

Hugh McCann Oral History Interview – 8/8/1966
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Biographical Note

McCann, Ambassador to the Court of St. James from 1958 to 1962 and Secretary of the Irish Department of External Affairs from 1963 to 1974, discusses planning for John F. Kennedy's 1963 visit to Ireland, relations between the United States and Ireland during the Kennedy administration, and McCann's interactions with the Kennedy family, among other issues.

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Hugh McCann

Hugh McCann

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Hugh McCann

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Oral History Interview

with

Hugh McCann

August 8, 1966
Dublin, Ireland

By Joe O'Connor

For the John F. Kennedy Library

O'CONNOR: Mr. Secretary, when did you really first have contact with John Kennedy [John F. Kennedy]?

McCANN: Well, my first contact with him was a very brief one. It was when I was counselor of our embassy in Washington, and when he was a senator, before he was president. And I also had contact round about the same time with the young lady who later became his wife, Miss Jacqueline Bouvier. She interviewed me on St. Patrick's Day when she was the roving correspondent for the *Washington Times Herald*.

O'CONNOR: Oh yes, that's right.

McCANN: But really, the first serious contact I had with him was when he came over to Ireland on his official visit in June 1963.

O'CONNOR: Well, what was the origin of the invitation to come over? Do you know anything about that?

McCANN: Well, naturally, with such a distinguished descendant of Irish parents,

we were very anxious here that he would come to Ireland on the first available opportunity. But because of the fact that we knew that he was an extraordinarily busy man, what we did, in fact, was we indicated to him that he would be welcome to come to Ireland whenever

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he felt it possible to do so. We left the timing of it up to him.

O'CONNOR: Was that when he was first inaugurated or...

McCANN: Well, it was done on more than one occasion. But I think it was shortly after that. But we in no sense pressed him to come because we realized that it was a thing he would do when he felt he could, and we knew that he did wish to come.

O'CONNOR: I see. When did you first find out that he actually was going to come over and what sort of arrangements did you make for him? What sort of problems did this entail?

McCANN: It was, of course, a very exceptional event for us in Ireland, and for that reason it was much more difficult to arrange than the ordinary visit. I think it was about three months before his actual coming that we first learned for certain that he was coming here. But of course, our problem then was that there were so many people in Ireland who were anxious to see him and so many cities anxious to do him honor. And so the difficulty was to arrange a program which would conform with his wishes and yet would give the maximum number of people and bodies in Ireland an opportunity to see him without killing the poor man.

O'CONNOR: Well, how was the itinerary really determined?

McCANN: Well, we began, as you would normally in any state visit, by arranging the things which are almost a must, you know: I mean the state banquet and various things in Dublin with the government and the head of state and the head of government. And then we had very numerous requests from cities like Dublin, Cork, Galway, and Limerick and naturally the people in Wexford whence some of his ancestors came. They were all very anxious to have him, and we tried to fit in as much as we could to meet these requests, consistent with, of course, the time that the President had available. And, of course, there again a problem arose because he was here, I think, from about the 26th to the 29th--really three days, the outside of three days.

And each one of these cities, when they got a hold of him would like to hang on to him for the day. Of course, we had sometimes to crowd a lot into a short period. For instance, one day he did Dunganstown, New Ross, and Wexford all before

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lunch. It was only because of the fact that he was going around by helicopter that this was possible. Normally, this kind of an operation would be completely impossible within the time available. In most of these places, he wouldn't have more than two hours for any one of them. And then there were all the various dignitaries who felt that they should have a place in the action, so to speak, and who wished to be seen and so forth--it was really quite a heavy program for him, but nevertheless he seemed to enjoy it so much and he seemed to get a certain amount of exhilaration out of it, too, because there was no doubt about it that the reception he received everywhere was extraordinarily warm. I mean one could feel it. It wasn't just something that was put on. There was no necessity on our part to try to generate any enthusiasm. The problem was more to keep it within bounds.

You see, in a way, it was a very significant event for us because, as you know, a very large number of our people went out to the United States in the coffin ships in the famine days in the forties [1840's]. They started at the very bottom in the United States--as laborers and such-like--and as time went on, they achieved greater fame and distinction in various walks of life, and this was the first Irishman to reach up to the top. He was an Irish Catholic President of the United States, and for that reason it was for our people here of very great significance.

O'CONNOR: Yes. Do you think that really is the reason why the people responded so much to him because this looked like a triumph over...

McCANN: No, that was only one of the ingredients. But I think what achieved for him his universal success here was also his own personality. I mean there were people--naturally some--who came to some of the functions slightly out of curiosity and then found themselves won over because there was no doubt about it, he had a magnetic personality and great charm.

One thing which struck me, too, about him was that, going to these different cities, you know, where he'd never been before, meeting strange people and so on, he always seemed to be very well attuned to the wave length of his audience. He even had an impish sense of humor and took a certain delight in "twigging" them without ever offending, and they appreciated this no end. Let's face it, he got the freedom of five different cities, and that type of ceremony was usually more or less the same with a lot of speeches, leading in, before and after, and normally when a person is on one's fourth or fifth experience, one might be pardoned if one's enthusiasm should wilt. But nevertheless, he always was very alive and sharp and, as you'd say in America, "on the ball" and he evoked a spontaneous reaction from his audiences. And for that reason, I think he had universal

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acceptance and warmth from everybody. I didn't meet a single person--and I traveled around with him in the helicopter and various vehicles involved in those trips--and I never met a case where anybody was even remotely critical, something which is very difficult for a visiting dignitary to achieve.

O'CONNOR: Oh, indeed, indeed. What do you think his reason was for coming back here? Now you've got a lot of American politicians of Irish descent who would like to say that they had gone to Ireland for the benefit of the voters behind, for the benefit of the Irish voters or something like that.

McCANN: Well, I suppose in all these things there is no single motive. I would say that my impression was that he wanted to do it for his own sake because there was no doubt about it that he was, for instance, very touched by his visit to Dunganstown where some of the ancestors came from. I suppose if there was, in the process, a political dividend, he wouldn't object to that. But I would say that his intention was really to see Ireland and perhaps to do honor to Ireland because there's no question about it that his visit to Ireland did, in the United States, I think, produce a good dividend for us. Relations between Ireland and the United States have always been good and they had been progressively improving over the years. But I think that his visit to Ireland gave a new personal dimension, and people, some people in the United States who up to then had either been indifferent or perhaps even critical of Ireland, had developed a new interest now in the wake of his visit. In a sense, for those people for which Ireland was nothing but a dot on the map up till then, it did put Ireland on the map for them.

O'CONNOR: Surely, there was a lot of criticism or hard feeling, just or unjust, about Ireland's position in the Second World War and this would be....

McCANN: That's probably true. But I think that his reaching the highest post in the United States and coming from Irish stock on both sides and having tread this course with distinction, too, I think that this did have an influence with the type of person who may have been indifferent or critical.

O'CONNOR: Well, did the fact that he was an Irishman as president, an Irish Catholic, an Irish-American Catholic, did this make any tangible difference in his approachability on the part of you, on the part of Mr. Aiken [Frank Aiken], or on the part of the Ambassador to the United States [Thomas J. Kiernan]? Did it make any difference at all or didn't it make any difference?

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McCANN: It's very hard to answer that question. I mean his predecessors in office were approachable also. Really, insofar as the climate of relations were reflected at the particular time you mention, perhaps in the immediate post war period, they may not have been as warm as they were subsequently. But even when I was in Washington, I met President Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower] on a number of occasions and I found no difficulty in approachability. But I'd say that perhaps President Kennedy, being of Irish direct descent added new warmth to it. But it wasn't as if there was any coolness previously, it just, as I said before, added a new personal dimension to it and a bond of empathy, if you like.

O'CONNOR: I wondered if this had any tangible benefits. I was thinking, for example, that John Kennedy having had Irish ancestors and having had obviously some interest in Ireland, since he had visited Ireland in 1947, as early as then, and again, whether he was concerned at all about Irish problems. People talk often about his love for Ireland because he came here twice, but that love I would expect to be shown in some real way aside from visiting, some real interest in the problems that Ireland has. And Ireland certainly has problems.

McCANN: Well, he had a real interest in Irish problems, but there was nothing specifically that we were seeking from the United States government. On the other hand, the fact that he demonstrated publicly this interest in Ireland, in the nature of things, perhaps made it a little bit easier for us to attract American industry. The people in the United States felt that the President of the United States viewed Ireland sympathetically, and in that sense, it probably made it easier. But one would not expect him to do anything special for us in the use of his power. He did, of course, lend his patronage to the newly founded Irish-American Foundation on the occasion of his visit with the President of Ireland [Eamon De Valera]. But there wasn't anything that we were seeking from him that he should do for us or that the United States government should do. But there was a dividend in the fact that his interest in Ireland and the image of Ireland that was created by this in the United States insofar as attracting industry and so forth is concerned.

O'CONNOR: I was wondering, Mr. Secretary, if the appointment of Ambassador McCloskey [Matthew H. McCloskey, Jr.] was indicative of John Kennedy's interest in Ireland or affection for Ireland or indicative of a lack of affection for Ireland, perhaps?

McCANN: It's very difficult to answer that question. I'm not sure quite what you mean by it, actually. Ambassador McCloskey, like most of his predecessors

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and his successor, were, as you know, non-career ambassadors to Ireland. He was an ambassador who met with considerable success here. He was popular. I can't say that this would give much indication either way--granted that it was the practice not to appoint a career man. He had a certain advantage, too, or course, being a person of political origins in the United States with direct access to the President. It did mean that perhaps one could get an idea or a viewpoint across directly to the President more easily than one could perhaps via a normal career ambassador.

On the other hand, we in Ireland see advantages to having a career ambassador because the techniques of modern diplomacy and the complicated subjects that come up are such that it's sometimes difficult for a person who hasn't had any previous experience to grasp the complicated problems that one is faced with such as in United Nations matters and elsewhere. So for that reason it's quite difficult to give a straight answer to your question.

O'CONNOR: Well, the reason I was asking was, or course, because I had heard from several sources that Ambassador McCloskey gave a certain offense, that he was not particularly a popular ambassador in Ireland because of, perhaps, his aggressiveness. Now would you agree with that or would you....

McCANN: No, I wouldn't say that he was unpopular, and I hadn't heard that he'd given offense. Every ambassador, of course, has his own personality. Some are very diplomatic, sometimes up to the point or making no impact at all. Ambassador McCloskey, or course, had been through the mill of the Democratic politics in the United States and perhaps was a rather forthright man in the way he said things. Sometimes some type of people appreciate that. I must say that personally I'm not aware that he caused any offense, and I think by and large he was a popular ambassador.

O'CONNOR: All right, another thing I had wondered about if there was ever any particular issues or particular points at which United States and Irish foreign policy clashed or came together especially. Were there any particular times when the United States and Ireland were working very, very closely together on particular issues? Now there were many, many issues. I'm not thinking of any in particular. Issues such as the Congo or issues such as the Soviet relations. Issues such as the Far East or in Vietnam, as that goes.

McCANN: You're talking in terms of when President Kennedy was in office?

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O'CONNOR: Yes, I'm talking specifically of then, not of present day or not before. I'm talking specifically of then.

McCANN: No, I can't say, first of all, that there was ever any case where they clashed. There would be occasions of course, in the United Nations where they wouldn't necessarily go along parallel tracks because we have been trying in the United Nations to make what little contribution we can in our own way towards peace.

O'CONNOR: Well, it's not such a little contribution.

McCANN: Well, I think our efforts with contributions of contingents to the various peace keeping forces, you know, have been very much appreciated by the United States, but in the nature of things, there could be occasions where on a particular issue the stand we would take would not necessarily coincide with that of the United States who would be thinking of it from the point of view of her particular role in the world, whereas we would be trying sometimes to work for a peaceful solution where there might be a conflict between the United States point of view and the point of view of other great powers. We have, I think, a reputation in the United Nations for being objective. It's because we have no axe to grind. That's the kind of

contribution we can make, a moral one and also this policing function of keeping the peace.

O'CONNOR: Yes. That's specifically what I was thinking of. For example, Irish soldiers died in the Congo.

McCANN: That's right. And then you have Cyprus, the Middle East the Gaza strip. And as a matter of fact, President Kennedy recognized this very much because, as you remember in that superb speech he made in the Irish parliament, he paid particular tribute to this role. As a matter of fact that was one thing that gave great pleasure in Ireland, the fact that he was so perceptive as to recognize the role we were playing and the value of that role. If we had been, say, just a very small country and a direct ally of the United States, we might be able to do much less. The fact that he showed that the United States Administration appreciated this was something that was very encouraging to us in Ireland.

O'CONNOR. Well, there weren't any specific favors or anything like that that were involved in American--I mean, a specific instance where the United States might have wanted some help from Ireland or asked Ireland to do something, anything of that sort.

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McCANN: Offhand, I can't remember. There were, naturally there would be in the course of things--in the United Nations from day-to-day occasions where they might be interested in having a particular resolution sponsored or a particular subject brought up and somebody else, some of our other friends, would not want it to be brought up, and we would try to evaluate.

O'CONNOR: Well, I can't name specific issues, but I can think of issues or instances when Ireland would make a resolution or offer a resolution, and I would know from reading the papers that this was something the United States would be very much in favor of.

McCANN: That's true. Yes.

O'CONNOR: And I had wondered ever if you know of any collusion behind the scenes or anything of this sort.

McCANN: Well, that's something, as you know, that goes on behind the scenes in the United Nations in the corridors. It happens all the time with all the countries. I mean even at the present moment, my Minister is trying to get through a resolution in the United Nations to ensure that the financing of peace keeping is put on a sound basis and not just on a voluntary basis where people pay when they feel like it and don't pay if they don't wish to. Well, there we would be trying to twist the arm of the State Department and the Canadians and everyone else to help. Well, the same thing would

have happened during President Kennedy's time. There would be certain things he would be interested in, perhaps the Indian-Pakistan dispute on Kashmir or something else where they would be concerned. But that's part of the normal life in the United Nations. Each country is lobbying the other from his point of view. But there would never have been, at any time in our relations, anything in the nature of a horse trade. That's the one thing we do not do in the United Nations: we do things according to our lights, you know. But we would never be influenced by: "Say, look, if you do this, we'll do that."

O'CONNOR: I didn't mean a horse trade exactly. I thought possibly there would be some instances which would stand out in your mind as being more important in bringing Ireland and the United States closer together on an actual working level than others. But if you can't remember any, well then perhaps that indicates that things went along at about the same level.

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McCANN: They went along, but, as I say, they wouldn't normally be parallel. Sometimes the paths were slightly opposed, and other times we'd be pushing them or they'd be pushing us. For instance, one of the main things we pushed and we got through was the resolution trying to prevent the dissemination of nuclear weapons. Well, in the earlier stages we weren't getting an awful lot of support from some of the countries, but in the end...

O'CONNOR: Did that include the United States?

McCANN: ...the United States and others were eventually breast high for it and were very keen on it. But sometimes in the beginning you have even to persuade people where their own interest lies. Yes. But now, as you know, the United States and Great Britain are pressing hard for that. But it's known as the Irish Resolution. It took about three or four years to get through. But I can't offhand now--of course, that was a few years back--recollect any major cause célèbre where there was either a great divergence of view or where they were pressing us. It is very difficult. I could say by looking at the records. But offhand, I can't.

O'CONNOR: Oh. No. If you can't offhand, that's significant.

McCANN: That's indicative in itself. Yes. But I think, by and large, it's true to say that the United States have rarely strongly disapproved of anything we've been doing. They may not always be enthusiastic.

O'CONNOR: Well, they couldn't be always enthusiastic.

McCANN: Because actually we're trying to do objectively what we think is right, and of course the United States has its own point of view on something like that, you see, and has its own pressures and counter pressures too.

O'CONNOR: Okay. Going back to John Kennedy just for a few minutes. We can wind this up because I don't want to take up too much of your time. Did you ever have any contact with him at all after that, or did you ever hear of any repercussions...

McCANN: Well, of course, I did have the good fortune to accompany our Prime Minister, Mr. Lemass [Sean F. Lemass], on his visit to the United States in October of 1963. As a matter of fact, I think we must have been amongst his last official guests, actually.

O'CONNOR: Yes. Indeed.

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McCANN: And, I must say, that was a very moving experience. One got the impression, and I'm sure it's true, that he went out of his way to make this a memorable occasion for us. As a matter of fact, people in the State Department told me that he took a greater interest in the visit than in the normal state visit and the details of it. And he did. There were some personal touches in it which indicated that, and for that reason when his tragic death came the following month, it hit us, in fact as it hit most people in this country, as if it were a personal loss that was involved. I mean it was more than the loss of a great statesman, a great American. We felt it as if it were a personal tragedy.

O'CONNOR: You don't remember any of the specific things that might have come up during that return visit at all in conversation with John Kennedy or in discussion...

McCANN: Well, the type of thing he did, the type of touch he gave. For instance, we had a reception in the Mayflower Hotel about the second or third night, and it had been arranged that he was to come down and we'd start receiving guests together at a certain point. And he arrived down just about the time appointed, but rather than go ahead with the reception receiving the guests, all the ambassadors and others waiting outside, he arrived down with a projector and a colored film of our trip up to date and insisted upon a private showing for Mr. Lemass of this and held the whole proceedings up for about twenty minutes, and when the projector wasn't working, he went over himself and tried to help and so forth to see if he could get it fixed up. That was a personal touch which one wouldn't expect. We had, of course, discussions with him in the White House.

O'CONNOR: That's what I was specifically thinking of, specific things which you might have discussed. I don't know whether you remember them or not.

McCANN: There again, because there were no problems between the two countries, we just talked about the world in general and his personal experiences, and they were almost lighthearted conversations, you know. They were really explaining our point of view and the American point of view on the major issues of the day. But there was nothing controversial in them. It was really just an exchange of information. It had only been four months previously that he'd been over here and we'd had the discussions across the dinner table and so forth, so that I don't think that there was anything that you would call momentous in the sense that there was nothing to be resolved.

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O'CONNOR: A specific problem which has hung over Ireland for a long time, of course, has been the problem of unification.

McCANN: Yes.

O'CONNOR: And I wondered if you had ever heard him talk about that or ever talked with him yourself about that and whether he showed much sympathy to the problem or was interested in it.

McCANN: Well naturally, we had various instances where we brought our point of view to his notice. And I think that one could read into his speech before the Parliament here a sympathetic attitude.

O'CONNOR: Yes, but I wondered on the personal level. He might speak--I would hope that if he spoke at all to the Parliament, he would speak somewhat sympathetically. But I wondered if on the personal level you could tell whether there actually was a genuine sympathy toward your point of view or a kind of indifference.

McCANN: I think there was. I would say that there was. But there again one realizes that relations with London are a cornerstone in American foreign policy, and I one would not expect him, certainly, publicly to do too much which might embarrass that relationship. On the other hand, we had always the hope that privately perhaps he might do something to, you know, bring nearer the day when there would be unification. And my personal conviction, although it's very difficult to put one's finger on this, is that he certainly had, while he was President, a sympathetic interest. Now what his views were earlier on the subject, I don't know, because he hadn't given to me an indication in my short contact with him any evidence one way or the other on it. But one got the distinct impression during his visit here and our visit to the United States that he had a sympathetic attitude, that he would like to have seen the problem solved. How far he'd go to do anything about it now is another matter. Naturally, we wouldn't put him in the position of asking him.

O'CONNOR: Well, you would think that this indeed, London, relations with London were very important, but this is a man who has had Irish ancestry, and you would indeed think that if his feeling and affection for Ireland were as strong as many people believed it, he might show some...

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McCANN: Yes. I would have thought that with this feeling and sympathy that, at a given moment, if there was something which he usefully could do, he would do it. But it's not a problem that can be solved overnight. I mean you have to first have a winning of hearts with our fellow Irishmen in the North, you know. You just can't impose solutions to issues. And for that reason, we understood it would be unreasonable to ask him to do something specifically, overtly, if, in fact, the result would not be fruitful.

O'CONNOR: Okay, we can cut this off unless you can think of any comments you'd like to add regarding John Kennedy. Or perhaps one more thing, regarding the rest of the Kennedy family. You may have met some of the other members, perhaps Ted [Edward Moore Kennedy] or...

McCANN: Yes, I met Ted and his wife [Virginia Joan Bennett Kennedy] and I met, I met...

O'CONNOR: Robert Kennedy [Robert F. Kennedy].

McCANN: Bob Kennedy very briefly over there. My wife, of course, knew a number of the Kennedy family because she was at school with the girls.

O'CONNOR: Oh, I didn't know that.

McCANN: Yes, she was at school at Manhattanville in New York. She was at school with Jean [Jean Kennedy Smith], and I met Eunice [Eunice Kennedy Shriver] a few times when I was in Washington as Counselor of our Embassy--I was there for seven years. My wife was American, and I had met Eunice off and on. But my wife was a classmate of Jean's in Manhattanville, and she knew the family rather well from that point of view.

O'CONNOR: Well, maybe I should have tried to talk to your wife.

McCANN: [Laughter] It might be more interesting. In a way, perhaps she would know more about the Kennedy family than I would.

O'CONNOR: I was not aware of that, that she had gone to school.

McCANN: Yes. She went to school with Jean, and we met Jean, she was Mrs. Smith then, of course, at the White House banquet in honor of Mr. Lemass when we were over there. A charming lady.

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O'CONNOR: I didn't know whether you felt you knew them well enough at all to comment, but I've often asked people what they thought might be the differences, characteristic differences, between John and Robert and Ted.

McCANN: Well, I would have thought that Ted's personality was nearer to the late President's than, say, Bob's personality. His was somewhat different. I would sense there was a very strong family loyalty. That was one thing that you could see straightaway. I mean there was very strong links there, and that each helped the other along. But I can't say that I knew them well enough really to make my own appraisal. As I say, my wife could probably make a better appraisal of the characteristics or the family.

O'CONNOR: Well, okay, I think that will do it.

[McCANN recalls another anecdote later]

O'CONNOR: Try to repeat that scene, if you like.

McCANN: Well, I was just remarking about the bond or empathy that seemed to exist between him and people on all levels. I mean he would make a point or going over and speaking to the waitress behind the table. Or take, for example, when he was leaving Iveagh House here after the State banquet and reception: There was a huge crowd outside, kept orderly by the police and so forth. He went out to go to his car, and they all cheered wildly and so forth in a very orderly manner. But, of course President Kennedy wasn't content with this, so he decided, to the horror of his Secret Service, to go over into the crowd. Of course, once he did it, there was a genuine melee. I have a distinct recollection of our Foreign Minister trying to get him back into his, having to put both his feet against the side of the car and put his full weight on the door to get it open again. And I must say I never saw his Secret Service agents so worried. It was a very good humored crowd but he was personally responsible just for breaking it up you know by going over and insisting on shaking hands amongst them. One gathered the impression that he liked to feel the grip of somebody's hand, actually--the personal contact.

O'CONNOR: Did you have much trouble any other places with crowds or...

McCANN: No. We never had any trouble because the people had so much affection for him that everybody was very considerate, but one did have the milling crowds. There was no question about that. But with

the fairly elaborate

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arrangements we had and given the good nature of the crowd, we never at any stage had any fear for his safety. I didn't hear one single word of criticism of any kind the whole of his days in Ireland. Not one single word from anybody.

O'CONNOR: That's amazing!

McCANN: He seemed to have some advantages partly due the fact that he started off being a person of Irish descent and Catholic and so forth, and his own personal magnetism and the fact that he didn't offend anybody at any stage with any remark he made, which is very difficult to do--to go into any country and not to tread on somebody's corns. And for that reason, while there was the problem of coping with the enthusiasm, there was never any real problem of protecting him.

O'CONNOR: Well, okay.

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