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Douglas Hyde (1860-1949). The Trinity Connection. Quatercentenary Discourse

by The President of Ireland, Mary Robinson

Pavilion, College Park, Trinity College Dublin, 11.5.1992

When you follow in someone's footsteps, even at some remove, by assuming the office of President of Ireland, it heightens your interest in the individual behind those formal portraits and busts and the other reminders of when he and his family lived at Aras an Uachtaráin. I am not, in any sense, an authority on the first president, Dr Douglas Hyde, but I have enjoyed identifying some common bonds between us. We both come from the west of Ireland. We were students at Trinity College, graduated from it with law degrees and we have each received honorary doctorates from Dublin University. We both served as members of Seanad Éireann and we have both recognised the importance of the Irish language to the Ireland of our time.

There, perhaps, the similarities end, and indeed, my own approach to the Irish language would be very different to that of Douglas Hyde. He championed the de-Anglicising of Ireland and the exclusive promotion of the Irish language, whereas my emphasis is firmly on a pluralist, open Ireland within Europe, where there is no sense of exclusion or criticism of those who do not speak Irish, but the opposite, rather a wider concept of Irish identity that embraces all shades of opinion and beliefs.

I thought it appropriate on this special quatercentenary occasion to explore in more depth one of the linkages Douglas Hyde and I have in common, by looking at the Trinity connection of the first President of Ireland. It is not, as we shall see, a connection entirely flattering to Trinity.

Douglas Hyde, a third son of Arthur Hyde and Cecily Oldfield, was born in Castlereagh, Co. Roscommon, on 17 January 1860. The family lived at Kilmactranny, near Boyle, and then Frenchpark, where Douglas grew up. He had no formal schooling and, apart from tuition from his father in Latin and Greek and some lessons in French and German from a cousin, he seems to have

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been self-taught. In his early teens he conceived a great interest in the Irish language and set about learning it from his Irish-speaking neighbours, an unusual preoccupation for a teenage boy.

Ina leabhar “An Scéaláí Gaelach”, scríobh Dúglás de h-Íde an méid seo faoi sean-fhear a bhí mar chomharsain aige agus a raibh Gaeilge mar theanga dhúchais aige:

An chéad fear a d’inis scéal Gaeilge riamh dom ba é Séamas Ó hAirt é, go ndéanadh Dia trócaire air. Do bhíodh sé ina chónaí i dteachín beag ar thaobh portaigh. Bhí Béarla aige go measartha ach b’fhearr go mór a theanga Gaeilge agus do bhíodh sé ag caint liom i gcónaí.

Nuair a fuair Séamas bás, scríobh de h-Íde an píosa Gaeilge seo ina dhialann:

Fuair Séamas bás inné. Fear chomh geanúil, chomh fírinneach sin, chomh muintreach sin, ní fhaca mé riamh. Bhí sé tinn timp-eall seachtaine agus ina dhiaidh sin d’éag sé. A Shéamais bhoicht, rinne mé foghlaim i nGaeilge uait. Fear le Gaeilge chomh maith sin ní bheidh tar éis seo. Ní thig liom duine ar bith d’fheiceáil feasta a mbeidh dúil agam ann mar ba mhaith liom tusa.

When Douglas was seventeen, his parents urged him to train for the ministry and they also suggested that he apply for a sizarship as an Irish speaker at Trinity. Clearly, it was their hope that he would follow in his father’s footsteps. Arthur Hyde, who, like his own father, grandfather and great-grandfather, was a Church of Ireland rector. He was refused a sizarship, however, on the grounds that his father was too well off. This refusal, coupled with the fact that he was already paying for his other two sons, Arthur and Oldfield, at Trinity, no doubt explains why Douglas’s father did not pursue the matter of sending him to Trinity any further at that stage. Presumably, he felt that they could not afford the expense, which may have led to his angry comment when Douglas himself raised the possibility of his entering Trinity:

TCD be damned! Look at how it made an undisciplined scoundrel of Oldfield and an agnostic of Arthur. I won’t let you through any College. You can be a preacher to your own Irish-speaking countrymen.

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However, when Arthur graduated and Oldfield was awarded a scholarship, the way was open for Douglas to apply to enter Trinity. In June, 1880, he took the entrance examination and did extremely well, coming seventh of the seventeen candidates placed in the first division. He took Irish as an elective subject and came first.

Hyde did not actually attend College until Trinity term of 1882. Instead, he opted for the famous "steam-packet degree course", sitting examinations at the end of each term in lieu of attending lectures. Nevertheless, he gained first class honors in German and the following year in French, also winning first prize in Irish in both '81 and '82. When he duly attended lectures in Trinity term 1882, he made many friends and had a good social life in the best Trinity tradition. This, added to his academic success, made life very pleasant, and he recorded in his diary: "In all, I think the term in College was the happiest time in my life."

All was not well however. He was under pressure from his father to follow a career in the Church and started taking Divinity lectures. He greatly disliked the content of them, being plagued by severe doubts about the ministry and, indeed, Christianity itself, which led to several rows with his father. His father finally agreed that he could switch to Medicine, but because of doubts as to whether his health would stand the demands of Medical School, in the end he continued in the Divinity School.

In 1884, he won prizes in Irish and Italian and he graduated with a Large Gold Medal, a "great honour" as he noted in his diary, "for only three were awarded that year". The following year, he gained second class honors in his Divinity examinations, and subsequently transferred to Law. He was awarded the LL.B. in December, 1887, and in April, 1888, the LL.D. with first class honors — no mean achievement!

From the Autumn of 1882, Hyde lived in College, first in rooms borrowed from a Roscommon neighbour and then in his own rooms which were on the ground floor of No. 24. He became one of a group of students who spent long nights in argument and discussion and heavy drinking. He also joined several student societies including the Historical Society, of which he became Auditor in 1884.

He also joined a number of off-campus clubs, such as the Discussion Club, meeting place of the Young Ireland Society, the

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Contemporary Club, founded in 1885 by his friend, Charles Oldham, the Shakespeare and Mosaic Clubs, where literature was discussed, and the Pan-Celtic Society. His circle of friends included W.B. Yeats, George Sigerson, John O'Leary, Rose Kavanagh, Katherine Tynan, and later, Maud Gonne. Among the Trinity staff whom he knew well were Goodman, the Professor of Irish, and Dowden, the Professor of English, whose house he visited regularly.

W. B. Yeats and Hyde met frequently at societies and on social occasions. Each admired the other's talents, but Yeats suspected that Hyde never spoke his real thoughts and complained in his diary of Hyde's "diplomatising", while Hyde complained of Yeats's incessant chatter when in company, and regarded it as an attempt to attract attention. Whatever about his "real thoughts", Hyde expressed some unpalatable views in papers to College societies.

His visits as a teenager to his Irish-speaking neighbours in Roscommon had brought him into contact with Fenianism, and he had espoused strong nationalist and anti-English views which he expressed in brash doggerel in Irish and English. Later on, these views were to be replaced by a more mellow advocacy of cultural independence which came to form his life's work. In the meantime, in 1884, he delivered a paper, "Irish Rule in Ireland", to the Hist and another, a year later to the Theological Society on "The Attitude of the Reformed Church in Ireland". In this latter, he demanded that the clergy of the Church of Ireland should express their approval of nationalism. He got a hostile reaction from his audience, but won favourable notice in the *Dublin University Review* for expressing his "clearly-defined views . . . in language so beautiful and simple".

It was in the *Dublin University Review* that two early important essays by Hyde appeared. His contacts with his Irish-speaking neighbours had led him to an awareness of the rich tradition of folk literature and lore which was their heritage. Recognising its importance, Hyde was soon engaged in a determined effort to collect what he could of the surviving songs and stories. In "The Unpublished Songs of Ireland", which appeared in the *Review* of October, 1885, he wrote of the songs which he had collected in a way which makes this essay a kind of draft of his published collection of songs of Connacht and, in particular, of the first and immensely influential "The Love Songs of Connacht".

The following year, the *Review* published another essay by

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Hyde, "A Plea for the Irish Language", in which he emphasised, and I quote, "the essential relationship which must exist between language and culture", and pleaded for the preservation of the surviving Irish-speaking communities. He had been a member of the Society for the Preservation of the Irish Language and a founder member of the Gaelic Union, and was aware of the threat of extinction which hung over the language. It was this awareness which became the mainspring of his work for the revival of the language.

Having graduated from Trinity, Hyde devoted much time to folk literature, and, under the influence of Scottish folklorists, John F. Campbell of Islay and John MacKenzie, adopted a scientific approach to the recording of this material. He had already collaborated with Yeats on "Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry" which appeared in 1888. His own first collection of stories, "Leabhar Scéalaíochta", was published in 1889 and was followed by "Cois na Tine" and "An Scéalaí Gaelach".

In spite of all this work, he was nevertheless keenly conscious of the fact that he lacked a profession. Therefore, he was delighted to go to Canada in September, 1890, to substitute during two terms for his friend W. F. P. Stockley, who was the Professor of English at the University of Fredrickton. Then, in December, 1891, he applied for the Professorship in English, both in the University of Chicago and the Queen's College in Belfast, and he sought testimonials from several people, including Provost George Salmon, his former Professor of Divinity, and his old friend, Edward Dowden, Professor of English Literature. Dowden wrote a very warm recommendation; Salmon's letter, while more restrained, was also favourable in that he concurred with Dowden's appraisal of Hyde. There is no evidence, in fact, that Hyde was considered for either post.

In 1892, the National Literary Society was founded in Dublin and Hyde was elected President. In November of that year, he delivered his presidential address "The Necessity for De-Anglicising Ireland" which was in essence a more developed version of his essay "A Plea for the Irish Language". Home rule was in sight and he appealed to Irish people to stop imitating English ways and instead — I quote — "to cultivate what they [had] rejected and build up an Irish nation on Irish lines".

We have at last broken the continuity of Irish life, and just at the moment when the Celtic race is presumably about to largely

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recover possession of its own country, it finds itself deprived and stript of its Celtic characteristics, cut off from the past, yet scarcely in touch with the present. In order to de-Anglicise ourselves we must, at once, arrest the decay of the Irish language. . . . I would earnestly appeal to everyone, whether Unionist or Nationalist, who wishes to see the Irish nation produce its best . . . to set his face against this constant running to England for our books, literature, music, games, fashion and ideas . . . [and] to do his best to help the Irish race to develop in future along Irish lines, because along Irish lines alone can the Irish race once more become what it was of yore — one of the most original, artistic, literary and charming peoples of Europe.

His audience received his lecture, in part, with incomprehension and, in part, with hostility. It was read by Eoin MacNeill, however, who conceived a plan for putting into effect the ideas that Hyde had propounded. This led to the founding, in July, 1893, of the Gaelic League of which Hyde was elected first President. He had been an active member of the earlier Gaelic Union, and now threw himself into the work of the League, travelling the country to give talks and lectures, urging and organising. The work of the League caught the people's imagination and its membership expanded rapidly.

Then, in January, 1896, the Professor of Irish at Trinity died. Hyde applied for the Chair and was confident of success: his publication record was good; he had the support of Celtic scholars such as Kuno Meyer, Standish O'Grady, Georges Dottin and Joseph Loth; he had gained some teaching experience in Canada; and his applications to Chicago and Belfast had been supported by Salmon, who was still Provost.

Trinity rejected Hyde's application, however, and appointed Rev. James E. H. Murphy. It was a bitter blow to Hyde that his *alma mater* had rejected him. He wrote to Yeats;

They would not have me at any price and I fancy the worse the man [appointed] was the better pleased they were, so that no attention could be drawn to Gaelic studies by him.

Trinity was undoubtedly suspicious of Hyde. Though he had abandoned the virulently anti-English stance of his early years, the policy of cultural independence and exclusivity which he had publicly advocated would have been unattractive to Trinity people, and his very active involvement as President of the Gaelic

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League in the furtherance of that policy would have been unacceptable.

However, it was Robert Atkinson, Professor of Sanskrit and Comparative Philology at Trinity and Todd Professor at the Royal Irish Academy, who provided the ammunition to scuttle Hyde's ambitions.

Atkinson was among those to whom Hyde had sent a copy of his "Leabhar Scéalaíochta" when it was published, and he now informed Provost Salmon that the Irish of Hyde's folk tales was "baboo Irish . . . a queer mixture of modern colloquialisms with the old literary Irish, of which Hyde has a very imperfect knowledge".

Trinity's academic historians, R. B. McDowell and David Webb, make the pertinent comment that "it does not seem to have occurred to Atkinson that this 'queer mixture' might have been just the language used by elderly storytellers of the day".

Is dóigh go raibh barúil mhaith ag de h-Íde cén sort fáilte a chuirfeadh Atkinson roimh an "Leabhar Scéalaíochta" mar bhí an méid seo a leanas sa réamhrá aige (rud a thug mé faoi deara nuair a bhronn Muintir Mhaigh Eó cóip den leabhar orm tamall ó shoin).

B'fhéidir go bhfuil corr-rud ins an leabhar seo go mb'fhearr le cuid de mo léitheóirí gan a fheiscint ann. Ach nuair a thosaigh mé ar an obair seo, chuir mé romham gach uile ní a fuair mé a scríobh síos go d'fílis agus go fírinneach agus do rinneas sin. Do chuir mé síos gach aon ní a fuairas, ach amháin, na fiotaí léamha nach raibh cruth ná cuma ná blas orthu.

Whether Atkinson's judgement of Hyde's linguistic competence was ill-informed or malicious, it was communicated by Provost Salmon to the historian, W. E. H. Lecky, who was M. P. for Dublin University and one of the trustees charged with making the recommendation of appointment. He helped to ruin Hyde's chance of being chosen.

Hyde continued his work as President of the Gaelic League and a great challenge and opportunity presented itself with the establishment of the Commission on Intermediate Education. The position of Irish was weak in the curriculum in comparison with the European languages, which, in turn, were in an inferior position to English and the classical languages. The League set out to argue for a great improvement in the position of Irish, but an opposition emerged which hoped to remove Irish completely from the curriculum. This opposition consisted, in the

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main, of three members of the Trinity staff: Edward John Gwynn, John Pentland Mahaffy and Robert Atkinson.

Gwynn, himself an excellent scholar of Irish, did not object to the academic study of early Irish language and literature, but he said that, and I quote, "Modern Irish has little to recommend it; its syntax is monotonous and underdeveloped", and he also stated that, "Modern Irish literature has . . . little or no value *qua* literature". Similarly, Mahaffy admitted that Irish was, and I quote, "a very interesting study from a philosophical point of view", but when asked: "Viewing it as a living language, has it any educational value?", his reply was, "none", and he asserted that, apart from religious literature, nothing existed in Irish literature that was not either "silly or indecent".

Mahaffy was Professor of Ancient History and claimed no expertise in Irish, but stated that his source for his assertions was "a much better source than any of [the supporters of the language]".

Hyde, as President of the Gaelic League, led the counter-attack. Because his opponents appeared before the Commission at an early stage in its proceedings, he had time to collect opinions on their statements from an array of Celtic scholars in England and on the Continent, most of whom expressed disbelief and outrage at what had been said. Armed with these opinions, he proceeded to demolish the opposition, and, in particular, Mahaffy, whom he criticised for quoting an unnamed expert. This drew Atkinson into the fray, for he was Mahaffy's authority. He repeated Mahaffy's assertions and went on to sneer at Hyde's command of the Irish language and at folklore, Hyde's central object of study. Again, Hyde was given the opportunity to reply in a written submission, and did so extremely effectively.

Mahaffy and Hyde continued the argument in the press. Some of Mahaffy's comments were not lacking in humour: "I have restored harmony on the Gaelic family by drawing their combined attack upon myself. I do not think that Dr Hyde has been properly grateful", he wrote. Subsequently, he was honest enough to admit that there were certain things in Irish literature which showed "a fine feeling and a certain poetic beauty".

Hyde was not to be pacified, however, and though he paid generous tribute to Mahaffy's virtues, continued to lacerate him and Trinity. I quote, "Dr Mahaffy . . . should not assume too far on that Stygian flood of black ignorance about everything Irish which, Lethe-like, rolls through the portals of my beloved *alma*

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mater.” In the introduction to his “A Literary History of Ireland”, which was published in 1899, he launched another bitter attack on Trinity. He gave instances of the “condescending contempt” in which Irish scholarship was held by Trinity; he mocked her for allowing her Irish professorship to be an adjunct of her Divinity School and, I quote, “founded and paid by a society – for the conversion of Irish Roman Catholics through the medium of their own language!”, and he scorned her for doing nothing to further research on her unique manuscript treasures, neither making them readily accessible nor publishing a catalogue.

Then, in 1903, his bilingual play, “Pleascadh an Bulgóide” was published together with a translation by Lady Gregory. In this bitter little satire, Trinity and Mahaffy, Atkinson and Gwynn were held up to ridicule and were accused by *An tSeanbhean Bhocht* of injuring the light-hearted Irish youth who fell into their hands by “removing his heart from his breast and replacing it with an English heart of stone”.

Subsequently events helped to heal the wounds inflicted in these encounters. In 1906, the Fry Commission sat to consider Trinity as an establishment of higher education. Hyde was a member of the Commission, and the Gaelic League’s view of Trinity was represented to the Commission by Eoin MacNeill and T. W. Rolleston. When the Professor of Irish, Rev. James Murphy, appeared before the Commission, Hyde questioned him, but was scrupulously careful not to engage him at the polemical level of the previous encounter with Trinity’s representatives.

From the other camp, in 1908, Mahaffy seconded a resolution that the Dublin University Gaelic Society deserved the support of the students and he admitted that he was “at fault” when he opposed Irish, having never expected that the language movement would become so great. Gwynn subsequently was closely involved in having Irish made available as a subject for a general degree at Trinity, became President of the Cumann Gaelach and, together with the Librarian, Rev. T. K. Abbott, published a catalogue of the Irish manuscripts in the Library. As Provost, he did much to reconcile Trinity with the new Ireland.

Hyde maintained contact with the College Historical Society over the years. Eventually, in 1931, he was elected President of the Society, and in accepting wrote, “. . . I need not say I esteem the honour highly . . .”

In 1933, Trinity made full amends to Hyde by conferring him

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with an honorary Litt.D. The citation refers to his work as one of the founders and first President of the Gaelic League and to his contribution to Celtic Studies, particularly in collecting and publishing the folk songs and tales.

The previous year, Hyde had retired from the Chair of Modern Irish at University College, Dublin, to which he had been appointed in 1909. His labours in the Gaelic League had long since ended. In spite of determined opposition over a number of years, he clung stubbornly to the principle of the League's non-involvement in politics. When this policy was overturned by an Ard-fheis in 1915, Hyde vacated the Chair of the meeting and resigned from the League.

Douglas Hyde served on the Senate of the Free State in 1925, and was again nominated and served for a brief period in 1938 under the new Constitution. On 6 May, 1938, he was elected first President of Ireland and held that office until 1945, when he declined to stand for re-election. He died on 12 July, 1949.

And what of the man himself? What struck me about Douglas Hyde was that he had an unusual capacity to be at ease — to be comfortable — with very different sections and strands of the Irish society of his time. Coming from a Church of Ireland background, he was at home in the cottages of the local Irish-speaking Catholics in Co. Roscommon and all around Ireland. He was a convivial, fun-loving, social companion to his fellow College students. He was part of the Anglo-Irish set who met in country houses, wore cricket flannels and discussed the latest writings of Yeats, Lady Gregory and others of that set. He was a central and highly respected figure in the Gaelic language movement. It was not surprising, therefore, that this man for all seasons was chosen to be first President of Ireland under the present Constitution, *Bunreacht na hÉireann*.