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St. Patrick's Day

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THE IRISH HERITAGE IN AMERICA

This day has been given over to parades, to feasting and to other more robust pursuits. That is true, not only here in Pittston, Pennsylvania but in cities throughout the nation and the world. Wherever two or more Irishmen -- actual or by inclination -- are to be found, there has been a great time today. On second thought, I shall revise that and say wherever one or more Irishmen can be found.

The celebration begun this morning will go on far into the night. All in all, the day should add up to a great deal of pleasure, much happiness and, though I regret to say it, some remorse tomorrow morning. Before the final account of this St. Patrick's day, 1955, is in, however, I want to add another item to the books. I want to enter a sober note. St. Patrick's day has its light side which we know very well. It also has a serious side and that we may not know so well.

In these days we are apt to take for granted the work of men like St. Patrick. Centuries divide us from the time when he first set foot on the shores of Ireland. At that time, western civilization was just emerging from the ruins of the Roman Empire. America was a land still undiscovered.

The unknown America of that era is a mighty America today. We have grown rich and powerful. In some ways, we have also grown

careless, careless of the things of God; but it was not always so. There was a time when men lived more for the things of the spirit. There was an era when men were more closely guided by the Commandments of God and the precepts of Christ. St. Patrick was such a man. He was a man with a message, who dedicated himself wholeheartedly to God, to the service of the Church and to the people of Ireland.

The Roman Empire had fallen by the time St. Patrick began his mission to Ireland. That citadel of paganism, materialism and militarism had long since ceased to be a center of civilization. It had settled into its last resting place beside other great but dead civilizations. A dark age had set in. An age of ignorance and brutality had enveloped Europe. The continent was in shambles, fragmented, and easy prey to hostile barbaric invaders from the East.

Until St. Patrick arrived Ireland too was a pagan nation, incredible as it may seem. But from that moment on Easter Sunday when on the hills of Tara, Patrick challenged the Druid High Priests, Ireland was destined to be brought into the Christian fold. Preaching throughout the island, establishing churches everywhere, St. Patrick saved the soul of Ireland. He made the Irish do for God what they would never do for any man -- he made them behave.

Ireland became and remained until the discovery of America the westernmost outpost of Christendom. The island played a major part in the preservation of the Christian heritage through the long twilight of the Dark Ages.

I do not have to stretch the historical analogies too far to point out that there are disturbing similarities between the situation that prevailed in St. Patrick's time and that which exists today. Although Europe has survived the devastation of two great wars, weaknesses and divisions remain beneath the surface. At the eastern gates of the continent, barbarism again gathers its forces and grows restless.

In these uncertain times the position of the United States is not unlike that of the Ireland of St. Patrick. We stand apart from the turmoil that grips the European continent, but like Ireland of old we cannot escape it. Like Ireland of old, this country has a great contribution to make to the preservation of the western world. That world needs our strength, our fortitude, our faith and our compassion.

An Irishman can understand these needs. He had them himself once, and they were filled by St. Patrick and the Church that came with him. That is one reason why this country, in being called upon to make a similar contribution in the present day, is fortunate to have its Irish heritage.

It is a heritage which as you know goes back to the earliest days of the nation. It has been transmitted through the Irish patriots, the churchmen, writers, and poets and by the millions who migrated from Ireland to these shores over the years. This heritage has now passed into the mainstream of American life. It blends with that of other races

and nationalities to make up this great land of ours. The Irish heritage in America is a part of the totality of American life, but it is also a thing apart. Its distinctiveness is kept alive by meetings such as this one tonight.

We need that heritage from Ireland now more than ever before. We need it for survival. We need it if, under the hand of God, we are to continue to move forward to new heights of achievement.

For that heritage is the stuff out of which peoples fashion their greatness under God. It is first of all the love of freedom. Ireland has taught us to hate oppression and discrimination. In the course of centuries her sons and daughters learned to recognize the ugly faces of these twin evils, and they have not forgotten them. Nor have their descendants in America.

From the day when King Henry II landed on Irish soil in the 12th Century until the turbulent era of the "black and tans," the Irishman felt in one way or another the heavy boot of repression. It crushed out his independence. It deprived him of his right to work out his own economic and social destiny. It dispossessed him culturally and intellectually. More than anything else it made him understand the desperate need of man to draw his breath in the air of liberty. The rage in the heart of the Irishman found expression in one word, "saorsa" (pronounced say-er-sa), freedom. And that word has echoed

down through the centuries, passed on from generation to generation. Wherever men have been enslaved you will usually find Irishmen have not only sympathized with them but fought to free them.

The fighting spirit of Ireland, like the love of liberty is also part of our heritage. It, too, has seeped into the blood of America. In the dilution, of course, the boiling point is not quite as low as in the pure Irish form. Even that, however, has its compensations. Not so much of it is spilled unnecessarily.

The fighting spirit of Ireland developed in two directions: one political and the other military. In the political arena, the great Irish patriots of the 19th century set a pattern of integrity, courage and brilliance for all those who came after. Led by men of the caliber of Daniel O'Connell and Charles Stewart Parnell, they compelled the British gradually to acknowledge the justice of their demands for freedom. And while they fought the great battles of wit and law in the legislative halls of England, others fought elsewhere and in other ways. In the darkened streets and alleys of Dublin and in the quiet of the Irish countryside, men with love and iron in their hearts saw to it that the promises of freedom were kept, even at the cost of their lives.

If the Irishman has gained a reputation as a fighter it is because through the centuries to survive meant to fight. His was a struggle not alone against political tyranny but against hunger, poverty, ignorance and decay. He had no allies in this fight except his noble Church. That

was enough. He fought with the invincible conviction that only a just cause can supply. He helped to teach America to fight in the same fashion, and I hope that we never forget the lesson.

This, too, then is part of the Irish heritage in America -- this stubborn courage, this fighting spirit of Ireland. It has manifested itself throughout the history of our country. You know the great Irish names in that history. You know them too well for me to repeat them tonight. They have fought the battle for humane government, the battle of the weak and unprotected. They have fought it in Congress. They have fought it as great governors of many states. They have fought it as outstanding judges of the courts. I should like to mention too, tonight, the countless thousands of the unsung and the unrecognized who have fought that same battle -- the battle for government with a heart -- in the grass roots politics of the nation. They have done an outstanding job and often a thankless job in keeping the party system of government alive and responsive to the needs of the people. A few Irishmen, very few, I have been told, have even tried to do something along these lines in the political party to which I do not belong. But that too is an incorrigible characteristic of the Irishman -- he is always attempting the impossible.

As in politics, so in war. Men of Irish blood have fought the good fight many times. Millions of them have joined in the defense

of this country in its wars from the Revolution to Korea. Thousands have died so that freedom might live in this country. Countless others, I know, are prepared to do the same, if it becomes necessary because the heritage of Ireland has bred in them a fierce and uncompromising loyalty.

To the Irishman loyalty is a matter of faith. Once that loyalty is fixed on man, nation, church or ideal, it is not easily shaken. This trait served Ireland well during the centuries of alien rule. Without it Irish independence would have been a beautiful dream but it would have been an empty one. America, too, needs this trait. In these troubled times, it needs it more than ever before. Beyond our borders we are confronted with the implacable Communist foe. Within our borders we are living in an age when consciousless traitors and lying informers vie with each other for the dubious distinction of destroying the nation. It is an old poison in a new bottle designed to eat away the fabric of faith on which our unity as a people depends. There is an antidote for this poison, the loyalty that is a part of our Irish heritage. It is not a lip-service loyalty. It is the kind of loyalty a man carries in his heart; loyalty to his country and to those free institutions which were designed by the fathers of this nation to protect even the least and the most defenseless among us.

Out of Ireland, too, and now a part of the heritage of this country has come a respect for hard work. In an earlier day, in Ireland,

economic conditions stifled the incentive to work. Poverty and exploitation which were the lot of the Irishman of those times was a thin diet to work a man on. But when the Irishman came to America, he found an outlet for his energies. He labored in this country for his existence. He labored hard, for he labored as a free man. His hands tore open the anthracite fields here in Pennsylvania. It was he who dug the nation's network of canals. It was he who laid tie after tie of railroad track until the nation was spanned from coast to coast. And it was he who did much to add the concept of the dignity of labor to the American heritage. We ought never forget the obligation that we owe to those early Irish immigrants. They deserve our full admiration. They deserve our lasting respect.

If you have travelled, as I have done, to the countries of the Orient, you know that labor, physical labor there, is not honored as it is here. The practice too often is to cheat and despoil the man who works with his hands and his back of the fruits of his labor. You know, too, that many of the political ills of those countries, the communism and the anarchy and the general unrest, feed on his resentment of that treatment.

If we do not have a similar situation here it is due in no small measure to those Irishmen of the Church and the labor movement who insisted that men were not cattle, that every man willing to work had a

right to a hire sufficient to keep his family in decency and dignity. They demanded that right not only for their Irish brethren but for that vast army of many races and nationalities that built a nation and made it great.

As he respects hard, physical work, the Irishman also has a love of learning and that too has been transmitted to this nation. Few Americans know of the great cultural renaissance in Ireland in the sixth and ninth centuries and it is a story worth telling. That was the Golden Age of Irish scholarship. The Monastery at Clonard had at one time 3,000 students. From Clonard went forth the Twelve Apostles of Ireland, founding schools all over the island and later upon the European Continent. In 563, St. Columba founded the monastery at Iona. Latin classics were studied and preserved in these monasteries. Scribes copied books and kept alive the great works of literature and learning.

One of the most ambitious tasks of the Celtic monasteries was the training of men to carry Christianity and learning deep into North Central Europe. The eighth Century witnessed a great wave of Celtic missions on the continent. Missions were established in an area which is now France, Germany and the Lowlands. These were the forerunners, in a way, of the many catholic missions which in our day, have gone out from America to the Philippines, China and other lands of the Orient.

When Ireland was completely "pacified" -- and that is always a relative term when applied to the Irish -- by Cromwell and later by William III, an intellectual darkness covered the land. But the spirit which had first produced the renaissance did not die. In America that spirit of learning of the sixth and the ninth centuries has re-emerged. American society is a fluid society. The Irishman used to be the "immigrant", the "foreigner" -- he has long since emerged as one of the leading elements in American life. At least one cause for this progress was the emphasis placed upon education and learning by our forebears. Many private schools, colleges, and universities today were founded and developed purely by the drive, incentive, and sacrifice of the Irish people. Americans of Irish blood have made significant achievements in literature, in the professions, in law, in the Church, and in Government.

The dominant characteristic of Ireland, however, and one of her great contributions to this country is love of God. This characteristic -- this love of God -- is, I believe, at the root of the genius of the Irish people.

When the Irishman came to America, he brought with him the same religious outlook, the same deep attachment to religious concepts, that he had in Ireland. He built his own churches, his own schools, his own religious and social institutions. To a great extent, it was the

Irishman who expanded the Roman Catholic Church of America and who, along with co-religionists from Germany, Eastern and Southern Europe, did so much to make this Church the imposing American institution that it is today. Along the canal beds, in the cities, factories, near the mines, harbors and railroad centers, wherever the Irishman settled, he built his Church. No sacrifice was too great for the Irishman to establish a House of God. His was a labor full of faith and love. His Church was the humble Church of the immigrant; but it has become something splendid today.

Today more than ever before this nation needs those Irish characteristics which, transmitted in the past, have done so much to build the greatness of the nation. It is fortunate that they are a part of our heritage. It is fortunate that what once was purely Irish has been transformed and fused with all that is America. For we are living in a time of challenge, which like never before will try the souls of men. We are up against the aggressive enmity of a new barbarism out of the East.

We Americans have so far responded to this challenge with determination and resolution. We have rejected counsels of retreat and withdrawal. We have come to grips with the problem of our time -- the problem of the preservation of liberty in a world slipping anew into the mad dance of totalitarianism.

We Americans need not fear the future. We can survive as a people, as a nation, and as a civilization. We can continue to grow and prosper provided we hold fast to the principles of a free society.

Love of liberty must always be a motivating force in the life of this country as well as in our relations with other nations. We cannot forget those less fortunate who have lost their freedom or who never gained it. Every action of national policy should carry that fundamental democratic impulse: the love of Humanity; for we are our brother's keeper, be he white, black, yellow, or brown. And, finally, as citizens of this nation dedicated as it is to the betterment of mankind, we must seek to carry out in our daily life as a nation the Commandments of God. A measure of our success or failure shall be the degree to which we manage to stumble along in the paths of Saints like Patrick. He fixed his eyes upon the horizon, on the majesty and grandeur of the Eternal and sought to create of this world a citadel of freedom, of good and of God. Let us, in all humbleness, strive to do the same.