

# 'I had to win New York's respect': Douglas Hyde's American odyssey

A new bilingual book gives a vivid account from Gaelic League founder and the first president of Ireland Douglas Hyde about a 1905 trip to the United States, where he visited 60 cities and sold out Carnegie Hall. Here is an extract ...



**3** *First president: Douglas Hyde in 1938, after he was sworn in*

December 7 2019 2:30 AM

We made land at New York on November 15, 1905 and even before we disembarked the ship, the journalists visited and interviewed us. The American 'reporter' has to say something and it worries him little, on occasions, if he has to invent it himself. I was taken aback the following morning to read that I had a "small" moustache and a vivid green necktie. Needless to say, I wore nothing green. I was dressed all in black, jet-black, because of my father's

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death but the reporter described me as wearing "bottle green". These newspaper people are a great irritation.

I had discussed them on board ship with a theatre woman, who had spent almost 40 years in America, and asked how best to deal with them. She sagely advised me to "go with them, as you would with any other person and you will find that they will be accepting of you". Travelling America I recalled that counsel and I followed it whenever I was interviewed by a reporter. And they posed the most difficult and vexing questions! Wherever I went, the reporter would ask, "What are the MPs doing for the Irish language?" and many other questions about the MPs and Parliament.

It was my habit, when asked such questions, to pause for a little while, take out my cigarette case, slowly light a cigarette, offer my interviewer a cigarette and at the same time say, "Now, my dear man, I wish to give you all the facts - how do you like my cigarette? But you know, just between us, there are certain questions that I prefer not to be asked, but you know that as well as I do." I was always very courteous with them and can say that I went across the whole country without any trouble, except for one occasion.

I was in one remote place - I do not recall its name now - and I was exhausted from constant talking. In the middle of the night, I heard a knock, followed by another knock, on the locked door. I paid no attention initially, but my patience waned in the end, and I refused to grant the man entry.



**33** Messages home: Postcards from Hyde's 1905 visit to the US including of Theodore Roosevelt and his family, and The White House

I uttered a few words through the door, which of course were less than conciliatory. He vanished and wrote a report that appeared in the following day's paper. Pretending to have interviewed me, he claimed that I said I planned a large meeting of the Irish in that town at

the end of the year and that the Irish should begin preparations immediately. I had to telegraph New York denying the claim in that article and advising them to ignore it. If I was cautious before this, I was more mindful than ever afterwards to treat reporters carefully whether in the light of day or the dark of night.

A great number came to the ship to welcome me. Among them were John Quinn who organised and directed the entire operation, Tomás Bán who had been working for a month in the city, Judge Keogh and many others. Out of respect for me, customs declined to search my luggage and allowed me entry without any formalities. Quinn brought me to the large Hotel Manhattan where a suite of rooms awaited us, because as he himself said, "Nobody is respected here unless he stays in a top place."

I remained four days in the Manhattan with reporters constantly interviewing me. I had to do my best to earn New York's respect; almost all the papers follow New York's lead, and if they do not copy them, they certainly pay great attention. Therefore, I had to do my utmost to ensure that the newspapers would be favourable to me.

When I had spent four days in the Manhattan, Quinn took us to his own place at 120 Broadway. Tomás Bán, (who had been staying there), had left a while before. (This was his method of work: On arriving in a city, he went to everyone he knew or knew of and to those whose names he was given as people who were favourable toward the language movement. Among them were bishops, priests, doctors, lawyers, titans of business, newspapermen, and the Irish societies; his role was to convene them to organise the meetings at which I would speak, and to seek financial support, as well as the papers' goodwill and adequate publicity.) Quinn had an 'apartment' and it contained a comfortable room for us.

My first engagement was at Harvard, perhaps the most famous university in America, on the 20th of the month. I went from New York to Boston on the train that day, and Dr Robinson, Professor of Celtic Studies, and Fr O'Flanagan, met me at the station. Robinson took me to his own home, and I had just enough time to eat dinner and change my clothes before being taken to the University Lecture Hall to speak on Irish folklore. Eliot, the University President, was absent, but Dean Briggs, the next in charge, was present. He was shy and nervous; on ascending the stairs, we were at cross-purposes as to whom should enter the room first; once we entered, he was unsure whether I should sit to his left or right. They are much more circumspect in America about such trivial things than in Ireland. We finally entered the room. There were some 500 in attendance, both faculty and students. I made them laugh several times during my lecture, and all agreed that my lecture was "informal", which pleased them since they are unaccustomed to such. We all retired to Robinson's home and had a great party, some 70 of us, professors and their wives. I thought those distinguished women were the nicest I had seen until then and that increased my respect for the professors' acumen.

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**33** A postcard of Theodore Roosevelt and family sent back by Douglas Hyde

I returned to New York on the morrow and on the same night at 11, Quinn and I boarded a train to Washington DC. We had a sleeper carriage and arrived at the premier state of America at seven or eight the following morning. We had an invitation from President Roosevelt himself to dine with him for lunch. Quinn and I went to the White House at one o'clock and the President welcomed us warmly.

He introduced us to his wife, a pleasant lady, to their second daughter (Alice, the eldest, known as the princess was not at home), to his sister-in-law, and to the other children, and we sat for lunch with no fuss or ceremony. It was a simple lunch with one black servant waiting on us; a cup of tea and glass of sherry to drink. Apples and green grapes, direct from the barrel, with ashes still on them, for the second course.

He was very well-informed about Irish and Norse mythology and compared them.

We smoked in each other's company after lunch; he informed us that he had had Irish nurses when he was young and that he had always known the names of Cú Chulainn and Fionn Mac Cumhail long before he saw them written. He also said his own family had Irish nurses, too.

He was of the opinion that there were still too many "colonies" in America; it was a nation composed of many nations and since there were so many Irish in their midst, America should accept everything good, worthy or interesting in the life of the Irish and make their own of it. He said he was to write an article for the North American Review urging wealthy Irishmen in the United States to establish Irish-language professorships in the colleges.

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Now came the day of reckoning: the great meeting I was to have at Carnegie Hall. It was well publicised in advance. The first-tier box tickets were auctioned in advance at Hoffman House

and raised a lot of money thanks to Quinn. He convened the people and appointed Finley Peter Dunne, a man known throughout America as 'Mister Dooley', to sell the boxes.

But when he was not available, they appointed another well-known man to sell them. Some of the boxes went for up to \$300. They were 140 Vice-Presidents there, all wealthy and famous people and they were generous with their money when purchasing the boxes. But the second-class boxes were sold to a man who undertook to purchase them for the counties as there is a special society for the Irish counties. This man did not pay in advance since there was no reason to doubt him. On the night of the meeting, however, he reneged on the deal claiming that he had failed to sell the tickets, in addition to returning 150 tickets that he had purchased.

This, it appears, was a deliberate effort to sabotage the meeting.

John Quinn was directing everything; he was standing at the door when the box tickets were, unexpectedly, returned. Fearing that the boxes would be empty and the meeting ruined, what did he do, but went immediately to those who only had standard tickets (which cost a dollar each) and ushered them into the empty boxes. The theatre was now full and none the wiser to what had transpired. The meeting was scheduled to start at eight o'clock, but due to what happened, it was later than 8.30pm when it started.

Chief Justice Keogh chaired the meeting, and Bourke Cockran, a wealthy congressman, and a solid Irishman, introduced me to the crowd. He had been urged beforehand not to speak for more than 15 minutes. He promised and guaranteed that he would not exceed that limit but did not keep his word. He has a fine voice, and he is said to be the finest orator in the States and I believe that. Once he commenced his speech with a large audience listening, he could not control himself, and he spoke for 33 minutes - and speaking all the while on a topic he knew nothing about! When he finished, my friend Patrick O'Shea performed 'Maidrín Rua' and 'Aililiú na Gamhna'. The High-Court Judge Dowling spoke, and proposed a motion in favour of the Irish language and called on me to deliver my lecture.

I began then with my heart throbbing with fear. I commenced in Irish and continued thus for five minutes. Many people understood me, but most were terrified.

They thought I intended to continue in Irish for the entire night. I then switched to English and delivered *mutatis mutandis* almost the same lecture I had frequently given at home on the de-anglicisation of Ireland. I spoke for an hour and a half and everyone listened attentively - laughing and praising - to every word I uttered. It was clear that they were of one mind with me, and that encouraged me to deliver my message forcibly. That I did.

Commencing in Irish, I said that we were gathered to strike a blow for the poor old woman, but upon my word, I said, she is no longer a poor old woman but a hearty young girl with whom thousands upon thousands are falling in love. While still poor, she is young, beautiful, and attractive. Moreover, there are things worse than poverty. Nevertheless, be she rich or poor, she is our own Ireland, and we are going to raise her. Twelve years ago, we found our country, I said, existing as a province, nay an English county, a small miserable annex; and we are making a nation of her.

Tomás Bán and I came here to explain and share what we are accomplishing in Ireland. There is a great difference between Ireland today and Ireland 12 years ago. Then there were but two parties in Ireland; the Lords and the tenants, fighting, knocking and bashing each other. That fight is now almost over, thank God. People are gaining control of the country's land again

and the Lords are becoming more Irish since they relinquished their land. At the end of the talk, I said, "I care not a toss for an Ireland with the language, music, sports, dances and manners of the foreigners, she matters little to me as such an Ireland would only be a little English annex, and I'd prefer to live in England proper than in such an annex." I spoke in English henceforth.

After my lecture, Diarmuid Lynch, President of the New York Gaelic League, presented me with an address and it was a lovely scroll. These were the concluding words - I only mention them here as they were prophetic, more or less, thank God - "May God in all his glory grant you long life and health, O Irish Prince; nor may he call you to Himself until Ireland is free from English oppression." Who on that occasion would have believed that the English would be gone so soon from the 26 counties and that Irish would be accepted as a national language?

The following day, the newspapers carried accounts of the meeting; they were univocal in their praise and all agreed that no such meeting of Irishmen had occurred in New York since the time of Parnell.

*'Douglas Hyde: My American Journey', edited by Liam Mac Mathúna, Niall Comer, Cuan Ó Seireadáin & Máire Nic an Bhaird; translated by Brian Ó Conchubhair. First published in Irish in 1937, this collection of journal and diary entries has been published for the first time in a bilingual edition.*