

Stories from the Visitors' Book of the Irish Legation to Australia*

Jeff Kildea

You have all heard the saying, 'If only the walls could talk'. Well there might be another saying, 'If only the visitors' book could talk'. But as we know neither walls nor visitors' books talk, so it falls to me today to speak to you on behalf of the embassy's visitors' book. Because I have limited time, it will and not be a long conversation, only a short chat, dealing with the first couple of years.

1. Even the front cover of the visitors' book has a story to tell. Its tattered appearance suggests it has seen considerable service over the years. But what I want to point out is the harp and the book's title.

The harp has been the symbol of the Irish state since its inception in 1922 and, as I am sure you are aware, dates back centuries before that in Irish heraldry. So, there is nothing remarkable about it appearing on the cover of an Irish-government official book. But the title, 'Irish Legation Australia', is worth remarking on.

From the time diplomatic relations between Australia and Ireland were first mooted in the early 1940s right through to the early 1960s, the form of those relations was fraught. Having been compelled by the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921 to forego its aspiration to be an independent republic and instead to become a dominion of the British Empire with sovereignty limited to 26 of Ireland's 32 counties, the Irish state which was established in 1922 took every opportunity to push the boundaries of dominion autonomy. In that regard it had the support of the dominions of Canada and South Africa who also sought greater independence. But not Australia or New Zealand, who, fearful of what came to be known as the 'yellow peril', embraced the idea of a strong and cohesive British Empire.

After years of chipping away at the constraints of the Treaty, Ireland by 1937 had a constitution which made it a republic in all but name. But it was not until 1949 that it became a republic in name also. The 1937 constitution claimed to apply to the whole of Ireland including the six counties of Northern Ireland, which were and are still legally and constitutionally part of the United Kingdom.

A paper given by Dr Jeff Kildea, Adjunct Professor in Irish Studies at the University of New South Wales at a function held on 12 July 2017 at the Embassy of Ireland, Canberra, under the auspices of the Canberra District Historical Society to mark the 70th anniversary of diplomatic relations between Ireland and Australia.

During the Second World War the Irish state also demonstrated its de facto independence by being the only dominion to declare neutrality, a position that earned it the disapproval of many, not only in Britain, but also in Australia.

One means by which the Irish state asserted its independence and its sovereignty over the whole of the island of Ireland was in the manner in which it established diplomatic relations with other countries. And this became the cause of friction between Australia and Ireland.

While the Australian government preferred 'Eire' to describe the 26-county state, the Irish preferred 'Ireland', which implied sovereignty over the 32 counties. While the Australian government preferred 'High Commissioner' to describe representatives of the dominions, the Irish government preferred 'Minister Plenipotentiary' to distinguish itself from the dominions of the British Empire.

Although Chifley's Labor government was committed to the British Empire, it included a number of influential Catholics of Irish descent, who were sympathetic to Ireland's aspirations. As a result, a compromise or fudge was reached. The Australian government formally welcomed TJ Kiernan as the High Commissioner of Eire but raised no objection to his using the term 'Ireland' or the title 'Minister Plenipotentiary'. This he did, for instance, on his business cards and when giving interviews to press and radio.

And it is in this context that the title of the visitors' book is significant. According to Professor Patrick O'Farrell, the mission adopted the practice of calling itself the 'Irish Legation' to further emphasise its distinctive status.

2. One of the strongest supporters in Australia of an independent Ireland was Daniel Mannix, the Catholic Archbishop of Melbourne. Alone among the Catholic bishops of Australia, he had supported De Valera's opposition to the Anglo-Irish Treaty. And guess whose name appears first in the visitors' book.

But, here's a curious thing. Archbishop Mannix is not known to have visited Canberra in 1946. But we do know that TJ Kiernan visited Melbourne that year and the suggestion is that in the case of Mannix's signature in the Irish Legation's visitors' book, the mountain came to Mohammad, with Kiernan having Mannix sign the book in Melbourne.

Click Here is a photograph of Mannix with Kiernan and his family at the Archbishop's Melbourne residence 'Raheen' in early October 1946 within about a week of their arrival.

Click And here is another photo, also at Raheen, with members of the clergy, including Father Francis Moynihan, who is in the back row, third from the left. His signature is the second on the page. Father Moynihan was editor of the *Advocate*, the official Melbourne Catholic newspaper.

But, unless Kiernan had brought the visitors' book with him from Ireland, which is possible, I doubt whether he would have been thinking about a visitors' book at that early stage.

The family had landed at Fremantle on 15 September and their ship had called in at Adelaide on 21 September before their arrival in Melbourne on 27 September. From there they travelled overland to Canberra, where they were put up at the Hotel Canberra where they lived for a year before finding permanent accommodation.

3. However, after travelling from Melbourne to Canberra on 8 October and visiting Sydney later that month, the Kiernans returned to Melbourne in November.

There they were given a formal public welcome on 21 November at the Melbourne Town Hall hosted by Archbishop Mannix. Sydney did not hold its official welcome until more than two months later, on 3 February 1947. However, given the close relationship between Archbishop Mannix and De Valera, it is not surprising that Kiernan, as De Valera's appointee, should be welcomed there first.

4. In addition, the Kiernans were given a Civic Reception on 27 November hosted by the Lord Mayor, also at the Melbourne Town Hall.

The signature at the bottom of the page is that of Francis Raymond Connelly, Lord Mayor of Melbourne from 1945 to 1948. One of Connelly's claims to fame was that he was instrumental in obtaining the Olympic Games for Melbourne.

As you might guess from his surname, his heritage was Irish – also, his mother's surname was Rooney. But what's interesting is that he was not your stereotypical Irish-Catholic politician. According to the ADB Connelly was 'an ardent Empire loyalist', he had sought preselection for the Senate for the Liberal Party, not Labor, and he was

knighted in 1948. As Richard Reid keeps reminding us, the story of the Irish in Australia is not a simple one.

Can anyone guess who Susanna Connelly was? She was mum, who, in fact outlived him, dying in 1954 aged 90.

So, perhaps Mannix, Moynihan and the Connellys all signed the visitors' book in Melbourne when the Kiernans were there in November 1946.

5. Here is another page. Do you recognise the signature at the top? That is the signature of Arthur Calwell, written in Irish script. The next signature is that of his wife Elizabeth, also written first in Irish script.

Arthur is no doubt well known to members of the society as leader of the Labor Party in the 1960s after Evatt and before Whitlam. He was also Minister for Information and Immigration in the 1940s, as indicated beneath his signature.

Although Arthur and his parents were born in Australia, he strongly identified with his Irish heritage, being an activist for Irish self-determination after the Easter Rising. In fact, Arthur and Elizabeth met at Irish language classes run by the Gaelic League in Melbourne, and throughout his life he retained an interest and fluency in the language. The ADB describes Elizabeth as 'social editor of the Catholic weekly newspaper, the *Tribune*, and an Irishwoman of sharp wit and strong will'.

The next signature is that of Dorothy Margaret Tangney. And as the inscription states, she was the first woman senator. Having been elected in 1943 for the state of Western Australia, she served in the Senate for the next 25 years. Her father Eugene was born in Ireland and her mother Ellen (née Shanahan) was of Irish stock. Judging by other entries in the visitors' book, Dorothy seems to have been a regular attender at the Embassy.

The next signature is that of the Minister for the Republic of Chile Manuel Eduardo Hubner. He had arrived in July the previous year. The reference to Senor Don Bernardo O'Higgins is to Chile's first post-independence president who freed Chile from Spanish rule in the early 19th century. O'Higgins was the son of an Irish immigrant, originally from County Sligo, and a Chilean mother. Alma Hubner, whose signature also appears on the page, was one of Manuel Eduardo Hubner's daughters.

The next signature is that of Shakuntala Paranjpye, daughter of the Indian High Commissioner Sir Raghanuth Paranjpye. The date 1945 is clearly wrong.

The last signature is that of Alec Murray, a society photographer who, as indicated, lived at 'Merioola' in Sydney. Merioola was a Victorian-era mansion in the Sydney suburb of Woollahra which had been converted into a boarding house. Merioola was home to a number of Australia's avant-garde artists active during the 1940s and early 1950s known as the 'Merioola Group' or the 'Sydney Charm School'. Perhaps the Kiernans had a portrait taken at that time?

Click At that stage the visitor's book seems not to have been used much as the next entries do not occur until September 1947. A possible explanation is that because of the shortage of suitable housing in Canberra, the Kiernans lived for almost a year at the Hotel Canberra until they moved into the house in Deakin formerly occupied by Chilean minister Hubner and his family who left to return to Chile in early September 1947.

At the top is the signature of Hal Myers the *Sydney Morning Herald* reporter in the parliamentary press gallery. He would later become the gallery president. There are signatures of other diplomatic representatives: China and the Netherlands. Plus what seems like the scrawl of someone's young child, perhaps with the initials BA – unless that was his or her academic qualification.

6. Over the page are more diplomatic representatives and Les Haylen, politician, playwright, novelist and journalist, who held the seat of Parkes for Labor for 20 years from 1943. His father was Irish-born. The following year he led a parliamentary delegation to Japan where he caused a stir by shaking hands with Emperor Hirohito.

Click At first sight this next page might not seem very exciting, but the clue is in the comment, 'Thanks for the party'. After obtaining permanent accommodation the Kiernans held some of the best parties in Canberra and with the delightful Delia Murphy in charge that is no wonder. The social pages of the *Canberra Times* carried reports of this function, which was for the directors of the YWCA, and of many other similar events.

Delia's reputation soon extended beyond Canberra. On 21 November 1947 the *Sydney Sun* reported:

JUST about Canberra's favorite hostess is the jovial wife of Eire's representative, Dr. T. J. Keirnan. She loves singing lusty Irish ballads, favors informality, likes people to be natural, and has become a great champion of the Australian

barbecue. A recent invitation to a barbecue at the Irish legation gave meagre instructions: 'Dress — utterly Informal. Toasting forks optional.'

According to the *Canberra Times*, one of those attending the barbecue was MP Tom Sheehan, the member for Cook, who had just changed into his informal attire in preparation to go to the event when the division bells rang and he had to enter the chamber in what the newspaper described as 'a leisure suit made on the principle of a battledress'. (A forerunner of Don Dunstan, perhaps.). The report continues:

The Chairman of Committees.(Mr. Clark) however, did not call on Mr. Sheehan to act as teller. 'Apparently Mr. Clark thought my suit was not becoming to Parliament,' said Mr. Sheehan.

Practically all members of Parliament attended [the barbecue] where they joined in choruses of Irish airs.

Mr. Langtry (Riverina) recited 'Murphy shall not sing to-night.' Members and guests ate chops and, drank beer 'off the wood,' in a large tarpaulin pavilion.

It must have been a good party for word of it spread to Brisbane, where the gossip columnist for the *Courier Mail* reported:

ON Tuesday night I went to a barbecue at the Irish Legation. Our host and hostess— the Eire Minister Plenipotentiary (Dr. T. J. Kiernan) and Mrs. Kiernan— did everything they could to make the evening pleasant for the 200 guests, even to providing fires where we could cook our steaks.

It was amusing to see well known Parliamentary and diplomatic personalities finding it much more difficult to balance a chop over the flame than to handle a rowdy meeting or gazing tenderly at a steak to see if it were done to a turn with as much concern as they might face a knotty international problem.

Party politics were forgotten. I saw the Speaker of the House of Representatives (Mr. Rosevear) cooking a chop for Mrs. Cooper, wife of the leader of our Senate Opposition. She declared later: 'My word, he can cook.'

The event was held in a paddock next to the house. Perhaps that is the reason the visitors' book was not brought out, for its pages contain no record of the event.

7. Here are a couple of interesting signatures. At the top on the left is Enid Lyons, first woman elected to the House of Representatives. That was in 1943, the same year as Dorothy Tangney was elected to the Senate. She was also the first woman member of cabinet and was the wife of prime minister Joseph Lyons. At the top on the right is Elizabeth Chifley. But her husband prime minister Ben Chifley does not make an appearance.

Let me finish our brief romp through the visitors' book with what is probably the page of most historical significance and then a final word.

8. At the top is the signature of Eamon De Valera. You can see from the next two signatures that the date was 29 April 1948.

Just three months before, De Valera had lost the 1948 elections after having been in power since 1932. So, he and his former Minister for Finance Frank Aiken (the second signatory) decided to visit Australia. Arriving in Sydney on 27 April from the United States they began a six-weeks tour of Australia and New Zealand. In an article relating to De Valera's visit, Professor Patrick O'Farrell noted that while De Valera attracted reasonable crowds in Melbourne and Sydney, smaller audiences attended his meetings in Brisbane, Adelaide and Hobart. He concluded:

Despite the size and apparent enthusiasm of these audiences, de Valera's Australian tour was not a success. It — and its aftermath — were to prove conclusively that Irish Australia was at an end, and that Australians of Irish descent or even Irish birth, could not be roused to any interest whatever in the affairs of Ireland.

An interesting observation that we do not have the time to examine today. Nevertheless as we can see from this page De Valera and Aiken visited the embassy just two days after arriving in Sydney.

The others in the party are also worth noting. John T McMahon was a Catholic priest who was born at Ennis in County Clare in 1893 and obtained a BA, Dip Ed and MA from University College Dublin, where he was tutored in mathematics by none other than Eamon De Valera, who, of course was a teacher before he turned to revolution and politics. Before emigrating to Australia in 1921, McMahon served as secretary to Patrick Clune, the Catholic archbishop of Perth who while in Ireland in 1920 unsuccessfully

attempted to broker a peace between the British government and Michael Collins. McMahon died in 1989 aged 95.

The next signature is that of Dorothy Tangney and underneath that is the signature of John Solomon Rosevear, who was the Speaker of the House of Representatives from 1943 to 1949. While his surname suggests a Cornish rather than an Irish background his mother was a McGuirk. As speaker, Rosevear had a reputation as the Bronwyn Bishop of his day, with opposition members and journalists accusing him of being biased and inflexible. He was also known as a heavy drinker. A story is told that at Rosevear's funeral the clergyman described him as a 'great national leader and statesman', a 'devout Christian' and a 'highly moral character', to which Fred Daly MP remarked audibly, 'By God, we're burying the wrong man'.

9. Finally, this page from June 1954 is headed, 'On the eve of the departure of the Kiernan' and it contains signatures and messages. Behind the comments lies a bigger story. Half-way down, Minnie and Ted Peters wish him a 'Safe journey & Speedy return', while at the top Billie Morris's farewell message seems more permanent: 'I ... wish you every happiness & Best of luck for the future'.

Even though Kiernan was going on leave, he never returned to Australia. Once again politics intervened in the fraught diplomatic relations between Australia and Ireland. Ironically, in 1950 things were looking up. In May there had been a reciprocal upgrading of the diplomatic posts to that of ambassador and Kiernan was appointed Ireland's ambassador to Australia with his credentials signed by the President of Ireland. But the Australian government, then led by RG Menzies, dragged its feet over the appointment of an Australian ambassador to Ireland.

Then in 1953 the government named Dominic McGuire as the Australian ambassador to Ireland. Although, as his name suggest, he was acceptable to the Irish government, the two governments fell into a dispute over the how his title was to be described.

Menzies' Liberal government, made up almost exclusively of Protestants of British descent, was less sympathetic to Irish nationalist sensitivities than the Labor government had been. It was not prepared to fudge it as Labor had done in 1946.

Then, in January 1954, the Australian government announced it would not proceed with the appointment. Following the announcement rumours spread that Kiernan would be

withdrawn. In June 1954 he left Australia on what was announced as furlough. Hence the ambiguity of the comments in the visitors' book. The following year he was appointed ambassador to Germany.

Full diplomatic representation was not resumed until May 1964. And only then on the basis of a fudge: the Irish Ambassador would use Irish forms and styles in his credentials, the Australian Ambassador the style used in the *Royal Style and Titles Act*—and neither party would attach to these titles the significance assumed by the other.

These are just a few of the stories emanating from the Irish embassy's visitors' book; a novel but fruitful way of looking back to the early days of diplomatic relations between our two countries.