

MAKING THE CALEDONIAN CONNECTION: BUILDING BRIDGES BETWEEN IRELAND AND SCOTLAND

Daniel Mulhall

BETWEEN GAEL AND GAEL

In September 1998, when I was preparing for my assignment as Ireland's first Consul General in Scotland, I became aware of the fact that the Irish Government had been represented at the funeral of Sorley MacLean on Skye in 1996. The Government's message of condolence described Sorley MacLean as 'file Ceilteach', a Celtic poet. In 1971, he took part in the first-ever visit to Ireland by the Gaelic poets of Scotland. This helped renew connections between the Gaels of Ireland and Scotland and underlined the commonality of our Celtic heritage at a time when this was not as widely recognised as it is today.

Sorley MacLean wrote a fine poem in tribute to his brother, Calum, who lived for many years in Ireland, in which he observed that

You were to the Gaels of Ireland
as one of themselves and of their people.
They knew in you the humanity
that the sea did not tear,
that a thousand years did not spoil
the quality of the Gael permanent.

Daniel Mulhall is Ireland's first Consul General in Scotland. He took up his appointment in September 1998. This article is based on the 3rd Annual Sorley MacLean lecture, which the author delivered at Plockton High School in October 2000 and a public lecture he gave at the University of Aberdeen in March 2001 under the auspices of the Research Institute of Irish and Scottish Studies.

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Those last lines are particularly evocative. Only in Scotland can an Irish speaker hear the strains of a recognisable Celtic linguistic cousin. There are also compelling affinities between our respective musical traditions which are highlighted each year at Glasgow's thriving Celtic Connections festival.

It is important that people who have as much in common as the Gaels of Ireland and Scotland should develop their contacts and celebrate the similarities between their cultures. These communities embody unique cultural resources. The Gaelic world of Ireland and Scotland enjoys fresh opportunities for economic and social advancement now that technological developments have removed the erstwhile disadvantages of distance from major population centres.

Our Celtic languages deserve to be treasured as invaluable expressions of diversity in the modern world. With the support of our two Governments, the Columba Initiative is nurturing and reinforcing links between members of a linguistic community that, in Brian Wilson's words, stretches 'from the Butt of Lewis to the Ring of Kerry'. This strengthening Gaelic strand contributes significantly to the rich weave of contemporary Irish-Scottish relations.

The enduring linguistic and cultural affinities between Ireland and Scotland can be traced back to the arrival of Irish settlers who established the Kingdom of Dal Riada in Argyll during the 6th century. Ultimately, the successors of the kings of Dal Riada became Kings of Scotland, giving this country its name and its Celtic cultural traditions. Ireland and much of Scotland occupied a single Gaelic cultural space until the 17th century when this cultural unity was shattered by formidable political and religious upheavals. Both societies suffered as a result of the expansion of metropolitan political culture. The values of the 18th century enlightenment had little time for diversity and both sets of Gaels found themselves derided and undervalued.

Contrasting Scottish and Irish reactions to their respective Treaty and Act of Union provides a measure of the different paths taken by our two countries for much of the last 200 years. Whereas the Treaty of Union of 1707 allowed for separate Scottish legal, educational and religious systems to survive within the British State, the 1800 Act of Union between Britain and Ireland was not accompanied by significant concessions to Ireland's Catholic majority. From the mid-18th century onwards, Scotland as a whole appears to have settled into its position as part of Great Britain whereas the 1800 Act of Union became a bone of contention for a developing Irish nationalism throughout the 19th century.

By introducing significant numbers of lowland Scots into Ireland, the Plantation of Ulster established a further lasting connection between Scotland

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and Ireland. One Scottish historian has called it 'the most successful Scottish colony of all time'. It was, for its time, a very substantial migration of people and, by the end of the 17th century, there may have been up to 100,000 Scots in Ireland. The proximity of Northern Ireland and the west of Scotland, and the industrial success that both societies enjoyed during the 19th century, preserved this connection. Many of the descendants of those who moved from Scotland to Ireland centuries ago remain conscious of their Scottish origins, some choosing to view themselves as Ulster-Scots. In recent decades, we have made strenuous efforts to reach out to this Ulster-Scots tradition in Ireland. Our Government has acquired the site of the Battle of the Boyne in Co. Louth and plans to develop it as a place of historical importance which many people of Ulster-Scots background will want to visit. One of the six all-Ireland bodies established under the Good Friday Agreement is devoted to joint endeavours in language promotion. This body has responsibility for the promotion of Ulster-Scots as well as for the Irish language.

Those who moved into the Northeast of Ireland in the 17th century brought with them a body of radical political thinking derived from earlier phases of Scottish history which took root in Ireland and had a major impact on the evolution of modern Irish nationalism. Some of the most prominent United Irishmen of the 1798 Rising were Presbyterians, who had studied at Scottish Universities where they picked up radical ideas that shaped their subsequent political activities. Two significant leaders of the United Irishmen, William Drennan and Thomas Addis Emmet, were graduates of the University of Edinburgh. Emmet helped create links between Edinburgh University and Trinity College Dublin which facilitated the flow of radical ideas at a time of intense political ferment brought about by the American and French Revolutions. Emmet later returned to Scotland in very different circumstances when, from 1799 to 1802, he was one of 20 Irish political prisoners confined at Fort George near Inverness.

The 19th century Irish land reformer, Michael Davitt, was someone who could operate in both Gaelic environments. In many ways, he epitomised the extreme difficulty - coupled with a unique intimacy - of British-Irish relations during the 19th century. Born in Lancashire of Irish immigrant parents, who had been evicted from their farm in County Mayo, as a young man Davitt lost an arm in an industrial accident and devoted most of his life to campaigning for land reform in Ireland. He believed it possible, indeed essential, to forge an alliance between Irish nationalism and British democracy. Davitt visited Scotland several times in support of Scottish crofters in the run up to the Crofters Act of 1886. In his **Memoirs**, W.B. Yeats recalls a conversation in which Davitt professed a desire to travel to Scotland to, as Yeats put it, 'recover for Ireland as much of Scotland as was still Gaelic in blood or in

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language'. My presence in Scotland over the last 30 months has been inspired, not by Davitt's view of Scotland, but by our analysis of, and reaction to, the contemporary realities of our immediate environment.

FORGING NEW LINKS BETWEEN IRELAND AND SCOTLAND

The Irish Government's decision to open a Consulate General in Scotland was taken in June 1998 shortly after the conclusion of the Good Friday Agreement and its approval by referendum. There were, I would say, two connected reasons behind this decision.

First, the Agreement altered the relationship between Britain and Ireland. It affirmed the two Governments' desire to develop still further 'the unique relationship between their peoples' as friendly neighbours and partners within the EU. The establishment of Consulates in Edinburgh and Cardiff represented a practical expression of the 'new beginning in relationships' at the heart of the Good Friday Agreement. Had the peace process come to fruition a decade earlier, its British-Irish dimension would have been very different. In the absence of devolution, it would have been difficult to allow for separate Scottish representation on the British-Irish Council which would thus have been confined to a triangular arrangement linking Dublin, Belfast and London. In this regard, Scottish and Welsh devolution has made a welcome difference.

The development of the peace process offered renewed scope for Scotland and Ireland to build on existing affinities and create a renewed friendship for a new era. The British-Irish Council is the first framework for bringing Irish and Scottish leaders around the same table - along with their counterparts from London, Belfast, Cardiff, the Isle of Man and the Channel Islands - to explore issues of common concern such as combatting drug abuse, social inclusion, transport, environment, and the 'knowledge economy'.

Second, there was a recognition in Dublin that, with the onset of Scottish and Welsh devolution, new political realities were about to dawn on our neighbouring island. Even without the incentive of the Good Friday Agreement, I believe we would have wanted to respond to the changed status of Scotland as a devolved entity with a stronger political profile.

On arrival in Scotland, I took the view that my responsibilities as Consul General had three main dimensions. These were: to build links with the devolved institutions; to promote Irish interests in Scotland; and to relate to the substantial community of Irish birth or descent.

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Connecting with a devolved Scotland

My prime task as Consul General is to connect Ireland with Scotland. My journey of discovery of the realities of today's Scotland has been an absorbing one. At the heart of the new Scotland are the devolved Parliament and Executive. As I see it, the building of a new relationship between Ireland and a devolved Scotland has three advantages. First, it is beneficial for two neighbouring administrations to compare notes and cooperate where this is feasible. Second, the Irish-Scottish link serves to diversify British-Irish relations. The Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985 has been superseded by the British-Irish Agreement of April 1998, but political realities need to match this name change. And, third, the evolution of Dublin-Edinburgh relations ought to be a positive development with regard to Northern Ireland, which has close historical and contemporary ties with Scotland.

Scottish-Irish relations are on the move. For us, the prospect of building a new relationship with a devolved Britain, and with each of its component parts, is an appealing one. When he was in Edinburgh in October 1998, the Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern, spoke about 'the Western Isles of Europe at the Millennium', and looked forward to 'the intensification of relations' between the Irish Government and a devolved Scottish administration in 'a new and exciting era of Scottish history'. The Good Friday Agreement envisages scope for such bilateral relationships between BIC members, including Ireland and Scotland.

Over the last 30 months, there have been a number of high-level visits in both directions. Ours was the only foreign Government with Ministerial representation at the formal opening of the new Scottish Parliament in July 1999. Since the establishment of the Consulate General, the Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern, has been in Scotland on three occasions, including in October last for the funeral of Donald Dewar, who visited Ireland twice during the last year of his life. Our Foreign Minister, Brian Cowen, who met Donald Dewar in Dublin in September 2000, praised his 'deep commitment to developing and enriching relations between Scotland and Ireland'. Our Deputy Prime Minister, Mary Harney, has paid two visits to Scotland which served to highlight the strong economic dimension to Irish-Scottish relations, 21st century style. In October 2000, the first ever delegation from the Scottish Parliament visited Dublin, initiating what I trust will be an ongoing and productive inter-Parliamentary dialogue. Since this article was written, Mr Ahern has paid an official visit to Scotland during which he addressed the Scottish Parliament, had meetings with the First Minister, Henry McLeish, and the Secretary of State, Helen Liddell, addressed a business event and inaugurated a memorial to Ireland's great famine of the 1840s.

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The highlight of my time in Scotland came in November 1999 when, just a few months after the establishment of the Scottish Parliament, President Mary McAleese became the first Head of State to visit a devolved Scotland. In her remarks inaugurating the Research Institute of Irish and Scottish Studies in Aberdeen, the President spoke of a 'moment of renewed hope for an end to old animosities and a restoration of interrupted friendships'. My work in Scotland has been inspired by those powerful sentiments.

There are, it seems to me, perfectly sound reasons for the intensified political contact between us. If we look at ourselves objectively, it becomes clear there are few countries as alike as ours. While our constitutional positions differ fundamentally, our histories have been intertwined from the earliest times. We have similar populations and land areas. Our two countries share a location in the northwest of Europe, removed from the main European centres of population. In today's world, we face comparable challenges in delivering sustainable prosperity and social justice to our peoples. In our different ways, we have each entered an exciting new era with regard to the evolution of political relationships within our respective islands. These analogies provide a rich vein of material for comparison and exchange of best practice as we both seek to measure up to the challenges of the 21st century.

Economic Links

The promotion of Ireland's economic interests has long been a core objective of the Irish foreign service. Accordingly, our presence in Scotland is inspired by economic as well as political considerations. There are clear economic advantages to be derived by both countries from increased trade, investment and tourism flows.

Ireland has been transformed during the last 20 years into a highly dynamic society building its national destiny within the European Union. In the mid-1980s, the Irish economy appeared to be a chronic underachiever, bedevilled by low growth and high unemployment. In the intervening years, we have experienced an unprecedented surge of economic growth which has averaged around 8% per annum since 1994. In the process, our economy has doubled in size in a decade. A major OECD report remarked on how 'astonishing' it was that 'a nation could have moved all the way from the back of the pack to a leading position within such a short period, not much more than a decade in fact'. In 1999, Ireland was rated as the 7th most competitive economy in the world while the World Trade Organisation ranked us as the world's third largest exporter on a per capita basis.

On account of sustained economic growth, our wealth levels have now caught up with those of our more prosperous European neighbours and Ireland has

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become a founding member of the Euro currency. Current predictions envisage that our economy is destined to continue recording growth rates well above the EU average in the coming years.

These achievements are the product of a combination of circumstances including:

- the development of an enduring national partnership between Government, trade unions, employers and farming organisations;
- favourable demographics;
- long-term investment in education;

and

- the development, by means of inward investment and indigenous enterprise fostered by supportive Government policies, of an export-oriented, high-technology, industrial sector operating within a successful European Single Market.

Ireland's economic advancement has clear implications for Scotland. Few other countries in the world have the benefit of a neighbouring economy that is undergoing such dramatic expansion. Scottish companies are already taking advantage of this situation. Ireland has long been a highly significant market for Scottish service sector exports and Scottish financial companies are prominent in Ireland. The Royal Bank of Scotland has become a significant player in the Irish banking sector on foot of its acquisition of the NatWest Group, which includes the Ulster Bank. For its part, the Bank of Scotland has made a considerable impact on the Irish mortgage market. Our current National Development Plan contains ambitious proposals for expenditure of £41 billion over a 6-year period to upgrade our economic infrastructure. There is significant scope for Scottish companies to secure contracts under this Plan. In February 2001, the Irish Government announced plans for the construction of a second pipeline between our two countries to carry North Sea gas to Ireland to meet the increasing demands of our expanding economy.

I believe that an enhanced Irish-Scottish business relationship offers particular benefit to our smaller companies. For Irish companies seeking export outlets, Scotland is an ideal target, being close by, easy to get to, posing no linguistic or cultural barriers, and being similar in scale to our own economy. Enterprise Ireland, which has had an office in Glasgow for 25 years, works with Scottish companies who are reviewing their supply base and seeking to keep abreast of industry developments. Enterprise Ireland organises regular visits to Scotland for Irish companies. Scottish Trade International does likewise for Scottish firms with an interest in Ireland. Irish

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companies supplying multinationals in Ireland have the opportunity to expand their operations to Scotland where a similar demand exists amongst the companies of Silicon Glen. In April 2001, I performed the official opening of new premises in Greenock for an Irish company, SerCom Solutions, which now operates two plants in Scotland.

While Britain is Ireland's largest export market, the fact that Ireland, with its population of less than 4 million, is Britain's 5th most important market is a more remarkable statistic. Combined trade between Ireland and Scotland is reckoned to exceed £1 billion per annum, and there is ample potential for further growth. We estimate that about 120 Irish companies are active in Scotland, of whom some 40 have established themselves here.

The two main Irish banks, the Allied Irish Bank and the Bank of Ireland, are active in Scotland, with branches in both Glasgow and Edinburgh. Aer Lingus and Ryanair now operate regular flights to Ireland from Glasgow, Edinburgh and Prestwick. Bord Fáilte, the Irish Tourist Board, actively promotes Ireland as a destination for Scottish tourists, more than 250,000 of whom visited us last year. With a view to stimulating additional Irish-Scottish economic activity, I have been working with Enterprise Ireland, Scottish Trade International, the Federation of Small Businesses, the Scottish Council for Development and Industry and others to set up a Scottish-Irish Business Forum to provide networking opportunities and foster 'Celtic Connections in Business'.

The Irish Community in Scotland

Tragic events in Ireland connected with the Great Famine of the 1840s had a major impact on Scotland's development during the 19th and 20th centuries. The leading Scottish historian, Professor Tom Devine, has made the point that the Irish 'have been Scotland's main immigrant group of modern times', vastly outnumbering other incoming groups. They made up more than 7% of Scotland's population as early as 1851 and this major influx continued for generations after the Famine. During that time, the Irish formed a larger percentage of the population of Scotland than they did elsewhere in Britain. Today, perhaps up to a million people in Scotland can trace their origins partly to this sustained influx of Irish immigrants.

Those who came to Scotland included people from both major Irish political traditions. Immigrants of Catholic background were not always made to feel welcome in Scotland, especially during periods of adversity for the Scottish economy. Despite the past vicissitudes they endured, it is obvious that Irish immigrants and their descendants have made an immense contribution to Scotland's development as a modern nation.

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In Ireland, we have over time become more and more conscious of the achievements of what we now term the Irish diaspora throughout the world. Recent changes to our Constitution make it explicit that 'the Irish nation cherishes its special affinity with people of Irish ancestry living abroad who share its cultural identity and heritage'.

When I was appointed to Scotland, I made contact with the Federation of Irish Societies of Great Britain to enquire about a list of their affiliates in Scotland only to be told that there were none. The reason for this, I suspect, is that those who came to Britain in the 1950s and 1960s are the mainstay of the network of Irish clubs and societies in England and Wales. The situation in Scotland is somewhat different with fewer Irish-born people but a much larger community who were born in Scotland but continue to identify in various ways with Ireland.

During my time here, I have sought to connect with this community of Irish birth and descent. I have been pleased to discover that Irish traditions brought here by immigrant communities flourish in today's Scotland. The Gaelic Athletic Association currently has 8 clubs playing Gaelic football in Scotland. The Gaelic League runs Irish language classes in Glasgow. Thousands of young people in Scotland learn Irish dancing. In March 2002, Glasgow will become the first city outside of Ireland to host the World Championships of Irish Dancing, an event which attracts 10,000 competitors from all over the world. The Irish musicians' organisation, Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann, has four very active branches in Scotland, most of whose members are Scottish-born. The existence of a strong tradition of Irish music ought to be seen as an asset to Scotland, enhancing as it does the cultural diversity of this country.

I have no desire to view people of Irish descent as a separate community in Scotland. They are an essential part of the fabric of Scottish society. I like to think of the modern world as a place where multiple identities are possible and where cultural diversity has become a source of satisfaction rather than alarm. Scotland is a country that has experienced both immigration and emigration and has generations of experience of managing different identities. In Ireland, on account of our economic success, we have for the first time in our modern history been attracting a net influx of population, which means that our hitherto homogenous society is having to cope with the implications of diversity.

It was with the aim of enabling people of Irish descent to commemorate their historical roots that I was happy to be associated with a proposal to erect a famine memorial in the west of Scotland. Some 3,000 people turned out at Carfin on 20 June for the inauguration by the Taoiseach of the famine

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memorial. The occasion was enhanced by such a large attendance and by the presence of so many Scottish political, civic and religious leaders. I would like Irish identity, as with Scotland's other ethnicities, to be seen as a subject of celebration. For the first time, this year's Census has given people in Scotland an opportunity to identify themselves as having Irish and other ethnic origins. The results of the Census will provide a clear measurement of the scale of Irish ethnic identity in today's Scotland.

CONCLUSION

These are exciting times for both our countries. For the first time in our modern history, Ireland has achieved a significant period of economic growth and deepening prosperity which allows us to pursue ambitions for our society that might hitherto have appeared to be beyond our reach. In Northern Ireland, a complex political accommodation has been worked out between nationalism and unionism which enjoys enormous public support throughout Ireland. Notwithstanding the challenges that lie in the way of genuine reconciliation in Northern Ireland, it would be unforgivable to unravel what has been achieved and turn the clock back from a situation full of potential to an unacceptable past riddled with despair and tragedy.

Developments in Northern Ireland have helped bring about improvements in British-Irish and Scottish-Irish relations. The fact that the Northern Ireland divide has some historical resonance in parts of Scotland may well give Scots a special insight into its problems. Through the British-Irish Council, and its bilateral links with Belfast and Dublin, Scotland has a valued contribution to make to British-Irish relations.

The religious and political differences that drove a wedge between the Catholic Irish and the Presbyterian Scots in the 17th century have long since lost their grip. The politics of Scotland have altered on foot of devolution and one expression of this is the deepening of political contact with Ireland. In recent times, Scottish-Irish relations have been boosted by developments in both societies. These have encouraged us to look afresh at each other and, I think I can say, we like much of what we see. Just as the coming of devolution has made Scottish politics more visible to those outside of Scotland, the growth of Irish studies here reflects an enhanced Scottish awareness of, and interest in, today's Ireland. The Irish-Scottish Academic Initiative and the University of Aberdeen's Research Institute of Irish and Scottish Studies have established a powerful network of scholarly endeavour.

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In an increasingly interconnected world, and with the new and positive horizons in British-Irish relations, I am sure that the Irish and the Scots will make sure to avail of the opportunities for further deepening their connections to our mutual benefit. The challenge for us is to build new dimensions to an already unique relationship. An excellent start has been made in restoring old links, refreshing existing ones and building the basis of a new relationship for the future.

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