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# Historical Commentary: "When General Grant to Ireland Came"

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# “When General Grant to Ireland Came...”

## A Discordant Note in an Harmonious Journey.

Jordan D. Fiore

In the spring of 1884 President Ronald Reagan visited the Republic of Ireland, the home of his paternal ancestors. Everywhere he drew large and friendly crowds, but at almost every point, there were groups of protesters who opposed his position on a variety of political and military subjects and were eager to demonstrate their opposition.

Some American reporters on the scene professed to be upset by this show of unfriendliness toward a popular political figure, and several correspondents spent almost as much time in dealing with this opposition as they did with the positive aspect of the trip. In reality, protest has almost always been a fact of life in Ireland, and indeed the opposition to Reagan was mild when compared with the insult to former President Ulysses S. Grant more than one hundred years ago.

After the completion of his second term as President, Grant decided to make a European trip, which eventually was extended to Asia and then across the Pacific to San Francisco. Wherever he went, there were parades, receptions, banquets, reviews, balls, and fireworks as crowds gathered to see the victorious general and former head of state, the first President of the United States to travel extensively abroad after leaving the White House.

Grant, his wife, one of his sons, and a large entourage of reporters and others sailed from Philadelphia on May 17, 1877, on the American line steamer *Indiana*. Their first landing place in Ireland was Queenstown (present-day Cobh), on March 27. A number of prominent local officials, mindful of the large number of their countrymen who had moved to the United States and of the many Irish-American soldiers who had served in Grant's army in the Civil War, assured him that he was loved and respected in Ireland and that the Irish people would welcome him "with all warmth and candor."

Grant accepted the accolades, but he regretfully informed the Irish leaders that he could not accept their hospitality immediately. He was expected in England at once, but he promised them that he planned to return to Ireland and to spend some time there before returning to the United States.

Nineteen months passed before Grant returned to Ireland. He traveled to England, where he met Queen Victoria, to Belgium, Germany, France, Italy, Egypt, Turkey, the Holy Land, Norway, Sweden, Russia, Austria, Greece, the Netherlands, Spain, and Portugal, and finally, before leaving for the Orient, he came to Ireland early in 1879.

He expected an enthusiastic reception in Ireland, not only because of the affinity of the people there to many of his countrymen, but because many of the national aspirations of the Irish, particularly in the southern part of that country, were an historic parallel to those of the Americans. As one reporter who accompanied the group wrote, "To an immense proportion of the Irish people General Grant typifies the republican form of government which they hope for."

The General and his wife spent a delightful Christmas in Paris, and then, leaving her behind, he went on to Ireland and landed in Dublin on January 3, 1879. The Lord Mayor welcomed him and gave him the key to the city. Grant expressed his pride at being made an honorary citizen of Dublin, and he reminded his audience:

*I am by birth the citizen of a country where there are more Irishmen, native born or by descent in all Ireland. When in office I had the honor -- and it was a great one, indeed -- of representing more Irishmen and descendants of Irishmen than does her Majesty the Queen of England.*

Supporters of Irish Home Rule and royal officials joined in honoring Grant, and that evening at a banquet he made one of the longest speeches in his career, pointing out to the English and the Irish that they had made great profit from American purchases there in the previous twenty or more years, but that the balance of trade would soon shift, and the exports of goods from the United States to the British Isles would soon exceed their imports. Before he left Dublin the news came that however happy the people of Dublin were at his arrival, Grant would be unwelcome in the city of Cork.

The United States Consul in Cork had written to the Cork City Council, an-

nouncing that the General planned to be in that city in a few days, and an Irish Nationalist member of the Council moved that the letter be marked "Read" and filed, and an animated discussion followed. Why should the Cork City Council have treated Grant in this manner and pronounced him objectionable?

In the fall of 1875, when several states held off-year elections, Grant went to St. Louis and then to a reunion of the Army of the Tennessee in Des Moines. Here he was asked to deliver an address, and he injected a new note in national politics. Concerned with the plight of the nation's teachers who had suffered greatly from the panic of 1873, he spoke of the destiny of the public schools, lower pupil attendance due to the depression, salary cuts, the abandonment of school buildings, and retrenchment in the support of public schools by local governments. He sought to realign the Republican party in favor of public education, since the conservatives of the Democratic party in the South and the large Catholic following in the North had never made full public education an issue.

Grant pointed out the need for Federal and State aid to education. "Every state, he said, should furnish to every child growing up in the land the means of acquiring a good common school education," and beyond the common school, Grant thought that every state should do whatever its wealth allowed. He added:

*Let us labor for security of free thought, free speech, free press, pure morals, unfiltered religious sentiment, and equal rights and the privileges of men, irrespective of nationality, color, or religion; encourage free schools; resolve that not one dollar appropriated to them shall go to the support of any sectarian school; resolve that neither state nor nation shall support any institution save those where every child may get a common school education, unmixed with any atheistic, pagan, or sectarian teachings; leave the matter of religious teaching to the family altar, and keep Church and State separate.*

Although this statement may seem innocuous to us today, some Democrats insisted



*U. S. Grant*

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that Grant was talking against Catholic schools and injecting an anti-Catholic issue into the campaign.

In fairness to Grant, it is certain that, although he was probably playing politics with the issue of education, he was no anti-Catholic. He had served with many Roman Catholics in the army, and his closest military associates were William T. Sherman and Philip H. Sheridan, both Roman Catholics, who owed to Grant their promotions to the highest rank. The most lucrative public office in his administration, the Collectorship of the Port of New York, was given to Thomas Murphy, a Roman Catholic, whom Grant appointed over much Republican opposition and who was characterized as a "Tammany Republican" and a "bigoted Roman Catholic." But the charge of anti-Catholicism did not die completely and was carried overseas and believed by the Cork City Council.

In Cork, one conservative member called in vain for the Council to invite Grant, stating:

*There can be no antipathy to the gentleman himself; neither was there anything in the government of the ex-President objectionable to the Irish people nor unpleasant to the Irish in America.*

One of the extreme nationalists, Barry, said that Grant had insulted the Irish people in America by raising the "No Popery" cry there. Another councillor named Tracy said that it would be unbecoming to welcome such a man, for Grant "never thought of the Irish race as he had of others, and he went out of his way to insult their religion." In this statement he was supported by one Dwyer, who indicated that, since Grant had never given the Irish the same recognition as the other inhabitants, it "would be an impropriety to pay any mark of respect personally to General Grant." One member made a slighting reference to Grant as a leatherman, a reference to his early background as a tanner. Other nationalists in the Council spoke in support of the plan to reject Grant's proposal to visit, and this motion passed unanimously.

Officially, Grant had already planned not to go to Cork, and he does not appear

to have been disturbed by the Council's motion. He was reported to have smiled when told of the decision of the Cork Councillors, and he said that he was sorry that they knew so little of American history. The action of the Council did receive much attention in the British Isles and in the United States.

Many persons in Cork particularly the conservatives, were indignant. An ex-Mayor said:

*The obstructionists who oppose a cead mille failthe to General Grant are not worth a decent man rubbing up against. It is a pity that the General has determined to return to Paris instead of visiting Cork, where he would have received such an ovation from the self-respecting population as would prove that the Irish heart beats in sympathy in America.*

In New York a number of prominent Irish-American citizens met at the Irish Volunteer Armory on Seventh Street "for the purpose of manifesting their disapproval of the late slights put upon General Grant, as a representative of America, by the city council of Cork." Included in the group of protesters were several high-ranking officers in the New York Militia, prominent politicians, mostly Democrats, Irish-American businessmen, and a number of priests.

The *New York Times* commented on this meeting in an editorial entitled "Why Get Indignant?" in which they asserted that Grant needed no such action and dismissed the Council by stating that Grant "thought he was doing an act of courtesy, and so he was, but there are people who do not understand acts of courtesy or know how to deal with civility." The writer pointed out that Grant was popularly received in the rest of Ireland and that Catholic leaders in France, Spain, Italy, and Portugal as well as Dublin saw no anti-Catholic attitude in Grant who was supposed to be one of the most tolerant of men. Even in Dublin the fact that Grant was not Catholic was known and respected. The writer added sarcastically:

*But every where this enemy of the Church, this pernicious heretic, was treated with consideration, until the Town Council of Cork heard that he was coming. It remained for them to stand faithful among the faithless and vindicate the Mother Church from the insults of this redoubtable foe.*

The editorialist concluded that the Irish-American defense of Grant was not needed. The action of the Cork Council

*should not be regarded as an affront to Gen. Grant, or a slight to a distinguished citizen of the United States, worthy of resentment. It would be undignified to treat it as such. It is merely an exhibition of the Town Council of Cork, and if that body chose to present itself before the world in such an unseemly attitude, expostulation should be made, if at all, in its own behalf or that of the city that is put to shame thereof.*

The *New York Herald* also took issue with the Cork Council stating that "The Town Council of Cork has done more to advertise itself in connection with General Grant than the municipal authority of any city of Europe" and added that that body

*has made a discovery which has escaped the rest of Catholic Europe and of Catholic Ireland. It proclaims, as a justification of its discourtesy, that General Grant went out of his way to insult its religion.*

## ...protest has almost always been a fact of life in Ireland...

*The deeds of General Grant have not been done in a corner, and it seems odd enough that it was reserved for its Town Council of Cork to detect and proclaim a fact which has escaped the knowledge of Europe and America.*

Supporting the *Times'* statement that Grant had been warmly received in other Catholic areas, the editorial writer concluded that "the Town Council of Cork would seem to be better Catholics than the Pope himself."

Alluding to Grant's speech in Des Moines the writer added, "But many American Catholics are supporters of anti-sectarian free schools," and concluded that "the Town Council of Cork has acted on a misconception and its members have every reason to be heartily ashamed of their ignorance, as well as of their illiberality and discourtesy."

In Boston *The Pilot*, which was the archdiocesan newspaper, took note of the event. The editor, the famous John Boyle O'Reilly, was a staunch Democrat, but was also an admirer of General Grant. On January 11, 1879, under the heading "The City of Cork Adopts a Strange Resolution," the editor stated

*At a meeting of the Town Council of Cork, after several bitter speeches by Catholic members, a motion that the letter of the United States Counsel in Queenstown, announcing General Grant's coming, be simply marked "read," was passed without a dissentient vote. A previous motion to give General Grant a reception was denied.*

A week later O'Reilly took up the matter again in a brief editorial. Although he disapproved of the Cork Council's action, he noted that if the action had been taken by any second-rate English town, "it would scarcely cause a ripple." He also deplored the fact that Grant had accepted honorary citizenship from the city of Belfast and referred to himself as an "Ulster Irishman," which O'Reilly thought was uncalled for.

*The Pilot* published a verbatim account of the Cork meeting on January 25, and the full measure of the insult was apparent to any reader, for the attack on Grant was a

personal one and several of the insults were obviously calculated. But the story had run its course and the newspapers dropped all reference to it.

General Sherman also wrote a strong defense of Grant pointing out that Grant's sister-in-law was a Roman Catholic, and his son had married a Roman Catholic. In addition his son Frederick had visited the Pope and the Pontiff had especially sent his blessings to the General.

The British and Irish newspapers responded warmly, and Grant should have been pleased with their support. Many local newspapers castigated the Cork Council for their action, and they were profuse in their apologies and assured the General that this was a unique action. The *Irish Times* in Dublin offered an apology stating, "Of all the strange proceedings reported by telegraph from Cork, we must speak in terms of unmixed regret. They were undignified, and altogether out of place." The *Cork Examiner* although critical of Grant and feeling that he had shown some anti-Catholic tendencies, stated that if Grant had decided to visit Cork, he would have been welcomed by the people there. The editor wrote

*The Corporation might determine to abstain from any formal act of recognition on personal grounds, but we are quite satisfied that the citizens at large would see it was their duty to receive him with respect, even though cordiality was impossible.*

The tour of Ireland continued and it was certainly a triumphant one. Grant went from Dublin to Londonderry, where he received the key to its city and on to Belfast where he was also made an honorary citizen. At every stop there were tremendous crowds, and, although there were occasional Irish nationalists who carried a banner or shouted in protest, everywhere there was much enthusiasm. At Belfast he met with the Roman Catholic bishop and upon his return to Dublin he was visited by the Roman Catholic bishop there, Bishop Ryan of Buffalo, the editor of the Catholic Union, and by several leading Protestant and Catholic clergymen.

All in all, except for the one unharmonious note, the trip to Ireland was a success.

One reporter who accompanied Grant wrote

*General Grant's visit to Ireland was ended, and it may be fairly said of it that a public man, from a far distant country, without official character, known to the world for his military glory and for services that saved a great republic from anarchy, was never more gently, warmly, earnestly and enthusiastically made to feel that heroism, and, above all, heroism in the cause of liberty, has no country, but is equally at home in any part of the world, where there is a people with a soul to appreciate great services and the aspiration to be free. An event like General Grant's welcome in Ireland does not happen in the lives of many men.*

For the people of Ireland General Grant's visit has long been regarded as memorable. The writer recalls hearing his Irish-American neighbors discussing the visit as part of family lore. In 1917, during World War I, a rollicking popular song "Macnamara's Band," published in London, became an overnight success. It has been sung by Irishmen and others since that time and appears in many anthologies of Irish popular songs. In one of the stanzas are the lines

*When the Prince of Wales to Ireland came  
He shook me by the hand  
And said he'd never heard the like  
Of Macnamara's band.*

But that was 1917. In the next few years the political situation in the British Isles changed greatly (to put it mildly), and the Irish Free State was created. The lines of the stanza were changed to read

*When General Grant to Ireland came  
He took me by the hand  
Says he, "I never heard the likes  
Of Macnamara's band,"*

indicating that the Irish had fully accepted the American President into their traditions.

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