

FROM IRISH BROGUES TO MEXICAN-AMERICAN  
ACCENTS: AN IRISH-AMERICAN MEMOIR OF  
SEVENTY-FOUR YEARS A-GROWING

By

John D. Maloney

Who I am as a first generation Irish-American – my values, attitudes, interests, concerns, beliefs, actions – finds its beginnings in my two Irish immigrant parents. I was born on November 18, 1936, in St. Elizabeth’s Hospital in the Washington Heights neighborhood of Manhattan Island, the second son of Edmond Moloney, a New York City trolley driver, later a city bus driver, and Elizabeth Curtin Moloney, housewife and later office cleaner at the historic Woolworth Building skyscraper in downtown Manhattan. (James Joyce in Finnegan’s Wake refers to that building as “a waalworth skeyerscriape of most eyeful hoyth entowerly.”)

My father’s membership in the Transport Workers Union of America, co-founded by the fiery Irish-born labor leader Mike Quill, made me aware as a youngster of the importance of unions in the life of the working class. I vividly remember reading and listening to Mike Quill and his defense of working people. Although my own father never spoke of the pre-union working conditions for New York City transport workers, my father’s brother, my Uncle Tom, also a member of the union, did describe the harsh working conditions and the importance of the union in improving those conditions. These early experiences were the source of my own concern for working and low income people and the motivation for my own life-long union membership.

Promptly after my birth, I was baptized at St. Elizabeth’s Catholic Church in Washington Heights, a church that had been consecrated in 1929 by Irish-American Cardinal Patrick Hayes, whose parents had been immigrants from County Kerry, Ireland. Six years later I was walking with my Lone Ranger lunch box down Church Hill to St. Elizabeth’s Grammar School, possibly one of the many schools opened in the nineteenth century by Irish-American Cardinal John

McCloskey. I have almost no memories of my first six years other than the birth of my sister Eileen Mary and, tellingly, a brief memory of being at a St. Patrick's Day parade while sitting with my father in his Ford car with its rumble seat and its crank started engine. I do not recall what I actually saw other than the inside of the Ford, but I can still feel the excitement of the crowds and the expectant waiting for something marvelous to pass by. It was the St. Patrick Day parade, something magical and glorious. And there was something special about us: we were Americans but strangely we were also Irish.

During the first ten years of my life in Washington Heights, there were many things Irish that made me proud and confident. What greater day, other than Christmas, Easter, and our individual birthdays, surpassed the annual St. Patrick's Day celebration, the parties, the wearing of green, the leprechauns, the pots of gold, the shamrocks, the parade down 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue with its green stripe painted down the middle, passing our very own St. Patrick's Cathedral, the marching bands, the police units, the endless lines of marchers. I loved our songs: "Galway Bay" "When Irish Eyes are Smiling." Those songs prepared me for the more authentic traditional Irish music that would be reborn a few decades later. There were also those Irish-Americans who proved to me how special we Irish-Americans were. We had the entertainers: Dennis Day, tenor of the Jack Benny show; Margaret O'Brien, the heart-tugging waif in one movie or the sprightly singer-dancer in Meet Me in St. Louis; James Cagney, dance man and gangster. I was inspired by Irish-American heroes like the five Sullivan brothers who all died when their navy ship was sunk during World War Two and whose bravery, while watching the movie The Fighting Sullivans, made me awed and proud; I had Audie Murphy, most decorated soldier of World War Two and Congressional Medal of Honor winner. It was only natural that I would later serve my country in

the U.S. Army from 1958 to 1960. We had the sports heroes: the Notre Dame football team (although there was nothing Irish about its founding); boxing champions like John L. Sullivan and Gene Tunney from the Lower Westside of Manhattan meant that I too could be strong and unbeatable. A plethora of Irish and Irish-American priests (some of whom were as inspiring or lovable as Bing Crosby and Barry Fitzgerald in the 1944 film Going My Way), nuns (some as kindly, if not quite as beautiful as Ingrid Bergman in 1945's The Bells of St. Mary's), teaching brothers, church novenas, Communion breakfasts – all these meant being Irish and Catholic were synonymous.

During my first ten years, other events and relatives also contributed to my immersion in one of the many variations of the Irish-American experience. Although I now am aware of the condescension involved in the practice of contributing to the fund for the African Pagan Babies and the disdain which is given to it nowadays, the practice did instill in me an awareness that there were others in need and I had a responsibility to help them. Every month on the twenty-fifth of the month, my classmates and I were encouraged to donate twenty-five cents for the cause. This concern reflected a very Irish concern for the poor and helpless. Also, during this time, my father's elderly Aunt Josephine McCarthy, "Aunt Jo," came to live with us for a while in our apartment, bringing another Irish brogue into my life. Frail, sickly, and very wrinkled, Aunt Joe reflected the lives of the 19<sup>th</sup> century "Bridgets," the young Irish women who came to America and supported their relatives back in the old country through their work as nannies and maids in the homes of the American wealthy. Never married, Aunt Jo had been one of those "Bridgets" for a wealthy Riverside Drive family and had sponsored my father's and other relatives' immigrations to New York.

The first ten years of my life had placed me solidly in an Irish-America filled with Irish brogues; those ten years would influence me to eventually voluntarily surround myself with the Mexican-American accents of the poor. But first, there were many more decades of the Irish-American life to experience.

In my tenth year, a major and dramatic change occurred which was to further cement the Irish part of my Irish-American identity. I was sent to live in Ireland for four years. The Ireland which was to be my second home was an Ireland that was not much different than that of the 19<sup>th</sup> century or, perhaps, even of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. I arrived at my grandparents' farm located on the edge of the village of Bruree, County Limerick, in the winter of 1946. My grandparents, Michael Curtin and Julia Dillon Curtin, lived in a whitewashed, thatched cottage; that description is where the quaint, romanticized Irish life and countryside ends. There was no electricity nor indoor plumbing (not even an outhouse), no radio and, of course, no TV; however, there was an open fire in the kitchen for cooking and heating and an oil lamp for lighting. There were bicycles and a horse and cart for travel. The twenty acre farm with its hens, cows, pigs, and potato garden supplied much of the food. It was here that I came to know and understand the homeland that so many of the Irish and their Irish-American descendants came from: their faith, their courage, their ability to survive, their humor, their love of music and of talk, their acceptance of suffering. I also learned that poverty need not crush one and that there were greater things in life than physical possessions. My grandparents were a living history of Ireland. Michael Curtin, then an old man, still vividly remembered the day as a young boy when his family walked the roads of County Cork homeless, having been evicted from their home and tenant farm. My grandmother recalled her mother, my great-grandmother, Bess Linnane,

telling of her seeing, as a child during the Great Famine, a starving man struggling along the road until he finally collapsed on the roadside and died. Many years later when studying for a master's degree in Irish Studies at New College in San Francisco and reading Lady Jane Wilde's poem "The Famine Year," I had a concrete connection to her words: "One by one they're falling round us, their pale faces to the sky/We've no strength left to dig them graves – there let them lie." Another legacy that my grandmother, Julia Dillon Curtin, passed on to me was one as a ten year old I did not know I would fulfill in the future: I would spend my adult life as a teacher. The Dillons included a long line of teachers going back to a noted "hedge teacher" of the early 1800s, a man who risked his life to teach the Catholic poor their heritage despite English laws forbidding it.

My years in Bruree also introduced me for the first time to the name and one occasion to the presence of a great local hero: Eamon de Valera, who was rebel, politician, prime minister, and eventually president of Ireland. Although born in New York City, upon the death of his father de Valera returned with his mother, Catherine Cull, to her family home just outside the village of Bruree. I attended the same National School in Bruree as "Dev" and, of course, heard the stories of his important role in Ireland's struggle for independence from the British. I had three indirect family connections with "the Long Fellow": as a schoolgirl during the War of Independence, hidden under her skirt, my mother had delivered a gun for Dev; my uncle, Michael Curtin, later married a Cull cousin of de Valera; and my aunt, Eileen Curtin, married a man named Bill Murphy who founded a local museum about de Valera located in the old National School building.

It was in Bruree that I also learned that being Irish included having a sense of humor and of learning how to overcome the political or legal system in creative ways. One Sunday afternoon, I stood with my grandmother on a rise above the village and beheld a strange sight – small scattered groups of men were striding purposefully along the surrounding roads and lanes. I looked with wonder at this strange sight, and my grandmother started to laugh, telling me with good cheer what was happening. At that time in Ireland, the selling of alcohol in pubs was prohibited on Sunday, except for someone traveling. To be traveling, a person had to be at least three miles from home; hence, those men out for a determined Sunday walk were heading for the closest pub at three miles distance. Furthermore, it was in school that I learned of the mythical Irish heroes the Fianna and Cuchulainn and the historical Brian Boru. What young boy would not be impressed by these bigger-than-life heroes? However, after four years, the time to return to America arrived and the gradual process of my maturing as an Irish-American was to continue.

With my psyche formed in the Irish-American environment of my first ten years of life in Washington Heights and my four years in County Limerick, I was set to strengthen and develop my Irish and American bond during my adult life. However, first, the values and attitudes of the Irish-America that I had been born into continued to guide my life. The epitome of Irish-American culture for me at that time continued to be the annual high school and college participation in the St. Patrick's Day parade along Manhattan's 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue. Shamrocks, "the wearing of the green," "Mother McCree," green beer, anti-Communism (led by Irish-American senator Joseph McCarthy), total support of the Democratic Party and working class unions – all these were essential elements in my being Irish-American. Some intellectual development did

occur in the literature classes at Manhattan College where I was introduced to the fiction of James Joyce and Frank O'Connor, which prepared me for an appreciation of the writings of Irish and Irish-American writers a few decades later.

The 1960s, 70s, and 80s brought Aran Island sweaters and Waterford crystal. I was also subconsciously prepared for the appreciation of a multicultural America. My father's brothers, Uncle Dan and Uncle Tom, had married into Italian and Jewish families; my mother's sister, Aunt May in Philadelphia, was married to a German-American Lutheran, whose only nod towards the Catholic Church was his proud annual contribution to Father Flanagan's Boys Town. And to me, Irish-American now signaled concern for the poor, for racial justice, and a liberal Democratic Party as personified by John F. Kennedy, our first Irish Catholic president, and other politicians like Senator Eugene McCarthy and later John McCormack, Speaker of the House. In addition, "Mother McCree" found herself out in the cold as traditional musicians like the Clancy Brothers and Tommy Makem prepared me to appreciate later the more authentic Irish traditional music of the Bothy Band, Planxty, and the Chieftains. Reading Cecil Woodham-Smith's The Great Hunger recalled on a deeper level for me the experience of my great-grandmother, Bess Linnane Dillon, during the Irish Famine.

My maturing interest in the Irish culture and my deepening interest in understanding the Irish-American experience in America finally led me in the 1990s to enroll in the Irish Studies Program founded by Daniel Cassidy at New College of California in San Francisco, where I earned a master's degree in Irish Studies in 2000, after taking the required courses in Irish language, history, and literature. My master's thesis entitled Family Relations in Selected Irish-

American Domestic Novels analyzed ten novels which had been written by critically recognized Irish-American novelists and which had focused on the relationships among the members of dysfunctional Irish-American families. The extensive study of the over 250 year history of Irish-American literature, especially the themes and literary elements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Irish-American novel, presented me with many more insights into the Irish-American experience. The psychological studies of the Irish-born parents in America and their American-born families, the wide variety of memoirs, and the wide selection of domestic novels that focused on the family deepened my understanding of the causes and effects of dysfunction in Irish-American families in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century which contrasts with the often rosy images of these families. The ten authors I selected, including James T. Farrell, Mary Doyle Curran, Maureen Howard and several others, identified a number of contributing factors for dysfunction in Irish-American families, but the four major ones seem to have been (1) the dominant mother, (2) the inability of family members to express feelings, (3) the need of maintaining respectability in other's eyes, and (4) the denial of reality or the acceptance of illusion. From my observations of many Irish-American families those that are dysfunctional seem to fall into these categories while many psychologically healthy Irish-American families avoid or overcome these characteristics.

In recent years the physical presence of Irish brogues has faded in my life; however, the Irish and Irish-American values of faith, concern for justice and the poor, and the love of music, humor and learning have flourished and grown. Happily, the accents of young Mexican-Americans are partially filling the void. My inherited trait of concern for the poor combined with my love of traditional Irish music and enjoyment of humor have influenced my almost full time volunteer activities at Sacred Heart/Our Lady of Grace Nativity Middle Schools in San Jose,

California, a location about twenty miles from my home. The school whose motto is “Breaking the Cycle of Poverty through Education” opened at the time of my retirement. This Jesuit-sponsored and donation-funded school is located in an inner city Mexican-American neighborhood and accepts only students whose families are below the Federal poverty line and who are academically-at-risk. After tutoring individual middle school students there for a while, I was conscious that the school’s limited budget prevented it from having a music program. Because of my love of Irish traditional music, at the time of my retirement I had taken some lessons on playing the Irish tin whistle. Concerned because of my limited amateur skills and not being a music teacher, I hesitated for two or three months before telling the principal that I would be willing to teach some of the students to play the instrument. As an experiment and to cause as little damage as possible, I started with four sixth graders. Six years later, I have about forty students per year learning to play the tin whistle but due to a lack of facilities and limited funds have to turn away many more each year. In addition to the fun the players experience, their confidence and self-images are improved by their opportunities to perform in public venues; they have appeared on local television, played in concert with the Irish-American traditional band Molly’s Revenge, performed at the annual San Francisco Crossroads Festival in March, won a St. Patrick’s Day talent show, and participate annually in a multicultural celebration produced by a nearby public school district as well as presenting two school concerts per year and other public performances.

Perhaps, influenced by the traditional Irish love of humor, what originally a few years ago started as a small St. Patrick’s Day skit with about 10 students has now grown to an hour-and-a-half production with as many as sixty students in our humorous annual St. Patrick’s Day

play entitled A Not Overly Serious Live of St. Patrick. Among some of the less well-known facts about St. Patrick are that his kidnappers were Mexican pirates, Patrick spoke fluent Spanish, and some Mexican-American Lucha Libre wrestlers such as Rey Mysterio helped Patrick throw the snakes out of Ireland. The annually revised play is very popular among the students, some of whom start asking to be in the play as early as September.

The brogues of my childhood and youth are gone now; the last one was my Aunt May Curtin Cameron, my mother's sister, who died at age 100 in 2004. As a present on her 100<sup>th</sup> birthday, I gave her a certificate of registration honoring her by having her name inscribed on the Statue of Liberty-Ellis Island American Immigrant Wall of Honor. On the certificate it states that she came to America from Ireland "joining those courageous men and women who came to this country in search of personal freedom, economic opportunity and a future hope for their families." Because of those Irish immigrants and the qualities they brought with them, Irish-Americans are now one of the most successful ethnic groups in America. My responsibility as an Irish-American includes supporting all immigrants to America in achieving the same freedoms, opportunities, and hopes.