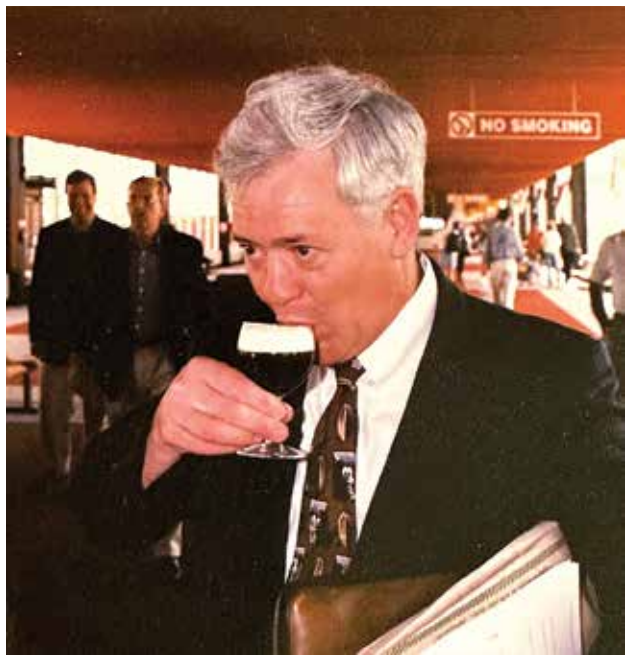
The name change isn't the end of any of the company's history; rather it's the beginning of another chapter for the Kelly family. Both Kevin and Sean have young daughters, who may one day follow in their footsteps.



Jim and the late Teresa Kelly at a travel show event.
BI photo file

"We're never going to fully abandon the name Crystal Travels because it does mean something to me that my parents started the business," said Kevin. "We'll have a proud heritage of that, but I think the new name is meaningful and unique and allows us to build on a new heritage."

"We're really looking forward to our next 40 years. Hopefully, I'll retire at some point," joked Sean. "But it's funny. I do really enjoy my job because we do get to see and help people experience some great, wonderful locations and have amazing, incredible experiences. Not everyone gets to do that in their jobs; some people have jobs that are a little less fun."



The founding father Jim Kelly enjoys a taste.
Photo from the Kelly family files

With debut album out, Elias Cardoso adds another benchmark to musical career

By Sean Smith
Boston Irish Contributor

Elementary school assemblies tend to be one of those mixed blessings of childhood: a respite from the typical school day, but – depending on the content – often lacking in entertainment value. Yet sometimes they can provide inspiration for what turns out to be a lifelong pursuit.

Such was the case for Elias Cardoso, who in recent years has become one of the more ubiquitous and highly regarded figures in the Greater Boston Irish music scene.

A Newton native, Cardoso didn't grow up in a particularly musical family (an uncle had a five-string banjo, which he never played, and eventually gave to Cardoso). But as a young child, he developed an interest in the violin – one that spiked after he watched a group of youthful fiddlers perform Irish tunes at his school.

"I just really liked the sound a lot, and I wanted to try it," he recalls. "Unfortunately, violin wasn't offered at my school, so I had to wait until middle school. Once I was there, the music teacher – who had an interest in Irish music and kept a stash of tin whistles – told me about a place in Brighton called The Green Briar, which had these things called 'sessions.'"

With that recommendation for one of Boston's most beloved – but now sadly defunct – Irish sessions, Cardoso formally embarked upon the musical odyssey that this fall reached an important milestone: the release of his debut album, "Come In Through the Window," which he formally launched at Club Passim in October.

The nine-track CD displays Cardoso's multiple talents: not only as fiddler, but also accordionist, guitarist, and vocalist (not to mention his Quebecois-style foot percussion). He shows himself as equally adept at arrangements for instruments and voices alike.

Most of all, "Come In Through the Window" indicates the scope of Cardoso's musical interests, which include – but are not limited to – the Irish traditional music he plays at sessions (notably Thursdays at McCarthy's Tavern in Porter Square) and elsewhere. Alongside the trad tunes like "Killavil Fancy" and "Antrim Rose" are contemporary ones, including an untitled jig of his own, plus the delectably edgy "Cigüeña," from Spain, featuring his accordion and multi-tracked fiddles.

And then there are the songs, encompassing the British Isles ballad tradition as well as the unapologetically bellicose "Blackleg Miner" and the gospel song "Gabriel's Trumpet," which has its origins in mid-19th century Maine.

Joining Cardoso on "Come In Through the Window" are two of his regular accompanists, Kat Wallace (fiddle, vocals) and Adam Hendey (guitar, vocals, and album co-producer with Cardoso), along with bassist Simon Lace and Sam Babineau — all part of a vanguard of talented musicians in the 20s/early-30s demographic who, like Cardoso, have made an impression in local folk/traditional/acoustic music settings in the past several years. Patrick Bowling and Dave Try – who supply bodhran and trumpet, respectively, on the album – are from a slightly older generation but have their own sweet spot in the area music scene.

"It felt great to have the closure, to get everything finished and then do the show at Passim," says Cardoso. "I'm so grateful to Adam, Kat, Simon, Sam, Patrick, and Dave, as well Brennish Thompson, who worked with me on the mixing, and Everest Whitman for the mastering. When everything is in process, of course, you have to concentrate on all the details, big, small and in between. But when I listen to the CD now, it's a lot easier to enjoy the art instead of focusing on the craft."

Cardoso has been working on both the art and the craft for years: sitting in at The Green Briar; taking fiddle lessons through the Boston Comhaltas Ceoltóiri Eireann music school (his teachers included George Keith, Cara Frankowicz, and Brendan Bulger); attending Berklee College of Music, where he focused on recording and arranging music; teaching himself accordion, thanks to a borrowed instrument from a friend; learning to play bodhran ("It seemed fun") at the Catskill Irish Arts Week; and picking up guitar, which he said was "a necessity, before I was good enough to gig on the fiddle – but I could at least do chords."

Elias Cardoso enjoys the camaraderie in Boston's Irish traditional music scene. "I could do this all day, every day," he says.

Make the rounds of sessions, concerts, ceilis, and festivals often enough, and you're bound to make connections that lead to formative experiences. So it was that Cardoso became acquainted with other local musicians like Calum Bell and Eamon Sefton, with whom he and Bowling formed the supercharged trad Irish/Scottish quartet Glenville (now on hiatus due to members' various other commitments). He also was an accompanist for local musicians like Mari Black and Isabel Oliart, both Scottish Fiddle Champions, and crossed paths with Hendey, Wallace, and Lace. His connections also reached outside Boston, and the US, as he toured with Scottish band Old Blind Dogs and Ireland's Socks in the Frying Pan.

"I haven't had a real job since college, when I was a sign maker for Trader Joe's," he quips.

More reflectively, Cardoso adds: "What I found was that pub sessions are a great lab for developing your music. Maybe you're backing somebody on guitar, and you hit upon this chord sequence you hadn't tried before; or maybe you add a variation to the tune you're playing on fiddle. You think to yourself, 'Oh, I'll have to remember that' and so you have these ideas to work on with someone if you're getting ready for a performance."

Invested as he was in the instrumental music, Cardoso also built up a song repertoire, drawing in part on his family's interest in ballad traditions and other folk music, including Appalachian as well as Celtic, as reflected in their CD collection. Making the round of sessions, festivals, concerts, and more informal musical gatherings gave him plenty of material.

A few years back, Cardoso says, he got the idea that "maybe I'd better make an album," to showcase the musical interests he'd been pursuing for a decade or more. In 2023, he applied ("whimsically," he says) for and was awarded an Iguana Music Fund grant from Passim, to help cover the cost of making a CD. There was no timeline to complete the project, and Cardoso had various musical obligations to fulfill, so the actual recording didn't take place until earlier this year – after he had been booked to do the album launch show at Club Passim. "I had a plan for what I wanted to do, and who I wanted to play on the album with me. I said 'OK, now, I just have to make the damn thing.'"

(And, yes, he got it done in time for the show.)

Among the instrumental tracks are "New Jigs," featuring the aforementioned unnamed jig (with Cardoso on fiddle, accordion, and bodhran), dotted with rests that lend it a whimsical stop-and-go character; the sweet-natured "Ellison Avenue," leading into "Antrim Rose," bolstered by Wallace's complementary fiddle; Cardoso's original hop jig ("Kat's Hop," named for her) is the starting point of another medley, segueing into a pair of reels ("Come In Through the Window/Killavil"). Hendey's guitar backing is solid and sympathetic throughout all these tracks, as elsewhere.

The songs on "Come In Through the Window" are flat-out exquisite, especially the three with Wallace and Hendey's backing vocals, which perfectly round out Cardoso's mellifluous, mellow bassy tones. This combination strikes the appropriate urgency on "Blackleg Miner," which dates back to 19th-century England. Recorded by numerous artists – including guitarist/singer-songwriter Richard Thompson, Cardoso's source – the song is unapologetic in its scorn of scab miners (and, by implication, all scab workers). The aggressive language has long left some listeners uneasy, but others have noted that union miners of the age faced long odds in agitating for better working conditions yet felt impelled to do so, even if it meant committing violence against the non-union "blacklegs."

"It rocks," sums up Cardoso. "It's powerful, driving and catchy. And when you listen to songs like these from centuries ago, you can't help but wonder how much has really changed?"

In contrast is "The Unquiet Grave," a ballad found throughout the British Isles, and with variants in other parts of Europe, that offers a different take on the ghostly-lover theme. Here, the survivor's lamentation for his (or her) dead sweetheart summons the deceased, who is unable to find peaceful rest because of the constant mourning. Don't be so anxious to join me, advises the ghost, but move on and make the most of the life you have left. While some versions accentuate the supernatural element, this incarnation is simply heartbreaking, due in no small part to the tune composed by Scottish singer-songwriter Kris Drever, whom Cardoso met while on tour in Glasgow.

The Cardoso-Wallace-Hendy vocals also enrich "One I Love" (thought to have emigrated from Ireland to the US, with some verses attributed to Appalachian singer Jean Ritchie) and "Bonnie St. Johnstone," a variant of "The Cruel Mother" ballad tree – both songs whose themes and narratives refute the notion of folk music being quaint and irrelevant in our modern age.

Massachusetts native Babineau joins Cardoso and Hendey on vocals for "Gabriel's Trumpet," which came to his attention via Western Massachusetts folk singer-musician and musicologist Tim Eriksen. Their forceful voices are in turn propelled by fiddles, bass, foot percussion, and a cameo by the titular instrument, making for a rousing final track.

Has "Come In Through the Window" whetted Cardoso's appetite for recording?

"I'm already thinking about the next one," he replies.

Meantime, Cardoso continues to enjoy the numerous opportunities to play for the sheer enjoyment of it, whether at McCarthy's or in a friend's living room.

"We're just having a whole golden-age trad moment here in the Boston area," he says. "It's so exciting to get together with people and find out what we have in common – what tunes we like, which musicians we listen to, what albums we have in our collections – and to learn from one another. I could do this all day, every day."

Elias Cardoso's website is elias-cardoso.com

MAKING THE ROUNDS

Upcoming Irish/Celtic-related music events in Greater Boston (and beyond)

By Sean Smith
Boston Irish Contributor

A whole lot of holiday-themed events is coming your way, not surprisingly, but don't assume they're all the same – there's quite a variety of styles and sounds here starting in the month's second week.

• Lexington's Cary Hall will be the venue for two Irish/Celtic-themed holiday concerts this year. Fiddler and Irish/world music-fusion pioneer **Eileen Ivers** was in the original musical cast of "Riverdance," of course, but she's also had a long-running show of her own, **"Joyful Christmas,"** which she'll bring to the hall on Dec. 14. Now in its 22nd year, the show brings together Celtic and Americana Christmas music and traditions – carols, Wren Day songs, storytelling, poems, and the characteristically bodacious and spirited performances by Ivers and her band Universal Roots: Buddy Connolly (accordion, keyboards), Colin Forhan (guitar, banjo, concertina, vocals), Lindsey Horner (upright and electric bass, baritone sax, whistles, harmonicas), Dave Barckow (percussion, guitar, vocals) and Caitlin Maloney (vocals). Ivers, by the way, also deserves notice for one of the best endorsements by a Nobel Prize-winning author – namely Frank McCourt: "Like Whitman she contains multitudes, and cannot be contained by Irish music itself."

Marking its 20th year, **"Irish Christmas in America"** will be on stage at Cary Hall on Dec. 21. The show has quite the trad credentials: Its producer is Sligo fiddler **Oisín Mac Diarmada** (of Téada and Lane to the Glen), and this year's line-up includes Dervish lead singer **Cathy Jordan**, **Gráinne Hambly** (Irish harp, concertina), Lane to the Glen's **Samantha Harvey** (piano, dance), **Jack Warnock** (vocals, guitar) and **Caoimhín Ó Fearghail** (uilleann pipes, whistle). To be sure, there's plenty of Irish music, song and dance, but a visual element as well: a photographic display that evokes the traditions and spirit of Ireland. (Nota bene: Massachusetts' own **Torrin Ryan** will be subbing for Ó Fearghail for a few dates in early December when the show is out west.)

The Cary Hall website is caryhalllexington.com

• Transatlantic traditional Irish powerhouse **Lúnasa** will be on its customary Christmas tour in the US, with three stops in Eastern Massachusetts: two shows on Dec. 17 at The Burren's Brian O'Donovan Legacy Series; Dec. 19 at the Groton Hill Music Center; and two shows on Dec. 21 at Rockport's Shalin Liu Performance Center. The quintet of Kevin Crawford (flute, whistle), Cillian Vallely (uilleann pipes, whistle), Trevor Hutchinson (string bass), Ed Boyd (guitar) and Colin Farrell (fiddle) will be joined by multi-instrumentalist, singer and dancer **Dave Curley.**

Venue websites are burren.com/music.html, grotonhill.org, and rockportmusic.org

• Gloucester's Rocky Neck Art Colony – one of the oldest continuously operating art colonies in the US – will host **"Welcome Yule"** on Dec. 13. The event features a mix of contemporary and traditional music, songs, and stories with **Nathaniel Diamond-Jones** (fiddle, mandolin, bouzouki, vocals), **Gary Dolinsky** (guitar, bouzouki, concertina, vocals), **Adrienne Howard** (hurdy-gurdy, fiddle), and **Rose Sheehan** (melodeon, vocals), joined by the Welcome Yule Children's Chorus.

See rockyneckartcolony.org/event/welcome-yule/

• Club Passim in Harvard Square features two now-annual Celtic-flavored holiday events, the first featuring **Scottish Fish** on Dec. 19 (two shows). Fiddlers Ava Montesi, Julia Homa, Caroline Dressler, and Maggie MacPhail, and cellist/pianist Giulia Haible have cultivated an energetic and creative approach to presenting Scottish, Cape Breton, and other Celtic music, as well as their own work. Even as they've done so with great respect for these traditions, the Fish have often injected a sense of fun into the proceedings – as evidenced by the track "Santa Kills Me" on their EP of holiday music, "Tidings." In non-holiday-related Fish news, they recently released a new album and will be the Brian O'Donovan Legacy Artist at next month's Boston Celtic Music Fest (more on all that at a later date).

Irish harpist and singer **Áine Minogue** makes her annual visit to Passim on Dec. 23 to celebrate the winter solstice and holiday season. The Tipperary native is known for her serene, meditative sound, blending elements of new age and world music with those of Irish and other Celtic traditions, and an abiding interest in the spirituality and mythology found in the ancient Celtic world and its traditions and rituals, including those of Christmas and the New Year.

More about Club Passim events at passim.org/live-music

Making a return to the ICC for their "An Irish Christmas" show is contemporary Irish folk band **Ishna**, on Dec. 21. The ensemble is headed up by husband-wife duo Ciaran Nagle and Tara Novak – who both have big-stage experience via their stints with "Riverdance" and The Three Irish Tenors – and includes Dan Meyers (uilleann pipes, whistles), Bjorn Wennas (guitar), David McGrory (accordion, banjo) and Brian O'Neill (bodhran, percussion). Their show comprises familiar Irish and holiday fare, as well as a modern musical perspective, and it's rumored that dancing may be included.

The Irish Cultural Centre website is at irishculture.org

• Nahant-based **Dashing Rock** is the trio of Betsy Ketudat (fiddle, Hardanger fiddle, nyckelharpa), Sarah MacConduibh (fife, accordion, whistle, flute) and Dave Cabral (guitar, fiddle, Scottish small pipes, vocals), all former members of Celtic ensemble Fellswater, which rang down the curtain this fall after 17 years. The three will present "Dashing Through the Snow," a concert that brings a glint of Celtic tradition to the music, stories, and lore of the Christmas season, at the Thomas Crane Public Library in Quincy (Dec. 14).

More information at dashingrockceltictrio.com/events

• **"Christmas with the Celts,"** a popular Celtic-Americana stage production which started out as a TV special first shown on PBS and in other countries more than a decade ago, will be at The Cabot in Beverly on Dec. 14. The Celts are centered around the duo of Ric Blair (vocals, guitar, bodhran, piano), a one-time jazz musician based in Nashville, and Scottish native Laura McGhee (fiddle, vocals), who are joined by Patrick D'Arcy (pipes, whistle, mandolin), Fiachra O'Regan (pipes, tenor banjo) and Matt Menefee (banjo, mandolin, dobro), as well as singers and dancers. The show presents a combination of modern Christmas hits, Irish carols, Irish dance– a Celtic instrumental setting of "God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen" here, a modern Nashville take on "O Holy Night" (with string section) there, a medley of tunes with a bodhran-drum set duet, and a "Santa Claus Is Coming to Town" singalong; plus, stories, banter and humor.

Find details at thecabot.org.

• Cape Breton gets its own holiday toast at the Shalin Liu Performance Center on Dec. 13 with **Natalie MacMaster and Donnell Leahy's "Celtic Family Christmas Party."** The spousal couple are fiddlers and step dancers with a keen sense of theatrics and have joined their respective family music dynasties into a new one that features their children, who have become performers in their own right. They'll all be bringing a Canadian Maritimes flavor to their seasonal celebration. MacMaster, incidentally, became a published author earlier this fall with the release of "I Have a Love Story," which contains her reflections on family, faith, culture, and music, and includes recipes and photos she's gathered over the years.

See rockportmusic.org

Massachusetts trio Dashing Rock will present their holiday-themed concert "Dashing Through the Snow" at venues in Greater Boston.

The "Irish Christmas in America" show will be stopping off at Cary Hall in Lexington this month.

'Tis The Season For Holiday Entertainment

By R. J. Donovan
Special to Boston Irish

"Twas The Night Before…"
Through Dec. 14, Wang Theatre

Based on the classic Clement Moore poem, Cirque du Soleil's holiday show spins the heart-warming story of a jaded young girl who rediscovers the magic of Christmas. With thrilling acrobatics performed by a cast of 26 artists from around the globe, plus a string of energetic Sugar Plum favorites, you've got a holiday event for the entire family. bochcenter.org

"A Celtic Christmas"
by A Taste of Ireland
Through Dec. 14, Calderwood Pavilion

After dazzling audiences in New York, A Taste of Ireland brings its holiday show to Boston for the first time. Featuring former World Irish Dance champions plus stars from "Lord of the Dance" and "Riverdance," this is a charming evening packed with Irish wit, traditional tunes, and heartfelt ballads alongside beloved carols. atasteofirelandshow.com

"Christmas Time"
Through Dec. 14, Reagle Music Theatre

Reagle's annual Christmas extravaganza returns, featuring a cast of more than 100 performers plus a live orchestra. The 2025 edition includes precision dancers, a living nativity, a visit to the North Pole, a glimpse of Victorian Christmas in Boston, and more than twenty yuletide tunes. reaglemusictheatre.org

"A Sherlock Carol"
Through Dec. 21 – Lyric Stage

Combine Sherlock Holmes with "A Christmas Carol" and you've got a festive literary mash-up delivered with liberal dashes of laughter and intrigue. Moriarty is dead. Sherlock is depressed. Tiny Tim is all grown up. And everyone's favorite humbug has been mysteriously murdered. Six actors reimagine the two tales in a clever holiday comedy. It's elementary. lyricstage.com

"A Christmas Carol:
A Musical Ghost Story"
Through Dec. 21,
North Shore Music Theatre

The North Shore lights up for the 35th presentation of its original musical adaptation of the spirited Dickens classic. Ebenezer Scrooge is guided through a series of strange and magical ghostly encounters, where he ultimately discovers the true spirit of the holiday season. North Shore favorites David Coffee and Cheryl McMahon return as Ebenezer Scrooge and Mrs. Dilber, respectively, for their 31st year. God bless us, every one! nsmt.org

"Black Nativity"
Through Dec. 21 – Emerson Paramount

A Boston tradition for 55 years, "Black Nativity" beholds the Nativity story through the lens of the African American experience, blending gospel, jazz, and African rhythms into a jubilant celebration of hope and community. With 75 voices, live African drumming and generations of performers, differences dissolves as humanity celebrates joy, resilience and peace. blacknativity.org.

"An Irish Carol"
Through Dec. 21,
Greater Boston Stage Company

Set entirely on Christmas Eve in the hushed glow of a cozy Dublin pub, "An Irish Carol" follows a man forced to reflect on his life, his choices, and the people who shaped him. Both touching and sharply funny, the play reminds us that, even at the holidays, it's never too late for a life to change. Prior to each performance, audiences will be treated to live music featuring Irish bouzouki player, guitarist and singer Lindsay Straw. greaterbostonstage.org

"Holiday Pops"
Through Dec. 24, Symphony Hall

Enjoy the musical magic of the season with Keith Lockhart and The Boston Pops. As always, Holiday Pops programs sparkle with David Chase's perennially popular arrangement of "The Twelve Days of Christmas," Leroy Anderson's "Sleigh Ride," a festive sing-along, an annual visit from Santa Claus and more. Haul out the holly for a spirited and family-friendly night. bso.org

"The Irish Tenors: A Family Christmas"
Dec. 11 - Lowell Memorial Auditorium

The Irish Tenors are back this holiday season to warm your soul with the beauty of Ireland's exquisite jigs, reels and ballads. The Tenors first gained popularity on PBS back in 1998 and have since dazzled audiences from Radio City Music Hall to the Sydney Opera House. The Tenors' festive winter show will get you in the holiday spirit, Emerald Isle style. lowellauditorium.com

"Midwinter Revels:
A Scandinavian Story for Christmas"
Dec. 12 – 28, Sanders Theatre

Revels' joyous blend of music and storytelling delivers an evening inspired by the radiant tale of "Matchless," by "Wicked" author Gregory Maguire. On an island so far north that it snows from September to April, a young boy finds warmth and light in the darkest days. Woven together with jubilant song and dance performed by virtuoso musicians, actors and Revels' intergenerational chorus, this is a touching illumination of a Hans Christian Andersen tale. Revels.org

"Urban Nutcracker"
Dec. 13 – 21, Shubert Theatre

Celebrating its 25th year, this classic dance experience showcases winter scenes set in present-day downtown Boston, blending the rhythms of Duke Ellington with the classical music of Tchaikovsky. Anchored by classical ballet, the performances also feature a musical swirl of tap, hip hop, swing, flamenco and jazz. Be part of the magic! urbannutcracker.com

"Celtic Woman –
A Symphony Christmas"
Dec. 17 – Lowell Auditorium

Celebrate the Christmas season in the company of these celestial-voiced young ladies as they perform holiday favorites and classic carols on their Symphony Christmas tour. Celtic Woman weave together angelic vocals, gorgeous harmonies, and soaring melodies with ease. lowellauditorium.com

"A Prairie Home Companion Christmas"
Dec. 18 –Shubert Theatre

Garrison Keillor is America's favorite storyteller. For more than 40 years as the host of "A Prairie Home Companion," he captivated millions of listeners with his weekly News from Lake Wobegon. Now he brings his merry Minnesota gang to Boston for a one-night holiday visit. bochcenter.org

"A Cosmopolitan Christmas"
Dec. 19 - Calderwood Pavilion

Boston favorites Mary Callanan, Robert Saoud, and Brian Patton **join forces for a** lighthearted -- sometimes naughty, sometimes poignant -- musical celebration of spirited joy, laughter and gaiety for the holiday season. Be Merry, Be Bright, Cheers! huntingtontheatre.org

"A Charlie Brown Christmas:
Live at the Symphony"
Dec. 30 – Symphony Hall

Celebrate the 60th anniversary of "A Charlie Brown Christmas" with actors bringing the iconic Peanuts crew to life, big-screen animations and Vince Guaraldi's timeless score performed live by the Boston Pops. bso.org

Already on the road with Christmas Tour, Celtic Women has Dec. 17 date in Lowell

For the vocalist Murigen O'Mahony, 'It feels like coming home a lot of the time'

By Cassidy McNeeley
Boston Irish Staff

Throughout December, Celtic Woman, the most successful all-female musical group in Irish history, will be presenting Ireland's rich musical and cultural heritage across the US on their Symphony Christmas Tour.

On Dec. 17, the ensemble, which stars fiddler Ciara Ní Mhurchú and singers Mairéad Carlin, Caitríona Sherlock, and Murigen O'Mahony will be on stage at the Lowell Memorial Auditorium.

O'Mahony, who joined the group in 2021, said that playing around Boston "feels like coming home a lot of the time." The Cork native added that "there's such a huge Irish heritage and link there. Boston is kind of, like, 'Oh, we're amongst our people here.'"

The 31-year-old described Celtic Woman, which was originally formed in 2004, as an "amalgamation of Irish culture – a lot of different styles of music, but kind of all shrouded in that kind of Celtic flavor."

From left: Muirgen O'Mahony, Caitríona Sherlock, Mairéad Carlin, and Ciara Ní Mhurchú.

Last year, the Celtic Woman celebrated 20 years with a legacy of 12 Billboard number ones, more than 10 million album sales, and 3 billion online streams to date.

This year's Christmas tour began in Utah on Tues., Dec. 2. Since then, the women have performed their new album, "Nollaig – A Christmas Journey" while on a journey of their own.

From Colorado to Texas, New York to Minnesota, and, of course, Lowell, O'Mahony and her peers will share yuletide classics like 'Little Drummer Boy' and 'Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas' as well as brand new compositions of Irish songs and tunes with a Christmas twist.

"There is a brand new original composition by Brian Byrne named "Nollaig na mBan," and it's kind of tied into the overriding name of the album, and is steeped in Irish tradition," said O'Mahony when asked about her favorite of the 13 tracks. "Nollaig na mBan" is actually a holiday that happens in January, where women of the house are celebrated. Nollaig means Christmas, and this little woman's Christmas signifies the day that the women would take a rest and they would be kind of catered to."

The show, which O'Mahony says is an "ode to Irish culture," will also include Irish instrumentation, Irish dancers, and songs in the Irish language.

"It's a fantastic cultural show, but with classical elements and a little bit of kinda musical theater style elements all under one umbrella," she added. "We get to perform with live orchestras in the States, and that is something that we do not take lightly. To have them support us in bringing these arrangements to life is just an absolute dream come true."

Though there will be plenty of Christmas activities and shows throughout the holiday season, O'Mahony thinks "the element of a really specifically strong culture infused into Christmas and Christmas music makes [the tour] that little bit different."

She continued, "And ultimately, Irish people have a lot of craic, and it's a lot of craic. So, it's a really fun time, and we hope to have the audience up on their feet dancing by the end of it."

To learn more about the tour or to purchase tickets, visit https://www.etix.com/ticket/p/48485263/celtic-woman-lowell-lowell-memorial-auditorium.

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UPDATES FROM THE PASTORAL CENTRE

Irish Pastoral Centre
IPC
–Boston–

Serving the Greater Boston Irish Community since 1987.

Nollaig Shona agus Athbhliain faoi Mhaise Daoibh.

In this season of giving, our thoughts turn gratefully to you with warm appreciation.

Your support inspires us and is the cornerstone of our mission to "welcome the stranger among us"

Go raibh Maith agaibh

May you be blessed with the spirit of Christmas,
which is peace,
The gladness of Christmas,
which is hope,
And the heart of Christmas,
which is love.

Irish Pastoral Centre
Winter Bereavement Programs

Led by Ciara Claffey, LICSW, an Irish-born clinician, this group will provide a culturally informed space for individuals experiencing grief and loss.

ANAM SOLAS THERAPY LLC

All are welcome | Registration is Required | Limited Space Available.

Grief around the Holidays Sunday Mornings	Sudden or Traumatic Loss & Grieving Alone
Sundays 11am–12:30pm	Monday 6:30pm–8pm
November 23rd	November 24th
December 7th	December 1st
January 4th	December 8th
January 11th	January 5th
January 18th	January 26th
January 25th	February 2nd
February 1st	February 9th
February 8th	February 16th

Irish Pastoral Centre, 540 Gallivan Blvd., Dorchester, MA 02124

To register please contact the IPC or visit ipcboston.org/events
(617) 265-5300 nhealy@ipcboston.org

617-265-5300
www.ipcboston.org
540 Gallivan Boulevard, Unit Rear, Dorchester, MA 02124

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Government of Ireland
Emigrant Support Programme

ANSCO LE CHEILE - HERE TOGETHER

Boston Children's Hospital
BLOOD DRIVE
Wednesday, December 17th
9AM - 4PM
Boston Children's

To Make an Appointment:
- bostonchildrens.org/halfpints
- Call 617-355-6677

Sponsor Code is IPC
For more info, contact events@ipcboston.org or phone the IPC directly: 617-265-5300

Community Sunday!

ALL AGES WELCOME!

Sunday, Dec. 21st
12:30PM - 2PM

The IPC invites the community to join us before our monthly Trad Session for Light Festive refreshments, good conversation, and a chance to connect with others in a relaxed, friendly setting!

All are welcome - Play area will be open for families!

Seisiún Ceoil na Nollaig
SUNDAY, DECEMBER 21ST
2 - 4 PM

The IPC invites the community to join us for our Seisiun Ceoil na Nollaig, an afternoon of reflections on Christmas in Ireland. Maureen McNally and John Kearney will lead the reflection along with special guests. All musicians, singers, dancers and listeners are welcome.

Boston Irish Dippers
Polar Plunge
In aid of the
The Irish Pastoral Centre's
Health and Wellness Program

New Years Day, Jan 1.
TIME TBD | Wollaston Beach
(between the yacht clubs)

Come join the Boston Irish Dippers as they plunge in aid of the Irish Pastoral Centre's Heath & Wellness Program.

Swimming not required.
Tea/Coffee will be provided.

IPC CHRISTMAS CRAFTS FAIR

Congratulations to the Bumble Bee Knitting Club led by IPC Board Member Della Costello on another successful Christmas Craft Fair on Saturday November 21st. There was a fantastic crowd that brought festive cheer, quality crafts and exciting raffles!

The IPC will be closed:
Wed December 24th
Thurs December 25th
Fri December 26th
Mon January 1st


Meet BOSTON
A WEEKEND
THAT FLIES BY
IN BOSTON
NEVER
GETS OLD
Starting November 29, holiday-themed drone shows light up the sky
every Saturday at 6pm and 8pm at Boston Common
Stay in the know with everything happening this season
meetboston.com/frostival

Boston Irish Hall Honors inducts 3 powerhouse leaders

By Cassidy McNeeley
Boston Irish Staff

More than 300 guests filled the the Artist for Humanity's Epicenter in South Boston last Friday (Oct.24) for the 15th annual Boston Irish Honors luncheon as three outstanding leaders of Irish descent —former US Ambassador to Ireland Claire Cronin, UMass President Marty Meehan, and Dr. James O'Connell of Boston's Health Care for the Homeless —were inducted into the Boston Irish Hall of Honors.

Since 2010, the Boston Irish Honors luncheon has celebrated the leadership and accomplishments of individuals and families who exemplify the very best of Ireland's values, legacies, and traditions. The event benefits the Edward W. Forry and Mary Casey Forry Foundation for Community Journalism, a non-profit affiliated with The Dorchester Reporter and BostonIrish.com.

At the event, emceed by former state Sen. Linda Dorcena Forry and Boston Irish Associate Publisher Maureen Forry-Sorrell, the honorees, whose life stories were told in extended profiles in the luncheon program and by the admirers who introduced them, accepted their awards with grace and generosity as guests enjoyed a meal of Guinness Braised Short Rib of Beef.

"This has made me rethink so many of my Irish roots and what people went through to get to places where I can do what I am doing," said O'Connell, whose own grandparents came to the US during the famine and landed in Newport, Rhode Island.

There, O'Connell's maternal grandfather, John Hayes, worked his way up to become the head pro at the Newport Country Club.

"He retired after 50 years as the golf pro and told me one day that he was never once allowed in the clubhouse, and that hit me," said O'Connell. "I never caught that. I just started thinking about all the struggles that so many of our ancestors have done so we can do what we are doing."

O'Connell gave special shout-outs to the late Dr. Tom Durant and to one of the luminaries in attendance—former Boston Mayor Ray Flynn, who also served as a US Ambassador to the Holy See. It was Durant and Flynn who asked O'Connell to manage a then-small program to serve men and women on the streets of Boston in the 1980s.

2025 Honorees: University of Massachusetts President Marty Meehan, former US Ambassador to Ireland Hon. Claire Cronin, and Boston Heathcare for the Homeless longtime CEO Dr. James O'Connell. *Photo by Flavio DeBarros*

Gov. Maura Healey, herself the recipient of an Irish Honors in 2023, introduced Claire Cronin, a onetime prominent Massachusetts state lawmaker who served as the US Ambassador to Ireland under President Biden. The governor saluted Cronin's career in state government and called her a mentor.

"How proud were we that Claire Cronin was named ambassador to Ireland on behalf of the United States?" said Healey to loud applause. "That was just such a cool announcement because it was the identification and appointment of somebody who truly recognizes good and who's about doing good. [It] didn't matter how much money she raised or contributed. That wasn't what it was about for Claire."

The governor added: "There is a recognition from President Biden of the good of Claire Cornin and how special she is as a person. People were a little surprised, maybe not the DNC donors lining up for those ambassadorships, but wasn't it awesome, it was none of those guys, it was Claire Cronin from Brockton, Massachusetts, going to Dublin."

Cronin said her upbringing in Brockton was heavily influenced by her family's Irish-American identity. She asked the audience, "What does it mean to be Irish?"

She answered herself, saying, "To be Irish means that family is everything. To be Irish means that you value education, hard work, and service to others. To be Irish means that you value freedom and you will fight for justice. To be Irish means that you are compassionate and empathetic and that you feel the pain of others in the same way you feel your own pain. To be Irish means that you are resilient and that you will always fight for and root for the underdog. And of course, to be Irish means that you appreciate literature, that you love sports, that you love music, and a good laugh, you love the craic."

Those themes were echoed by the day's final honoree, UMass President Marty Meehan, a former US Congressman and Lowell native who has served a lifetime of public service. He was introduced by Cork City native Ruairi O'Mahony, who serves as UMass Lowell's associate vice chancellor for Sustainability and Enterprise Development.

In his remarks, Meehan said: "Lowell was an immigrant city, and Irish folks came there, a lot of folks came from Greece, a lot of folks from Canada, a lot of folks from Poland and Portugal. We were a community that understood the importance of immigration.

"Our grandparents and my parents never let me forget where I came from, and I appreciate that," he added.

The Boston Irish Honors event was initially scheduled to be held at the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum in Dorchester, but was relocated due to the federal government shutdown, which has resulted in the temporary closure of the library.

Proceeds from the event will support the mission of the Forry Foundation, which includes training and scholarship funds for young journalists from Boston's neighborhoods. For more information on the foundation, please visit forryfoundation.org.

Making the rounds at the Boston Irish Honors Luncheon

1– Jim Brett, Linda Dorcena Forry, Dr. James O'Connell, Hon. Claire Cronin, Ray Flynn, UMass Pres. Marty Meehan, Mrs. Ray (Cathy) Flynn; 2 – Andrew Medema, Kerry Cronin Medema, Claire Cronin, Gov. Healey, Ray Cronin, Kara Cronin; 3 – Mary Forry Tanner, Matt Tanner, Brenda Forry CSJ, Maggie Wallace CSJ; 4 – Jim Hunt Jr., Joe Kennedy, Dr. Jim O'Connell, Gabrielle O'Connell, Julie Bogdanski; 5 – Bill Forry, Dr. O'Connell, Claire Cronin, Marty Meehan, Linda Dorcena Forry; 6 – Ray Flynn, Ed Forry, Maureen Forry Sorrell, Cathy Flynn; 7 – Dr. O'Connell; 8 – Linda Dorcena Forry, Marty Meehan, Maureen Forry-Sorrell; 9 – Co-chairs John O'Hara and Regina Quinlan Doherty, Linda Dorcena Forry; 10 – Artwork saluting the honorees; 11 – Guests at Artists for Humanity, South Boston

All Photos by Flavio DeBarros


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Marty Meehan follows two guiding lights: his Irishness, and the martyr Thomas Ashe

By Robert P. Connolly

As a young man visiting his grandparents' home after Sunday Mass, Marty Meehan came to appreciate his family's special connection to Ireland.

Affixed to the living room wall at Josephine Ashe Meehan's home in the Acre section of Lowell was a formal portrait of her beloved first cousin, the Irish patriot Thomas Ashe.

After John F. Kennedy's assassination in 1963, his photograph joined Ashe's portrait – making it clear to visitors that for her these were two epic figures.

Josephine Ashe and her cousin, Thomas Ashe, grew up in Lispole, an Irish-speaking village on County Kerry's Dingle peninsula. Thomas, a teacher, school principal, musician, writer, and native Irish speaker, found himself drawn to the fight for Irish freedom. Josephine emigrated to the United States in 1911, settled in Lowell, and married Martin H. Meehan, an Irish immigrant and World War I veteran.

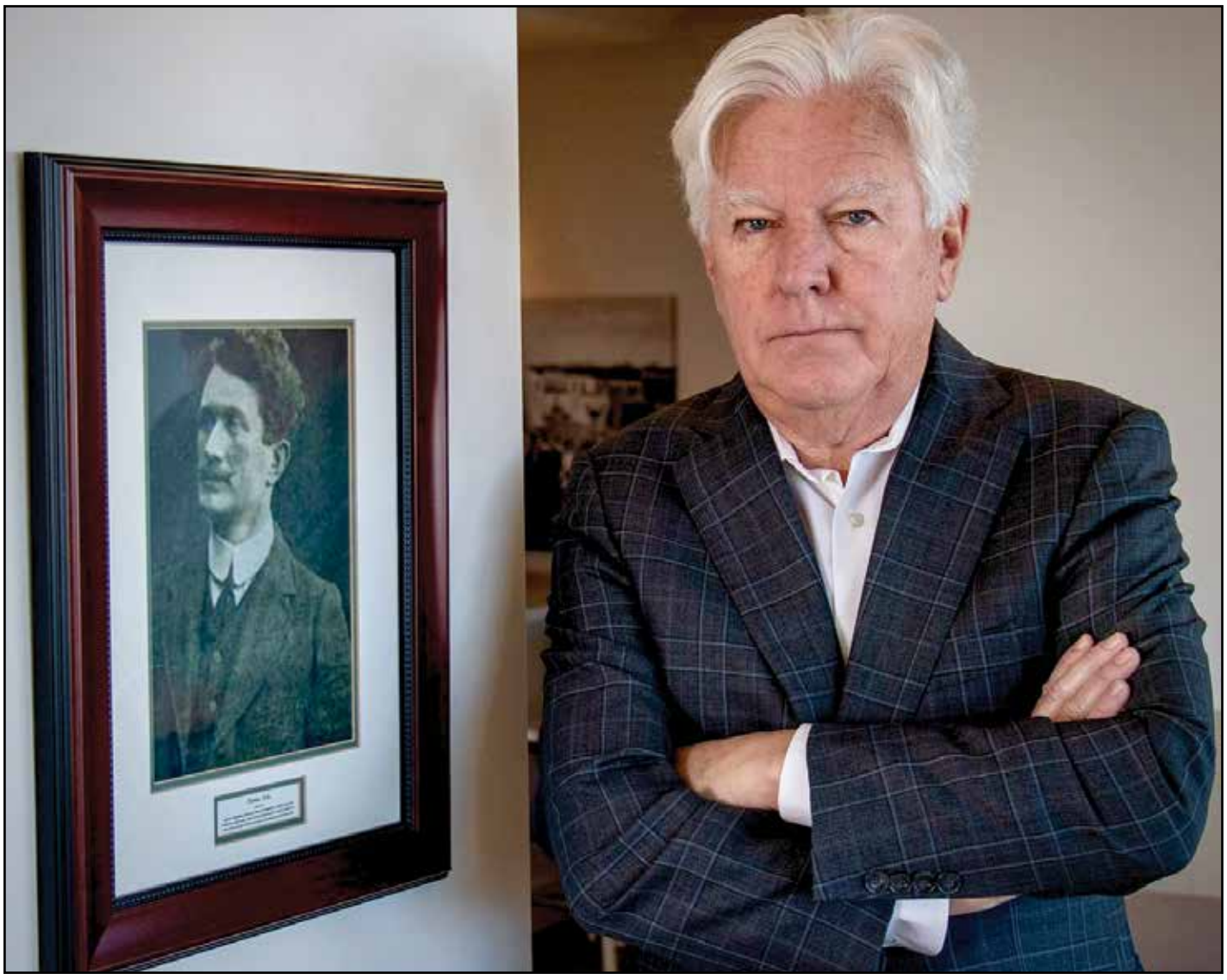
"My grandfather was Martin H. Meehan, but my father and I are both Martin T. Meehan – the T being for Thomas Ashe," Meehan recalled in an interview.

A founding member of the Irish Volunteers and president of the supreme council of the Irish Republican Brotherhood, Thomas Ashe fought on the front lines in the Easter Rising of 1916, at one point leading an Irish Volunteers attack on a police barracks in Ashbourne, County Meath, that was seen as one of the few military victories for the revolutionaries. His hit-and-run tactics created a template for republicans during the 1919-1921 War of Independence.

Ashe's biographer, Sean O'Luing, compares the Battle of Ashbourne to the battles that took place in Lexington and Concord in 1775. "Like Lexington and Concord, it re-echoes around the world," he wrote in "I Die in a Good Cause, Thomas Ashe: A Biography."

Taken into custody after the demise of the Easter Rising and initially sentenced to death, Ashe was released from prison in 1917 as part of a general amnesty. In prison, he had served as an Irish Volunteers leader alongside the future Irish president and taoiseach Eamon de Valera.

Arrested again in 1917 after delivering what British authorities deemed to be a seditious speech, Ashe began a hunger strike to protest the British government's denial of political-prisoner status. He died on Sept. 25, 1917, suffering a horrible death after prison officials at Mountjoy Jail tried to end his hunger strike by force-feeding him. He was 32 years old. An inquest into his death resulted in an unambiguous finding: "We condemn forcible or mechanical feeding as an inhuman and dangerous operation, which should be discontinued," the members of a coroner's jury said.



Marty Meehan at home with portrait of Thomas Ashe, seen in full measure below. *Family photo*

History records Ashe as the first Irish republican prisoner to die on hunger strike – and his death rocked Ireland, with 30,000 mourners filing by as his body lay in state at Dublin City Hall. Thousands more filled the streets when his funeral procession wound its way to Dublin's Glasnevin Cemetery. Michael Collins, Ireland's legendary military and political leader, spoke at Ashe's graveside. Tragically, Collins would be buried at the same cemetery five years later at age 31, a victim of Ireland's Civil War.

Decades later, IRA prisoners in Northern Ireland would follow Ashe's path, with 10 republicans starving themselves to death – similarly protesting the government's refusal to treat them as political prisoners.

On the day of Ashe's funeral, de Valera told mourners: "His death would tell the world … that nothing but freedom would satisfy the Irish people, and that they are ready to perish, one after the other, rather than submit to be conquered."

Notes the historian Francis J. Costello: "Ashe's death caused indignation throughout Ireland and his funeral served as an occasion for national protest."

Reflecting on the life of the man who occupied a place of honor at his grandparents' home, Marty Meehan said: "Thomas Ashe was a great Irish hero. I have always been inspired by his courage and his commitment to the cause of freedom, dignity, and equality. And I've tried to fight for the same things."

His career has focused on public service. The Lowell native served as a member of the US House of Representatives from 1993 to 2007 before leaving Congress to become chancellor of his alma mater, UMass Lowell. In 2015, he was elected president of the 73,000-student, 5-campus UMass system. Throughout his career and in his various leadership positions, Marty Meehan has worked in particular to build bridges between the United States and Ireland.

As a result of his commitment to public service and to US-Irish relationships, he is being inducted into the Boston Irish Hall of Honors this year along with Claire Cronin, the former Massachusetts legislator and US ambassador to Ireland, and Dr. James O'Connell, president of the Boston Health Care for the Homeless Program.

"It is particularly meaningful to be entering the Hall of Honors alongside two such distinguished public servants," Meehan said. "Dr. O'Connell has saved and improved lives on the streets of Boston, and Ambassador Cronin has represented her constituents and our nation with great distinction. Dr. O'Connell and Ambassador Cronin have fought for people and for a brighter future -- and I'm honored to be associated with them."

Irishness is His North Star

Perhaps because of his connection to

Marty Meehan's Political Times

Thomas Ashe and his legacy, Irishness has always loomed large in Marty Meehan's life. It has served as a guiding light for him. "I've always felt that our Irishness is why we have to fight for everyone." he says. "I think there is Irishness in my passion for education, and part of me thinks that comes from Thomas Ashe. Fighting for the underdog is something I've always believed in. When people find themselves in a difficult situation, I always feel drawn to them and want to try to help them," Meehan said.

Growing up, Marty Meehan was heavily influenced by his father, Martin T. Meehan Sr., a compositor, or typesetter, for the Lowell Sun newspaper. He recalls that during the 1960s "my father asked his mother (Josephine Ashe Meehan), to write to her sister, who was still in County Kerry, to ask if he could come to Ireland to visit. When she said yes, he took a week off from his job. He fell in love with Ireland and traveled there every year after that.

"And I would tell you that when I go to Ireland, I feel at home. And I feel the presence of my father when I'm over there. My father had a tremendous influence on me. I always loved him."

Early on during Meehan's congressional career, the stars began to align in favor of the United States playing a more constructive role in Northern Ireland. In the US Senate, Edward M. Kennedy of Massachusetts, Daniel Patrick Moynihan of New York and others forged ties with leaders on both sides of the Irish border. In the US House, Meehan banded together with colleagues like Richard E. Neal of Springfield, Joseph P. Kennedy II of Boston, Peter King of New York, and Bruce Morrison of Connecticut to forge a new and more even-handed approach aimed at settling the conflict in Northern Ireland.

Rep. Neal, Meehan's Washington DC roommate during his years in Congress, has made key contributions to the Irish peace process and continues to serve as co-chair of the Congressional Friends of Ireland Caucus.

For those hoping for a change in US policy toward Northern Ireland, the election of Bill Clinton in 1992 was a welcome development. "After Bill Clinton was elected president, it became clear that that the United States was going to play an important role in addressing the Troubles, and I wanted to be part of that," said Meehan.

For years, the United States had essentially rubber-stamped British policy in the North, but Clinton and leaders in Congress believed that new thinking was needed and that the US should play a more active role.

"We worked together to fashion a policy change that I believe helped to bring a peaceful resolution to the conflict that lasted there for too many years and claimed far too many lives," said Meehan. "The United States played a very important role, and today, life is better in Northern Ireland than it was."

As a US House member, Meehan served on the Ad Hoc Committee on Irish Affairs and cosponsored resolutions calling for all-party peace talks – negotiations that eventually led to the signing of the 1998 Good Friday Peace Agreement.

Jennifer Maguire Meehan (Marty's wife), Bill Clinton and Marty Meehan at the 25th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement celebration in Belfast, 2023 EMK and MTM.

At UMass, he has forged ties to colleges and universities throughout Ireland, creating research and student-exchange programs that provide significant benefits on both sides of the Atlantic.

At UMass Lowell, he established the Center for Irish Partnerships, an entity that works to create links with educational institutions in Ireland and Northern Ireland in areas including the social sciences, the natural sciences and engineering, the humanities, health, and education.

As president of the UMass system, he has fashioned collaborations with Irish educational institutions including Queen's University Belfast, Dublin City University, University College Cork, and the University of Galway.

Meehan traveled to Belfast in 2017 to deliver the keynote address at the Senator George J. Mitchell Institute for Global Peace, Security and Justice, located at Queen's University Belfast. On that occasion, he spoke about the successes and durability of the Northern Ireland peace agreement negotiated by Mitchell with these words:

"That this agreement, forged in the cauldron of conflict – with hatred, violence, and mistrust never far away – has proven to be so resilient is a testament to the courage and tenacity of the political and governmental leaders, to the people of Northern Ireland and, of course, to the man who guided the process with wisdom and patience and whose work and life you honor, Senator George Mitchell."

More recently, he signed on with the Massachusetts-Ireland Trade Commission, an entity established last year to "to help strengthen the economic ties between Massachusetts and Ireland."

His decades of involvement with Ireland and Irish issues have formed a bond that Meehan prizes. "Like my father, I fashioned a lifelong connection to Ireland and its people. It's an important connection, which is why I am so pleased about becoming a member of the Boston Irish Hall of Honors," he

(Continued on next page)

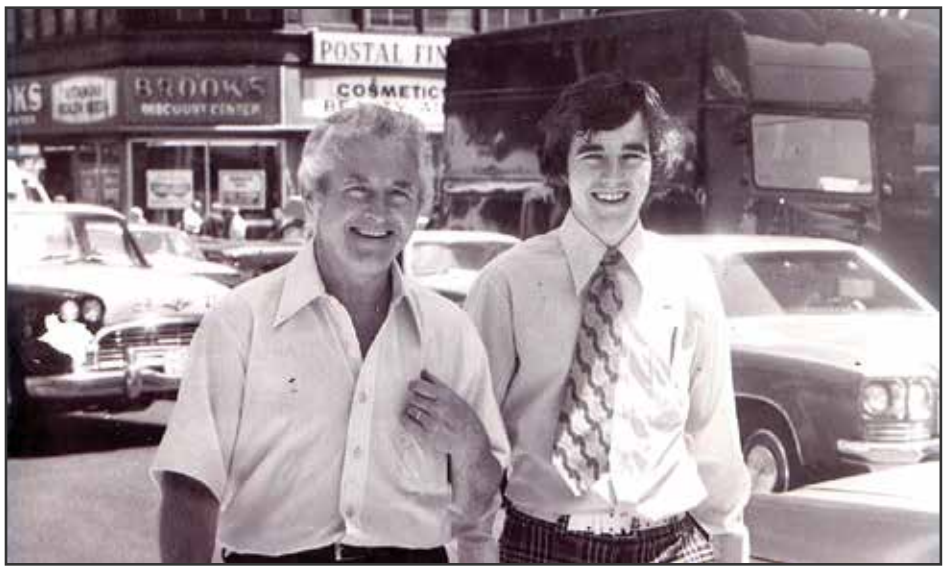
US Sen. Edward M. Kennedy with then U.S. representatives Edward Markey and Marty Meehan

Tony Blair and Marty Meehan on the 25th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement celebration in Belfast, 2023

Marty Meehan and US Rep. Richard E. Neal at the dedication of a bust honoring former US Senator George Mitchell at Queen's University Belfast

Meehan Family Album

Meehan family … Martin T. Meehan Sr. and Alice Meehan with their seven children

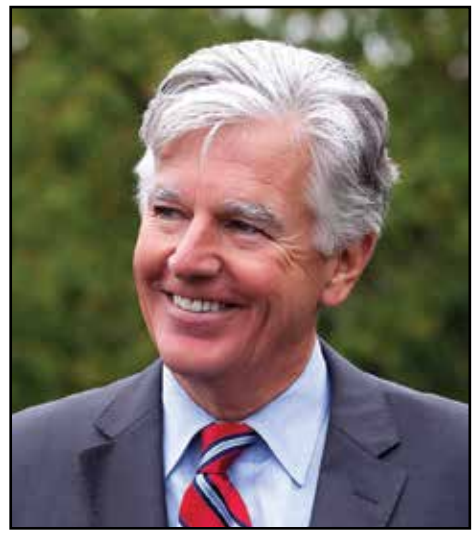


Marty and his father, Martin T. Meehan Sr., in downtown Lowell

Marty Meehan and brothers Mark and Paul Meehan with their grandmother, Josephine Ashe Meehan. Marty at the left, Mark at the right and Paul being held by Mrs. Meehan.

"I've always felt that our Irishness is why we have to fight for everyone. I think there is Irishness in my passion for education, and part of me thinks that comes from Thomas Ashe."

–MARTY MEEHAN



said. "I've been privileged to be able to give back during the course of my career – and I look forward to building and deepening this vital relationship."

A 'Most Remarkable' Personality

Thomas Ashe was among the republican prisoners who began a hunger strike on Sept. 20, 1917. Because of their unwillingness to accept common-criminal status, the republicans had already been forced to sleep on cold, damp floors after their beds, bedding and shoes were taken away by prison guards.

The feeding procedure involved a rubber tube being inserted into a prisoner's nose or mouth and then forced into the victim's stomach. A mixture of eggs and milk was then pumped into the prisoner.

Ashe endured five feedings before dying on Sept. 25. During his fifth and fatal feeding, he complained that the tube was being inserted into "the wrong passage," perhaps into his lungs, but the procedure continued. The cause of his death was ruled to be "heart failure and congestion of the lungs."

In his introduction to Sean O'Luing's biography of Ashe, the esteemed Irish historian J.J. Lee assumes that the fallen patriot no doubt would have gone on to great things had he not died in 1917.

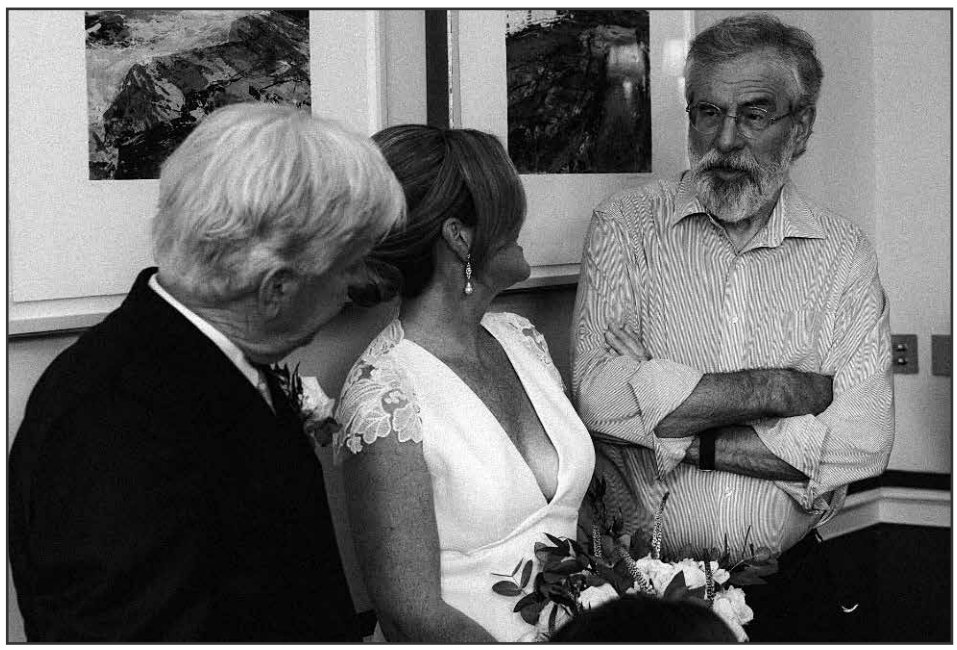
He speculates that Ashe might have become a minister in government and potentially would have played "a central role" in the War of Independence and, perhaps, in the Civil War that followed. While his premature death denied him those opportunities, "Thomas Ashe remains one of the most remarkable personalities in Irish history," Lee writes.

Various memorials throughout Ireland pay tribute to Ashe, as does a poem written by the celebrated Sean O'Casey, the author of plays including "The Plough and the Stars," "The Shadow of a Gunman" and "Juno and the Paycock."

In his poem "Lament for Thomas Ashe," O'Casey writes:

"The breasts of the mountains with anger are hearing
Swift rivers of tears down their rugged cheeks fall,
Their mantle of heather the wild wind is rearing,
And their proud heads are capped with a storm cloud of woe.
Why gather the gloom in a manner appalling?
What causes the sunshine in terror to flee?
The mountains of Erin are plaintively calling,
Thomas Ashe, Thomas Ashe, we are mourning for thee."

Robert P. Connolly has written about Irish issues for the Boston Irish Reporter and the Boston Herald. He is retired from his position as vice president of communications for the UMass system.



Marty Meehan, Jennifer Maguire Meehan, and Gerry Adams, president of Sinn Fein (1983-2018).

Her Irish heritage and community service are central to Ambassador Cronin's story

By Cassidy McNeeley

In May 2021, Claire Cronin was riding comfortably in the passenger seat of her family's Acura as her husband Ray drove along the familiar backroads from Easton to Mansfield. A few miles into their ride to Trattoria Romana Pizzeria, where they were meeting up with her sister and brother-in-law for dinner, their conversation, paired with the background sounds of the radio, was interrupted by a phone call.

As the ringtone blared through the car speakers, Ray pulled over, and Claire moved her hand toward the center console screen, which had lit up with a 202 phone number and "Washington, DC" typed below. "I was, like, 'that's a strange number,'" she recalled in an interview. "I answered, and, lo and behold, it was President Biden."

The president wasn't just calling to say hello. He asked her if she would like to become the US Ambassador to Ireland. As Cronin said later: "When the president asks you that, there is only one good answer and that is 'yes.'"

After a bit more chatter on the White House phone, it was on to dinner over an Italian meal with exciting information that she couldn't yet share. But that stop and phone call along the road in Easton wasn't the start to her ambassadorship; the journey had begun long before.

With her husband Ray and their daughters Kate and Kerry standing by proudly, US Ambassador to Ireland Claire Cronin presented her diplomatic credentials to Irish President Michael D. Higgins at his residence in Dublin on Feb. 10, 2025. *US Embassy photo*

Cronin grew up on the west side of Brockton with her parents, James Daniel McLaughlin and Phyllis (Lucey) McLaughlin, four siblings, and deep Irish roots. Her father, a lawyer, was a first-generation US citizen, the son of immigrants from the Inishowen Peninsula in Donegal. On the Lucey side, all four of her great-grandparents were from Ireland, two from Galway, one from Cork, and one from Clare.

"When we did our ancestry.com, we came back as like 99.99 percent Irish," Cronin said with a laugh. "It was a big part of our life, particularly with my father's family. We certainly grew up with a very keen understanding of Irish history and culture. My father would tell us stories about the War of Independence and the Civil War in Ireland."

The strong heritage wasn't passed down in history lessons alone but also through holiday fun. When Cronin thinks of Christmas, she can still hear the Irish tunes her grandmother played on the piano and the voices of her siblings singing along.

"I was number three out of five, the middle child, but I was really more of an older child because my parents had two children, and then there was an eight-year gap, and then I came along. I was the oldest of the younger three."

Might the responsibility for looking out for her younger siblings – sister Joan, and brother Hugh – be the source of Cronin's leadership skills as she moved through Whitman Elementary School, West Junior High, and Brockton High School.

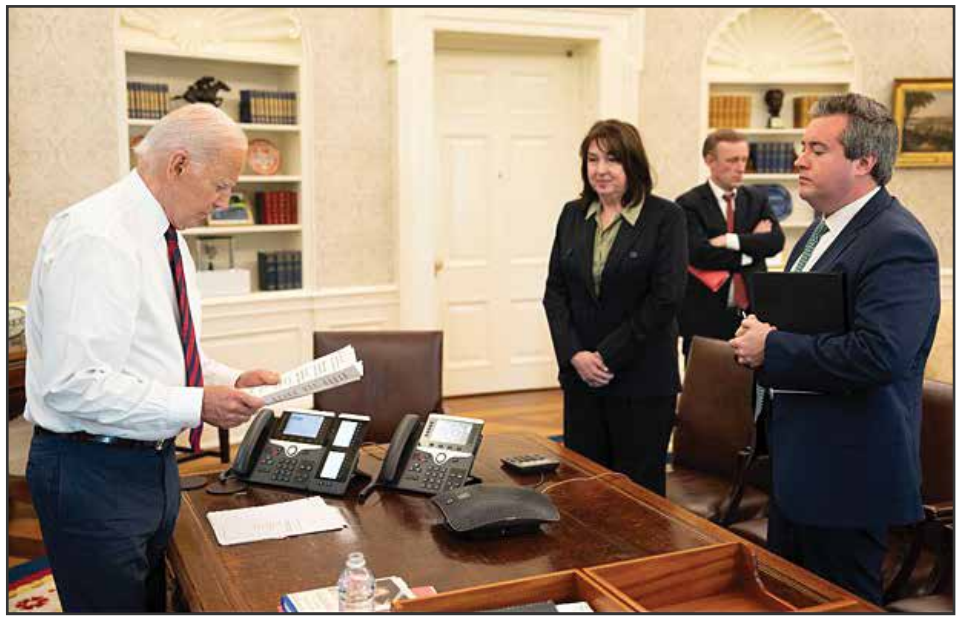
"I certainly got my interest in the law growing up in a household with a father as a lawyer," she said. "But probably the greatest impact in my life was that I grew up in a family that tremendously valued public service and the way it could benefit your community."

While her father spent his time in court as a trial lawyer, her mother was leading elementary classrooms in Randolph and Avon. But a commitment to public service in Massachusetts politics extended beyond Claire Cronin's immediate family.

"I am the third generation of my family to have served in the House of Representatives," she noted, though it was not a matter of the baton being passed from person to person. "The first was a great-uncle, William McCarthy, my mother's uncle. He represented Rockland and served in that chamber in the 1920s and 1930s. The second was C. Gerald Lucey, an uncle who was a member from 1947 to 1953, and mayor of Brockton from 1952-1956. I was first elected to the Legislature in 2012."

Thirty years before that formal entry into the world of politics, Claire took her Brockton High School diploma with her to next-town-over Stonehill College, where she studied political science and communications.

"I had a great interest in politics, and I always thought I wanted to be a journalist," she said. "I interned in the Governor's Office, and that is probably the first time when I really felt the importance of the work being done at the State House. I always thought I would be part of it as a staff member, not actually the elected."



Briefing president Biden in the Oval Office in March 2024 with John McCarthy, Special Assistant to the President, and National Security advisor Jake Sullivan in the background.

While Cronin wasn't aware of how she was seen as a possible player in the political realm, others saw the possibility early on.

"Gerry Lucey was probably the most famous mayor of Brockton. He was incredible," said fellow former mayor Jack Yunitz. "I think that's what deep down inspired her in the end to get into government." He related a story about her political beginnings that has been told with minimal variations over the years.

One day during her senior year of college, she left the library, picked up the phone, called the State House, and asked for the governor's office. She chatted with a man on the other end of the phone for quite a while. After ex-

plaining why she was calling and what she hoped to gain from the experience, the gentleman invited her to meet him at the State House the following day. That's when Claire finally asked for his name. He told her he was Ed King, and he was the governor. She started her internship the very next week.

After Stonehill, Cronin continued her studies at Suffolk University Law School, where she earned her degree in 1985. That same year, she passed the bar and was admitted to practice in US district courts and before the US Supreme Court.

At some point between lectures, case books, and briefs, and exams, there came into her life a young man, also of Irish descent, named Ray Cronin. "Claire and I first met through common friends when she was still in college and I had graduated," he said in an interview with *Boston Irish*. "I had a bunch of buddies, we rented cottages on the Cape. Claire ended up at one of those cottages."

He added, "We were friends for eight to nine years before we had any inkling that we were more than friends. We decided one day that we had more interest, and it didn't take long. We had only dated for about six weeks before we were engaged." Marriage followed in 1989 and it has been the Ray and Claire Show ever since.

In 1992, they took their first trip to Ireland to attend her brother Hugh's wedding. After hearing about the old country all her life, Cronin said the visit was something she will never forget. Despite falling in love with areas like Dublin, Kinsale, and Dingle, she didn't return until 2022, of which trip she says: "In my wildest dreams, I never would have anticipated that I would come back as the US ambassador."

But between 1992 and 2022, a lot of life happened. The Cronin family grew with the arrival of two daughters, Kara and Kerry, and lost dearly with the deaths of her father in 1998 and her mother in 2012.

In the early 2000s, Cronin juggled being both a parent and a public activist, maintaining a law practice in Brockton and sitting on several Democratic committees.

In 2012, she took the big step by announcing her candidacy for a newly redistricted seat in the House where her ancestors had served. The campaign wasn't easy. Cronin first had to win a four-way Democratic primary and then defeat the Republican candidate in the general election.

During the campaign, she grappled with the passings of her mother and a brother-in-law. "My mom saw me win my primary in September, but she did not see me win my election. That's probably one of my little sadnesses in life that she never got to see me get to the finish line."

After Cronin took her seat in the House two months later representing the 11th Plymouth District, it didn't take her long to become a leader there, too, said Rep. Carole Fiola of Fall River.

"I came in after Claire in a special election. She got sworn in in January, I got sworn in in September," said Fiola, from Fall River. "I didn't know her at all and didn't really know other reps; it was kind of lonely."

Above, Ray and Claire with their daughters Kara and Kerry on the occasion of Kerry's graduation from Providence College. Below, four McLaughlin siblings in front of their grandfather's home in Moville, Ireland. From left, Joan Burke, Claire, Geraldine Osborne, and Hugh McLaughlin. Bottom, Her grandfather, Hugh McLaughlin, fourth from the left with his brothers, James McLaughlin, Thomas McLaughlin, Eugene McLaughlin and Michael McLaughlin after they gathered in a New York City pub shortly after arriving in the United States.

Family photos

She added: "One day, Claire, who sat in a different division from me, said, 'Hey, I noticed you over there,' and invited me to meet with her. She was extremely welcoming. It's a rare thing in this world, in this type of job, that is very focused on your district, your legislation, your priorities, for someone to reach out."

Over time, the two women established a lifelong friendship, bonded over marriage and motherhood. To this day, they refer to themselves as the "Gateway Girls," having represented Brockton and Fall River.

During her nine years in the House, Cronin served as the vice-chair of the Joint Committee on the Judiciary and then became the first woman in the history of the Massachusetts House to serve as chair of that panel.

Current House Chair Mike Day met Claire during his first year in the Legislature in 2015. "I got assigned to my first term on the judiciary committee, and Claire was the vice chair at the time. I talked to her right off the bat, and she helped guide me through the first term. Ups and downs, mistakes, what to watch for, things like that. I'm not alone in looking at her as a role model, a mentor, and a friend. That's unusual to have those three bottled up in one person to so many people in the Legislature."

While at work on Beacon Hill, Cronin took time to get involved in Joe Biden's 2020 presidential campaign, during which she announced the Massachusetts numbers in the roll call at that year's Democratic National Convention.

"After the president was in office, I received an email from the transition team that just said, 'Would you be willing to be considered for a position within the administration?' Truth be told, I was incredibly happy with the job I had in the House of Representatives." Not thinking much about it, Cronin

(Continued on next page)

responded that she was interested in working with the State Department and identified Ireland as her top choice if selected. "That was pretty much the end of it. I didn't lobby for the position, I went happily along with my life, and I was made majority leader in the House."

All of which brings us back to the very beginning of this story, when Claire Cronin's next steps in life came together on a suburban road south of Boston in 2021:

There were extensive background checks, thorough investigations, and numerous interviews before President Biden announced in June his nomination of Claire Cronin as United States Ambassador to Ireland. US Senate confirmation came in December, and she was sworn in on Jan. 19, 2022.

Laura Striese, the executive director of the Charity Guild, a food pantry Cronin supports in Brockton, has known Cronin most of her life and describes her as a "hometown hero." Ray Cronin seconds that motion: "Becoming an ambassador is the manifestation of the adage 'When preparation meets opportunity,' he said. "She brings people together and builds great relationships."

When the new ambassador moved into her most-elegant new residence in Dublin, Ray and their daughters joined her for the ride. Within the first six months, Cronin had already visited all 26 counties in the Republic of Ireland and ventured into the North as well. Later in her tenure, with thanks to extended relatives, she got to explore where her family came from.

"Last Christmas," she said, "my brothers and sisters came over to Ireland, and we made the trek up to Donegal for them to see my grandad's house, which is still owned by the family. It was unbelievably emotional to go with my siblings on this trip."

In addition to all the traveling, Cronin was a very welcoming host at the Deerfield Residence in Dublin's Phoenix Park to family and friends from afar during her three years as ambassador. But it was the "Open Doors" program, a cultural exchange initiative led by Cronin, that brought the largest number of people to her stately home.

US Envoy to Ireland Claire Cronin with students on a visit to Scoil Eoghain National School. *US Embassy photo*

"I wanted to open the doors of the embassy and the residence to people who normally would have never had that opportunity," Cronin said about the program of engagement for students and young adults. "I wanted to make sure that the average person whom I might have known in my life back in Brockton or Easton had that opportunity." The result: Participation in the J-1 Visa Program hit an all-time high.

One notable visitor was the president himself, who, with Claire as part of his entourage, took a historic four-day tour around Ireland to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement.

The juxtaposition of that experience with Cronin's just-folks demeanor in other venues struck her friend Tim Cruise, Brockton's city clerk, as defining her sense of place

"I would receive pictures of her on Air Force One with President Biden, and at the same time, when she was home for a weekend, she could be at the local pizza place with us and make everyone feel the same," said Cruise. "That's a rare trait that people have. To be able to move in those high circles but still be grounded and remember who you are and where you came from."

Now Claire is back home, and still busy. She is a scholar-in-residence for Public Policy and Global Affairs at the UMass Amherst's Newton campus and a consultant to the public policy law firm Smith, Costello, & Crawford.

And politics? "I don't have any immediate plans," the ambassador says, "but I would never say never."

From Claire serving lunches to seniors at a Brockton Council on Aging summer barbecue to speaking at the signing of a long-awaited Criminal Justice Reform bill with then-Attorney General Maura Healy behind here, Claire embraces political life. *Courtesy photos*

“I’ve become the local doctor I wanted to be’ – Jim O’Connell of his time with the homeless

By Kevin Cullen

When the Famine hit Ireland 180 years ago – and, let’s be honest, it wasn’t a famine; it was an unnecessary starvation, caused by a government that wanted rural, unreformed Catholic Ireland to die – the O’Connells from Kerry and the Hayeses from Cork rolled the dice and got on a boat.

They didn’t know each other, but fate would put them together. And in their leaving, like so many who abandoned Ireland when the potato crop failed and the British government failed them, Ireland’s loss was America’s gain.

The two families settled in Newport, Rhode Island, which at the time was not the home of fancy yachts and people who lived elsewhere, summered in Newport, or maybe the Hamptons, and golfed on weekdays. It was a working-class harbor town, and the people who were employed there, like the O’Connells and the Hayeses, worked with their hands and survived by their wits.

Some of them went off to fight in the Civil War, for the Union, for a country that didn’t accept them, like it didn’t the Tuskegee Airmen and Black patriots who fought the Nazis and returned home to be called the “N” word. But the Irish, as there was at that time, no “I” word, went off and fought, because they knew they were doing so for something that mattered.

These are the roots underlying the life of Jim O’Connell, the doctor for the homeless, the unrooted, the abandoned, like the Famine Irish who had no alternatives but to leave their homes and throw their lot in with a place that initially rejected them, reluctantly accepted them, and gradually came to the conclusion that, as they say, you can’t beat the Irish.

O’Connell was one of six, or as they’d say in Newport at the time, “in a small Irish Catholic family.”

He was the product of a mixed marriage, not only in the context of Kerry and Cork, but also because his parents hailed from parishes of different strata. Newport was like Dorchester, in that people identified themselves not by neighborhood, but by parish. His mother Anne (Hayes) O’Connell grew up in St. Augustine’s, downtown, in the 5th Ward. His father Jim O’Connell was from St. Joseph’s, uptown, which was grittier, poorer.

His dad didn’t make it out of high school; he instead went off to fight the Nazis before graduating. His mom got a full scholarship to Fordham, but her descent into a fog of mental illness at the time prevented her from accepting it. Later, she went to a small Catholic college for women in New Jersey.

His mother’s illness led to frequent hospitalizations and absences from the family home. While his father worked at the local Navy base, young Jim spent a lot of time with maternal grandfather, John Hayes, who somehow, beyond any explanation, found himself the head pro at the Newport Country Club, a bastion of the landed gentry which, if it were any snootier, would be up its own nose.

He served the golfing membership at the club for a half century, and in that time, he was never allowed to enter the clubhouse, because he was a Catholic, and even worse, an Irish Catholic.

“Now my cousins are on the country club board,” Jim O’Connell said, chuckling.

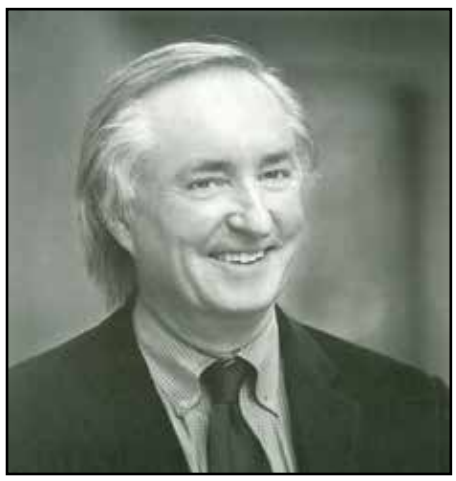
Things change.

When he was president, Dwight Eisenhower summered in Newport, and frequently golfed at the Newport Country Club. “He’d golf with my grandfather,” O’Connell said. “Eisenhower liked him because he was quiet, reserved, unlike everybody else a president was around.”

He saw a gun for the first time around that time – It was sticking out of the golf bag of one of the Secret Service agents guarding Eisenhower.

Jim O’Connell was a young boy on a September day in 1953, when his grandfather took him to stand outside St. Mary’s Church in Newport. At that age, he didn’t appreciate what he was witnessing, but his grandfather was insistent that he would see Jack Kennedy marry Jacqueline Bouvier.

“He was so taken by the idea that this Irish Catholic kid, a kid from Boston, could become president of the United States,” O’Connell said.



Dr. Jim O’Connell was tending to a homeless person on a Boston street when the photographer Bill Brett came by and took the photograph above. About such occasions, the doctor says: “These are people who have been dealt terrible hands, and they invite you into their world, without reservation, without conditions. Those relationships sustain us all.” Bill also featured Dr. Jim, at left, in his 2014 book-as-photo album, “Boston Irish.”

O’Connell was educated by nuns for eight years, Christian Brothers for high school, and then by the Holy Cross fathers at Notre Dame, so he has every right to be estranged from his upbringing. But he is not, as is his nature. He sees beyond the criminality of the bishops who protected abusers to remember the priests and nuns he admired for their commitment to caring for the poor and the marginalized. His Catholicism is steeped in social justice.

“You can’t just abandon that,” he said.

And he never has. Whatever kernel of goodwill those nuns and brothers in Newport put in his head, eventually blossomed, like a beneficial virus, to do good.

But it wasn’t a straight road. It never is.

In college, he thought he was going to be an academic. But his heart wasn’t in it. After graduating from Notre Dame with a degree in philosophy, he enrolled at the University in Cambridge for a master’s degree.

“It trained those two years in England,” he said.

Not surprisingly, he left the rainy greens of England for the sun and soothing winds of Hawaii. He followed a woman, and while that relationship never progressed, his love of the lush, wild landscape of Hawaii, and his love of those multi-cultural Hawaiians, did.

He taught high school students in Honolulu and loved it. They gave him energy. But as much as he liked teaching, and loved those kids, it wasn’t doing it

The late globe-trotting humanitarian, Dr. Tom Durant, was a key welder of Jim O'Connell's life in medicine.

Courtesy photo

for him. "I was living in paradise," he said. "But I didn't know what to do."

He decided to go back to school, to the New School in New York, to pursue a doctorate in political philosophy. He was assigned as a teaching assistant to Hannah Arendt, the great German and American philosopher and his hero.

It was 1975 and he thought he had found his path. A few months later, Arendt died of lung cancer, and O'Connell was left adrift.

He went back to work where he always went back, since he was 11 – to The Pier, the restaurant in Newport where the tips were good and the customers were not so bad.

He and his roommate at the time convinced themselves that everything would be so much better in rural Vermont, so they pooled their tips and bought a place, for short money, near Smugglers' Notch and invited their drop-out friends to join them.

Jim O'Connell, the great street doctor, was, in fact, a hippie ski bum for two years. "I can't refute that," he said.

What we can refute, in hindsight, is the notion that his time in Vermont somehow detoured him from what was his ultimate goal. To the contrary, it helped him focus on something that was more fulfilling.

At some point, as ski bums always do, he woke up from a fog and realized that his life wasn't cutting it. He finally admitted to himself that he wanted to be doing something that would satisfy his soul. He wanted to be a doctor.

For an aspiring medical student, he was something of an anomaly. He was, um, old, and he realized that he needed all those pre-med science classes he had eschewed in college. So he signed up for classes at Brown University.

While he was doing that, he was still working weekend nights at The Pier.

In 1978, to his great surprise, Harvard Medical School accepted him. It wasn't his first choice. He had wanted to go to the University of Vermont, imagining himself the local GP who took care of everybody in the village.

But UVM told him, basically, what everybody in that world would: You're too old. He remembers, word for word, what one of the admissions counselors at UVM said: "Unless you are possessed of a font of human energy bordering dangerously on the pathological, I would dissuade you from pursuing a career in medicine."

Luckily, for those thousands of his future patients, O'Connell ignored that counselor's advice. He was headed to Harvard, which, for its irony, would have pleased his grandfather to no end.

"Growing up in Newport, we hated Harvard," he said. But he grew to love it, and Harvard loved him back.

Medical school match day, when students learn where they will go for their post-graduate residencies, is a both a joyous and a crushing day.

It's joyous because young people, who have decided to dedicate their lives to helping others, have finished the first, rigorous leg of their journey, medical school. Crushing, in that they often don't not get the place they wanted.

On the evening of Match Day, St. Patrick's Day, in 1982, O'Connell and his compatriots retired to the Black Rose, the Irish pub next to Faneuil Hall. They were celebrating, but also commiserating.

"There was a guy," O'Connell remembers, "dancing a jig, jumping from table to table." When "the guy" got to O'Connell's table, he looked down at the crestfallen medical school grads and said, "What's the matter with you guys?"

O'Connell tried to explain, saying that while they were happy to graduate from medical school, they weren't so happy with where they were going off to work.

The guy who danced on the tables told them, "Do not do that. Do anything else." And then he danced off.

Jim O'Connell did not dance off. He went off to Massachusetts General Hospital and the first day he was there, a doctor, an older doctor, got up to address the new residents.

The doctor who greeted them, Dr. Tom Durant, was the man who was dancing on the tables at the Black Rose and told a group of medical school grads to do something, anything, else.

On that first day of orientation, Tom Durant remembered that night in the Black Rose, without saying so explicitly. In the midst of his introductory remarks, he looked squarely at O'Connell and said, "I thought I told you not to be here."

But he was there, and Durant would become an important mentor, a welder of O'Connell's life in medicine.

O'Connell could not have chosen a better mentor. Tom Durant was one of a kind, a Dorchester guy who became a globe-trotting humanitarian doctor.

I knew Tom Durant for much of my adult life. When he wasn't tending to people at Mass. General, or teaching at Harvard Medical School, he was off in some far-flung, poverty-stricken or war-ravaged place, treating the poor, the forgotten, the dying.

When I was the Boston Globe's European correspondent, based in London, I covered the Balkan wars, and one day I was in Macedonia, after weeks in Kosovo, where the Serbs were ethnically cleansing the place of Muslims. A man I knew at my regular hotel in Skopje, the capital of Macedonia, told me that there was a doctor treating the refugees at some godforsaken field near the border with Kosovo, where the Macedonian authorities had corralled all the war refugees.

"He is wearing a baseball cap," my Macedonian friend said. "Boston Red Sox."

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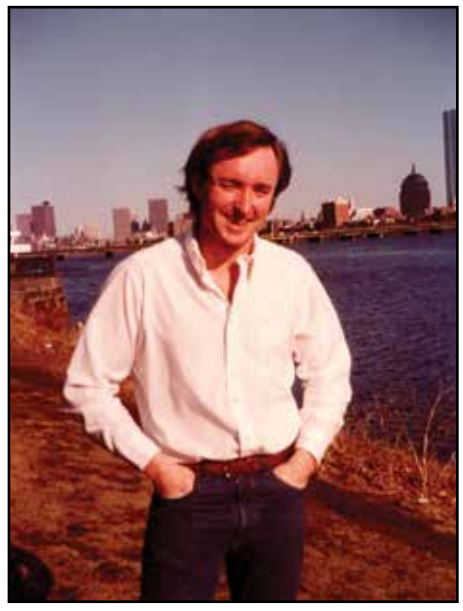


Above, new University of Notre Dame summa cum laude graduate Jim O'Connell and his parents, Jim and Anne (Hayes) O'Connell, in 1970. At left, a young Jim shadowed by the Boston skyline. Below, Dr. Jim with an extraordinary servant of the homeless, the late nurse Barbara McInnis (1935-2003) who showed him the ways and means of treating Boston's homeless wherever they are at. The South End's Barbara McInnis House is dedicated to her memory.

He's now the doctor he wanted to be

As I set off for the refugee camp, I knew who I was looking for. I stumbled around for a bit then ducked into a medical tent, and there was Tom Durant, explaining to a homeless, pregnant refugee what she needed to do to deliver a healthy baby in an unhealthy environment. He was doing his best to comfort someone clearly distraught, tired, scared, and hungry.

Durant looked up at me, betraying no emotion. His greeting was typical of him. "How'd the Sox make out last night?" he asked. "I don't know," I replied, shrugging. "I don't have time to check the box scores."

Tom Durant sniffed, saying, "Then you're useless" and turning his attention back to his patient.

Jim O'Connell nodded in recognition when I related that story to him. He knew that, aside from a great sense of humor, Tom Durant carried with him an oversized sense of empathy for those who needed care. It didn't matter what they looked like, how much money they had, their religion, where they came from, their language. If they needed help, Tom Durant was there.

That was the kind of doctor Jim O'Connell wanted to be, and in many ways, Tom Durant ensured that was the kind of doctor he became.

If it is simplistic, but not totally inaccurate, to reduce the peace process in Northern Ireland to John Hume asking Tip O'Neill and Ted Kennedy to get Ronald Reagan involved and then Reagan getting Maggie Thatcher to take the Irish government and Garret FitzGerald on as equal partners and then John Major and Albert Reynolds pushing the thing forward, and Bill Clinton throwing the money and might of US diplomacy behind it all, and then Bertie Ahern and Tony Blair getting the whole thing over the goal line, then it is both simplistic and accurate to explain how Jim O'Connell and Boston Health Care for the Homeless came about.

When he was mayor of Boston, Ray Flynn was trying to get a grant to provide medical care for homeless people, whose numbers had grown dramatically in the 1980s.

So Flynn, a Southie guy, called his old Dorchester pal, Tom Durant, and said, "I need a doctor." And Durant said, "I've got just the right guy."

That right guy was Jim O'Connell, who at the time was in his last year of residency at Mass General. Dr. John Potts Jr., the chief of medicine at MGH, was fully involved in the conspiracy with Flynn and Durant to make O'Connell the head doc for the homeless.

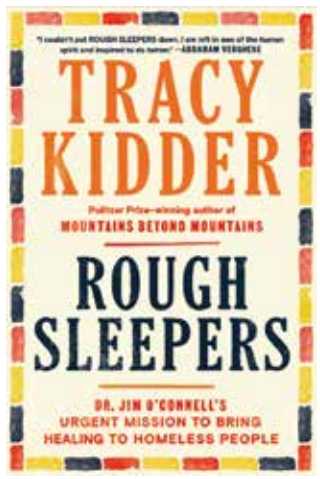
"Do this for a year," Potts told O'Connell, who knew exactly what was going on.

"I said yes because it was Tom Durant behind the scenes, and I couldn't say no to Tom," he said.

So in 1985, Jim O'Connell left the ICU at Mass General and started taking care of the homeless on the streets of Boston. He took Potts at his word – that it was just for a year – but then a funny thing happened: Jim O'Connell fell in love with his patients.

They were, like his Famine-era immigrant family, refugees, cut off from the creature comforts of a wealthy society that in many ways didn't see them and would rather they disappear.

But they never disappeared to Jim O'Connell. They became more than his patients. They became his friends.



He had once imagined himself becoming the local GP in some rural burgh of Vermont, up in the mountains, the wise old doctor who took care of the local people.

Then he realized that local people in Boston also slept on the grates in back of the Public Library in Copley Square and nodded off on benches in the Boston Common in the middle of the day because it was impossible to get a decent night's sleep outside. They lined up outside the Pine Street Inn or at the shelter at the Shattuck, looking for a meal, a bed or maybe just a kind word.

Forty years is a long time in any line of work. But tending to the most vulnerable among us brings a special burden. O'Connell, now married to Dr. Jill Roncarti, ScD, a volunteer researcher at BHCHP, and the father of Gabrielle, doesn't see it like that, though.

"What's kept me going is, you realize it's a privilege," he said. "These are people who have been dealt terrible hands, and they invite you into their world, without reservation, without conditions. Those relationships sustain us all. And I'm blessed, working with the people I work with. I've become the local doctor I wanted to be."

As they say in Belfast, good on ye, Dr. Jim, good on ye.

Kevin Cullen is a columnist at The Boston Globe.

Northern Ireland is focus at Tourism Ireland's Boston roundtable

By Cassidy McNeeley
Boston Irish Staff

While some 50 guests enjoyed eggs, bacon, potatoes, Alison Metcalfe, Tourism Ireland's Head of North America, welcomed them to a discussion aimed at promoting the island of Ireland as a leading holiday destination.

"I'm particularly delighted to welcome some of our top-tier travel partners who are here, all of whom are actively programming and selling the Island of Ireland, selling Northern Ireland as part of the broader island as a vacation offering," said Metcalfe. "We want to encourage people to travel year-round. We want to encourage people to get off the beaten track and to explore our region and get people to stay longer and experience more."

Minister of State Charlie McConalogue added that "Northern Ireland and Donegal have not been explored by as many people as the southern half of Ireland. Traditionally, it has been people coming to Dublin, Galway, and Kerry. But it's been wonderful to see, over my lifetime, the wonderful transformation of the northern half of our country."

Like McConalogue, Minister Archibald grew up in Northern Ireland and hopes more people will choose her home as a vacation destination.

"Getting to Ireland has never been easier," she noted. "This summer, there were direct nonstop flights from 21 different American gateways, including right here in Boston. Air access from the US to Ireland for this winter remains strong with seats up 17 percent on last winter, and that includes Aer Lingus and Delta services from Boston."

Dr. Caoimhe Archibald, Northern Ireland's Economy Minister with responsibility for tourism, joined key travel trade and media personnel at the Boston Harbor Hotel for Tourism Ireland's Industry Leaders Breakfast Roundtable last month *. Cassidy McNeeley photo*

Metcalfe added that despite economic hardships, trips to Ireland were up four percent through September. "People are still prioritizing travel within their discretionary spend buckets. Travel has become such an important part of people's lives," she explained.

Archibald reminded attendees that in Northern Ireland, visitors can explore the Titanic experience in Belfast, pose with the Derry Girls mural on Orchard Street, tour the Game of Thrones studio in Banbridge, and play at some of the world's best golf courses.

"Our American visitors tell us they are motivated to visit by our beautiful landscape and scenery, as well as our rich culture, history, and heritage," she said. "We have so much to offer American visitors across the year, from St. Patrick's Day in the spring to Halloween in the fall. I hope we can encourage more visitors to discover the beauty of regions across the North and the island."

According to Archibald, tourism is one of the country's largest industries, supporting around 300,000 jobs across the island. "Our strong historical, cultural, and economic connections mean the United States is a critical market for us," she said. "American visitors typically stay longer, tour around our regions, and spend more than visitors from other markets. We believe that there is potential to grow this further in the years ahead."