



THE IRISH ASSOCIATION
for cultural, economic and social relations

75th Anniversary Dinner President's Remarks

The Irish Association has its origins in the dark days of the 1930's. Those were dark days indeed throughout this island. The economic war of DeValera's Free State not only created hardship for its citizens but produced a bitter atmosphere in Anglo –Irish relations.

Equally in Northern Ireland sectarian riots prevailed. 1933 saw the first sectarian murder for eleven years. In 1934 and 1935 homes are destroyed in the midst of sectarian confrontations. The riots of July 1935 left thirteen people dead and over two-thousand homeless. Towns in then Irish Free State were not exempt. Letterkenny, Limerick and Clones saw their sectarianism also.

It was against this background that Major-General Hugh Montgomery began a correspondence with his close friend Viscount Charlemont which was to led to the foundation of the Association, in 1938 **'to make reason and goodwill take the place of passion and prejudice in Ireland, north and south'**. Montgomery, Charlemont, and the *ad hoc* group were soon joined by leading figures from the South, including Donal O'Sullivan, Frank MacDermot and J.J. Horgan. These were men of vision.

The *three stands* of the Belfast Agreement of 1998 had their origin – not in the corridors of power at Westminster or the Dail - but in a Leaflet produced by this Association in 1938! This leaflet set out the aims of the Association to further better relations between:

1. Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland
2. The people of Northern Ireland and the Irish Free State (as it then was)
3. The people of Great Britain and Ireland

Viscount Charlemont held the Presidency 1938–1946. Charlemont had been a Company commander in the 5th Tyrone Regiment of the Ulster Volunteer Force, before being

commissioned into the Coldstream Guards in 1914. A Member of the Senate of Northern Ireland from 1925 to 1937, served as Minister of Education 1926 to 1937. He was, like most of his generation, a member of the Orange Order.

The purpose of this Association has always been to keep the channels of communications open even when mutual distrust, was at its highest. The Association has consistently provided the broadest platform for the discussion of the most pressing and difficult issues in Irish life.

Except for those committed to violence, it has been addressed by the entire spectrum of Irish opinion. Activities throughout the years bear out the fact that, contrary to popular opinion, the Association is not a talking shop for “the great and the good”.

The Seminars and Conferences – many of which were not for the faint hearted – produced debates between Austin Currie and Sammy Wilson, or ex paramilitaries Shane Paul O’Doherty and Gusty Spence and churchmen Cardinal O’Fiach and Archbishop Eames - whose conference was picketed!

We want thank the two Governments who through various agencies have supported us financially over the years – particularly the DFA who have been very generous.

Every organisation must be open to self-examination. Having examined ourselves closely in recent years we are convinced that we are still needed and we can still play a part in fostering better relationships.

The vision of our founders is still our vision today. It is encouraging to see that strands two and three – that is RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN - The people of Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic and - The people of Great Britain and Ireland have never been better.

It is strand one identified as far back as 1938 which still eludes us – that is – relationships between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland.

The local news reports of today bear a striking similarity to seventy-five years ago as the scourge of sectarianism is played out in both sectarian language and sectarian motivated

violence. The street names of 1938 keep reappearing – Union Street, North Street, Millfield, York Street, Donegall Street, Sandy Row, Ormeau Road.

In his Nobel Lecture, David Trimble said:

The dark shadow we seem to see in the distance is not really a mountain ahead, but the shadow of the mountain behind - a shadow from the past thrown forward into our future. It is a dark sludge of historical sectarianism. We can leave it behind us if we wish.

It is the blight of sectarianism which still confronts us on a daily basis. This is the unfinished business of the Belfast Agreement - **and of the first aim of the Irish Association.**

In order to continue to address this issue the Association is embarking, with History Ireland, to mark a “Decade of Commemorations” the first of which is scheduled for 10th December in Belfast City Hall, when we will be examining the Volunteering Tradition in Ireland.

We believe by examining these issues together we can dispel the myths of history which still enslave many, and unless checked, has the potential of destroying the lives of future generations.

We cannot solve the issue of sectarianism alone. Therefore, as we have in the past, so we will continue in the future to challenge everyone in **civic** and **political** society to address sectarianism both by **word** and by **deed**.

Secretary of State, Tánaiste, distinguished guests ladies and gentlemen; the Irish Association has spent the last seventy-five years addressing the issues of relationships among all our peoples.

We will continue to do so for as long as it takes. Because we are committed to a positive future in this our island home – because this island belongs to all of us.

Brian Kennaway (Rev)

President

9th November 2013