

**Some reflections on the role played by Queen Elizabeth
in Anglo-Irish relations 1995 – 2012**

by
Dr. Roddy Evans

In the autumn of 1997, five candidates were standing for election to become President of Ireland; Mary Robinson, at that time the incumbent, had declined running for a second term. On the 25th October that year, the following news item, written by ‘Quidnunc’ appeared in *The Irish Times*:

McAleese has royal link

Would Queen Elizabeth vote for **Mary McAleese**? Possibly. As far as Quidnunc is aware, Mrs McAleese is the only one of the five presidential candidates personally known to her. The two first met in October 1995 at the special event in St James Palace, London, for the 150th anniversary of the three Queen’s Colleges – Belfast, Galway and Cork – attended by the then President **Mary Robinson**. Mrs McAleese got talking to **Sir Simon Cooper**, head of the Queen’s Household, about the position of nationalists in the North. An invitation from the Queen to a private lunch in Buckingham Palace followed in May 1996. There were eight guests in all including **Sir Rupert Smith**, GOC Northern Ireland. The North was the topic of conversation. Afterwards Mrs McAleese sent the Queen a copy of **Seumas Heaney’s** *The Spirit Level*. The Queen replied saying she hoped to have read it by her next meeting with President Robinson. If Mrs McAleese makes the Park, will Queen Elizabeth be her first State visitor?

That State visit by the Queen was not realised until May 2011. However, many non-State meetings between the Queen and Mary McAleese took place during the latter’s 14 years as President of Ireland. One such meeting was an occasion in Belgium when the Queen and President McAleese stood side by side at the commissioning of a round tower as a memorial honouring Irishmen, North and South, who died in The Great War 1914-1918. Together, the two Heads of State opened the Messines Peace Park.

In a letter to me dated 13th July 2012, Dr. Martin Mansergh described his part in the selection of Mary McAleese as the Fianna Fail candidate to run for the Presidency of Ireland. Dr. Mansergh had been adviser to three Prime Ministers (Taoiseach) of Ireland, Charles Haughey, Albert Reynolds and Bertie Ahern. His letter reads in part:

‘Father Alec Reid was the first to mention Mary McAleese’s possible candidature in March 1997. I met her by chance in the National Concert Hall in June 1997 and had a good discussion with her then. In late September, I think it was, I brought her up to meet the Taoiseach and the Chief Whip. I had been asked by the private office for advice on the request on her behalf by one of her backers – Harry Crosby from Co.Meath. I had advised in writing that he should meet her, partly out of respect for her Northern backers . . . she clearly was the President of the Peace Process and the Royal visit in 2011 was a fitting culmination.’

That culmination Dr. Mansergh writes of was the State Visit to Dublin by Queen Elizabeth II in May 2011. In the July issue of the magazine of my Church of Ireland parish, St.Finians, East Belfast, I wrote the article that follows, which gives a flavour of that truly historic occasion:

Monarch heals the estrangement of centuries

God puts His people in place when He wishes to accomplish great work. This is an account of one person’s (myself) undoubtedly limited understanding of the unfathomable ways of God. In 2003 at a luncheon in the City of London I had a brief encounter with the Prince of Wales. The occasion was the restoration and rededication of a medieval church, St.Ethelburga’s, which had been almost totally destroyed by the Bishopsgate bomb in 1993. I had a premonition that Prince Charles would come and talk to me, so I had rehearsed in my mind what I should

say to him. Sure enough he came and asked me, "Where do you come from?" I replied, "Ireland". I then continued by thanking him for a recent speech he had made on a visit to the Glencree Reconciliation Centre in Co. Wicklow (a founder and first chairperson of the Centre was Lady Eleanor, Countess of Wicklow). I then added that I hoped his mother, the Queen, would visit Vice Regal Lodge in Dublin (now Aras an Uachtarian, the residence of the Presidents of the Irish Republic). The Prince replied, "She's a wonderful person," which he repeated; he was, of course, referring to President Mary McAleese, whom he clearly knew well.

The office of President

To fill the office of President of the Republic of Ireland, a candidate is elected by national ballot for a term of seven years. To be a successful candidate for President, he or she usually needs to be a member of a political party, as the party then supports the candidate in his or her campaign. The power and prestige of a political party is greatly enhanced when its own candidate wins the Presidency, so it behoves a party to put forward a candidate with the potential to win.

Mary McAleese carried two severe handicaps, when she was first persuaded to stand for the office of President. Firstly, she was an outsider; she did not belong to a political party. Secondly, she came from Northern Ireland, a separate jurisdiction. However, she had some influential backers, one of whom was Fr. Alec Reid from Clonard Monastery, Belfast, who was crucially involved in bringing peace to Northern Ireland, and another was Dr. Martin Mansergh, who escorted Mary McAleese to meet with the Fianna Fail Parliamentary Party tasked with choosing the party's Presidential candidate.

It transpired that they chose Mary McAleese from two other prospective candidates who were both members of Fianna Fail, as a result of an effective presentation of her suitability, and she went on to win what turned out to be a bruising election.

Enduring peace

With enduring peace at last in Northern Ireland and the Good Friday Agreement firmly holding, the tricky prospect of a State visit to Dublin by the Queen was under consideration. The Dublin government dithered, overcome with concerns for the safety of the Queen. But President Mary McAleese was determined that a visit should take place and her insistence finally won out.

On a Friday evening in June 2012, I sat down at my TV to watch Prince Charles pay tribute to his mother, the Queen, celebrating her Diamond Jubilee. Somehow, I was convinced that Northern Ireland would feature, probably towards the end of the hour-long programme. Sure enough, the section on Northern Ireland began with describing the peaceful days when the Queen and members of the Royal Family enjoyed visits there. Then came the days of conflict and the death of the Prince's uncle, Lord Mountbatten, at Mullaghmore, Co. Sligo, followed by the solemnity of his State Funeral.

Prince Charles went on to say: "Few could have believed that from this Royal tragedy Her Majesty the Queen, some years later, would arrive at Aras an Uachtarain to be welcomed to Ireland by President Mary McAleese." Relations between the two countries had been so estranged

that no English Monarch had set foot in Dublin for 100 years. At a State dinner in Dublin Castle, the Queen addressed the Irish nation. It was a speech of such magic, power and healing that it liberated two nations from centuries of rancour and misunderstanding. As we watched this on TV, Prince Charles made an historic comment, "That was the Queen's great achievement."

The speech given by Queen Elizabeth in Dublin Castle that evening was the highlight of the State Visit. Dublin Castle had been the seat of English rule in Ireland from Henry II in 1172. The Queen's speech has changed the temper of Anglo-Irish relations for ever. She had begun with words in the Gaelic language, so perfectly said, to the utter astonishment of President McAleese, who was sitting beside her. But it was the words the Queen spoke later in the speech that really

mattered: “To all those who have suffered as a consequence of our troubled past, I extend my sincere thoughts and deep sympathy. With the benefit of historical hindsight, we all can see things which we would have done differently or not at all.”

One historic occasion followed another on that momentous State Visit:

- At the Garden of Remembrance, the Queen and the President, having both laid wreaths, stood together with bowed heads honouring those Irish patriots who died in the Easter Rising of 1916 as they fought for Irish freedom
- The Irish dead in the First World War were honoured with a ceremony at Islandbridge Park of Remembrance, a war memorial designed by Sir Edward Lutyens
- During the bloody Anglo-Irish war of 1919 to 1921, on a Sunday afternoon at a football match being played at the National Stadium, Croke Park, the British army gunned down players and spectators alike. That awful day still burns strongly in memories ninety years later: it was here that Queen Elizabeth was welcomed as an honoured guest to tread the hallowed turf.

Royal visit to Northern Ireland

In 2012, Queen Elizabeth continued to make history, with visits to Belfast and Enniskillen in Northern Ireland. Again I described these two occasions in the October issue of my parish magazine:

A rapturous welcome

During June we enjoyed a rapturous two-day visit by the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh. This was the first Royal visit for many years when both the date and the programme were announced well in advance. The Queen was able to mingle with delighted crowds and in Stormont Park, the Queen and the Duke, standing in an open vehicle, toured through 22,000 people, the capacity crowd allowed in the Park.

Of all the public events, two are of special significance. Firstly, following the service in the Church of Ireland Cathedral in Enniskillen (where among those officiating were the Primate of Armagh, Alan Harper, and Cardinal Sean Brady) the Queen and the Duke crossed the road and were received in a Catholic Church. This was the first Catholic Church the Queen had ever visited in Ireland. It is not so long ago that a Northern Ireland Prime Minister lost his job by visiting a Catholic convent, a much lesser offence.

A private meeting

The second significant event occurred in Belfast, when the Queen met the former commander of the IRA, Martin McGuinness. This meeting was not a part of the Diamond Jubilee celebrations. It was a cultural and artistic event staged in the Lyric Theatre under the auspices of Co-operation North. Like the Glenree Reconciliation Centre in Co. Wicklow, this is an organisation assisting in resolving the situation in Northern Ireland, and its two Patrons are the Queen and the President of Ireland.

Many writers and poets were invited to this event at the theatre. However, the first thing that took place was in a small room with only seven people present: the Queen and the Duke, Michael Higgins, President of Ireland and his wife Sabina, Peter Robinson, Martin McGuinness and Sir Christopher Geidt, the Queen’s Private Secretary. There is no record of what was said, nor were any photographs taken; all we do know about that meeting was that the Queen shook the hand of Martin McGuinness, who later said on the radio that he had raised the matter of the death of Lord Mountbatten, and that the Queen was very gracious.

A public meeting

Following this meeting, the Queen and the Duke mingled with the distinguished writers and poets present. Here, a second handshake took place, which was recorded and appeared on the front page of every Irish paper, and I imagine, most English papers too. David McKitterick, Ireland's correspondent of the London newspaper *The Independent* wrote, "It was an encounter as quick as it was carefully choreographed, but its symbolic importance will last forever". Another journalist quoted from a poem by Michael Longley (who was present at the occasion) called 'Ceasefire', describing Priam's encounter with Achilles:

'I get down on my knees and do what must be done,
I kiss Achilles' hand, the killer of my son.'

'Maintain the middle ground'

I will close this account of these truly memorable and remarkable events with some paragraphs from a report published on the front page of the monthly magazine *The Church of Ireland Gazette* of the 2nd November 2012, headlined:

Enniskillen clergy attend reception in Buckingham Palace

The Very Revd Kenneth Hall, Dean of Clogher and rector of Enniskillen, diocese of Clogher, and the Very Revd Canon Peter O'Reilly, parish priest of Enniskillen, recently attended a reception at Buckingham Palace at the invitation of the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh.

During their time at the Palace, both clergy had the opportunity to speak to the Queen at length upon arrival and also again later as part of a small group at the Queen's request.

Speaking to the *Gazette*, Dean Hall referred back to the Queen's symbolic crossing of Church Street (to the Catholic Church) which he described as "making a connection, without a word, for all to see ... enabling us to feel powerfully that we were one people under God and one people together".

The Dean and Canon O'Reilly updated the Queen on cross-community developments in Enniskillen since her visit there ... Dean Hall said that the Queen "took on board" with great interest all that the clergy told her and repeatedly spoke of the need to 'maintain the middle ground'.

JRE

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James Roderick Evans was born in Co. Meath, Ireland, in 1923. He graduated in medicine from Trinity College, Dublin and the Adelaide Hospital in 1947 and became a Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland in 1951. He practiced medicine in Dublin and London and later in Asia and South America and has travelled widely in the Middle East and Southern Africa.

In 1971 he returned to live in Belfast, where he has experienced at first-hand the unfolding of the historic developments in Northern Ireland over the last forty years.