
AN NASC

D'Arcy McGee Chair of Irish Studies
Saint Mary's University
Halifax, Nova Scotia



Special issue in memory of Cyril J. Byrne

Volume 17, Spring 2007

Editor: Pádraig Ó Siadhail

Layout & Design: Jenny Kaulback

Versions of several of the contributions in this newsletter featured in the special Tribute to Cyril Byrne at the Canadian Association for Irish Studies Conference at the National University of Ireland, Maynooth, in June 2005. We wish to acknowledge the role of Dr. Jason King in organizing that Tribute.

With thanks to Laurie Mireau for providing many of the photographs in this issue.

AN NASC was established as a link between the Chair of Irish Studies and those who are involved or interested in promoting Irish Studies and heritage in Canada and abroad. It also seeks to develop awareness of the shared culture of Ireland, Gaelic Scotland and those of Irish and Gaelic descent in Canada

AN NASC is provided free of charge. However, we welcome financial contributions which will allow us to extend the activities of the Chair of Irish Studies. A tax receipt will be issued for all contributions over \$10.00.

We welcome letters and comments from our readers.

If you would like to receive **AN NASC**, please write to:

AN NASC

D'Arcy McGee Chair of Irish Studies
Saint Mary's University
Halifax, Nova Scotia
Canada B3H 3C3

Telephone: (902) 420-5519

Facsimile: (902) 420-5110

irishstudies@smu.ca

<http://www.smu.ca/academic/arts/irish/>



Cyril J. Byrne
1940-2006

Elegy on Cyril Byrne, 1940 - 2006

Sandra Murdock

The difference to me is not in days nor hours,
Though few enough were spent in colloquy.
His perfect patience holding balance; his stories
Shearing the chill from stone-floored college halls.

Too much to discuss in measured pace from classroom to
Office, but time for him never so dear as to withhold
An indulgent ear or meandering gait.
His love for Ireland's letters bore a stamp from

The country in which we all were born (in spite
Of blood or nation). And his celebrations
More than song and dance (no 'O' in Irish).
The space he'd clear among the toppling files

And cloth-bound books where Apollo and Dionysus
Dreamt in sheaves slightly foxed — that space
A kingly welcome. And better yet, a shoulder
Tipped to clamber up and glimpse —

if fleetingly— the giant's panorama.
The academic's seat he wrought, placed
In a wing far left of the Ivory Tower, needs
No humble apologia (not then, not now),

Though we have lost the one ever ready
To rush the stable of dour business and "pull out the bolt."
How strange that expectations, when their framing
Lips are marble-cold, should leave the onus
More deeply graven still.

Cyril J. Byrne: A Tribute

Pádraig Ó Siadhail

We made a mad rush to the St. John's airport, as triumphant and giddy as Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid after knocking over a bank, but with one wary

eye to our backs lest the locals caught us and lynched us as another bunch of gringos who had come to rip them off. It was the morning after the Newfoundland businessman, Craig Dobbin, had hosted a \$1000-a-plate dinner in his home on behalf of

the Chair of Irish Studies and Cyril had pocketed a large cheque to add to the Chair's Trust Fund. Despite his euphoria at the success of the fundraising event, the irony of the situation was not lost on Cyril, a loyal son of Newfoundland and one who had long railed against those from away who arrived in Newfoundland, made a quick buck and then cleared off. Call him Butch Cassidy with an enduring

attachment to his roots and a strong social conscience. As for the Sundance Kid, well, I was just along for the junket.

Whatever one's level of belief and faith,

one would like to imagine that Cyril and Craig Dobbin, who died on October 7, less than two months after Cyril's death, are now sharing memories not just about that fundraising dinner, but about Newfoundland and Ireland.



The President of Ireland, Mary McAleese, with Cyril Byrne on the occasion of the conferral on the President of an honorary doctorate from Saint Mary's University in October 1998.

mmm

The occasion of this special edition of *An Nasc* should have been so different. Rather than marking Cyril's death, it should have been marking Cyril's official retirement from his faculty position at Saint Mary's University, celebrating his accomplishments and achievements, specifically in the sphere of Irish Studies, and wishing him the best as he commenced the next stage of his career,

fundraising for the D'Arcy McGee Chair of Irish Studies, teaching Irish Studies' courses on a part-time basis, and finishing off manuscripts long neglected because

course, it is no great surprise that I would have this view about the importance of Irish. It is a tribute to Cyril that he pioneered this view in Canada, although he did not have the opportunity to learn Irish at school. I had Cyril in one of my introductory Irish language classes a few years ago. He was a wonderful student: he attended class religiously, completed assignments punctually, and participated actively. He was so keen. But you know what they say about a person's inability to grasp a command of a language after the age of 6 ... To the very end, he continued to ambush me with conversations in Irish based on the material from that course. I know that it was one of his regrets that he never had the opportunity to immerse himself in Irish.

Cyril's first experience in building a new academic programme at Saint Mary's was as one of the founders of the Atlantic Canada Studies programme which continues to thrive at both undergraduate and graduate levels. His interest in ACS was perfectly understandable due to his own Newfoundland background and stemmed from his belief in the importance of allowing students to explore their own region and in encouraging research that examines the history and culture of Atlantic Canada and frequently challenges stereotypical views of that area. The disadvantages affecting Atlantic Canada and the unequal distribution of economic wealth, political power and employment opportunities within Canada are major issues on which

Cyril held strong views. But when the opportunity arose in the mid-1980s to establish an Irish Studies chair at Saint Mary's with partial funding from the Federal Government under the Multiculturalism programme, Cyril's motivation, as a Newfoundland Irish Catholic, was driven as much by the heart as by the head. There is an interesting article to be written about the history of the thirty or so ethnic studies chairs that have been set up under this scheme — the politics behind the programme, the politics behind the geographic spread of the chairs, the politics behind the definition of the word, 'ethnic' — but what is clear is that Cyril possessed the vision, the political nous, and the energy to ensure that there would be an Irish Chair at Saint Mary's.

From the start, the Chair has focussed on undergraduate teaching. While Cyril had the aim of developing graduate offerings, his view was that our main responsibility was to allow our students access to Irish culture and history and to open up for them aspects of the Irish experience in Canada. Over the last few years the achievements of students from our programme who moved on to graduate studies were a great source of pride for him: to mention a few names, Marnie Hay, recently awarded her PhD in Irish history at UCD; Matt Knight who won a full scholarship to undertake a PhD in Celtic Studies at Harvard; Adam Lawrence who is doing his PhD at Memorial; and Sandra Murdock, who received the Ireland Fund of Canada Graduate Studies award in 2004,

such a charmer,' says she, 'the way he takes you by the arm and walks beside you, and talks to you directly and makes you feel so special.' I always felt so inadequate when I listened to this guff!

Funny, wonderful company, a great mimic, an inveterate teller of stories and, certainly, no plaster saint, despite the letters that arrived into our office addressed to the Revd. Father Cyril

Reflections

Ann MacLean

After a thirty-year hiatus from studies, I returned to Saint Mary's University to complete a degree in Arts. I was delighted to be welcomed into the Irish Studies programme. I was particularly fortunate because the D'Arcy McGee Chair of Irish Studies had been established, thanks to Cyril Byrne, giving me the opportunity to study something that was a great personal interest, plus I was able to major in Irish Studies.

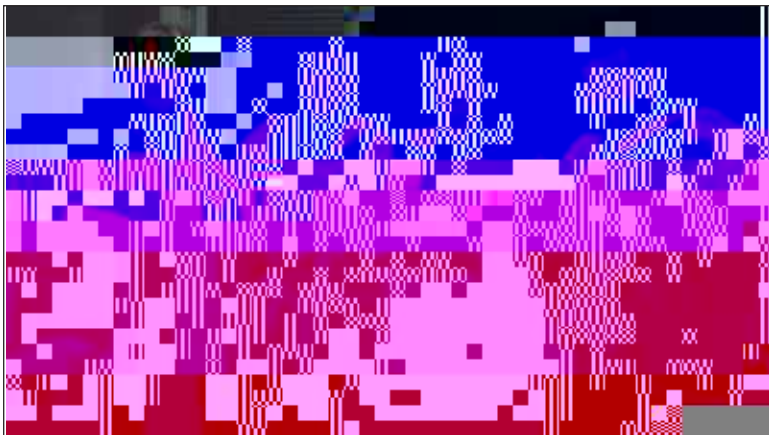
Cyril often used the phrase "a slice of life..." to describe circumstances of characters in Irish literature. I could also use that phrase to describe this time in my life – a wonderful time of learning about Irish culture, history and literature.

Cyril played a big part in that "slice of my life" – an outstanding teacher, passionate about his work, and a kind friend. He always offered encouragement

and I am sure many students benefited from his great wealth of knowledge. He and Pádraig Ó Siadhail provided a whole new world of learning for me. Under their tutelage, my interest in and love of all things Irish and Celtic flourished. It's now been ten years since the completion of my degree, and I still keep in touch with the Irish Studies programme at Saint Mary's.

During one of his lectures, Cyril referred to a garden as being a place of quiet serenity, of nature beauty and of peace. I know that he has found "peace" in his own garden, and I am grateful for his impact on me through his own love and dedication to the study of Irish culture.

Ann MacLean completed her Irish Studies degree at Saint Mary's University in May 1997.



Cyril J. Byrne, Pádraig Ó Siadhail, Ann MacLean, Guy Chauvin.

Memories of Cyril—Our years before Saint Mary's

Ken MacKinnon

Cyril and I were in the St. Dunstan's Class of '60. I thought then and still think that Cyril would have had a satisfying career as an actor. But that was not to be his destiny. His loyalty to his Newfoundland family got in the way. Instead, an academic career would be both acceptable and provide an outlet for his expressive talent and his love of classic drama.

St. Dunstan's was ideal for Cyril. Newfoundlanders were a relatively new student constituency in mid-1950s Prince Edward Island. Cy, as he was often known then, was both respectful and jolly to faculty and comrades, though to the latter he was at first regarded as somewhat of a curious fellow. Fresh from an Irish Christian Brothers school, he seemed more thoroughly Catholic than we were, and with white shirt and tie he dressed formally in contrast to the careless appearance of the Island boys (women were only ten percent of the student body). If he was not long in acquiring a reputation for academic prowess, which he took seriously, more gradually he became a star performer in the more prominent non-athletic extra-curricular pursuits—in the chapel choir, the Glee Club, the Dramatic Society, the Student Council, and Liberal leader in the model parliament. As well, he wrote short

stories and served with aplomb as editor of the *Red and White*, the campus literary magazine. As a leading extra-mural man (even doing some radio work) he courted many of the town's attractive young ladies. And he made solid friendships with fellow students and a few faculty members. It was a time when he gained the confidence we associate with him.

All went well, then, at St. Dunstan's, though there was that snag just before graduation when he was discovered returning to his room after an evening's entertainment in town: he was charged with being drunk and given the harsh penalty of a month's banishment from campus. This was astonishingly bad luck. He missed the last weeks of classes, though he was entitled to write his finals. At the time, you could get sent home for a week just by skipping off to town without leave. The priest who caught Cyril was—uncharacteristically for St. Dunstan's—officious and obnoxious. While he liked a drink, Cyril was never a carouser. Cy had perhaps been overconfident of his high place in the eyes of the faculty; certainly he was careless in having the young lady drop him off too close to his building. Yes, he was a happy boy feeling no pain as he approached his room in a dark corridor, but an unbiased observer would have noticed more the

lipstick on his shirt than the booze on his breath. The miserable creature that suddenly shone a watchman's flashlight in his face was a heartless dry stick who had probably noted how long the car was parked before a dark figure entered the residence. When Cyril told me that story again in his last months, I reminded him that he wrote me when he taught at St. Dunstan's in 1965, how that same pathetic cleric with subtle innuendo kept casting him in taunts as an Errol Flynn unable to reform his wicked, wicked nocturnal ways.

The St. Dunstan's class revered Cyril as a savant and bon vivant, and he revered St. Dunstan's. He kept up his contacts over the years, especially with Brendan O'Grady, Jim Kelly, and Regis Duffy. In his last year, while on a brief Island visit, a group of classmates who were Charlottetown residents held a dinner to honour Cyril, which I know mattered deeply to him. Other St. Dunstan's people came to see him in Halifax. Father Jim Kelly, his old Classics professor and friend, took three shuttle trips to Halifax to see Cyril in that last year; Father Jim

outlasted Cyril by only a month. During his final illness, other St. Dunstan's people came to see him in Halifax. His Saint Mary's colleague, Roger MacDonald, was one, and Parker Lund, newly located in Dartmouth, was another who saw him regularly. Bob Linegar, his SDU roommate, made a stop-over to see him during a trip home to St. John's from Vancouver.

And my old roommate, Lorne McGuigan, came visiting from Rothesay: I was present for these visits. We laughed again at an old quip in the humour section of a 1959-60 era *Red and White*: "Things we'd like to see: Byrne-Linegar and M c G u i g a n - MacKinnon rooms swept!"

During the 1963-64 academic year, when Cyril had a one-year contract at Mount St. Vincent, we shared

a sub-let flat, rather uncomfortably, for neither of us had much patience for sweeping and basic housekeeping. On weekends, when we weren't out of town ourselves, we would have great feasts to entertain our girlfriends and visiting friends, for even then Cyril liked to cook up either a great Newfoundland scoff, or (depending upon the guests) something



Cyril J. Byrne at St. Dunstan's University,
Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island,
in 1957.

he thought European, and he would use every dish and vessel in the house.



Cyril Byrne was one of the principal driving forces of Irish Studies in the Maritimes. Not only did he pursue his own passion for things “Irish,” but he also took (and delivered) pains to actively encourage everyone with similar academic interests (on both sides of the pond) to pursue these interests with what he considered to be an appropriate level of dedication.

Long before it became fashionable,

We really met over Sean O'Casey. This was the early 1970s. Not that I knew much about O'Casey, but Cyril had a doctoral dissertation to submit, and I knew how to proofread. My recollection of the next few years is largely filled with editing and proofreading, first deciphering Cyril's own i d i o s y n c r a t i c handwriting (it's a good thing I was trained as a paleographer), then toiling through the vagaries of other people's writing, as the Chair of Irish Studies was gradually established, and publications ensued. By the early 1980s Cyril was working on

contaminated, and his accent too—not to mention the shrinking of his historic South Leinster roots in imperial pale cloisters?

Grafton Street coffee at Bewleys provided reassuringly negative answers to my questions. Cyril of Corner Brook would soon strike me as a sort of peregrinary Duns-Scotus-of-the-Anecdotes, whose mission in Ireland was NOT to search for roots familial but RATHER to shake on us leaves from branches of the

of the Presentation Sisters, had been born and raised, the headmistress, Mother Bernard, a Presentation nun, jumped to the conclusion that I was God's gift to Newfoundland—bringing to her students the insight of Edmund Burke and the piety of Nano Nagle. Luckily I did not mention the Nagles' quondam friends and neighbours, the Hennessys of Ballymacmoy, now of Cognac.

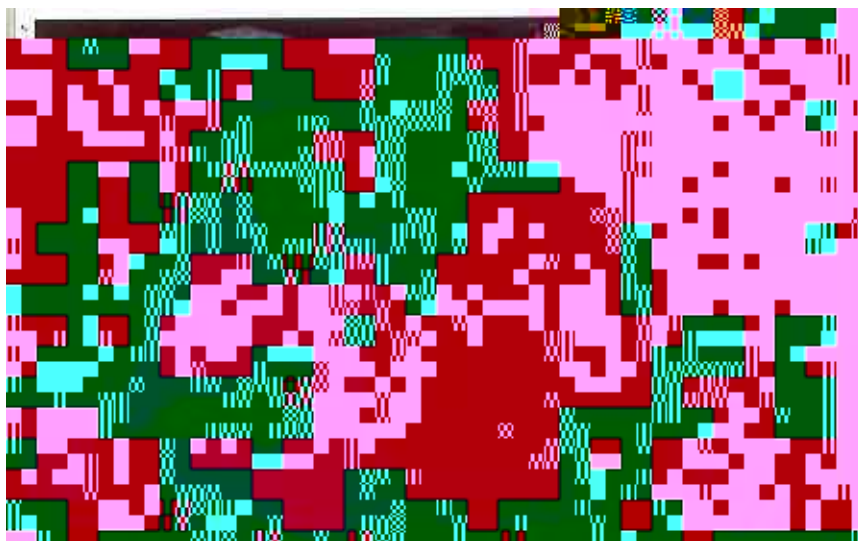
Poor woman. I was not God's gift but Cyril Byrne's.

But, come to think of it, the difference is slight: Both are creative. Both providential. When my son Dan lunched with my favourite Newfoundlander in Toronto a year ago to celebrate the 90th birthday of Mrs. Byrne, and when my daughter Janelle breakfasted at his home in Halifax during the 2004 CAIS congress, both had to bow in reverence

before the wanderer without whose intervention in the summer of 1961 they would never have come into being.

My wife, Cécile, has one unanswerable question: What happened in the last 45 years to the best dressed and best groomed male student at UCD? Did God punish him with sense of neatness that she long considered to be uniquely mine? Or, in his Dublin days, did Cyril meet with and steal the carefree style of An Gobán Saor or perhaps the rakish weeds of the Gingerman?

Ninian Mellamphy is Professor Emeritus, Department of English, the University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario.



Kenneth L. Ozmon, the former President of Saint Mary's University, and Cyril J. Byrne at Cyril's retirement party, summer 2005.

A Man Called Cyril

Cecil Houston

When your name is Cecil, the Canadian “long e” version, and you are also interested in the Irish abroad, you have a problem. Your name is unpronounceable to some and unfathomable to others. So you occasionally end up being called “Cyril.” Two former Irish ambassadors to Canada and a few who attend CAIS meetings have called me “Cyril.”

It is a good thing to be called “Cyril.”

After all, I am interested in the Irish and have been driven by motives comparable to Cyril’s to comprehend the impact of Irish culture on Canada and to take a chance to mould a life in academia around a subject close to the heart.

Cyril’s heart is in a good place. He is a migrant from Newfoundland to Nova Scotia, like countless people before him and since. A migrant from what he considers to be Canada’s “most authentically Irish” region.

From his region and from his deep love for it, Cyril has pursued a vision, a vision that has family resonance through that of his cousin Robert O’Driscoll but a wider community value that celebrates the “most authentically Irish” place.

I have the greatest admiration for what Cyril did to make his vision real. Through his actions, he was a model

cultural and community leader. Cyril created a strategy and followed it with constancy and energy.

He established a simple target—an academic chair—an academic Chair of Irish Studies—an academic chair named after Irish Canada’s romantic icon, D’Arcy McGee.

- He lined up a few good and loyal benefactors.
- He created a large network of committed small benefactors who he adored and nurtured.
- And he designed great PR by launching in 1985 with an Honorary Degree to Garret FitzGerald.
- In 1986 he launched the Chair and kept collecting the funds and building the loyalty to that chair.

Cyril gave his people and his region something that his university cannot take away. That is exceptional leadership, rare among academics, and a gift to Irish and Canadian cultures.

To be mistaken for Cyril is a good thing.

Cecil Houston is Dean, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Windsor

I had the pleasure of knowing and working with Cyril Byrne in various capacities over a period of twenty-five years.

When we first met, I was a Nova Scotian living

reflected strongly the ethos of Saint Mary's University: the Chair is rooted in the deep tradition of the institution, and it serves not only the academy but also the broader community.

When I returned to Saint Mary's as Academic Vice-President in 2001 (Cyril was among those who encouraged me to do so), it was in time to witness another of his major contributions to the preservation of Saint Mary's tradition. He was a leader in the 200th anniversary celebrations of 2002, and worked diligently with other members of the organizing committee to see that events were held, plaques were mounted, and research completed to commemorate milestones in institutional history. He had a special interest in learning all that he could about Bishop Edmund Burke, and was instrumental in telling the story of how Burke's school of 1802 laid the foundations for Saint Mary's University.

In the twenty years between our collaboration on *Religion and Identity* and the 200th Anniversary celebrations at Saint Mary's, I was privileged to have many personal and professional contacts with Cyril. I knew him as a warm and charming (not to say witty and mischievous) person, who pursued his scholarly interests as a labour of love and act of filial piety. He was steeped in the traditions of Ireland, the Irish diaspora, his native Newfoundland, and the University to which he dedicated his working life; but he was also progressive, creative, forward-looking and a builder of lasting legacies. We can only admire what he managed to accomplish, and work within our means to ensure that its benefits endure.

Terry Murphy is the Vice-President, Academic & Research, at Saint Mary's University.

We're Online!

You can find all back issues of *An Nasc* on our website at:

<http://www.smu.ca/academic/arts/irish/newsletters.html>



played in bringing the Second Congress of Celtic Studies in N. America to Saint Mary's in 1989 with the theme 'Celtic Languages and Celtic Peoples.' He was a keen promoter of Welsh language and learning and proved over many years to Dr John Shaw, Mr Joe Murphy, myself and others involved in the Scottish Gaelic field a champion supporter of that language in the Province. During my period as Visiting Professor in the Chair as long ago as 1991 Cyril was instrumental in arranging both informal céilidhs and recording sessions with Halifax's resident Cape Breton Gaels, including the late *Mac Eàirdsidh Sheumais*, Archibald A. Mackenzie of Christmas Island, of whom he was a particular admirer. These and other materials important to the cultural heritage of Irish and Scottish Gaels are now at Saint Mary's, together with the associated valuable library holdings Cyril was active in building up over the years of his tenure at the university. As we were reminded at the 1967 Celtic Studies Congress in Edinburgh by the doyen of N. American Celticists, Professor Charles Dunne, practitioners of that particular discipline in the continent in question require for the most part to be amphibious. Cyril's other medium of academic life was English Studies, which was equally beloved and cultivated by him. It must continue to amaze that he achieved so very much in the promotion of Irish Studies while working from a base in another discipline and one, in this case, so demanding, particularly in terms of teaching.

C. J. Byrne the man was a true friend and a fine colleague. Though an accomplished researcher, academic administrator and teacher, he was at all times modest – the mark of true scholarship. I cannot forget on the last occasion on which I visited his home how pleased he seemed when one of his sons confirmed to him that his teaching abilities were highly regarded by his students. Cyril's untimely death has left

A Friend of the Nova Scotia Irish

D. Brian O'Brien

It is indeed an honour to write about my friend, Dr. Cyril Byrne, and his close relationship with the Charitable Irish Society (CIS) of Halifax. Ralph Waldo Emerson once said: "What lies behind us and what lies before us are tiny matters compared to what lies within us." Cyril was a great model for this sentiment. While he accomplished much in his short life time and leaves a great legacy, what many of us will remember most is who he was as a person. Cyril was of the Irish and a passionate friend of the Irish. He believed in creating a richer future for this community by learning from and honouring our deep Irish history. And, he was a long-time supporter of the CIS and shared our passion for the preservation of Irish culture in Nova Scotia.

Cyril became associated with the CIS shortly after his arrival in Halifax in 1970. His interests were closely aligned to the society's, which revolved around all aspects of Irish and Celtic culture, including language, history and literature. Many of our mutual interests have made a significant mark on Saint Mary's University. An important point

of intersection was the establishment of the D'Arcy McGee Chair of Irish Studies at Saint Mary's University in 1986, in which Cyril was instrumental and the CIS fervently supported. Other mutual interests included fundraising to provide Saint Mary's University with a facsimile copy of the historic Book of Kells, which now resides in the Patrick Power Library of the University. And, in large part because of Cyril, the CIS annually awards two Larry Lynch scholarships to students in the Irish Studies Program at the University.

Cyril's interests were not limited to his extensive knowledge of Irish history. He was also keenly interested in creating connections in the current world context. In association with Saint Mary's University, he enabled CIS members to meet two Irish presidents – Dr. Mary McAleese, current President of Ireland, in 1998, and Dr. Mary Robinson, former President of Ireland, in 2003, when each received honorary doctorates from the University.

Cyril was also one of the initiators of an important current effort to document and restore the grave stones of Holy Cross



Cemetery, located on South Park Street in Halifax. This historic cemetery, the burial ground of thousands of Halifax Irish, religious, and political leaders, is in a state of significant disrepair. Together

and organizing theme had to be the Irish language. That single decision helped lead the rest of us to recognize that Irish wasn't just English with a funny accent and that Ireland was something more, and certainly something different, than the caricatures of it in both American movies and old British magazines.

Cyril's topic at An Cumann's first Irish heritage evening was "what it means to be Irish." True to form, he described a much wider view of "Irishness" than most of us were familiar with or perhaps even comfortable with. In recent years, as Ireland has become a multi-cultural society, we have come to see just how apt Cyril's words were nearly two decades ago.

All of this might paint a picture of Cyril as merely a provocative intellectual, but that would be a woefully incomplete description of the man. He was, of course, a brilliant intellectual, but one who thrived on friendship and who loved to entertain and to be entertaining. He

was a born storyteller, with a prodigious memory, a deep, rich voice, an ability to mimic almost anyone and any accent, and a penchant for humour. He was also enough of a rogue not to let the literal truth get in the way of a better story.

An Cumann was fortunate to have Cyril as a member from the beginning.

He attracted a large audience each of the several times he spoke at a heritage evening over the years and he never disappointed his listeners. At the end of one of Cyril's lectures, you could depend on both knowing more and having a smile on your face.

With the death of Cyril Byrne, the Irish communities of Halifax, Nova Scotia, the Atlantic Provinces and beyond have lost a great champion. We won't see his like again.

Pat Curran is a former President of An Cumann/The Irish Association of Nova Scotia.



a total and refreshing lack of self-importance.

Cyril understood the need for genuine community traditions in healthy communities, and the ineffectiveness of second-hand Anglo conformity in the Maritimes. The fact that fortunate things just seemed to 'happen' around him overlay a strong determination and sense of purpose. The raising of \$1,000,000 for the Chair of Irish Studies stands as a r e m a r k a b l e a c h i e v e m e n t considering the funding context at the time, and owed much more to his w i d e - r a n g i n g sophistication and personal skills than it did to luck. He also had an unusual common touch, and Cape Breton Gaels will remember for many years his initiative in the award of an honorary doctorate from

A Mentor and a Friend

Stephanie Lahey

By my last year of high school, I had determined that I would study marine biology. I selected this, not out of any particular sense of mission, but because I did well in sciences, and I loved the sea. I had already applied to Dalhousie University in Halifax, when I came across an announcement in the newspaper: in conjunction with the Charitable Irish Society, Dr Cyril Byrne, Chair of Irish Studies at Saint Mary's University, would be giving a public lecture.

Like many Nova Scotians, I was raised in a household where my "Irish Catholicness," despite its origins in the distant past, was always emphasized. And yet, I had never heard of Irish Studies. I

was intrigued. I went to the talk, and my world was forever changed.

Cyril's lecture enthralled me. I began to read, avidly, about Irish history, culture, mythology. When my acceptance letter arrived from Dalhousie, I declined. I had always adored books; I read compulsively, but I had never seriously considered studying literature. Yet, here I was, applying late to Saint Mary's, and chewing my nails to ragged crescents as my name languished on a waiting list in the Registrar's office. Finally, the envelope arrived – I was going to SMU. It was the best decision I ever made.

Cyril was an engaging professor from the very first class: he had delightful stage



Cyril Byrne, Stephanie Lahey, and Adam Lawrence, Irish Studies graduate and now doctoral student at Memorial University, at the Women's History: Irish/Canadian Connections Conference, 21-24 August 2002.

presence. As he read (or, frequently, recited from memory), the text began to breathe. Characters escaped from their typographic prison, and stood, paced, leapt amongst the desks. Writers I had never heard of rose up and spoke. Cyril had a genius for oratory, and he made literature live.

However, Cyril was not only a charismatic performer. His learning was extensive, and under his tutelage I was introduced to the intricate continuity of human thought. Like an intellectual virtuoso, he drew together the arts, history, mythology, psychoanalysis, theology, philosophy into a vast homogeneity – demonstrating that they were not distinct disciplines, but merely different languages, alternate ways of articulating experience. Most importantly, he taught me how to explore and approach ideas, introducing me to critical thinking. Before I took his classes, I had had many years of schooling, but Cyril was the first person to *educate*

An Impossible Act to Follow

Heather Laskey

Stately plump Cyril Byrne, academic, actor, author, showman-impresario, man of letters, eminent scholar, and excavator of largesse from the vaults of corporate Canada and the pockets of Irish hyphenated Canadians, was a familiar sight as he proceeded along the bleak Jesuitical hallways of Saint Mary's.

I followed in his wake, to get material for an article about him and his beloved D'Arcy McGee Chair of Irish Studies, on an afternoon in early 2001, his passage punctuated with easy greetings to and from janitors, colleagues, students, and canteen staff.

The antecedents of this native of Corner Brook (and apparently unscarred alumnus of an Irish Christian Brothers' schooling) were clear, both physically and, for lack of a better word, culturally. In the early 1960s, Cyril had spent two years studying for his MA in Dublin. I was living in the city around that time and know how easily he would have become part of the scenery and scenario. Sitting in an Irish pub, a glass of the dark native libation with its creamy froth in his hand, the more than 200 years of separation since his forebears crossed the pond to Newfoundland would have been unnoticeable.

Said Cyril, the thick nasal Dublin accent to perfection: "I was in this pub and there were these two 'aul wans' there at the same table, with their half-pints of stout, and they were complaining about the rats in their Dublin Corporation flats.

So I asked why wouldn't they complain to the Corporation. 'Complain!' says the one of them, and the feather on her hat goes bobbing back and forth, 'Complain – a lot of good that would do! You may as well be talking to the f----g sphinx!'" As Cyril spoke, the little finger of the aul wan's evoked glass-holding hand was raised daintily, a sign of refinement, and on his face, the look of her purse-lipped fatalistic indignation.

"It was a great time to be in Dublin," he told me, "the ambience affected all my notions of Irish literature. I met people like Patrick Kavanagh (the poet) and Mary Lavin (the novelist). It was a marvelous experience." It also extended the range of accents, intonation, and phrasing which he used as an occasional actor for CBC radio drama.

That was only one of Cyril's various personae, as well as others, such as author of learned publications, more associated with Academe. Another was as fund-raiser, the role he played with such energy and determination, in order to see the establishment at Saint Mary's of the D'Arcy McGee Chair of Irish Studies. Halifax, he said "was the obvious place for Irish studies ... This region is the most Irish part of the country."

For over a decade he had lobbied, charmed, persuaded, planned and politicked to get the Chair into existence. It was finally kick-started in 1986 with endowments from the city's Charitable

Irish Society and from Saint Mary's, plus federal multicultural funds. But, in an era of cutbacks to university financing, that was only the beginning: there was the \$1,000 a head dinner held in Montreal, sponsored by Matt Barrett, the Irish-born ex-CEO of the Bank of Montreal – a contact set up by Richard O'Hagan, a Saint Mary's alumnus, and Pierre Trudeau's former press secretary. Craig Dobbin, one of Cyril's 39 cousins and the owner of Canadian Helicopters, hosted another lavish party at his mansion in Newfoundland.

There were the big dinner events in Halifax organized by Irish-born hotelier Joe Gillivan, and Denis Ryan the musician/businessman, and which were usually attended by the Irish ambassador. Donations have also been received from generous individual patrons like Margaret Fallona, an Ontario woman of Irish descent, and more recently from Ann MacLean, an ex-student of the programme.

Cyril brought over Irish eminences like the poet, Seamus Heaney. The current President of Ireland, Mary McAleese, past President Mary Robinson and the then Taoiseach (Prime Minister) Garret FitzGerald received honorary degrees from Saint Mary's, and Cyril was involved with organizing a public subscription in Halifax to raise \$14,000 for the purchase of one of the limited edition copies of the Book of Kells, the exquisite 1,200 year old illuminated Irish monastic manuscript, now in the Patrick Power Library. However, by the time I interviewed him for the article, when over \$1 million had been

Memoir by John McGahern

Reviewed by Brian Robinson

John McGahern (1934-2006) is best known as a novelist. His portrayal of growing up in County Leitrim gave his early novels *The Barracks* (1963) and *The Dark* (1965) an intense claustrophobia that seemed too close to the narrowness of the times to be bearable. However, what is notable about his last novel *That They May Face the Rising Sun* (2002) is how he managed to create a more open account of rural life in a county without large towns. As he says in the opening of what has proved to be his last book, County Leitrim's relative isolation has preserved a sense of locality that has made the place a source that McGahern could write from: "amazingly, amid unrelenting change, these fields have hardly changed at all since I ran and played and worked in them as a boy." As the title *Memoir* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005) suggests, there is an accounting aspect that takes McGahern back to the early novels. This provides the reader with the kind of revelatory detail which scholars will find invaluable. Equally valuable however is how, in what McGahern must have known was to be his last published work, the writer goes beyond documentation to show what it means to write fiction rather than autobiography...

At the end of his *Memoir* John McGahern provides a coda which opens with some seemingly matter of fact sentences:

This is the story of my upbringing, the people who brought me up, my parents and those around them, in their time and landscape. My own separate life, in so far as any life is separate, I detailed only to show how the journey out of that landscape became the return to those lanes and small fields and hedges and lakes under the Iron Mountains.

cut:hose a large town. As he says in the opening of what has proved to be his last book, County Leitrim's relative isolation has preserved a sense of locality that has made the place a source that McGahern could write from: "amazingly, amid unrelenting change, these fields have hardly changed at all since I ran and played and worked in them as a boy." As the title *Memoir* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005) suggests, there is an accounting aspect that takes McGahern back to the early novels. This provides the reader with the kind of revelatory detail which scholars will find invaluable. Equally valuable however is how, in what McGahern must have known was to be his last published work, the writer goes beyond documentation to show what it means to write fiction rather than autobiography...

also been given some hints as to what lanes, fields, hedges, lakes and the Iron Mountains (where his mother had come from) meant to the boy growing up. And vice versa; the intensity of this relationship is also driven by the opposing opaqueness of his father's origins: "a life from which the past was so vigorously shut out had to be a life of darkness." Where his ex I.R.A policeman father had come from was as remote as the state he had helped give such a violent birth to. McGahern's "return" is therefore not a reconciliation with some abstract patrimony. In nearly every case where he might seem to be giving his father the benefit of the doubt, McGahern closes the discussion with a terse "but I think not." So, since throughout the book mother and father are separate genetic and geographical entities, the effect is to turn "return" into the reiteration of what McGahern's mother had imparted to her son concerning County Leitrim's "Lanes and small fields and hedges and lakes." Reiteration is therefore an essential aspect of the book's poetics of loss.¹

The coda's apparent prosaic wrapping up serves to underline how the final paragraphs effectively return to the opening of the book. McGahern's conclusion is the return his calling as a writer enabled as he repeats what had seemed to be a naturalistic descriptive

setting of unchanging fields where he had run and played and worked as a boy. However, it is only at the very end of the book that the reader appreciates the necessary "detail" of the following: "the beaten path the otter takes between the lakes can be traced along these banks and hedges, and in quiet places on the edges

of the lakes are the little lawns speckled with fish bones and blue crayfish shells where the otter feeds and trains her young." In the book's final words this observation is transformed into what the reader could not have appreciated initially. What McGahern's risky life as a writer had held out the hope of was the cycle of returning in his imagination to remembrance of his mother in terms that take him

beyond beloved lanes and fields and hedges: "we would leave the lanes and I would take her by the beaten path the otter takes under the thick hedges between the lakes. At the lake's edge I would show her the green lawns speckled with fish bones and blue crayfish shells where the otter feeds and trains her young." The changes from the opening are minor, but his final thoughts are a transformation that I cannot quite prepare the reader for in this short review: "the otter whistles down the waters for the male when she wants to mate and chases him back again to his own waters when



his work is done; unlike the dear swans that paddle side by side and take turns on their high nest deep within the reeds.”

I say transformation because there is more to it than the realisation that McGahern’s mother gave birth to her last child when she was dying of cancer. The child was the conjugal consequence of, presumably, one of the infrequent visits from her husband who lived 18 miles away in Cootehall, Co. Roscommon. Even more inexplicably her final days were spent virtually alone because her husband had taken their children back to the black hole of his Garda barracks in Cootehall. The final tragic disconnect is that her son is not allowed to attend his mother’s funeral, so the event is reported as imagined by the boy. Indeed, as one might have suspected, this is repeated in McGahern’s fiction as well. As Colin Burrow has noted, “self-plagiarism, a recycling of fiction back into his account of his life, is perhaps the only way to write about, or write down, this traumatic event which he was forbidden to witness.”² How McGahern represents the boy’s imagination is of more than cathartic interest however:

They’d carry her up the path of cinders to the hearse at the gate. The hearse would move slowly at first, gathering speed as it went by Brady’s pool and Brady’s house and the street where the old Mahon brothers lived, past the deep, dark quarry, across the railway bridge, and up the hill past Mahon’s closed shop to the school, the hearse halting at the school gate [where she had taught], past

the hall and the football field and up the small hill to the church, all the banks of the way covered with the small flowers she loved.

The conjunctions reintegrate the lanes and hedges and fields and lakes of her lifetime with her final journey. Equally significant is the remarkable fact that the reference to “Brady’s pool and Brady’s house and the street where the old Mahon brothers lived” has occurred, by my
s024 Tc0.1181fiignseil pastsigncling ofa mema





The Inaugural Cyril J. Byrne Memorial Lecture

Wayne Johnston

The award-winning novelist from Newfoundland, one of Canada's most critically acclaimed writers and author of *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams*, *The Custodian of Paradise*, *The Divine Ryans*, and *Baltimore's Mansion*.

Friday, May 4, 2007

Saint Mary's University

Sponsored by the Atlantic Canada Studies Programme, the D'Arcy McGee Chair of Irish Studies and the Department of English, Saint Mary's University.

To reflect Cyril J. Byrne's wide-ranging contributions to the entire Faculty of Arts and to celebrate and promote Saint Mary's University's long-standing commitment to interdisciplinary studies, the theme of the Cyril J. Byrne Memorial Lecture will rotate on a three-year cycle, highlighting Atlantic Canada Studies, Ireland and its culture, and English literature in successive years.

For information, please contact Dr. Alexander MacLeod,
Department of English, Saint Mary's University
(902.491.6222) or alexander.macleod@smu.ca

**The D'Arcy McGee Chair of Irish Studies is Cyril J. Byrne's
Legacy to Saint Mary's University, Canada, and Ireland.**

ANNasc, the Newsletter of the D'Arcy McGee Chair of Irish Studies, Saint Mary's University, Halifax, is provided free of charge.

We welcome financial contributions which will allow us to secure Cyril Byrne's legacy and to extend the activities of the Chair of Irish Studies.

Name: _____

Address: _____

Phone: _____

E-mail: _____

I enclose \$_____ as a contribution to the work of the Chair of Irish Studies.
(A tax receipt will be issued for all contributions over \$10.00).

Comments and Suggestions:

An NASC
The D'Arcy McGee Chair of Irish Studies
Saint Mary's University
923 Robie Street
Halifax, NS
B3H 3C3 Canada