

PASSING THE TORCH

THE AISLING SOCIETY OF SYDNEY
1955 - 2005



EDITED BY PETER GRAY

Let the word go forth from this time and place, to friend and foe alike,
that the torch has been passed to a new generation ...



John Fitzgerald Kennedy, Inaugural Address,

Washington DC, 20 January 1961

Cataloguing in Publication Data
National Library of Australia

Passing the torch.

ISBN 0-646-45448-X

1. Irish - Australia. 2. Ireland - Social life and customs.

3. Ireland - Social conditions. I. Gray, Peter Walter.

II. Aisling Society of Sydney.

305.89162094

First Published November 2005

The Aisling Society of Sydney

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Typeset by Campbell Murray Creating Pty Ltd

Printed in Australia by Griffin Press

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Among the many, many people who have willingly assisted in all manner of ways over the years in which this book has been maturing, special thanks are due to —

Anne Webster, Consul-General of Ireland, for her unswerving, generous and imaginative support of the Aisling Society and of the publication of this book;

Maureen McLoughlin and Patrick Tansey, for collating and digitising hundreds of photographs taken over several decades;

Eve Ross, Patrick Tansey, David Vaughan, Jeff Kildea, Tom Power, Gerard Windsor, Anne Stevens, Peter Kuch, Marie Leech and Maureen McLoughlin for proof-reading and amending sundry draft transcriptions of various Talks;

Billy Cantwell and the *Irish Echo*, and Michael Lyons and the *Irish Radio Programme*, for their help in publicising this book and our associated fiftieth anniversary seminar;

Mary Corkhill, for so patiently and skilfully transcribing and formatting innumerable tape recordings and typescripts of Talks, many of which verged on the impenetrable for reasons of technology, accent or otherwise;

Stuart Murray and CMC, for their expert work on the design, layout and publishing of the book and for their unfailingly friendly and obliging approach;

Eve Ross, Gerard Windsor and Jeff Kildea in particular, for all kinds of advice and guidance in relation to publishing generally;

all the contributors and/or their families, for kindly allowing their Talks to be included in the book.

FOREWORD

ANNE WEBSTER

Over fifty years have elapsed since the foundation of the Aisling Society of Sydney, by a group of friends led by Mary Hegarty, Brian McGrath and the redoubtable Father Nicholas McNally.

The objectives of the Society, set down in the Constitution agreed on the eve of St Patrick's Day 1955, were and remain: the promotion of cultural relations between Australia and Ireland; the fostering of the study of the history, life and culture of Ireland; and the study of the impact of Irish heritage on Australian life.

As you, dear reader, will see from the scintillating Talks in this magnificent book, *Passing The Torch*, in the half century which followed the objectives of the founders of the Aisling Society have been resoundingly attained. The Aisling's *magnum opus* reflects the impact which, in every area of endeavour – whether government, law, education, politics, religion, literature or race relations – the settler Irish, their descendants and more recent arrivals have had on the process of building up the institutions and the values of the shining continent of Australia.

The Aisling's *Passing The Torch* has an even more compelling aspect to its scholarship. For, in addition to the great names and the renowned events, *Passing The Torch* reflects also on the often unknown, unheralded, and frequently painful lives of the "ordinary" Irish person – every man and every woman; truly the woof and warp of Irish-Australian life. All the compelling facets of the Irish life and experience, and their profound interaction with the ancient land of Australia, are to be found here in the pages of this volume.

I commend the Aisling's splendid book to friends of Ireland and Australia, and to all who celebrate the achievements of the human spirit.

Anne Webster
Consul-General of Ireland

Sydney, 21 October 2005

INTRODUCTION

PETER GRAY

The Aisling Society celebrates its fiftieth anniversary this year. This book is an opportunity to offer, to our members and friends and to a wider audience, a selection from among the kaleidoscopic array of Talks we have enjoyed over that eventful half-century.

For readers less familiar with our story, the bare bones of our origins, aims and activities are encapsulated in this extract from our current brochure:

Who we are

AISLING (pronounced Ash-ling) is an Irish word meaning a vision or a dream.

The Aisling poems and songs were a phenomenon of the eighteenth century penal days, helping to keep alive among Irish people a knowledge of the past, a pride in their heritage and a hope for the future.

The Aisling Society was founded in November 1954 by Father Nicholas McNally, Mr Brian McGrath, a Sydney lawyer who drew up the Constitution of the Society, and Miss Mary Hegarty, a high school teacher of great scholarship who, as Secretary for nearly twenty years, was chiefly responsible for the development, stability and high standards achieved by the Society.

The Constitution of the Aisling Society of Sydney was accepted by the foundation members at a meeting on Wednesday 16 March 1955. Article 2 was, and still is, as follows:

The objects of the Society shall be:

- (a) the promotion of cultural relations between Australia and Ireland;
- (b) the fostering of the study of the history, life and culture of Ireland;
- (c) the study of the effect of our Irish heritage on Australian life.

What we do

The principal means by which the Society has pursued its stated aims has been through monthly meetings. At each of these a Talk is presented by a member or an invited guest, each an expert in his or her particular field. Subjects include such topics as:

- Irish and Irish-Australian literature, from the days of the bardic poetry and prose romances of the seventh century to writers and poets of today;
- Irish and Irish-Australian history, reaching from pre-Christian cultures to the present time;
- Irish and Irish-Australian art, drama, music and dancing;
- The Irish economy and its relationship with other countries, particularly Australia.

The Society has been fortunate that authorities in all these areas have been more than willing to accept an invitation to address members.

Meetings are usually held in the evening of the fourth Wednesday of the month at the Irish Consulate in Sydney. Each of the seven ordinary meetings comprises Society business, a Talk (followed by the opportunity to ask questions of the speaker) and a light supper. Three times a year the meeting takes the form of a social function; a St Patrick's Day dinner in March, a Mid-Year luncheon in July and a Christmas party in December. There is no meeting in November or January.

The Society also sponsors prizes at several New South Wales universities.

How to become a member

Membership of the Society is open to anyone who is interested in Ireland and Australia – their history, culture, economy and destiny and their relationship with each other – whether or not of Irish descent.

As to membership, in the Society's early days many of its members were themselves Irish emigrants, or the children of emigrants. Nowadays, alongside those who are Irish-born, most are second, third or fourth generation Australians, with a sprinkling of those attracted simply by the subject matter rather than by ties of blood. Throughout, always and resolutely, a position of uncompromising inclusivity has been maintained, with everyone – Northern, Southern, Protestant, Catholic, *et al* – represented and heard.

Of course, over fifty years, all kinds of changes and transitions have occurred, in Ireland and Australia, and in people's attitudes and preconceptions there and here. Some of those developments have been expressly considered in Talks included here, while other emerging currents are reflected more in aspects of tone, style, approach. Thus for example in Australia in the 1950s and 1960s it was not unusual to find, or to sense, a defensiveness about, as well as the felt need for a determined pride in, the Irishness of much of Australian history and of the Australian ethos. Something of that feeling may perhaps be detected in the Talks from those years which are included in this volume. By the 1980s and 1990s there was abroad a different sensibility, a composure, an assurance that Irishness had mattered, had flourished, and was appreciated or at least reckoned with. Now, in 2005, we have on the one hand, for example, Gerard Windsor (see 'Farewell to Old Ireland') iconoclastically deconstructing the burnished urn of "memory Ireland" (*pace* Vincent Buckley) and on the other hand the appointment to the High Court, by the Howard Government, of a St Patrick's Day-celebrating, bodhrán-thrumming, Catholic woman judge being greeted by a phlegmatic public as part of the natural order of things. Where will it all end?

Those outside philosophy will naturally think of a dilemma as in some way a bad thing. If politics is one's concern, a dilemma *is* a bad thing. It causes splits, enmities, loss of zeal, as activists and potential activists take up their positions. In philosophy, it is the opposite. There is nothing that feeds philosophy like a good dilemma, and a truly irresolvable one is a philosophical Magic Pudding. The more monographs, critiques, PhD theses and talkfests that have been carved out of it, the more there are left.

James Franklin, *Corrupting the Youth: A History of Philosophy in Australia*, Macleay Press, 2003, p 361.

Exploring or re-imagining Ireland, or Irish literature, or "Ireland's English problem" (as Patrick O'Farrell reframed that particular dilemma), or Irish Australia, or any of the myriad related ideas and motifs, is a bit like philosophy in that regard. We can probe and tease out and worry away at such themes more or less endlessly, and not only do we never tire of it but the rewards of the journey expand rather than contract. Roy Orbison was perhaps following a similar thought-path when he remarked, musingly, in another context, "I realised you could tour America forever, almost."

Reproduced as an Appendix is a list of all the Talks of which tape recordings are available. The earliest of those dates from 1974, and

not every Talk since then has been taped, so the list is by no means comprehensive in terms of the fifty years under review; but still it gives an indication of the range and variety of topics that have been ventilated.

The process of selection of Talks for inclusion in this book has been, largely through necessity, a little idiosyncratic. We wanted to give some indication of the range of subject-matter, and of the changes in approach, mentioned above. We also wanted to include a reasonable number of Talks from people who have been especially important in the Society's history and development. However, we were faced with two particular constraints. From the period prior to 1974 a mere handful of typed manuscripts of Talks has come down to us. Otherwise the Talks given in those first twenty years live on only in the country of the mind, in the memories of those who heard them. Since 1974 we have tape-recorded most, but still not all, of the Talks which we have heard. Unfortunately, though, the sound quality of many of those tapes, especially the older ones, is variable; a good many of them were found, on exhaustive checking, to be simply not susceptible of acceptable transcription. So the field of potential Talks for publication narrowed. Maureen McLoughlin and Marie Leech joined with me a few years ago to produce an initial wish-list of possibilities; since then the Society has bravely entrusted to me the task of testing, modifying, deleting from, adding to and fine-tuning that list. I hope the results of my (intended to be benevolent) dictatorship will find acceptance; however, as befits dictatorships, no correspondence will be entered into.

The first four Talks in the book were given during the Society's first twenty years. Brian McGrath was the Society's inaugural President, and a man of diverse accomplishments – scientist, Naval Officer, lawyer, linguist, historian. It is a pleasure to be able to include his trenchant survey of the pilgrimages undertaken by emissaries of Ireland to the new world in the antipodes, in the decades before and after Federation. It is followed by Mary Hegarty's portrait of the impact of the Irish in the first thirty years of the Australian experiment. Of all the great members in whom the Society has been fortunate, surely none surpasses gracious, generous, erudite Mary; her Talk is typically vivid, scholarly and compassionate. Any volume of this kind would be enriched by a contribution from Patrick O'Farrell, the doyen of Irish-Australian history. We were and are proud that Patrick was a Life Member of the Society and one of its staunchest champions. His Talk on Albert Dryer and the INA

illuminates a neglected gem of Sydney Irish history. By contrast, Daniel Mannix could hardly be described as having been neglected by history; yet Edmund Campion's finely-turned piece on the complexities and significances of Mannix, with its more glancing appreciations of Bishops Duhig and Burgmann, is a gem in its own right.

Oliver MacDonagh stands with Patrick O'Farrell and Tony Cahill as among the true greats of Irish-Australian studies. We were privileged to have Oliver, too, as a member for many years. The address reproduced here, given to a St Patrick's Day dinner in 1986, characteristically combined a poetic sensibility with historical discipline and a classicist's breadth of learning. Kingsley Aikins' uproarious, rollicking ramble through the highways and by-ways of Irish sport was another kettle of fish, or salmon, altogether. Roguish, whimsical, tongue-in-cheek, and frequently hilarious, Kingsley's Talk was a highlight for everyone present. "Whimsy" is not perhaps a word which usually springs to mind when discussing High Court judges, but dare I suggest there are distinct traces of it in Sir Gerard Brennan's beguiling address on the common bonds of law – both those of an intellectual kind and, especially, those involving people – between Ireland and Australia. Philip Lee, a Life member, twice our President, and a giver of many delightful Talks over the years, is represented by his typically quixotic story of one of the Irish-Australian giants, John Hubert Plunkett. The inclusion of my own St Patrick's Day address on the occasion of our fortieth anniversary enables a little more of the history of the Society to be described, and ensures that the names of at least some of the "ancestors" are accorded the acclaim they are due in this book.

From Anne Stevens, our current President, comes a judiciously woven story of two remarkable philanthropist brothers and their family, while Peter Kuch, a past President, weaves a different kind of tapestry as he takes us behind the scenes of his nuanced exploration of Irish poetry, and poets, in the first forty years of the twentieth century. Vincent Pike was already 93 when he gave the Talk I have chosen for inclusion here. I remember so well how he settled into a chair, gently closed the written paper he had prepared and pushed it to one side, and in an avuncular, fireside way took us with him, without a note, on a rhythmical, rolling voyage around the life and times of Erskine Childers. It was a beautiful Aisling evening. Muredach Dynan's Talk on the 1998 Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland was spellbinding in a different way. Told from the intimately well-informed perspective of a passionate yet

thoughtful and perceptive participant and observer, and received by a very large, hushed audience, it was by turns evocative, humorous, powerful, wistful, hard-hitting and – it mercifully still seems – prescient.

Susan Ryan entertained us over dinner with a bracing and witty account of her personal Australian journey back into the essentials of her Irishness, meshing as it did with the movements taking place over the same period in the two countries themselves. Much of Maeliosa Stafford's journey has been in the other direction, from Ireland to Australia, and in his mellifluous voice, bubbling with ideas and good humour, he piloted us along a fast-flowing current of thoughts about theatre, and drama, and the arts, in both countries. In 2001 Patrick Dodson brought his calm, measured, broad understanding to bear upon the synergies to be found or visualised between the stories, past and future, of indigenous Australians and the Irish; and later in the same year Jeff Kildea held us in thrall with his study of the turbulent events surrounding 1916 in the two countries, meticulously researched yet at the same time full of life and verve. Michael Kirby's presence as our guest for St Patrick's Day happened to coincide with the end of a week of spectacular pyrotechnics in federal politics, in which his name had been at the epicentre of the storm. As he had risen above the small-mindedness on display there, so his Talk to us about acceptance and equality in Ireland was moving in its serenity and steadfastness. The last of our selected Talks was given only a few months ago, and how fitting it was that Gerard Windsor, Aisling member, ensured that in our fiftieth year we risked no lapsing into complacency as with polite contrariness he challenged orthodoxies: provoking, extending, reaching, elucidating.

I should stress that a deliberate attempt has been made to capture something of the flavour of these Talks, as Talks. This is unambiguously a book of Talks, not of papers. Almost all have been transcribed from tape recordings of the speaker's presentation to an audience. For the most part (although there are some exceptions to this) they are accordingly not anchored or dignified by footnotes or references, nor are the grammar or mode of expression as formal or precise as they might otherwise be. In some cases a typed manuscript has been available, rather than, or as well as, a tape recording. Eleven of the nineteen Talks were given at ordinary monthly meetings of the Society, where typically thirty or forty people might be present, listening intently and ready to contribute questions and observations of their own. The other eight were

presented at either a St Patrick's Day dinner or a Mid-Year luncheon, to commensurately larger audiences bringing with them, no doubt, hopes or expectations of a slightly different entertainment quotient. Different speakers respond differently to such environments, but I think it is fair to say that Aisling meetings and gatherings tend to be characterised by an element of rigour, embedded in warmth, humour and camaraderie.

The idea for this book springs from two main sources, both of them legendary in the Aisling. The first is Maureen McLoughlin, our Treasurer and a driving force for so many years, past and to come. It was Maureen's initiative to begin taping our monthly Talks, as long ago as the mid-1970s, so that members unable to attend a meeting could listen to the Talk at another time. Those tapes provide the platform of material which made it possible to assemble this collection. The second was Vincent Pike, memorable and distinguished member, who left a bequest to the Society specifically earmarked to assist in the production of a book such as this. My thanks and admiration to them both, and to everyone who has helped along the way.