

Abraham Lincoln and Robert Emmet

Contributed by Brian P. Hegarty Jr.

When you think of Irish United States Presidents, who is the first that comes to mind? Grant, McKinley, Kennedy, Biden or perhaps another one that I have not mentioned? For me, it is John F. Kennedy. Being Catholic and addressing Ireland's Dáil Éireann may have something to do with it. However, most likely it is for the framed picture of John Kennedy in my grandparents' home that I remember seeing my entire youthful life.



Not on the list above is Abraham Lincoln. That is because he is of English descent. However, he duly belongs in the Irish President category not because of his blood line but as a president who had a thoughtful and affectionate affinity for the plight of the Irish. In 1847, Lincoln contributed \$10 for relief of the Irish during the Great Famine, not an inconsiderable amount of money at the time that private soldiers during the Mexican War were being paid \$8 per month. That would translate to more than \$500 today. (Research also shows that US President James L. Polk gave \$50).

When Lincoln visited General McClellan at Harrison's Landing, Virginia, he picked up a corner of one of the Irish colors, kissed it and said, "God Bless the Irish Flag."

When Irish Catholics faced discrimination in this country, Lincoln spoke up for them in spite of the fact that most Irish Catholics were Democrats. At the height of political success of the Know-Nothing movement in 1855 Lincoln, in a letter to his friend Joshua Speed, wrote: "I am not a Know-Nothing. That is certain. How could I be? How can any one who abhors the oppression of negroes, be in favor of degrading classes of white people? Our progress of degeneracy appears to me to be pretty rapid. As a nation, we begin by declaring that "all men are created equal." We now practically read it "all men are created equal, except negroes." When the Know-Nothings get control, it will read "all men are created equal, except negroes, and foreigners, and Catholics."



As young man, Lincoln is known to have memorized Robert Emmet's speech at the dock by heart. Robert Emmet, a protestant (Church of Ireland) Irishman, just twenty-five at the time, was sentenced to be hanged, drawn, and quartered in 1803 after his capture by the English for leading an unsuccessful insurrection in Dublin. Emmet's family was sympathetic to the plight of their Catholic countrymen, as they had been sympathetic to the cause of the patriots in the American Revolution. Unbeknownst to Emmet, his chief defense counsel had been bribed by the English to help assure his conviction, although his junior defense counsel defended Emmet with all his skill. Emmett took full advantage of his opportunity to speak before sentencing. What followed was a masterful piece of oration that Lincoln learned and delivered often as a party piece for dignitaries visiting Perry County, Indiana (now Spencer County), where he lived.

The influence that Robert Emmet had on Lincoln would be with him through his life and Presidency. Emmet's speech was a passionate oration. "Let no man write my epitaph: for as no man who knows my motives dare now vindicate them, let not prejudice or ignorance asperse them. Let them rest in obscurity and peace, my memory be left in oblivion and my tomb remain uninscribed, until other times, and other men, can do justice to my character. When my country takes her place among the nations of the earth, then, and not until then, let my epitaph be written."

In 1865, Lincoln was considering an appeal to spare a boy soldier accused of being a confederate spy when Delaware Senator Willard Saulsbury, who in January 1863 had called the president "a weak and imbecile man, the weakest that I ever knew in a high place," appealed for clemency. Saulsbury played the Emmet card. He wrote, "You know I am no political friend of yours. You know I neither ask or expect any personal favor from you or your administration. All I ask of you is to read the defense of this young man Samuel B. Davis, unassisted by counsel, compare it with the celebrated defense of Emmet, and act as the judgement and the heart of the President of the United States should act." The sentence was duly commuted.

Emmet's sympathy with the American revolution, as addressed in his speech at the dock, cemented his links with our nation. He was charged with being an emissary of France, which he was not. The English alleged that his wish was to sell the independence of Ireland to France. A change of masters. Emmet states: "I looked, indeed, for assistance of France; I wished to prove to France and the world that Irishmen deserved to be assisted—that they were indignant at slavery, and ready to assert the independence and liberty of their country; I wished to procure for my country the guarantee which Washington procured for America... These were my objects; not to receive new taskmasters, but to expel old tyrants. And it was for these ends I sought aid from France; because France, even as an enemy, could not be more implacable than the enemy already in the bosom of my country."

It is believed that Emmet was planning to escape to America with his fiancé before his capture. His brother, Thomas, emigrated shortly thereafter, eventually becoming New York attorney general. In 1856, at the Republican National Convention in New York, Lincoln was defeated for the party's vice-presidential nomination. Here he had direct contact with a member of the Emmet family. Thomas' son was the convention chairman and keynote speaker, New York judge and politician, Robert Emmet. Judge Emmet made a passionate attack on the Democrats and their embrace of slavery and may have influenced Lincoln.

Emmet's famous speech from the dock lives on inspiring countless millions in years to come, including a man who would be born in far off Kentucky six years after Emmet's death.