

John Fitzgerald Kennedy 's Visit to Ireland

Contributed by Brian P. Hegarty Jr.



Less than 24 hours after her husband was assassinated in Dallas, Jackie Kennedy was on the phone to the Irish Ambassador to the United States. The reason for her call was to request the presence of the Irish Army Cadets rifle drill team at President Kennedy's funeral. The request was formally conveyed by the U. S. Ambassador to Ireland, Matthew McCloskey, to then Taoiseach, **Seán** Lemass, on the evening of November 23, 1963. Mr. Lemass immediately gave the go ahead.

The Irish Defence Forces 37th Cadet Class would play at the Kennedy graveside as part of the funeral ceremony at Arlington National Cemetery. President Kennedy had witnessed them perform a rifle drill at Arbour Hill in Dublin where he laid a wreath on the graves of fourteen leaders of the 1916 Rising during his visit to Ireland in June 1963. He described it as the finest honor guard he had ever seen. The cadets performed their rifle drill exercise just feet from the president's grave with commands in the Irish language echoing over the rolling grounds of Arlington National Cemetery.

John Fitzgerald Kennedy's term in office is best remembered for the role he played in the cold war. His response to the Cuban Missile Crisis, his determination to surpass the USSR in the 'Space Race,' and his shocking assassination in November 1963 are the events most often cited when speaking of his legacy. However, his charismatic personality, iconic image and impassioned oratory have stood the test of time.

His emotional and poignant speeches, whether delivered from the steps of Capitol Hill or in front of the Berlin Wall, connected with his audience, and often signaled landmark shifts in US domestic and foreign policies. His address to the joint Irish Houses of the Oireachtas on June 28, 1963, was one such moment.

John Fitzgerald Kennedy was proud to be the First American President to visit Ireland during his term in office. Ireland is the country from which all eight of his great grandparents had fled in the 19th century. Kennedy described his visit to Ireland in June 1963 as one of the most emotional periods of his life. He had visited three times previously, with his father in 1939, after his service in World War II in 1945, and as a senator.

Kennedy would spend four days in the country visiting Dublin, Cork, Galway, Limerick, and his family's ancestral home in Wexford. His arrival was long anticipated, and he was happily received by the Irish people. Although Kennedy was not the first White House President to have visited Ireland (this honor belongs to Ulysses S. Grant who visited in 1879 during his tour of Europe, two years after leaving office). JFK's status as the first Roman Catholic elected President to visit an independent Irish state heralded his visit as

significant. The President also benefited from the advent of television. The young **Republic had only launched its first television station, Telefís Éireann, two years earlier** but Kennedy had long mastered the medium. His state visit was extensively recorded, and this included his twenty-five-minute **personal address to the Dáil Éireann; which was** also a first by a foreign head of state.

He spoke at length about the long, shared history of Ireland and the United States; the impact that Irish immigrants had in shaping and advancing America and its institutions, and the role they had, and continued to play in the defense of liberty and freedom of the world.

He also referenced and quoted several Irishmen who had played key roles in American history such as James Hoban, the architect of the White House; John Barry, the father of the US Navy; John Boyle O'Reilly, a noted Fenian leader, poet and journalist, and Thomas Francis Meagher, the leader of the Irish Brigade in the Union Army in the American Civil War and later Acting Governor of Montana Territory.

President Kennedy presented one of the flags of Meagher's battalion, the 'Fighting 69th', to the Irish people and ended his address with a call to action, announcing that Ireland's hour had come and that her role on the global stage was to ensure 'peace with freedom'.

JFK's ascent to the pinnacle of US politics was an 'Irish' success story to be proud of and often his portrait could be found beside that of the Pope in Irish homes long after he had departed from Ireland. Ireland claimed him as their own.

When leaving Ireland from Shannon Airport he said, "This is not the land of my birth, but it is the land for which I hold the greatest affection, and I certainly will come back in the springtime."