

IRISH AMERICA

May / June 2019

Your Voice is Needed in Brexit Deliberations

-Robert F. Lyons, Kennebunkport, Maine

In your Trailblazers Past & Present column in March/April issue, you cite examples of Irish-Americans who played a decisive role in the Good Friday Agreement and on immigration issues. You rightly state that “your voice is needed” to remind today’s generation that “America has a vital role to play.” Senator George Mitchell, whose father was born to Irish immigrants, exemplifies the type of man whose voice and skills are sorely needed today. (George Mitchell, A Keystone of the Good Friday Agreement (IA [April / May 1999](#)))

As Brexit flounders and morphs into Flexit with changing goals and demands, Senator Mitchell must wonder what is next in store for Northern Ireland. As peace negotiator of the Good Friday agreement in Belfast twenty-one years ago, Mitchell made it possible for people of the six counties of Ulster to live untroubled and for all of Ireland to be united in its economy without any border.

It’s those pesky six counties in the North of Ireland that continue to be the primary problem for the United Kingdom as it crashes out of the European Union. The Brexit dilemma remains: how can England withdraw from the European Union and retain a frictionless open border between the Republic of Ireland and the part of the UK called Northern Ireland? The answer is: it cannot do so without addressing the ancient problem of why does an English border exist inside Ireland in the 21st century?

The irony of this dilemma is that these Brexit deliberations are stretching toward the month of May which marks the 850th anniversary of the first landing of Anglo-Norman forces in County Wexford, Ireland. The arrival of Strongbow, agent of the King of England on May 2, 1169, was arguably the single most formative event in Irish history.

Henry II became the first reigning English monarch to set foot on Irish soil, by which act, he formally brought the island of Ireland under the English crown, a constitutional relationship that endures to the present day in Northern Ireland with six counties of Ulster attached to the UK. Trinity College Dublin is hosting an Invasion 1169 conference in May to review this foundational moment in the shared history of Ireland and Britain.

Jimmy Cagney captured this formative chapter of modern Irish history in his poem written while in Dublin to film *Shake Hands with the Devil* in 1959:

*The men of Tyrone and all the six counties
(Intransigent seems to describe them)
Supply all the bounties from all those counties
So England continues to bribe them.*

*Elizabeth I, the queen called virgin,
Set up the haves and have-nots
By usurping the lands of the old Irish clans
And gave them to Anglos and Scots.*

*Essex and Raleigh and Cromwell,
All Englishmen of distinction,
Had an overall plan for the old Irish clans
And the overall plan was extinction.*

The British Empire upon which the sun never set has been stripped of its dominions, colonies, protectorates and mandates in Africa, Asia, Europe and the Americas. As England severs its relationship with 27 countries of the EU, it clings to the adjoining land mass of two conquered small nations - Scotland and Wales - and maintains a fragile grip on the six counties in Northern Ireland.

On the 20th anniversary of the Belfast Agreement, Sen. Mitchell pointed out “that a new generation which never knew The Troubles...were coming to adulthood and had no memory of how bad things had been at the height of the conflict.” Leaders of every political persuasion fear that Brexit may reignite those savage days of memory where the scar of the border in Ireland has yet to fully heal. Angela Merkel-Germany and Emmanuel Macron-France have joined in solidarity with Irish Prime Minister Leo Varadkar and vowed that they will do everything possible to protect the Good Friday agreement and avoid emergence of a hard border between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland.

The United States through its Marshall Plan rebuilt a modern and united Europe, one of the greatest foreign policy triumphs in U.S. history. This laid the groundwork for formation of the European Union. The United States has played no part in the Brexit deliberations. Neither an ambassador to Ireland nor special envoy to Northern Ireland has been appointed since President Trump took office.

Although, Seamus Heaney reminds us, that “No poem or play or song can fully right a wrong inflicted or endured” (Cure at Troy), it would come as no surprise “[to think it could be Brexit that finally gets the British out of Ireland](#)” as Patrick Radden Keefe wrote recently in the New York Times. Only then will Brexit’s Irish dilemma be resolved—and “The longed-for tidal waves of justice rise up, and hope and history rhyme.”