



## Laying the Foundation

Incorporated in 1964 in Minnesota, the foundations of the Irish American Cultural Institute were actually laid by a series of television programs in 1962.

Dr. Eoin McKiernan, the Institute's founder, had pressured the Irish government for decades to create a cultural entity in this country. A chance meeting with a television producer in St. Paul led to the invitation to write some programs on Ireland. The first series was so successful that a second followed. Dr. McKiernan planned and directed both, which were shown on public TV nationwide. The overwhelming response encouraged and enabled him to create the Institute.

The Irish American Cultural Institute was incorporated in Minnesota in April, 1964:  
for scientific, literary and educational purposes.... the stimulation of scholarly research into all facets of Irish civilization and culture, ancient and modern, in Ireland or elsewhere; the dissemination of this research...; the direct encouragement of the arts in general, but literature and drama in particular...

## Publications

Connecting with membership was critical to McKiernan's thinking, so one of the first ventures was the publication of the scholarly journal *Eire-Ireland*, followed a few years later by the newsletter, *Dúchas*.

Within a short time, the journal boasted subscriptions from libraries in 26 countries.

## IACI Chapters

Gathering members in different areas into chapters was another important way of staying connected. New Jersey, under Neil Sullivan and then John Walsh, has had one of the strongest chapters over time, offering additional and creative programs. Dr. McKiernan traversed the country, fundraising and visiting chapters; at its peak, the IACI boasted 30 chapters.

## Programs

Dr. McKiernan was the idea man for most of the Institute's projects and programs.

- Awards for literature were established almost immediately, followed by those for art and music. The Butler, O'Shaughnessy, Gainey and O'Malley families made several awards possible. These proved a lifeline to struggling artists in an economically deprived Ireland.
- Research grants came a few years later.

- Commissioning the first Irish symphony was also McKiernan's idea; it made its debut in Springfield, MA in 1981.
- A reforestation program, "**Trees for Ireland**," established several forests in Ireland during its short lifespan.
- Theatre groups were brought to the States on tour, as were art exhibits and even a fashion designer.
- An ambitious program of speakers (the **Irish Fortnight**) originated in the 1970s, with a variety of Irish academics rotating among dozens of cities in the U.S. and Canada over a two or three week period.
- The **Perceptions** series evolved out of the Irish Fortnight series and was a less complex program of two or three events during the fall and spring ().

### A Royal Connection

**Princess Grace of Monaco** so admired the Institute's work that she contacted Dr. McKiernan, who persuaded her to serve as honorary International Chairperson, which she did until her untimely death. Both she and Dr. McKiernan were concerned about the next generation; their discussions resulted in the creation of the **Irish Way** summer enrichment for teenagers.

HSH Grace was a main attraction at several fund-raising events. To supplement other sources of funding, Dr. McKiernan sought and eventually obtained a National Endowment for the Humanities grant from the federal government. Under John Walsh's leadership, a Washington Ball gala, at which an award is given to an outstanding Irish American, became the year's highlight.

### New Leadership

Dr. McKiernan turned over the day-to-day operations of the Institute to Brendan Shortall in the mid-1980s. Shortall was succeeded by John Walsh, whose leadership extended well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Walsh moved the Institute's headquarters to New Jersey in 1995. McKiernan continued as Chairman of the Board for many years, although his wife's illness eventually affected his level of involvement.

Dr. McKiernan died in July, 2004. The Institute is his legacy to all who are proud to call themselves Irish Americans.