

# DOUGLAS HYDE: MY AMERICAN JOURNEY

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From the final third of the nineteenth century the ‘American tour’ became a regular feature of the strategic plans of a succession of leaders of political and cultural movements in Ireland.

As the largely urban post-Famine settlements of Irish Catholics began to advance in American society – in politics, the professions (notably the law), labour organisations and select arteries of trade and commerce – Irish leaders came to see Irish-America as a potential source of significant support, if effectively mobilised. An historical sense of grievance brought from Ireland and burnished by the hostility experienced by the Catholic Irish communities

as they struggled to improve their condition, ensured that at least a significant portion of these Irish-Americans retained an interest in Ireland and a desire to see it prosper and be a suitably dignified motherland from which they could proudly claim ancestry.

Committed Irish-Americawas not, however, a passive or readily malleable force. Not only were there the deep divisions between the more militant separatists and the more moderate nationalist sympathisers, but regional and personal rivalries and factions made the challenge of effectively harnessing Irish-American support a formidable task. Any leaders of an Irish-based movement undertaking the American visit, in the hope of raising morale and money, would have to navigate the treacherous waters of the competing egos and rival agendas

of their hosts. This would become clear to de Valera in 1919 and 1920, and notoriously so during the battle for the hearts, minds, money and political influence of Irish-America that marked the decades of conflict in Northern Ireland after 1968.

Cultural evangelists, though not as violently projected into the factionalism of the Irish-American political scene, were required nonetheless to demonstrate an assured diplomatic

poise, if they were not to offend one or other of the various parties whose support they were seeking. The fund-raising visit of Douglas Hyde to the U.S.A. in 1905–06 was – by any criteria one might wish to apply – a resounding success. Landing in New York on 15 November 1905, Hyde’s coast-to coast tour covered 19,000 miles, with engagements and speeches in more than sixty centres. His audiences numbered more than 75,000 in total and he returned to Ireland in mid-June 1906 having raised \$50,000 net for the Gaelic league programme of work. Hydewas at the height of his powers and of public affection in Ireland at

the time of his tour. The Gaelic League's message of cultural revival – and the general gospel of national pride and self-respect that it preached – attracted support across a broad spectrum of the thinking public, even if the actual prescription of the league (reverse language-shift) would prove too strong a dose for many of the political and clerical notables who were happy to express general support for the message of self-reliance.

Hyde was not a total stranger to North America, having spent the year 1890–91 lecturing in New Brunswick, and the Gaelic League had contacts throughout the U.S.A. However, the key to Hyde's successful tour was the organisational direction and support provided by John Quinn, a wealthy Irish-American lawyer and patron of the arts in New York. Attracted to the wider project of Irish cultural revival, Quinn, at once patrician and practical, was the initial proposer of Hyde's tour, having already organised a successful tour for W. B. Yeats. He enjoyed enviable access to the great, the good and the wealthy of early twentieth-century Irish-America and was determined that Hyde should give priority to cultivating this class. Hyde understood this, but was also drawn to the larger audiences of modest but ideologically more committed Irish-Americans across the continent. Quinn's contacts opened doors beyond Irish-America: Hyde dined twice with President Theodore Roosevelt and was respectfully received by leaders of various Ivy League universities and other respected civic dignitaries.

Hyde kept a record of his trip and in 1937 published (in Irish) two volumes of memoir, the second of which was *Mo thuras go hAmerice*. The 'journey' provides a fascinating who's who of a cross-section of culturally and politically engaged Irish-America at the opening of the twentieth century, together with a travel commentary rich in observations of landscape and development across the continent. It also provides further evidence of Hyde's character: behind the seemingly guileless and homely scholar, folklorist and cultural idealist, Hyde was always quite astute in judging the tone and content of his formal presentations and, when required, of his informal conversations.

This splendid new edition provides a standardised Irish version of the original, a close English translation (by Brian Ó Conchubhair), twenty-eight pages of notes (drawing on new archival sources), a rich selection of illustrations (photos, postcards, excerpts from primary sources) and a perceptive 'Introduction' (by Liam MacMathúna). The result is a credit to publisher and editors alike.

Tá an t-eagrán nua seo de chuntas an Chraoibhín ar a thuras go Meiriceá sa bhliain 1905–06 curtha amach le barr slachta ag eagarthóirí agus foilsitheoir araon. Leagan glan,

caighdeánach de bhuntéacs de hÍde; nótaí mínithe agus faisnéise (ag tarraingt ar bhunábhar nua), lear mór léaráidí, liosta foinsí agus leabharliosta, maraon le ‘Réamhrá’ meáite ag Liam MacMathúna. Ba mhaith ab fhiú leagan Béarla den ‘Turus’ a chur ar fáil do scoláirí agus do mhórphobal an Bhéarla, le go bhfaighidís léargas ar an ngréasán luachmhar Gael-Mheiriceánach a bhí sásta tacaíocht a thabhairt don athbheochain chultúrtha i dtír a sinsir ag tús na fichiú aoise.

Hyde’s triumphant tour of 1905–06 was very likely a distant memory for most Irish people by the mid-1930s. His resignation from the Gaelic League presidency in 1915 (when the militant separatists edged it into an explicitly political stance) heralded for Hyde a lengthy period of withdrawal into the world of scholarship and academe. A brief period in the Free State senate (1923–5) did not, to his disappointment, signal a prolonged return to public prominence. By 1937, when he published his two volumes of memoir, the memory of his and the Gaelic League’s halcyon days was fading. *Mo thuras go hAimerice* recalled those halcyon days for Irish-speakers. Within the year de Valera had nominated Hyde to the reconstituted Seanad and shortly thereafter Hyde was elected, unopposed, as the first president of Ireland under de Valera’s new constitution. In a curious way, *Mo thuras go hAimerice* had ended as an bóthar go hÁras an Uachtaráin.

– GEARÓID Ó TUATHAIGH