

Thomas J. Kiernan Oral History Interview – 8/5/1966
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Biographical Note

Kiernan was the Irish ambassador to the United States from 1961 to 1964. In this interview he discusses U.S. ambassadors to Ireland, John F. Kennedy's (JFK) 1963 visit to Ireland, and various contacts he had with JFK and other members of the Kennedy family during and after JFK's presidency, among other issues.

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Oral History Interview

Of

Thomas J. Kiernan

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Thomas J. Kiernan

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Oral History Interview

with

Dr. Thomas J. Kiernan

August 5, 1966
Palmerston, Ireland

By Joseph E. O'Connor

For the John F. Kennedy Library

O'CONNOR: Ambassador Kiernan, when did you first meet John Kennedy [John F. Kennedy]?

KIERNAN: He gave a reception for the diplomatic corps, for all the heads of mission on the 8th of February, 1961, in the White House at five o'clock. That was the first time I met him. He received each head of mission and then he and Mrs. Kennedy [Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy] went around mingling with the people. And in that way I had my first chat with him, a very little chat, but it was a chat. Both in the receiving line and in the chalet I realized that we were on the same wave length, the same communication between us which was very important.

O'CONNOR: Oh, certainly.

KIERNAN: President Kennedy was a great American. I think he had Irish reactions. And the Irish reactions helped me in understanding. I don't know whether I ought to say that these talks can be put down, they're confidential, but...

O'CONNOR: This material will be restricted for as long as you want it, for five years or ten years, twenty years, any time you like.

KIERNAN: But you have the striking contrast say, in the reactions with Grewe [Wilhelm Grewe], the German ambassador.

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O'CONNOR: The German ambassador.

KIERNAN: There was an impossibility. The wavelengths were so different.

O'CONNOR: You mean in your conversations with him, or do you mean in President Kennedy's?

KIERNAN: No, no, no. In President Kennedy's with him. I mean they just were on different wavelengths. I don't believe they could ever understand each other. There's something in that; it's an intangible thing, but it's terribly important in diplomacy that you're able to meet a man somewhere—cross minds—on a wavelength.

O'CONNOR: Yes.

KIERNAN: With President Kennedy of course, you could. And with me, I found that we were exactly on the same level. The attitude, as far as I could understand from an enquiry made at the State Department of all countries was to make a quick rush to get in on what might be called the band-wagon. Some of them had made false anticipations, had thought that Mr. Nixon [Richard Milhous Nixon] would come in, and there was a good deal of mending of fences. And it became an embarrassment to keep off heads of state and prime ministers waiting to pay formal visits to the State Department. I believe that Ireland was unique in holding completely back. And that happened right through President Kennedy's presidency. There was no attitude of assuming he'd be any more friendly than, for instance, President Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower]. There was no question of attempting to take advantage of the fact that his ancestors had come from Ireland. I myself was very strong on that and my own government agreed with me, so that possibly we bent backwards to avoid any kind of what I would regard as an intrusion. I did mention to him at an early stage that he knew very well that if he could ever come to Ireland during his term of office, he'd be tremendously welcome. But there was no question of expecting him to come.

O'CONNOR: Did he give any indication at that time that...

KIERNAN: That's what I mean, he'd do his level best. He told me how difficult it was with Congress watching the president leaving the United States, the president having to have a really good reason for going away to come to the fair, and I told him that I understood that very well.

I believe also that his visit to Ireland was the only one which he made on his own initiative.

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O'CONNOR: He seemed really to have enjoyed himself, everyone says, when he came over here. He was more relaxed than...

KIERNAN: He enjoyed himself. He had come across from a very unrelaxed situation in Berlin.

O'CONNOR: Oh yes.

KIERNAN: And he found the situation when he arrived in Ireland, one which was entirely different. That is there was no organized public reception. I was a little bit disappointed myself, coming from the airport, that everything was so quiet and having been perhaps too official, interferes with people wanting to come down. There were a few picnickers but it was only when we began to get in towards the city that the crowds began to assemble.

O'CONNOR: Well, had the government actually tried to prevent crowds from getting out to the airport or getting out near there or something?

KIERNAN: Yes. Our Department of External Affairs is inclined to be overcautious in matters like that and to insist on closing down and having cards and only certain people with permission. And the people themselves are not inclined to press for any kind of concessions from what they regard as bureaucracy. There still is the old feeling, well, if the government wants to do that, let the government do it. The spontaneous reception then was so obviously spontaneous and individual from each member. It wasn't a crowd thing like, let us say the West Berlin which was a fearful affair, like a ritual of handkerchiefs all prepared, and the little white handkerchiefs waving. In Ireland it was entirely different. It was very much a grass-roots reception and he realized that.

Well, the first formal visit I made to him after that meeting on the 8th of February was on the 17th of March, 1961. There again was nothing exceptional about it. The visit had been paid to his predecessor to present shamrock. And it's done every year. Eisenhower had accepted the shamrock and we presume wore it. Shamrock is given to the members of the Senate and the House of Representatives.

O'CONNOR: Were you there alone at that meeting, or were there other people with you at that meeting?

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KIERNAN: I was alone. I had gotten the idea of finding out if it was possible to devise a coat of arms for President Kennedy and to associate it

with the visit of the 17th of March, 1961. The Office of Heraldry in Dublin is a very ancient institution. It's one of those things that has kept on from Norman times. And I consulted them and they agreed that the coat of arms could be prepared from the O'Kennedy coat of arms of, I think, the tenth century. The old origin of a coat of arms was that a man had done something exceptional for his people, he had earned his coat of arms. Then it went down from generation to generation. In the case of Kennedy, a new coat of arms was made. That is, an earned coat of arms. And that was done by taking the original Kennedy coat of arms and mingling it in heraldic fashion with the Fitzgerald dynasty's coat of arms, which is a Norman coat of arms—Fitzgeralds were a Norman family. And finally, personalizing it for President Kennedy himself by putting in the arm and from that statement he made in the Inauguration about the eagle holding—I forget what—a bundle of arrows; and so the arrows were put in. And in the present coat of arms of the Kennedy family we had the arrows then put in so that it is a new coat of arms based on an ancient coat of arms, and earned by John F. Kennedy in the opinion of the government of Ireland and presented to him on the 17th of March.

O'CONNOR: That was 1961 you presented it? That was very nice.

KIERNAN: He was delighted with that. Of course that meant a longer session with, at any rate, the press fellows and the television crowd and so on, as you can see it. And he wanted to hear a little quatrain in old Irish on the coat of arms. He wanted me to say it. I asked him if he would try and repeat it after me, which he did. [Laughter]

In the same year the Wexford people decided that, or rather their local administration, Wexford County Council, I think they call it, they'd like to present a christening cup to the new baby, John [John F. Kennedy, Jr.]. They sent along a christening cup, I think it was from the seventeenth century—it was an old cup at any rate—to be presented by my wife to Mrs. Kennedy. About half an hour before the ceremony I got a call from the White House saying that President Kennedy, who couldn't himself receive it because he had a particular meeting on that morning, had changed his mind and had decided to come out of the meeting and to receive it, and for that reason I was to get along quickly and make the presentation. And that's what gave rise to my not having anything ready to say except very pedestrian words.

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So that when I was on the little platform facing the cameras, the President on my right and Mrs. Kennedy and Mrs. Kiernan on the left, I asked him if instead of a speech I might recite a poem which had been made for my son the day he was born. It's mentioned in Sorensen's [Theodore C. Sorensen] book, a little bit of it, I think. The President was very moved with that. He was especially moved with the ending, "At the end of all loving and love, may the Man above give him a crown." And he said to me, "I wish that were for me." He was going over to answer.

O'CONNOR: That must have been a delightful ceremony.

KIERNAN: It was a very happy ceremony. You know, Mrs. Kennedy had then a secretary [Letitia Baldrige], a tall lady, who took command of every situation, and the original arrangement was adhered to that Mrs. Kennedy and Mrs. Kiernan would get together. So that we waited awhile for President Kennedy to come out before we began. And Mrs. Kennedy's secretary...

O'CONNOR: Was that Pamela Turnure? Was that who it was?

KIERNAN: No. She resigned before her.... Really tall, six foot.

O'CONNOR: I can't think who that is.

KIERNAN: She was employed in Chicago in the Kennedy...

O'CONNOR: Oh, I should know that—not Carpenter, oh who? I can't think of who that is right now.

KIERNAN: Anyway, she was very keen in a rather bureaucratic way that there should be no mention of that fact that the cup had traveled by means of Irish International Airlines because that might involve a commercial advertisement entering the White House. And that was all agreed. When the President came into the room he had a piece of wood from the podium on which he had taken the oath when he had taken the oath of office on the Inauguration day, and a beautiful plate and inscription to the people of Wexford which he was going to give in return. Just as we were going in to face the press and have the proper handing over, this private secretary said, "And Mr. President, it's arranged that there will be no mention of Irish International Airlines." "Who arranged that?" said President Kennedy. That was all. He went in and we followed him. When we were leaving then, he came back—he suddenly remembered and he came back to the press and he said, "By the way, this christening cup was brought by courtesy of the Irish International Airlines." [Laughter]

O'CONNOR: He wouldn't be held down, would he?

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KIERNAN: Yes, he was insistent on it.

O'CONNOR: That's cute. You have these listed on your notes—these meetings.

KIERNAN: Simply the dates, but there's no point in them really.... Again, his visit to Ireland originated in his taking the initiative on the 17th of March, 1963.

O'CONNOR: Was that when you contacted him again for the same...

KIERNAN: That's when I contacted him again, that's it. After we had finished the formal talk, the usual procedure is to shake hands and greetings—the press are invited in and the TV people for a couple of minutes. And then there's simply a private talk with the President and the visiting ambassador and the Chief of Protocol as a rule. And that's the end. But on this occasion the President said, "Let's go out into the garden." He closed the door on the Chief of Protocol, Biddle Duke [Angier Biddle Duke]. When we got out he said, "I'm glad to say that I can go to Ireland and I'd like you to find out if that's agreeable to your government." He said, "I told you before about the difficulty. Ireland is not a nuisance in international affairs or is not one way or the other in the picture very much so that there's no justification to Congress to go. For that reason I'll have to make the visit in association with another visit. I'll be visiting Germany (and he gave the date, whatever it was) in June, 1963 and I'll go to Ireland then." I said, "Well, the dates, you may take it straight away without referring to the government, will be agreeable, and you can come and have a comfortable rest." And he reacted at once to that, and rather shocked me and said, "I don't want to rest in Ireland. I want to go around and meet people. I want to meet plenty of people. I don't want to stay in Dublin. I don't want too many official receptions. I don't want any of the stuffed shirt arrangement, if you can avoid it. Just to meet people. But, it certainly won't be a rest. The more I can cover, the better it will be. That's what I call a rest." So, that's really how the whole thing started.

O'CONNOR: Well then, did you have to arrange—how was it decided what places in Ireland he'd visit? Who decided that? Did he decide it, or did you or did the government decide it, or how was that arranged? Do you know?

KIERNAN: I should think that that sort of fitted in from almost the importance of places. Once we knew how long he'd have—that there was almost a necessity to visit Wexford.

O'CONNOR: Surely.

KIERNAN: Then there are the three cities; Dublin, Cork, Galway.

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KIERNAN: It would mean tremendous political difficulty here.

O'CONNOR: If he didn't go to the...

KIERNAN: If he didn't go to each of the three. He could leave out the others. He could visit Limerick, which comes next in size or importance on his way to Shannon, which was what he did. It really fitted in without any difficulty. There was no question of our choice about it.

O'CONNOR: I heard an interesting little story from Mrs. Condell [Frances Condell]

in Limerick about his visit there. And I just wondered if you know anything about how it was chosen that he would go to Limerick or any of the other arrangements that were made for him?

KIERNAN: He had a helicopter from Galway to Shannon. Limerick was on the way. He stopped down in the helicopter at Galway. And then the next stop down was Limerick, and then Shannon. Limerick and Shannon are so close that—I don't know that this is a different story than Mrs. Condell told you, but the reception there was very formal because everybody was caged in the race course, and wouldn't move. But, by the time the helicopter reached Shannon, Mrs. Condell herself was there. She had got in her car and put the steam on.

O'CONNOR: Zoomed down.

KIERNAN: He was surprised to see her twice.

O'CONNOR: What did you do then? Could you tell us anything about what you did after talking to him, after his initially saying to you that he wanted to come to Ireland?

KIERNAN: No, I can't think of anything. You see, the.... We never had any problems. I mean, there were no.... It would have been an occasion, I suppose, to have said, "Well, several problems will arise for discussion." At a later date when I found in connection with the final preparations for going to Ireland—it happened as I remember to have been the day when that Russian women astronaut [Valentina Vladimirovna Tereshkova] was upstairs and he was in very bad humor, the first time I had seen him in bad humor.

O'CONNOR: Because of that he was in bad humor?

KIERNAN: I think every American was in one. I mean it was a tiresome thing that a woman was circling round about.

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Then I said, of course, that I'd never troubled him to take any line or make any intervention with Mr. Macmillan [M. Harold Macmillan] in the matter of the partition problem, which is our major problem. And he said he understood that. It would embarrass him because naturally with the special relationship between the British and the American governments, that would have put the American government—perhaps it could have got him in a difficulty. At any rate, it hadn't been raised. I told him then that we didn't expect him to make any reference to the matter when he was in Ireland in his speech. His major speech was to the Parliament here to the Dail, and in the ordinary way on account of the relevance and the importance of his partition business, it would have been mentioned, I suppose, by a visiting statesmen. And to avoid any embarrassment on his own foreign

relations I told him that we didn't expect anything. Presumably he would talk privately to the ministers here, but that was another matter.

O'CONNOR: Had you ever talked to him at all or mentioned to him at all the problem of partition? Had he ever said anything about it before?

KIERNAN: Yes. He asked me what could be done. And I said, "Well, what do you think is the issue?" And he said, "Well, of course it's an Irish issue." I said, "Well, that is the British line very good. But partition was enforced against the wishes of both parts of Ireland by the British. No country cuts itself in two." And that took him aback. He said, "That's quite true, of course, it is a British issue." I said, "The fact that the British are constantly in financial difficulties and yet subsidize the position in Northern Ireland at the rate of a hundred to a hundred and fifty million dollars a year indicates that they have an interest in perpetuating it." And he did ask me to explain what I thought about the position, and I did go into it a bit with him. How difficult it is to get rid of old notions—the old notion that Britain had, that she needed her for self-defense, to have a foothold in Ireland, that that disappeared with the atomic bomb, with modern weapons of defense and offense. And finally I said what we would like and all that we would ask is that some British spokesman should say that it is not contrary to British interests if Ireland becomes united. That, after all, is putting it in a very minimum way. And he said, "Well why, why would you—what value is that?" I said, "The value is that partition remains because the junta in the six counties feel that they have—they know they have—the moral support of Britain. If a statement were made by the British government that it would not be contrary to imperial or to British interests if the country united under

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a single government they'd begin to get shaky in the moral support, quite apart from the financial support. And he said, "Well, you know it's very hard. I can see the British difficulty. It's very hard to say that on account of the past history." We left it rather like that. You see, President Kennedy was, and this is putting it much too extreme but it's no harm to put it like that, apart from his Americanism which was a hundred percent, was more British than Irish.

O'CONNOR: That's a very interesting statement. Would you explain that a little?

KIERNAN: I mean he had—I suppose it's the New England attitude in him, I suppose it's the Harvard attitude. And then those with Irish names in America are still wanting to be accepted as part of the establishment, or at any rate not be regarded as outsiders. And then of course the British, the white Anglo-Saxon, et cetera are still regarded as almost incapable of doing wrong. I'm afraid that is the position, that there is a certain bias there which nothing can deplete. Kennedy's first reaction would be, if there were any even minor dispute between Britain and Ireland, would be to side with Britain.

O'CONNOR: You really think his sympathies would have been with Britain in... He doesn't seem to have had a very sympathetic reaction when you talked to him about partition, that's true.

KIERNAN: Well, after all, that was the big issue. If your country is cut in two, that is your major trouble.

O'CONNOR: He didn't show much sympathy at all when you talked with him about it?

KIERNAN: No, he was very cold about it. That is, he was looking at it with a cold attitude. You see, Kennedy was in his blood reactions, which after all were completely Irish on both sides, was Irish in his speed of communication, in his wit, in his debunking—self-debunking, which is part of the Irish attitude. It's a defensive attitude. In all of that, Irish. Behind that was something that wasn't Irish; the cold summing up, the logical follow up. And in the matter of issues between Ireland and England the reaction might come in a sentimental way. I don't know, but when it came to any kind of practical business, the other man behind, the cold man would take control, which is understandable. And the line I'd draw all the time was one of the great understanding, of never any kind of intrusion on him in Irish affairs.

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The same happened when Mr. Lemass [Sean F. Lemass], the Irish Prime Minister made the return visit. The State Department were asking me, accustomed as they are to "beg and bum" nations thrumming 'round, "What were we going to—what proposal were we going to put?" And we couldn't believe it. We didn't come for any proposal. It was a courtesy return visit.

O'CONNOR: They were very unused to that.

KIERNAN: That became a grievance with them. [Laughter] It honestly did, so much a grievance that I was pressing my own government, "For God's sake, can't you think of..."

O'CONNOR: ...anything to ask?"

KIERNAN: Anything.

O'CONNOR: Who asked you that? Who in the State Department asked you?

KIERNAN: They have an Irish desk.

O'CONNOR: Yes, yes.

KIERNAN: And then it goes up from the Irish desk through this man named

Tepper [Robert J. Tepper], from Tepper to Tyler [William R. Tyler], and Tyler to Dean Rusk, I should think.

O'CONNOR: Who was it that you talked to now? You didn't talk to the men at the Irish desk?

KIERNAN: Yes.

O'CONNOR: Oh you did.

KIERNAN: To Tepper and then to Tyler.

O'CONNOR: Oh I see.

KIERNAN: Yes. The attitude and feeling was there that something should have been asked. Lemass—let me see when was this, the 16th of October 1963—private talk with Lemass and Aiken [Frank Aiken] and myself and Kennedy. At this stage, of course, the State Department had given us up as a bad job. The initiative came from President Kennedy himself, suggesting that the United States might cooperate in undersea fisheries research. And we spoke of the cost, the cost would be born by the United States.

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KIERNAN: It was something that we hadn't asked, it's something I think that's working out very happily and all. It's good and it was a nice gift, but...

O'CONNOR: That's very interesting. What else went on at the meeting? Was it a very pleasant meeting? Did Mr. Lemass get along well with the President?

KIERNAN: He did, amazingly well, except Mr. Lemass was very solid in trying to go into a lot of statistical detail. He was putting on a good show and explaining our trade and so on. He was finding out what trade we had with America—pretty poor—industrial goods and so on. I said at the end of this, "Mr. President, the trade with the United States, the Irish exports to the United States are mainly agricultural goods, about eighty percent of our exports in the system—meat and a little bit of sugar." He burst out laughing then, and Lemass thought, was shocked at this remark, "a little bit of sugar," because there's a whole mix-up about the allocation of the Cuban sugar. There's a man named Cooley [Harold D. Cooley] who allocates it in his own way. And, as you probably know, there are very strong professional pressure groups on Washington of all kinds. And there are pressure groups for countries as well as for American...

O'CONNOR: Domestic industries.

KIERNAN: – domestic industries. Ireland has none, and has no means of exerting pressure, hasn't tried. Before my time there had been what I'd thought was a bad system of cultivating the good will of congressmen and senators to bring in resolutions in favor of ending partition.

O'CONNOR: Yes. What do you mean a bad system? Do you mean the ambassador would talk to these congressmen and ask them to do this?

KIERNAN: Yes. I believe all the pressure is bad, you see. I don't take the entirely cynical, professional, ambassadorial view, although I've spent forty years in the foreign service. And I think it's bad. I think the proper thing is the professional way of going to the State Department, putting one's cards on the table, making one's case, doing one's best to influence opinion there. This appealing to congressmen and the like did stop during my time and has stopped since. In fact there's nothing in it. The congressman is simply obliging himself, considering the next election, and setting himself up as a great supporter of the Irish, and that way collecting Irish votes. I mentioned it to

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President Kennedy. I said, "You know," (in one of the conversations I had with him about the partition) I said, "You're the one of those who put forward a bill in the Senate. You got seventeen votes, I think." And he burst out laughing. He said, "That's right." Of course he did it for selfish purposes.

O'CONNOR: Surely, surely.

KIERNAN: I just deviated a moment there. What was I running on? Can you.... There were very strong pressure groups to influence the congressional committee dealing with the allocation of the sugar quota, because it meant getting a higher than world price for sugar at the expense of the American taxpayer. The Irish sugar company employed a lawyer, an American lawyer in New York who had his man, another lawyer in Washington. And they put their material before the congressional committee making a claim, or making a request rather, for some small allocation for Ireland's export of beet sugar. And they came to me and said, "Look, this is hopeless. We can't do anything. Can you do anything?" I said, "No." So, the thing ended there. Soon after that, I happened to run into O'Donnell [Kenneth P. O'Donnell]. I said to him, "Look, it's a pity that Cooley's committee has—I don't know how they've worked it out—but they've given sugar quotas to all kinds of weird countries that were never in before and a little to Ireland would help us a great deal, and we got nothing. We're buying quite a bit more from America than America's buying from us, and we can't sell all the meat we'd like because there's a limitation on meat. Everywhere we turn we can't get in and we have an open market fight." So he said, "Well, I don't know. I'll see what..." It was quite some time after that I was going out to lunch one day. It was one o'clock. I had two guests. I was going across to the Cosmos Club. And a girl came running down and said, "Will you come back?" And I said,

“What is it?” She said, “The President’s on the telephone.” So I went back and took up the telephone and President Kennedy was waiting on the telephone. He went in great detail into the Kashmir dispute and told me that Krishna Menon [Vengalil Krishnan Krishna Menon] was creating a major part of the difficulty, that poor old Nehru [Jawaharlal Nehru] was a sick man, he didn’t think he’d last the year. He said there was a resolution coming on in the United Nations. “There’s a meeting up there at the United Nations at half past three and we’d like a certain resolution put forward and we can’t put it forward ourselves without it being knocked and we want Ireland to put it forward. (At that time we were on the Security Council). And we’ve been turned down by your men in New York. If we can get you to come along, we’ll get others...”

O’CONNOR: Who was the man in New York? Do you recall?

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KIERNAN: Boland [Frederick H. Boland].

O’CONNOR: Boland. Oh yes, that’s right, that’s right. I remember his name now.

KIERNAN: He said, “Can you do anything for us on this because it’s really very important, it’s very urgent and we want to get the resolution passed.” And he gave me the various—about eight points I jotted down. He gave me these points and I said, “All right, I’ll do my best.” He said, “Well, our position is like this.” And in a very clear way he summarized the whole eight points again in a sentence each. He had a tremendously vital mind like that—crystal clear. I got them right. I said, “Right, I’ll do all I can on that and I think you can take it we’ll help.” He said, “Well, that’ll be fine, that’ll be fine.” Then he said, “How are you?” And I said, “I’m fine.” Then he said, “Ken O’Donnell mentioned something to me. I’ll look after that.” I went out to lunch and I had to go through the motions of hurrying them as quickly as I could. In the middle of lunch—who was it, oh a man in the State Department with a funny name—Harriman.

O’CONNOR: At the Irish desk?

KIERNAN: No, right up at the top.

O’CONNOR: Harriman?

KIERNAN: Harriman.

O’CONNOR: Averell Harriman [William Averell Harriman].

KIERNAN: Averell Harriman.

O’CONNOR: Yes.

KIERNAN: Telephoned me and he said, "Look, before you left your office did McGeorge Bundy telephone you?" I said, "That's right." And he said, "Did he say that this thing could be left over in case the notice was too short, that we could leave it over until tomorrow, we could have the meeting postponed?" I said, "That's right." He said, "Well, don't act on that, for heaven's sake. The thing will come up today. Go ahead." I said, "All right, all right." And the plates and dishes—you know in the Cosmos Club there's no room to get at anyone—they were all banging as I tried to listen to this. And I went back to the other two fellows and I finished lunch and said, "Well now I'll have to leave you two boys to coffee because I've got to get back to the office." So I left

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them there at the club and I went back. And I got on to Boland to tell him the position. And he said, "Look, this is impossible. You can't do this. Krishna Menon spent two hours with me over this business and he'll be wild. And we'll lose.... We have a certain friendship with India from old days, and so on, and we can't do it." I said, "Well, I don't know myself whether we can or not. I only wanted to let you know the position that we can't ignore the fact that has happened today and that we have been given this request. Now, what I wanted anyway was that I'm now telephoning Dublin to speak to the Ministry." He said, "Well, in that case, I'll have to settle my position here so that I'll be ready." I said, "That's all I wanted." There was the six hour difference always, of course, we had, and I got through to the Secretary of the Department. The Minister was at a dinner somewhere. Everything was fixed by the time the meeting opened. And we introduced the resolution.

O'CONNOR: This was Mr. Aiken that you talked to; was he Minister then?

KIERNAN: That's right.

O'CONNOR: And he agreed immediately?

KIERNAN: Yes.

O'CONNOR: Even though this might create problems with Krishna Menon?

KIERNAN: Yes. When it came direct like that from the President he agreed without any demur, no difficulty whatever. We introduced the resolution. It was put through. It came as a tremendous shock, of course, to Krishna Menon. And that was that. In the speech President Kennedy made here in Dublin in the Parliament he was evidently searching—or I suppose those who helped him to prepare the speech, but he must himself have written quite a good deal of it because I could see signs of his writing here and there.... He said, "You have not hesitated to take the lead on such sensitive issues as the Kashmir dispute." Just that one sentence was a reference to that, nothing more. And the reason for his laughing at my remark that we were exporting meat and a little bit of sugar was that to the surprise of the Cooley Committee, a new bill was handed down, not including all these various countries—it was a rather different type of bill—but

specifically including Ireland. A small quantity, but enough to suit us for our export purposes. We, for the first time, got in on the sugar market. The *Wall Street Journal* said that it was hard to understand how it happened, but somebody with a large smile in Washington seemed to have been responsible. [Laughter]

[END SIDE I, TAPE I]

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[BEGIN SIDE II, TAPE I]

KIERNAN: I forgot to mention in connection with the Kashmir business—and this is an illustration of a certain type of sensitivity about the Irish approach to affairs—that when I telephoned first after telephoning Boland at the United Nations, I telephoned Cremin [Cornelius C. Cremin] who was the Secretary of the Department of External Affairs, and I told him the whole story. And at the end of it he said, “By the way, if you’re talking to the Minister on this and when you’re writing your report will you leave out the part dealing with the Ken O’Donnell business because that certainly was something that the Minister would just hate. It could very well prejudice him.” So I left it out and the Minister I’m pretty sure doesn’t know this. Anything in the nature of “do this for me and I’ll do something for you”, and was not wanted, but “here’s something I’d like you to do. This will help my policy,” then that was something that was bound to get a positive response. By the way, we were talking a moment ago off the tape mentioning McGeorge Bundy’s name—I got the idea of offering Kennedy honorary citizenship of Ireland. This was in 1963 and I mentioned it to him just in a casual way at the reception in February of that year. When I saw him—it was the 15th of March—I called on him. He had to go somewhere on the 17th of March, to one of the Latin American republics, I forget where, he said, “You know, the thing has to go through—there are all kinds of procedures and it probably will need legislation. The Senate would have to approve. In any case, he said, “It’s gone to my brother [Robert F. Kennedy]. He’s the main fellow and he may turn me down. I’d love it, but we’ll see what he says.” Well, I did have then discussions at the Attorney General’s office and he went into tremendous detail and trouble. It was very doubtful. And there were all kinds of possible precedents for it and nonprecedents and so on. Finally McGeorge Bundy called me up on the 11th of April to say that they’d considered it very fully and they felt it would be much better if it wasn’t followed up. So we just didn’t go any further with the honorary citizenship.

O’CONNOR: Did the President seem like he would be in favor of it through?

KIERNAN: He was in favor it, yes. Oh yes. But that came to an end.

O’CONNOR: Do you have any other notes written down there?

KIERNAN: No, I haven’t because these are only dates really. You can cut this out of what is going to remain, but when I met him first he said, “Who’s

our ambassador in Dublin?" And I said, "McLeod [Scott McLeod]." You know, the State Department didn't

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like him because he was chasing them down for homosexuality and got a lot of fellows sacked. He was sort of clearing up the McCarthyism [Joseph R. McCarthy] business and he was just as dislikable. Anyway, he was the ambassador there and Kennedy said, "Oh, he's no good," which was understandable coming from a Democrat. He said, "Well, I asked because I want to tell you I'm going to send you a really good ambassador, an ambassador that will really represent America."

O'CONNOR: McCloskey [Matthew H. McCloskey, Jr.]?

KIERNAN: Well, I said, "Thanks," I said, "That'll be wonderful." And being very frank I said, "You know, we don't get them." He laughed. The truth is of course, that it's just like the officials, State Department officials in Dublin. Ireland is much too unimportant for the State Department to waste good men by sending them here. It could be perhaps a justification of some kind of experience of seeing European affairs from a neutral sort of angle, an observation post, but as far as our being concerned in the big affairs of Europe, we just aren't, so that it doesn't pay. And usually the ambassador port is given to some nonentity who contributes heavily to the party fortunes. No, the man he sent was Stockdale [Edward G. Stockdale] who was a very, very poor type. He was a real estate agent in Miami.

O'CONNOR: Did he mention to you when he talked to you who it was?

KIERNAN: No, he didn't. I doubt whether he knew. He said, "I'm going to send you a really good man." I think he had him in mind, but Stockdale.... You see, it showed President Kennedy's lack of interest in Ireland certainly at that time. He had in mind, "well, I should send a good ambassador." Well, you always felt you'd like to send a good ambassador anywhere.

O'CONNOR: Sure.

KIERNAN: He certainly had no intention of sending a good ambassador. He sent a man who may have—I don't know his background—he may have contributed to party funds. The poor man was knifed afterwards by McCloskey and committed suicide...

O'CONNOR: My goodness.

KIERNAN: Because he got into a lot of financial troubles over those slot machines he was hiring out. He wasn't able to meet his

responsibilities and so on. But the fellow had very little, very little intelligence. He was, well, I'd say he was normal and in doing that I think I'm exaggerating. [Laughter] His I.Q. wasn't very high. And that's all we got. And the next thing we got was McCloskey.

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O'CONNOR: Well, how did you like McCloskey?

KIERNAN: What?

O'CONNOR: How did you like McCloskey?

KIERNAN: I think McCloskey.... I was at the farewell dinner in Philadelphia when McCloskey was.... That was in June '62. McCloskey gave himself a dinner. That is to say he said his family was standing it and he invited a lot of people. And he had President Kennedy there. I was sitting next to Lady Bird Johnson [Claudia Alta "Lady Bird" Johnson] who was very cynical about the whole affair herself. She's a hard woman. [Laughter] McCloskey, not being a speech maker, had something prepared, the main tenor of which was that he was not in the least Irish or interested in Ireland; that he had never attended anything Irish in his life; that on St. Patrick's Day he went about his business as usual; that he resented very much this nonsense in America of Irish-American; and that he was 100 percent American. Well, in fact, like all people—Irish Americans use a 150 percent American in order to prove that he was American. But, he said, "I'll go to Ireland as 'Mr. America' and I'll say when I get there '*Fag an Berlanach*.'" Do you know the meaning of "*Fag an Berlach*"?

O'CONNOR: I don't.

KIERNAN: No?

O'CONNOR: No.

KIERNAN: Well, here was a fellow saying he had nothing to do with Ireland and yet he was using a Gaelic expression which is warlike. It means literally "get out of my way", but it's used in an aggressive sense. It led to a little bit of trouble, because a scholar by the name of Sullivan wrote in the *Irish Times* saying this was a very poor way by which an ambassador begins his career in a country.

O'CONNOR: Yes indeed.

KIERNAN: To insult the people who would be willing to welcome him and put out the red carpet, especially as we give terrific welcomes to American

ambassadors. You know we let them have the Phoenix Park, the only people we allow in there.

O'CONNOR: Sure, a beautiful place.

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KIERNAN: And we got no reciprocity for that in Washington. I needn't tell you there they wouldn't even allow me to park my car in the garage there. But McCloskey there went right on the wrong foot from the beginning.

O'CONNOR: My gosh.

KIERNAN: And he showed himself to me "Mr. Bad Mannered American" and he lived up to that reputation right up to the end.

O'CONNOR: How do you spell that "get out of my way" in Gaelic?

KIERNAN: "*Fag an Berlach*"?

O'CONNOR: Yes.

KIERNAN: F-a-g—there's an accent, an acute accent on the "a", "fag", f-a-g. A-n—small "a" that's the definite article, "Fag an." "Berlach", b-e-r-l-a-c-h.

O'CONNOR: Okay, just wanted to know.

KIERNAN: It's a war cry really. You say it when you're going to cut a fellow's head off.

O'CONNOR: It sounds like an incredible way for an ambassador to a country to begin. It sounds like he must have been joking.

KIERNAN: He wasn't. You know, his big red neck was getting redder and thicker and he was getting quite excited over it.

O'CONNOR: That's amazing. Well, would you say you've found an improvement now? We've got a different ambassador. We've got Ambassador Guest [Raymond R. Guest] right here.

KIERNAN: Well, as long as it's quite some time—he'll probably be dead before my remarks are heard.

O'CONNOR: Sure.

KIERNAN: Not a lot of improvement.

O'CONNOR: That's a shame. I'm kind of sorry to hear that, really.

KIERNAN: Not a lot of improvement. There is the sense that he's more cultivated. He's better able to conceal his ignorance.

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O'CONNOR: [Laughter] Well, that's the kind of remark I was saying a while ago I would call cynical. That's about as backhanded a compliment as you could possibly make. [Laughter] I think the girl who is able to transcribe this interview will get a big charge out of that.

KIERNAN: Well, I don't want to have a libel action thrown against me.

O'CONNOR: No, no there won't be any libel action. This will be long, long—nobody'll see this, nobody'll see this. You couldn't speak freely, no one could speak freely if there weren't restrictions placed on this. And we'd never get anything more than what you see in newspapers.

KIERNAN: You might as well not have started it.

O'CONNOR: Exactly, exactly.

KIERNAN: And it is a unique thing in starting this, and it can be a very good thing.

O'CONNOR: People don't very often keep memoirs or diaries anymore, and this at least will enable their memories to be perpetuated.

KIERNAN: Yes, well, I wouldn't bother writing; talking is much easier.

O'CONNOR: Okay, there was one more thing—unless you have some more things that you wanted to mention—there was one thing that came to mind and we alluded to it a number of times, and that is just how much interest did John Kennedy have, how much genuine interest, genuine sympathy for Ireland did he have? There's been much comment about his great love for Ireland and it may have been true at times. There's also been much comment about his Irish heritage and his Irish ways people have referred to. In fact one very close priest friend of his that I talked to had told me that his immediate reactions to a political situation, to a family situation, to a religious situation were Irish, not American. And I didn't know but what the man might have been exaggerating a little, and I wondered what you thought about that? If you have an opinion on how deep was his feeling for Ireland or how deep was his interest in Ireland?

KIERNAN: Mrs. Kennedy mentioned to me on the Saint Patrick's Day after his death.... I had a conversation with her in her house in Washington because I promised him the previous Saint Patrick's Day that I'd give him a companion vase. It was a very beautiful Waterford vase with the features of the first architect of the White House incised in it. He was a fellow

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from County Kilkenny. It was difficult to get the features. A direct descendent of his was living in Long Island and we had to get them that way. And I told Kennedy that I'd bring him a companion vase the next year with John Barry of Wexford who was associated with the beginning of the American Navy. And, as he was now dead, I had arranged with the Attorney General, and he then was, to go along to Mrs. Kennedy on Saint Patrick's Day and give her the companion vase. And she mentioned then how proud she was that the Kennedys were pure Irish, that it's so rare in America to get any kind of purity of blood. With so much intermarriage, it's inevitable. And she said, "You know they tell me I'm French. I should think it's about half percent French, but the Kennedys are all Irish until my children. And they're the first who are mixed."

Well, it's a jump from Mrs. Kennedy to Carl Jung [Carl Gustav Jung], the psychologist. He believes in the.... Or he has brought out that theory of the racial unconscious.

O'CONNOR: Collective unconscious.

KIERNAN: Yes, which comes out in moments of stress or strain and which really is at the basis of everything we do. We have our cultures superimposed on top of it. I feel myself that that was in Kennedy, that one could apply that to Kennedy himself, this racial unconscious and the reaction coming from it. Now, the culture superimposed upon it, is a hard culture, a culture of living up to Boston's Harvard, which for an Irish person treated as they were.... And I was surprised how often Kennedy mentioned, "No Irish need apply." It wasn't just superimposing a culture directly on a German or an Italian. It was superimposing it against a terrific obstacle, the obstacle being the hatred I believe was felt for the Irish in America. I have no sentimental idea that there's any love lost for the Irish in America. I think there's a tremendous amount of not only antagonism but really inmost hatred which you don't get for other nations. And it's probably built in with their religion. It may be. It's also built in with the fact that we dared to stand up against another nation which has spread its tentacles all over the world.

Kennedy couldn't divide that Irish heritage, but what was superimposed upon it made him, I imagine, often wish, as I think it makes many Americans often wish, that they could avoid it. He couldn't avoid it because it was there in his blood. It was a great advantage he had in his charm, in his speed of communication. You can probably notice that in me. You can notice it in a great

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many Irish people, that they're articulate, they're able to bring their mind and their language together very speedily. I think his attitude towards Ireland then, was something which grew, which wasn't there at the beginning because he wanted above all things to be a good New Englander. And when he was in London when his father [Joseph P. Kennedy] was Ambassador, he did come across to Ireland and stayed here with David Gray at the Legislation as it was then. But he came very much as an English American with English people. He did go to Wexford, but it was rather in the way of "Let's have a look," you know, "I'd like to see what the old sod is like," and so on. The turning point did come on his visit to Ireland. I doubt it came very much before that. It was coming, but when I was in the helicopter with him on the way from Dublin to Galway, he was constantly asking about places. We were low enough to see large-sized houses. He was costing houses. How much would a place like that cost with a certain amount of land attached? I assumed he was wondering just what it would be like to live in Ireland or to have a *pied à terre* where he could come or send the children occasionally, and so on. One could almost see an affection for Ireland growing out of that visit. I wasn't able to see it before that. He had a sort of affection or friendship for me because—perhaps because I didn't bother him too much, because we reacted well together, but there was nothing specially pro-Irish. He said to me, "By the way, I've been asked by a crowd in Boston to ask you to address them. They're called the Charitable Irish Society. Will you talk to them?" I said, "As a matter of fact, I've already arranged—they wrote to me—I already arranged to me." He said, "Well, I'd be interested to hear what you think of them. I have an idea that they're neither charitable nor Irish." [Laughter] well, that applies of course to great many of these Irish societies, The Friendly Sons of Saint Patrick, who aren't Irish at all. I've sat through their dinners in New York twice on Saint Patrick's Night. They had Humphrey [Hubert H. Humphrey] as their guest and Rockefeller [Nelson A. Rockefeller] and Wagner [Robert Ferdinand Wagner, Jr.].

O'CONNOR: They're good Irishmen.

KIERNAN: Well, the word Ireland wasn't mentioned in any speech; not a single mention of Ireland the whole way through. They're societies, like the Sons of the American Revolution or the Daughters of the American Revolution, that give you a certain *éclat* to have come from early days, and if you're Irish from the famine. And that's something.

O'CONNOR: But that's all. Other than that they're not Irish. Well, I think people talk so much about—and I mean they're not kidding—about how relaxed he was when he was here

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and how much he really did seem to enjoy his visit here that perhaps he was building up a kind of affection or a kind of a relaxed feeling when he was in Ireland.

KIERNAN: Well, who relaxed him?

O'CONNOR: I don't know. Who did relax him?

KIERNAN: You see, when he got off the plane he saw the official crowd 'round, the bumperdom you always get at these affairs, but no great crowds, some speeches. Then the magnificent entry into Dublin. And it must have taken him a back considerably. I was in the third car and he was in an open car with De Valera [Eamon De Valera]. And his idea apparently was to stand up, you see, because if you stand up, you get the plaudits of the thousands, except that unfortunately there weren't any thousands. Then when he.... It was a cool welcome, and it went on like that until he got about half way through, then he got in.... His first visit was to Aras An Uachtarain, which means the House of the President, in Phoenix Park, to meet Mrs. De Valera [Sinéad De Valera], to meet De Valera and then go on to the American Embassy where he was staying. I sat down after the hand shaking and so on, beside Mrs. De Valera, and I said to her, "What did you think of the procession?" which was on TV. She said, "Don't ever tell this to anybody—I didn't see it." [Laughter] She said, "You know, all my life I've been wanting to read—she herself was a teacher and she's written quite a bit of material, plays for children and so on—all my life I've been wanting to read. I had children. I thought, 'Well, there are plenty of books and I'll read when those children are grown up.' And then I found that I had little grandchildren and I still couldn't read." And she said, "Now since I came out here, for the first time I can read and I have a cubbyhole down below with books around. And I just immerse myself," she said, "in reading. And would you believe it, I forgot altogether the procession was on. I was reading." But that's why I asked you who relaxed President Kennedy. The whole atmosphere was relaxing for him because it was natural. It was just as I had said to him when I met him first; "We're not going to press you to come or to invite you officially, but you're always at home when you come and there won't be any fuss." And that's what happened. There was no.... Mrs. De Valera forgot he was coming on his way. And then of course after that it went in that...

O'CONNOR: That's a good story, that's a real good story.

KIERNAN: I think probably when you get to Wexford you'll find the same. I think there he liked sitting around in the house and the cottage and so on and he felt very relaxed, apart from.... He obviously didn't like the—nobody likes the mayors' speeches they read out and so on. That was boring, but he

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just had to go through it and do that. Otherwise, the relaxation came from Ireland itself towards him. They took him as their own.

O'CONNOR: But he wasn't just coming back this time on a kind of a triumphal tour, though, do you think? He wasn't just coming back as a king might come back to see the land that he came from or something like that?

KIERNAN: No, I'd put it in another way. When he arrived first at Collinstown his

little speech was about the famine and the conditions when his people left Ireland. And when he was leaving Shannon the following Saturday, he was on the same topic. This time he put it how near America was to Ireland on account of the way the Irish had been forced to expand into so many countries, that it was not only America, but other countries too. I think that his coming back to Ireland was a closing of a chapter that began with the famine. It was triumphant in that way. It was the first year, by coincidence, since the famine that the population of Ireland showed an increase. It was the first year when emigration turned into an inward flow of immigration. These are simply historical coincidences, but I think he appeared to the people as an ending to the famine, as a triumph out of the famine. The famine, although it happened a hundred years ago, remained in the consciousness of the people. The famine and the evictions following the famine on such a huge scale, reducing the population from nine million to four million, somehow remained, although for that reason wasn't spoken of. But at the back of people's minds was a feeling of failure. Famine spelled failure. And the entire government of the country since the famine had been a government by non-Irish. This again indicates failure. And here was a success come at top level. Here was a fellow who came from famine stock on both paternal and maternal sides and who had reached the very top in the United States. That was felt throughout the country. I think in that sense you could say he wasn't coming as a king, he was coming as an ending of a bad epoch, a bad century. And whether he felt or not I don't know, because in his speeches he did refer so much, kept referring to that period you see, as if it was yesterday, which is very much the Irish way of talking. And Mrs. Kennedy wasn't in Ireland with her husband.

O'CONNOR: Yes, I know.

KIERNAN: Two of the sisters came and Mrs. Kennedy's sister and Mrs. Tubridy [Dorothy Tubridy]. At the dinner which De Valera gave him at the Phoenix Park, President Kennedy spoke praising the work which I had done and said that I was running away from him in Dublin. But mainly it was due to the fact that these ladies

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including Mrs. Tubridy were taking up all the room in the helicopter. There was no other way out. Now I thought Mrs. Kennedy seems to have some attitude about Ireland which changed completely on her husband's death. You might have remembered in the American newspapers attempts to find out when I gave President Kennedy his coat of arms, attempts to trace a Bouvier coat of arms. And actually there were serious attempts being made to do this. Mrs. Kennedy said to me, "You know, it's a great shame, I'm sorry he did ask you." I said, "Why?" She said, "He wants to have it on his cuff links, on everything." It was fun, but at the same time it was obvious she was a bit tired of it. The Irish was getting her down, I think. She spoke to me on that occasion in Washington after his death, in an entirely different way saying that she wanted the children to understand Ireland and for that reason she didn't want to bring them to Ireland until they were able to absorb something, to realize the difference between one country and another; that Caroline [Caroline Bouvier Kennedy] had been

already taught by her father the various names of states of the United States and Ireland was always included at the end of it, but it was simply a name to her; and she intended to have them in Ireland for quite long periods when they were able to understand Ireland. And she definitely I think now, has some desire to keep the Irish feeling or the Irish tradition.

O'CONNOR: I wonder what changed her mind, I wonder what made her change her mind. The affection that was shown to her husband when he was here do you think, or the affection after the assassination perhaps?

KIERNAN: I don't know. I think it's probably the need in herself to build up the entire Kennedy after his death. And part of him was Irish, she must realize that. And she wants to include that in her affections. Whereas in the hurly-burly of married life it must have been a bit of a nuisance to her—this talk about Irish. And then I suppose she had the normal American attitude most likely tinged with superiority or contempt for the Irish. I don't think there was any interest on her part in accompanying him to Ireland, because she could have come then instead of going to Greece. I think she was on one of the Greek Islands at the time he was here. And it would have been quite easy. Just before the return visit of Mr. Lemass, she stayed on. She was going somewhere. She stayed on to receive at the railway at Washington the Emperor of Abyssinia, Haile Sellassie, then left. But she was missing also on the return visit. And one of the sisters acted as hostess. So that there was no indication that she in any way shared whatever affection, whatever sentiment her husband had for Ireland during his lifetime. And, as I understand from her, there is a change of attitude now. And she may perhaps next year,

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she didn't want to come and bring them when the boy is able to...

O'CONNOR: All right, I was wondering also if you would care to comment on, or if you feel in a position to comment on the differences or sort of the characteristics of Robert Kennedy as opposed to his brother John Kennedy? I don't know whether you had any dealings with him or many dealings with him or not.

KIERNAN: Not many, but enough to form some kind of conclusion. Oddly enough, I think that Robert Kennedy is much more sensitive than his brother. That is to say a finer character in the sense of being more sensitive. I don't think he has any particular interest in Ireland. I don't think he has any at all. I should imagine now. His wife's sister lives there. She's married to an Irishman.

O'CONNOR: Yes, Mrs. Coffe [L. Coffe].

KIERNAN: So that perhaps his wife, who is probably of, I don't know, Czechoslovakian origin, has more interest in Ireland than he has. Of

course, what has to divide up.... In real politics, no American need have any interest in Ireland. In sentiment, I don't know. Ireland is so far away. The links are very small and they're growing more and more tenuous. There's more interest in other European countries with other backgrounds; in Italy and France and Germany than in Ireland. And I think the Kennedys share that. In other words, so far as Ireland may at election time be of any help to them, they'll be really interested in Ireland, otherwise, if there's something in the way of a pleasant holiday in Ireland, they'd be as interested in Ireland as they would be in France or Spain. That may be going too far, but I don't think it is.

O'CONNOR: Well, we're interested in your opinion.

KIERNAN: Yes, I think when it comes down to hard tack, that's what the position is.

O'CONNOR: What caused you to say that you think Robert Kennedy is a little bit more sensitive a man than John Kennedy? Did you have any specific thing in mind?

KIERNAN: No, I think it's simply—you know the way one sizes up a person's character in conversation. They come from two branches of the family, I should think. I never met Mrs. Kennedy [Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy], but I have an idea—that's the mother—Robert Kennedy

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is probably more like her. And Cardinal Cushing [Richard James Cushing] once said to me—he was talking about Mrs. Kennedy—"You know, I don't know how to describe her; she's odd. You don't know what she's thinking." Of course, that's probably the sensitivity of a person. If you say you don't know what they're thinking, they're probably too sensitive in most cases to express themselves. I think that in the broad, crude distinction, John F. Kennedy was extrovert and Robert is introvert, which means he's going to be hurt a lot more. But he's gotten tough enough to allow him not to worry about being hurt.

O'CONNOR: We think so.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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