

# Reintroducing Douglas Hyde

BY TIMOTHY G. MC MAHON

**D**OUGLAS HYDE'S *My American Journey* is both a beautiful book and a profoundly important one. Published originally in Irish as *Mo Thurus Go hAmerice* in 1937, its audience was limited to readers of Irish who sought out information on Hyde or on his most widely known endeavor as President of the Gaelic League (Conradh na Gaeilge). Now, a team of experts from Ireland, Northern Ireland, and the United States reintroduces this text in stunning fashion. Building on new research into Hyde's life and career—expertly rendered in the introduction by Liam Mac Mathúna—they provide the first translation into English, as well as an updated Irish-language text, copious footnotes that contextualize Hyde's narrative of his travels, and dozens of illustrations, most of which come from postcards sent home to the Hyde children during their parents' eight-month tour of the United States and Canada in 1905-1906.

Few giants of Irish history have been as underestimated as Hyde (1860-1949). That claim rests primarily on a tendency in Irish historiography to give primacy to political narratives and party leaders when discussing different eras (Tone, O'Connell,

Parnell, de Valera, Lemass). Even when we focus on culture, however, we often privilege those whose achievements are recognized for their genius and impact (Joyce, Yeats, Beckett, Ní Dhomhnaill, Heaney, Boland). Rarely do any of these named individuals fit neatly into a particular box. To claim otherwise would be ahistorical, but as President Michael D. Higgins notes in his Foreword to the present work, Hyde shaped so many spheres of modern Irish life ("an idealist, visionary, and scholar") that he does not get the study that he deserves.

To be sure, Hyde's name resonates with many, perhaps because his inaugural speech to the National Literary Society in 1892 ("The Necessity for De-Anglicising Ireland") is cited frequently in general studies of the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries, though its text is far less frequently analyzed carefully. Its call to reinvigorate the Irish language and the use of Irish surnames and placenames was not a mere kneejerk response to imposed norms from the government of the day, but a fundamental call for Irish people themselves to consider who they were and whether they saw themselves and their place in the world only or primarily through their relationship to their near neighbor in Britain. (The

present writer heard the Kenyan intellectual Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, author of *Decolonising the Mind: the Politics of Language in African Literature*, discussing the profound legacy of Hyde's insight in 2018 at a symposium at Mary Immaculate College in Limerick.)

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## Douglas Hyde.

MY AMERICAN JOURNEY

FOREWORD BY PRESIDENT MICHAEL D. HIGGINS.

EDITED BY LIAM MAC MATHÚNA, BRIAN Ó CONCHUBHAIR, NIALL COMER, CUAN Ó SEIREADÁIN, AND MÁIRE NIC AN BHAIRD.

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Over the course of his adult years, he affected so many aspects of modern Ireland that one might be tempted to wonder whether he was fictional or real: prize-winning student; poet, folklorist, and playwright; president of the National Literary Society and later a guarantor of the Irish Literary Theatre and vice president of the Irish National Theatre Society; founding president of the Gaelic League; Senator of the National University of Ireland and professor of Irish at University College Dublin; Senator of the Irish Free State; and

first President of Ireland. Little wonder that Gareth and Janet Egelson Dunleavy titled their biography of him *Douglas Hyde: A Maker of Modern Ireland*. That work came out some thirty years ago, but it is a mark of the still-marginal view of Hyde that so few books have focused on him since, and that one of them, the excellent study by Brian Murphy, is itself titled *Forgotten Patriot: Douglas Hyde and the Foundation of the Irish Presidency* (2017).

Forgotten no more. To begin with, Murphy's work appeared as events associated with the Decade of Centenaries raised awareness about the Gaelic revival's impact on the revolutionary generation. Further, Irish-language scholars in Ireland, including Mac Mathúna (Professor Emeritus at UCD) and Nic an Bhaird (from Maynooth University), as well as American-based scholars such as the University of Notre Dame's Ó Conchubhair, have benefitted from new and newly recovered materials from the Gaelic League, of which Comer—a lecturer in Irish at Ulster University—is president and Ó Seireadáin is Curator. Together they reintroduce Hyde to present-day readers, demonstrating some of what made him the fourth most popular man in Ireland in 1905, according to a poll of 15,000 readers of the *Irish Independent*. (Only John Redmond,

leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party, Cardinal Michael Logue, and the Archbishop of Dublin, Dr. William Walsh, outpolled the scholar-activist at that time.)

Hyde comes across as insightful, funny, engaging, observant, and thankful. His journey was, after all, a fund-raising trip, and the New York attorney and philanthropist John Quinn, to whom Hyde dedicated the 1937 original, oversaw his itinerary. Quinn had met Hyde, as well as Yeats, a couple of years earlier when they were all visiting Lady Gregory. Quinn believed that what the language and literary movements were doing in Ireland deserved support, but for that support to come from Irish Americans—especially the growing ranks of well-off Irish Americans with whom Quinn was connected—the leading Irish figures would need to speak directly to them. Yeats actually went to the US two years before Hyde, and one of the standard talks on his tour referenced the Gaelic movement. When Hyde finally consented to make his own trip in the autumn of 1905, the ground had been well prepared. In fact, a robust series of lectures to university audiences (the honoraria from which supported the Hydys over the eight months of the trip) augmented public lectures on behalf of the Gaelic League. All told, they traveled more than

50,000 miles and raised nearly \$64,000. The impact of this money cannot be overstated in the context of understanding the legacies of the Gaelic Revival. Arguably the League's most impressive and impactful campaign—the effort to ensure that knowledge of Irish was compulsory for students in the National University of Ireland—could not have succeeded as it did in 1910 without a fully operational and engaged membership, something only achievable with the American money supplementing branch dues and collections

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from the annual Irish Language Week (Seachtain na Gaeilge).

The story of the trip itself makes entertaining reading. One follows Hyde from New York, through New England, across the Midwest, to the West Coast, back to the Midwest and then South, before journeying

to southern Canada, and back to the East Coast. Readers meet figures who shaped early-twentieth-century America, as Hyde dined (twice) with President Theodore Roosevelt, met governors, senators, leading church figures, university officials and community leaders, and Irish-American activists. He was part celebrity, part diplomat, part tourist. Nowhere captured his and Lucy's hearts or imaginations more so than San Francisco, which served as the hub of their multi-week West Coast swing. The depth of their affection for the city and the measure of Hyde as a person can be found in his response to the news of the Great Earthquake of 1906, which hit San Francisco just weeks after they had moved east again. After cabling the League executive in Dublin for permission, he instructed Quinn to send \$5,000 to Fr. Peter Yorke—a cousin to Major John MacBride, a stalwart supporter of the League, and a fiery labor activist—for earthquake relief. (As Hyde notes at the end of the text, that generosity was reciprocated, and the Californians returned that amount to him and the League a few years later.)

It is important, of course, to see the book for what it was—a piece of campaign literature reflecting back on events that

occurred three decades earlier. Hyde published it on the eve of his nomination to be Ireland's first president, alongside another memoir that detailed his early association with the Gaelic League, *Mise agus An Connradh go dtí 1905* (1937). As evidence of his journey, therefore, one must be cognizant that he was reconstructing events from memory, albeit with reference to his extensive diaries and correspondence. The present edition, meanwhile, carries that reconstruction further, with its notes and illustrations affording modern-day readers insights into Hyde the campaigner, as well as offering his snapshots of American society in the first decade of the twentieth century.

*My American Journey* should take an honored place on the shelves of those interested in the connections between Ireland and Irish-America, and especially those with an interest in the Gaelic Revival and its distinct manifestation in the US as contrasted with (and in relationship to) its home base in Ireland. Most important, it will become a landmark in the burgeoning research lifting Douglas Hyde to the place he deserves in the historical consciousness. •

—Marquette University