

Eamon de Valera Oral History Interview – 9/15/1966
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Interviewer: Joseph E. O'Connor
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Biographical Note

de Valera was leader of the Irish militants in their war with Great Britain in the early twentieth century, served as prime minister of Ireland three times between 1938 and 1959, and as president from 1959 to 1973. In this interview he discusses the Irish in America and John F. Kennedy's visit to Ireland, among other issues.

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Oral History Interview

with

His Excellency Eamon de Valera

September 15, 1966
Dublin, Ireland

By Joseph E. O'Connor

For the John F. Kennedy Library

O'CONNOR: Mr. President, what were your first recollections of John Kennedy [John F. Kennedy] here in Ireland?

de VALERA: Well, the first we had, of course, was that he was candidate for the presidency. We followed the candidature fairly closely. We were wondering whether the prejudice which operated so severely against Al Smith [Alfred E. Smith] would still be strong enough to defeat him. Of course, it was a tight contest, and we were overjoyed when he was finally declared elected as President of the United States. We began then to take a closer interest in the man. His name, of course, his name John Fitzgerald Kennedy--two of the names most famous in our history. The Gaelic name Kenedy associated with the great Dal gCais of which Brian Boru was the most illustrious member. Brian Boru was the king who defeated the Danes in a decisive battle and finally broke their power here in the west. That name then was one which was enough to show how far back his lineage went. And the other name, Fitzgerald, was one of the great Anglo-Norman names. They came over here in the time of Henry II at the invitation of the King of Leinster who wanted their aid against some of the other chiefs here. And they were later so prominent in history in standing out against the English Crown that they were regarded as more Irish than the Irish themselves. They intermarried no doubt and awoke the Irish language. And,

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as I say, they were regarded by many of the historians--they were referred to as being more Irish than the Irish themselves. So, no, there couldn't have been a better combination of names than the two which we have here, than which he had.

O'CONNOR: All right.

de VALERA: So, no man could have more distinguished or so distinctive Irish names as he had. Well then, when he was elected, as I have said, we were delighted, and took interest in the man himself. We began to know of his courage as a soldier. He was, I think, in the Navy, wasn't he? It was in the Navy, wasn't it?

O'CONNOR: Yes, it was the Navy.

de VALERA: ...yes, he was as a soldier and in the war and later of his great fortitude in illness. We began also to get to know something about his writings, the books which he had written. We got to realize that he was a man of very noble ideals, and we were watching to see to what extent he would put these ideas into practice as President of the United States, now that he was perhaps in the most powerful position that any individual can be in. And we were delighted to see that the ideas weren't mere fancy, that there were things that he really believed in, and that he was going to act up to the highest things that he had spoken of.

We were particularly interested in the threat, the Russian threat at the time of Cuba and took particular note of the firmness with which he dealt with the situation. Those of us who had the experience of international affairs, we were satisfied that he was doing the right thing, and we were very glad that he succeeded in it without war ensuing. We knew that, really, he was a man of peace who wanted peaceful conditions, who was interested in the happiness of mankind, of the individual, of every individual. So, we knew that it would have been very sad, he would have felt very sad indeed if it was out of his firmness it was that war had to ensue. But the view was that if war didn't ensue at that time, it would have ensued later if hadn't taken a firm stand which he took. We were very happy that it all worked out well, But it proved that he was a man of firm character.

In all the things we watched him then, we were also pleased with his attitude on the race question in the United States. We

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know it's a very, very big problem and a difficult one, one which we were very pleased we didn't have any of the same kind to deal with here. But we recognized that the line which he was taking was the correct one, at least looking at it from the outside. I had been in the United States I had traveled through the Southern states; I knew what the conditions were as well as the Northern ones. I knew what the situation was over there, and I knew how difficult it would be to give effect to his program. But it was one of these things that had to be tackled

sometime, and he was tackling it in what we considered the only way that it could be tackled. So that all we knew of him, before he came here, fitted in with the vision of a great man, great in simplicity, a great man who was in a very powerful position.

When we heard he was coming to Ireland, we were very pleased. And when he arrived, he got a reception such as no other visitor, to my knowledge anyhow, has ever received. He was received with open arms by young and old. He was cheered wherever he went along the streets. It was a triumphal procession from the airport to up here. He paid his first call here. But we regretted very much that he didn't stay with us here. He didn't stay with us because he pointed out that he wanted to be in very close contact all the time with Washington. And that meant that the installation of a great deal of equipment and tons of equipment were necessary to keep that contact. He was here for luncheon, and he was here for a garden party. And when he was here, his officials asked, could they link us up so he would be able to get in contact, if necessary, at any moment with Washington. That was arranged, and by accident I picked up one of the phones here at my desk, and immediately got an answer from Washington faster than I would get it from even our house phone here. So it showed that the linkup was very thorough.

My regret was that he didn't stay with us. We had only met him at a few luncheons. I, personally, and my wife [Sinead de Valera] had met him only at a couple of luncheons and at a garden party at which the weather was unfortunate for us. It was very wet, so the people weren't able to meet him as they wished. The danger there was that there was a mob that was crushing in upon him, and the security men were trying to keep them back, but of course, they were being pressed in with the crowd. And he was anxious anyhow to go out and meet the people. And I think that very often that is the simplest way to avoid this crushing if the person who is being protected by security men can walk out and meet them. And

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I thought anyhow that there was no danger likely to come to him here. I did think when he was coming in with me from the airport, he was standing up, and it did pass through my mind, curiously enough, what an easy target he would have been. But then, no man can protect himself in a position who wants to meet his people; no man can protect himself if the other people are prepared to give their lives in return. So although, as I said, he would have been an easy mark, I know there was no danger about it at all. However, the security people had, naturally, quite a different view of things. Well, as I say, we were very sorry he wasn't here with us. He went down to see relatives, down in Wexford. And we saw him, people saw him on television and so on, saw him meeting his relatives, and saw the refreshments they had down in their home, and the contact with the local people. But everywhere he went, more and more people got to like him, got an affection for him, and the result was that they were very, very, very sorry when he was leaving. I don't think that there is much more I have to say.

A point I was making when I spoke about the prejudice against Al Smith, people here in Ireland felt that that was very unfair. Our people here know that one-half of Washington's [George Washington] army was of Irish extraction, and they knew that in the latter half of the nineteenth century nearly all the hard work of the development of America had been done by the Irish. They knew also that the Irish, in the next generation, had been educated; that was

one of the things that our people paid particular attention to in America, the education of their children. And the second generation then, they got into higher positions. The others were the hewers of wood. In the earlier stages, they had to be. They left here from a famine stricken country they had no capital, and the only thing they had was their brains and the strength of their arms. So they played a very big part in the building up of the United States.

And then, in the second generation, they took naturally to politics. Politics is one of the highest of the professions. People seem to think they can look down on it. It's one of the highest of the professions. It was said to be so, I think, by some of the greatest of philosophers because it is the welfare of the community as a whole. The fundamental task of the politician is working for the welfare. So the Irish people drifted into politics in every community, whatever city or town they were

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in. They were elected by their peers to positions of trust as members of the town councils and so on, and state legislatures, and then, of course, the national legislature as well. So it seemed very unfair that there should be prejudice against them because they were Irish, and we sort of resented it at this point.

The fact is, of course, that the Americans of Irish blood in every period in history wore strongest in defense of the United States. There are no citizens that love the United States better. But they have affection for the land of their origin, of their people, their ancestors. I was once in the United States, and I remember being questioned about this. How was it possible that a person could love two countries? I said, "Now look here, a man can love his wife and love her best in the world, but that doesn't prevent him at all from having a very deep love for his mother. And for us, as for a lot of our people, this was the mother country." As a matter of fact, when I was a child--I was born, as you know, in New York and when I was a child, I suppose I was more in touch with America because my mother was still there than I was with any other country; but in my childhood days they used to talk of America, of the United States, as being the greater Ireland beyond the seas [Laughter], and I would see Boston referred to as the greatest Irish city because there were probably more people of Irish extraction, at that time, in Boston than in the city of Dublin--at that particular time. I have a recollection of over eighty years--conscious recollection of things of over eighty years--I can go back quite a length of time. But that was the position when I was young. Well, when the President departed, as I said, we were very sorry that his stay was so short. And when he went over, we still watched his work there, and then of course, we were dumbfounded when we heard that he was shot.

O'CONNOR: Do you remember where you were when you heard of his assassination?

de VALERA: I was in here, in the next room. There's a television set. I can't see very well, but if I looked close up at the side, if I put my face fairly close at the side, I've a little peripheral vision, and I can see roughly what's on the screen. So I was happening to be listening to--I

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forget whether it was news or what it was--when the news came that he had been shot. And then there was a delay. And later on we were told that he was dead. So that was the position in which I received it. Of course, I was dumbfounded. I did make a little talk to our people on the radio at that time.

O' CONNOR: He got on famously with your wife, by the way, while he was here.

de VALERA: Yes, my wife and he got on very well together because he was interested in poetry, and she has a great deal of poetry in her head. She has a very good memory. When she read a poem two or three times, she remembered it. So she found a very willing listener, apparently, and he was interested in the poetry, and they got on very well together. Of course, it was only at a lunch or so, they didn't have much opportunity. And I couldn't go, and my wife traveled down to Wexford with the President.

O'CONNOR: But your wife also wrote poetry, and didn't he quote some of your wife's poetry at one point?

de VALERA: No, what happened was, he was going down to the Shannon, and she quoted a poem about the Shannon.

O'CONNOR: Oh, I see.

de VALERA: The funny part of it was, you see, he took it down, and he wasn't able to read his own writing afterwards when he was going down in the helicopter, from here down, and they all put their heads together, with the result they turned out something which wasn't the real poem at all. So that the words of the author that had done it, they were different words from what's in the poem. [Laughter] That happened. He wrote it down rapidly, you see. I forget "It is, it is the Shannon stream, brightly glancing, brightly glancing..." I forget it now. I did know it as a child when I was in school. But she quoted it for him, and he thought it rather nice. And the Shannon looks very nice at times. Particularly if you look at it from the air, you can see it's a very fine river. Just at the mouth, just down there where you have the airport and from that

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out to the sea is rather nice.

O'CONNOR: Well, the thing that has interested me again about John Kennedy's visit, is, well, some people have said that one of the reasons for his visit was really for domestic politics, for domestic American politics, and people here certainly, in Ireland, don't feel that way at all. You don't agree with that?

de VALERA: I don't feel like that. My view was that it had nothing to do with domestic politics. It is true that some of our own people didn't vote for him, and I was greatly surprised at that. I think they had some sort of fear that as an Irishman... He was the first Irishman, you see, of what you might call the Gaelic stock who had got into office in the United States, and he was coming in it at a very critical time, and they were wondering whether the result that the task was so terrible that if an Irishman failed in it, it would be held that it was an Irishman who failed. I don't know, I've only just heard something like that. But we were surprised that there were Irish people, of Irish blood, who didn't vote for him. But of course, in America you have quite a number of Irishmen in the Republican Party as well as the Democratic Party. And they fought both in the South, in the fight in Lincoln's [Abraham Lincoln] time. They were fighting each other in some of the battles. They were fighting each other on opposite sides. I think that was the case because I know St. Patrick's Day, in a lull of the fight, they both sang the same songs.

O'CONNOR: Well, did he seem to know much about Ireland, when he was here? Did he really seem to be interested in Ireland?

de VALERA: Oh, he seemed to be interested and seemed to know a good deal about it. He was very quick you see. He was very quick on the uptake. He was a good listener. He could listen, and he was quick on the uptake following. He was able to size things up all right.

O'CONNOR: You didn't take him down to Boylan's Mill, did you? [Laughter]

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de VALERA: Ah no, there was no time. That wasn't in his line of fun, you see. That would be all right if he were staying here for a month or so, and we were wondering what we should do with all the guests. But he wasn't here, he didn't stay long enough. One of my regrets was that he hadn't come to us.

O'CONNOR: Well, I'm sure there are many things we're forgetting in this interview, but unless you can think of any other comments you'd like to make, why, I suppose this will bring it to an end.

de VALERA: Well, there isn't anything in particular.

O'CONNOR: Okay.

De VALERA: The main thing is his courage as was shown in battle, his fortitude as was shown in his illness, his strength of character as was shown in his attitude toward the others, and the simplicity in dealing--there was a sort of boyish simplicity in his attitude towards people. But that hid behind a very strong character. He showed good judgment. And I am sure that as President of the United States the last word lies with him. If he was wise at all, he would listen very carefully to the

opinions of his counselors. He may not accept their opinions.... Was it Lincoln who said, "Ten nay (or something) and one aye. The ayes have it." [Laughter] He was the one, you see. He didn't agree with them. They all took a certain view, but he didn't agree with them, and he had the last word. And it's very nice to be in a position in which you can listen. If you're wise and listen to counsel, listen to the arguments that they have for a particular course, weigh it up yourself, and then decide. You're very happy if your own view is that of the majority, or if it's unanimous, but you must be prepared, if you strongly feel that they're wrong and that you are right, you must be prepared to act on your own judgment. It's a very heavy responsibility, of course. But the wise man will listen, certainly, to the counsel that is given to him even though he may finally reject the advice. And I think he had that gift.

O'CONNOR: I think that's certainly true. Okay.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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Eamon de Valera Oral History Transcript
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