

# FORTY YEARS OF THE AISLING SOCIETY

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Foolish people, not usually Irish, sometimes suggest that nothing good comes from drink. Tonight's splendid gathering is living proof of how wrong they are. For the idea of the Aisling Society, of which we are so proud, first took form over the raising of glasses at a hotel in Margaret Street, not very far from here, a little over 40 years ago.

Three friends gathered at Pfahlert's Hotel early in 1954. They were Mary Hegarty, a classical scholar and teacher; Brian McGrath, a distinguished Sydney lawyer; and Fr Nicholas McNally. They shared a love of Ireland, of literature and history and learning generally, and a desire to place Ireland and her culture, and her relationship with Australia, at the forefront of Australian consciousness.

Their idealism and enthusiasm were contagious. In August of that year, a dinner was held at Pfahlert's, when the idea of a society with these aims was developed. In Brian McGrath's chambers, a draft Constitution was framed. Contact was made with a Society which had already come into being in Melbourne, also called the Aisling Society.

Finally on 16 March 1955, 40 years ago yesterday, the inaugural meeting of the Aisling Society of Sydney was held, a Constitution adopted, and office-bearers elected. Tonight we celebrate the achievement of those early pioneers, and of those who have come after.

It is worth noting the objects of the Society, as set out in that first Constitution. They have never altered. They were and are:

- (a) The promotion of cultural relationships 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.

It is fair to say, I think, that the Aisling Society has never lost sight of those objectives, and that the passing of the years has served only to underline their importance and value to the Australian experience.

As the old bittersweet saying has it, Ireland's finest export is her people. Stories abound – some heroic, some just with a bit of “Irish” in them – of Irish men and women excelling after leaving home, influencing or even dominating events in their chosen land. Think of the hero of *The Mountains of Mourne*:

You remember young Peter O'Loughlin of course  
 Well now he is here at the head of the Force  
 I met him today, I was crossing the Strand,  
 When he stopped the whole street with one wave of his hand,  
 And there we stood talking of days that are gone,  
 While the whole population of London looked on...

On a similar note, and remembering that my own roots lie deep in the black soil of County Kerry, there is the story of the visitor to Hyde Park in days gone by who heard a Sinn Féin speaker haranguing a vast and enthusiastic crowd with a passionate denunciation of England and her terrible misdeeds. One of his London listeners, finding all this not to his liking, called out “As an Englishman, I should have you horse-whipped”. Any possible disturbance of the Queen's peace, however, was prevented when a big constable with a broad Kerry accent materialised beside the heckler and advised him “Move along dere now, and don't be disthruptin' a lawful meetin'”.

Part of the point of stories like these is of course the sense of community, of belonging to an extended family. Much that is important is implicit, unstated, simply understood. And this is true of the Aisling itself: its meetings and gatherings have the flavour of a civilised discussion among members of such an extended family, usually a not too dysfunctional one.

What of the name itself? As we know, “Aisling” is an Irish word meaning a dream or a vision. An Aisling was a type of poem or song, very popular in the “hidden Ireland” of the eighteenth century, which kept alive the spirit of the people in the penal days. It seems an especially appropriate name to be adopted by people of Irish descent or humour living in far-off Australia. For despite modern communications technology, and for all the resonances between the two countries, there is still an awesome sense of distance, and difference, between them. Visions of otherness, other places, other times, other people, other ways of thinking and doing things, keep alive that Irish cast of mind, or as it has truly been described, that Irish genius, which has proven so vital in Australia's journey towards its own mature individuality, a journey now gathering pace.

The first office bearers were Brian McGrath as President, Mary Hegarty as Secretary and Ena Sullivan as Treasurer. By the end of 1955 there were 93 members. That number has fluctuated over the years, and as we gather tonight, it is again around the 100 mark. Two of the Foundation members [those who had joined and paid the first subscription – 2 guineas – by 31 March 1955] are still with us, both now life members. One is Miss Roma Drew, and the other is our esteemed past President, Fr Patrick O'Rourke. Ill health unfortunately prevents both of them from attending tonight. Fr O'Rourke's contribution to the Society, in particular, has been enormous; as well as serving as President and Councillor, he has been an indefatigable researcher and presenter of Talks, and an ever-reliable source of guidance and counsel.

Of those first office bearers, Mary Hegarty demands special mention. She was never out of office in the Aisling Society; Secretary for 18 years; very fittingly President in 1965-6; and later acclaimed a Life Vice-President – one of a handful of people (including Fr O'Rourke and Vincent Pike) to have been so honoured. Mary's learning lightly carried, the breadth and depth of her knowledge and interests, her warmth and gaiety and grace, are cherished memories of many in this room.

Since 1955 the Society's year has had two constant features; a program of monthly Talks, and a celebration dinner on St Patrick's Day. There have been many and varied other activities: theatre parties, musical evenings, film nights, picnics, exhibitions of Irish dancing, and in most years, a Christmas party. In more recent times a Mid-Year luncheon, now regularly held at St John's College within the University of Sydney, has become an established event in the calendar.

In 1955 the first ordinary monthly meeting was held in April and the Talk was presented by James A Meagher. He took as his subject W B Yeats, and the Society was truly off and running.

James Meagher was evidently one of the Society's first great characters. Among his many distinctions at University College Dublin had been the Gold Medal for Oratory. He was a lawyer, and a great wit and raconteur, and had moved in the same circles as Yeats, Joyce and other literary and political figures of the Dublin of the twenties.

Anne Stevens will forgive me if I repeat a story about him which she told at a Dinner celebrating the Society's 25th anniversary. James Meagher's initials were of course J.A.M., and he was known as "Jam". On one occasion he was to visit James Joyce but he was ill and so could not attend. One of the other guests remarked "No Jam tonight". To this Joyce replied "No, tonight it is a case of Meagher malade".

As Anne pointed out, it is not often you run across someone who has been the subject of Joycean puns, especially in French.

Later in that first year, in September, a program of films was shown, courtesy of the Irish Embassy. This was the start of a long and happy association between the Embassy and our Society. Successive Ambassadors have gone out of their way to nurture the relationship. The largest audience ever for an ordinary monthly meeting was in April 1986 when Ambassador Joseph Small, remembered by us all with great affection, spoke on the Anglo-Irish agreement. Ireland's very first Ambassador to Australia, T J Kiernan, had been instrumental in the founding of the Melbourne Aisling, now no more, in the 1940's. How fitting it was that his son, Aisling member Professor Colm Kiernan, should in due course have become Professor of Australian History at University College Dublin, and that he should have addressed our Society's silver jubilee dinner in July 1979. Tonight we are delighted to be able to welcome Ambassador Martin Burke, doyen of the Canberra Diplomatic Corps, and Mrs Burke, as well as Minister Howlin and Secretary O'Donoghue.

The Society has forged equally close links with other Irish bodies. Aer Lingus, Bord Fáilte, the Irish Export Board, the Allied Irish Bank: they and their various human faces have given support and friendship from day one.

Tonight, of course, another great Irish institution is represented in force, if I may put it that way: the Garda Síochána, Guardians of the Peace. According to my sources, the Garda Síochána took over from the Royal Irish Constabulary in 1922, and it was in 1925 that the Dublin Metropolitan Police were amalgamated with the Gardai to form a unified national police force. So our honoured guests tonight also celebrate an anniversary this year, their seventieth. We bid them a very warm welcome to Australia and offer our congratulations on their achievement.

As I hinted earlier, I am the grandson of a Kerry man, and a Kerry woman. But it is not just anywhere in Kerry that is home in Ireland for me. It is the heart of the kingdom itself, Knocknagoshel, one of the nations of the earth. And I was therefore particularly pleased earlier in the week to meet the Commissioner of the Garda Síochána, Patrick Culligan, and his wife Carmel. Because Commissioner Culligan hails from Knocknagoshel, where his father indeed had been the sergeant of police.

I should say that I have myself had some experience of Knocknagoshel policing. I recall on my first visit to Ireland being told that a sing-song

had been arranged in my honour at the favoured pub on Saturday night. I was most excited, and looked forward eagerly to the occasion. On the evening in question, I was a little puzzled when time began to slip by with no perceptible change to the usual routine. Cows were milked, dinner was cooked and eaten, we watched Gay Byrne on *The Late Show*. No sign of any movement, much less singing. Yet I knew it would be closing time soon. Had the plans been changed? Eventually, about 11, preparations were made and we set out, arriving at the pub as most of the last of the patrons were shuffling amiably into the night. We were ushered knowingly into "the back room", where a roaring fire and a circle of chairs revealed we were indeed expected. Most of the party, at least all that I knew, seemed to be assembled, but still things did not get underway. Someone, it seemed, had not yet arrived. Then the door opened again, and in came the local sergeant and his wife, dressed up and beaming, and ready for their night out. This, it seemed, was community policing, Kerry style. Now we could begin, and a wonderful night, and morning, duly unfolded. Out of respect for the Irish libel laws, I have not named the law enforcement officer in question – it wasn't Patrick Culligan's father! But I understand the good sergeant is now a superintendent, and perhaps he will follow that Knocknagoshel career path all the way to the top.

In the course of thinking about what I might say tonight, I spent some enjoyable hours leafing through the old annual reports and minute books. I had thought I might pick out highlights from some of the years that have gone. But, quite apart from the fact that I am perhaps trespassing on your courtesy for too long already, the task of selection proved beyond me. The overwhelming impression which remains after such a survey is of the sheer quality of the Talks that we have heard.

Indeed, if there is one feature which has characterised the Aisling's endeavours over all the forty years, it has been the uncompromising pursuit of excellence, coupled with the assumption that that is the natural and appropriate way for an Irish-based society to go about its affairs.

If name-dropping were the order of the day, there would be no difficulty in my reeling off the names of a galaxy of celebrated and distinguished people who have accepted an invitation to address the Society's meetings over the years. Even more striking, however, is the calibre of the contribution which has been made by the Society's own members. The most cursory of browsing through the minutes reveals the tremendous range of their interests, and their capacity to engage with them at a level of discourse which has invariably been high.

I have already mentioned Mary Hegarty and James Meagher, each of whom was a bounteous provider of Talks. Numerous other members have spoken, many more than once. But there is a small number who have subsequently risen to the occasion so often, and with such flair and aplomb, that I feel I must single them out. The first of these whom I would mention is Fr Michael O'Sullivan. Twice President, a long-time Councillor, a wise and witty commentator and mover of votes of thanks; and the person whose name seems to recur over and over as the author of all manner of Talks on all manner of subjects: his contribution has been prodigious. The others whom I have especially in mind, and on similar grounds, and I ask them to forgive me for grouping them together, are Fr O'Rourke, Philip Lee, Anne Stevens, Mary O'Connell and our honorary Life Member Professor Patrick O'Farrell. I thank each of them most sincerely on behalf of the Society for all they have given to it.

There have been other great stalwarts of the Society who cannot be overlooked on an occasion such as this. I joined the Aisling in 1977, too late to have known Fr F X O'Brien or Fr Neil Collins, each of whom has a special place in the history of the Society and in the hearts of those who knew them. No doubt there are other memorable figures from the early days, and the later days, whom I have not mentioned; I assure you that no discourtesy is intended, and I apologise for any omission which anyone might feel to have been particularly egregious.

Rare has been the Aisling gathering in my time which has not been punctuated by the stentorian tones of Vincent Pike calling for "Order!" or giving an authoritative "Hear! Hear!" Alone with Philip Lee and Fr O'Sullivan, Vincent has been twice President of the Aisling Society. He was in active legal practice for over 50 years and indeed this is his sixty-sixth year as a qualified solicitor. He is a Life Vice President, as is Fr O'Rourke. He gave Talks to the Society as long ago as the 1950's and as recently as 1991. The Society owes him a great deal and we thank him.

For more than half of its life, the Society has been fortunate in having Maureen McLoughlin as its Treasurer. Her efficiency in that role may be somewhat taken for granted, but her energy and hard work in seeing to countless additional tasks, and her great big warm heart, have become the stuff of legend.

As well as those I have already named, I pay tribute to other past Presidents, Brendan O'Connell and Mary Lee, both here tonight, and Tony Baine, each of whom has made a distinct and substantial contribution to the Aisling Society. And I record with pleasure the vigorous and imaginative leadership, and the wide-ranging intellectual curiosity, which our current President, John Ryan, has brought to the position.

There have been, and are, many more great characters, but as we all know who we are, I forbear to mention us. There is one other person, however, whose memory burns bright this evening. I have spoken of Mary Hegarty. Mary's sister, Joan, followed in her Aisling footsteps, and until her death in harness last year, was Secretary for 16 consecutive years. She was a Life Member, and in many ways the life blood, of the Aisling Society. She participated in full measure in the dream, and the vision, urging us always onward and upward to greater and better things. We honour her, too, tonight.

Those two women, Mary Hegarty and Joan Ward, inspirations of the Aisling Society, were my aunts. And as it happens the Aisling Society and I are almost the same age: I was born just about the time that the idea of the Aisling itself was born, in 1954. So far as I can ascertain, this was mere coincidence, entirely unrelated to my father's expectation that I would be the first Australian Pope. But I do have a particularly personal interest in the present and future well-being of the Society.

I am glad that in recent years, for instance, we have continued to keep faith with our name. There is now an annual Aisling Society Prize at each of the University of New South Wales, the University of Sydney, Macquarie University, the University of Wollongong, the University of Western Sydney and the Australian Catholic University, for the best essay on an Irish or Irish-Australian theme. The Society has been a committed, indeed passionate, supporter of the Celtic Studies Foundation (of which our past President Mary Lee is President) and its work in establishing a Centre for Celtic Studies at Sydney University and ultimately, we hope, a permanent Chair of Celtic Studies there.

I hope we will continue to reach out and embrace such new opportunities. I hope we will continue to be inclusive and tolerant of a broad range of interests and points of view. One of the strengths of the Aisling Society, as of modern Australia, notwithstanding the immense contribution made to it by those from the Catholic tradition, has been its openness and receptiveness to people and ideas from other traditions. As hope begins to reappear in Northern Ireland, let us ensure that we maintain that stance, and encourage it everywhere. Where there is disagreement, as invariably there is on matters of political or religious controversy, such as form part of our frame of reference, let us continue to deal with it by resort to reason and scholarship rather than sentiment. I hope we will continue to attract and enjoy fine speakers, and I hope we will continue to enjoy each other's company over the raising of glasses, just as it all began, a little over forty years ago.

I hope you will join me now in a toast to the Aisling Society of Sydney, her past and her future.