



**THE IRISH ASSOCIATION**  
for cultural, economic and social relations

**My Time with the Irish  
Association**

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## EARLY HISTORY

I thought I would begin with a short account of when, where and how the Association was founded. The man mainly responsible was Major-General Hugh Montgomery of Blessingbourne, Co. Tyrone. A correspondence between him and his friend Lord Charlemont, who was to become the Association's first President, gives an idea of their views in the early 1930s.

By 1933 both men had become alarmed by the growth of sectarianism in Ulster. In a letter from Charlemont to Montgomery, written that year, he says: "I am a Protestant and was born one, but I'm not a 'born Protestant'. I'm sure I would have been very happy as a Roman Catholic or a Hindoo, had my parents been of either persuasion". He goes on to say "There is a Protestant temperament something to do with ductless glands, I expect - and it is a physical fact as well as a state of mind. I think that blue eyes almost always go with it..... The point that I am getting at is that militant Protestantism is in their blood, and no argument or reasoning power will get it out. They are in fact not responsible people in this direction, and if they are low in class they can't restrain their actions either." He goes on to say that his grandfather was a kind-hearted man and deplored the fact that Roman Catholics were doomed to go to hell - it seemed rather unjust to him. But he never doubted that it was so.

Montgomery showed himself less hardline in his attitude, at one time he wrote to Charlemont: "I am quite sure there are large numbers of reasonable men in Ulster who do not like the present state of things .....The principle of tolerance has never really been fairly stated to the Protestant population who are not in my experience deaf to argument". The Belfast riots of 1935 in which many were killed were according to Professor Paul Bew really the events which created in General Montgomery's mind the idea of the Irish Association.

As a Unionist member of his local council Montgomery had pursued whatever measures he could to promote better relations between the two religious communities. He now saw the need to extend this to the whole island. He looked to people of like mind in the south. Frank McDermott seemed an obvious choice. A member of the Irish senate and former TD of the Centre Party he had unsuccessfully contested West Belfast as a Nationalist in 1929. Others were Donal O'Sullivan, I think he was from Cork, and John Joseph Horgan, a solicitor and coroner for County Cork since 1914. Other early members of the association included: the author Edith Somerville; Major Leonard Darwin (son of Charles Darwin) and academics J.C. Beckett, who only died recently, and R.B. McDowell who happily is still with us and addressed the association in this hotel at the AGM of the Southern branch in 1998. The Country Shop, familiar to many of you, was a regular venue for committee



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meetings. Its founder Muriel Gahan had also been a founder member of the association. Sybil Le Brocquy was also a member from early days.

## **THE MOVE TO POLITICS**

Meetings were held regularly, as now, in Belfast and Dublin, but unlike recent times, politics and religion were the two topics to be avoided. This was to change once the recent troubles began. Donal Barrington and Berry O'Neill initiated the move but it was Brian Garrett, with the support of his predecessor as president Una O'Higgins O'Malley, who decided in Brian's words 'to transform the Association from a Knitting Club' to something much more forceful that would deal with the new political situation in NI and try to do something about it.

Throughout the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s there were many significant interventions at Irish Association meetings. Prime Minister Terence O'Neill's address at a critical moment in his career convinced Belfast Telegraph editor, John Sayers, that his commitment to reform was more intellectual than emotional. Cardinal O Fiaich gave a careful exposition of his views to the Association shortly after his elevation. Long before then, in 1962, Kenneth Darwin, then Director of the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, gave a lecture to the Association in Belfast. When the lecture was repeated in Dublin, attended by Conor Cruise O'Brien among others, it was reported in the Irish Times and Darwin shortly afterwards was reprimanded by Stormont Castle for associating with a 'subversive organisation'. The lecture had been based on the correspondence between Montgomery and Charlemont!

At the beginning of the Troubles and particularly during the Workers' Strike support from the South was very important. Many felt they got this support through the Irish Association: for many it was the only platform on which they could air their views without fear of recrimination. The constriction on any night-life in Belfast led to the southern branch running Spring week-ends in Dublin which were entirely social, involving theatres and receptions. A fore-runner of the Spring Seminar.

## **JUBILEE CELEBRATIONS**

At Easter 1987 I was invited by Enda McDonagh to have lunch with him in Maynooth. He told me that the Irish Association was planning to celebrate their Golden Jubilee the following year. A sub-committee had been set up consisting of Brian Garrett, the then president of the Association, Brigid Wilkinson, Hugh Munro and himself. They had decided to ask me if I would be interested in doing a feasibility



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study to see what could be done, what funding would be available to celebrate their fifty years by putting on an arts festival in Dublin. As a mature, mature student I was due to sit my degree exam in June so I explained I could not begin until the exams were over. A week after finishing exams I started with the Association and went to Belfast.

My first husband Michael and I had always been interested in Northern Ireland so apart from helpful members of the Association I had contacts with people I had kept in touch with since Michael's death. I put an advertisement in the Belfast Telegraph looking for shared accommodation and was very lucky to find myself sharing a modern, penthouse apartment overlooking the Lisburn road with a social worker who worked in Newry.

Friends warned about the upcoming 12th July. I must hide my car with its Dublin registration from the route of the march. I must be inconspicuous, not speak to anyone, not cross the road etc, etc. It was all so different from the warnings. People strolled across the road through the marchers as they felt like it. The atmosphere was that of a family outing though I did not wait to see the return which may have been more threatening. I heard how people of both traditions used to enjoy the day together but sadly that had changed. About ten years later I went to Kesh, in Co. Fermanagh on the 12th with some friends from Dublin. It was more relaxed and when we wished to leave before the march was over I asked a policeman how we could do so. I have photographs showing our car with its Dublin registration in the midst of the march with banners all around it!

Living in Belfast was a great way to get to know the city and its people and I soon, with help from many, was able to produce a report showing we could raise £55,000 to put on exhibitions, a play, poetry readings and three concerts in the National Concert Hall; one with the pianist Barry Douglas, one with James Galway, and the third with the Ulster Orchestra. James Galway gave the festival a great boost by appearing on the Late, Late Show and telling the audience why he was in Dublin.

Council decided to go ahead and I was asked to stay and organise the different events. We called it 'A Celebration of Ulster'. It took place in Dublin, opening with the premiere of Frank McGuinness's play 'The Cathaginians', launched by Tony O'Reilly in the Peacock theatre, on 26th October 1988. The other big event was an exhibition, held in the not-yet-completed RHA Gallagher Gallery, of Ulster Art in the '80s. Jamshid Fenderesky, who runs a gallery in Belfast, was invaluable in the help he gave in organising this exhibition. Hanging the exhibition was fraught by the harsh remarks made by Tom Ryan, RHA to the artists whose work he did not approve of. Not easy when many of these artists were exhibiting in Dublin for the first time. At the





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opening Paul Durcan read his poem 'Micky Donnelly's Hat'. Micky Donnelly was one of the artists participating in the exhibition. I remember the crowd downstairs being very noisy and Enda McDonagh had to go down to tell them to keep quiet and listen to the poet.

Gerry Dempsey was very helpful on the fund-raising side. He had been treasurer when Jeremiah Dempsey was president, which was in the early 60s. He was now at this time (1987) the Republic of Ireland administrator of the International Fund for Ireland. Charlie Brett was the administrator for Northern Ireland. I remember going to see Charlie in his Dickensian but beautifully appointed solicitors' offices in Chichester Street. He was quite intimidating. However he agreed to support us and subsequently presented us with a cheque for £st30,000 at a reception in Tailors' Hall. Tony Ryan of GPA gave us £20,000 which went directly to cover the cost of mounting the RHA Gallagher Gallery exhibition. The Belfast Harbour Commissioners lent some very fine paintings from their collection. I remember being surprised at their generous response it seemed they would lend anything I liked and asked for. What did bother me though was the unprotected way in which two marble busts were transported and I worried that they might be damaged and whether our insurance would cover them. These were part of an exhibition mounted in the recently restored buildings in Merrion Square which had once been used by the British Embassy and burnt out after Bloody Sunday. We borrowed material relevant to Northern Ireland from the museum in Dublin. They had two sets of gauntlets belonging to King Billy but would not agree to a suggestion that one pair might be given to the Ulster Museum which also lent some items. The National Trust of Northern Ireland also lent exhibits as did the Linenhall Library.

We put on an exhibition of paintings from the John Hewitt Bequest and portraits of artists and writers, all lent by the Ulster Museum in the Kerlin Gallery, then situated in Dawson Street. An exhibition of Early Irish Printing was displayed in the The Long Room of Trinity College Library. An exhibition of Traditional Needlework from the Ulster Folk Museum was held in the Crafts Council Gallery in Powerscourt Townhouse Centre. The festival closed on 3rd November with a concert by the Ulster Orchestra in the National Concert Hall.

Before it closed a Gala Dinner was held in October in the Royal Hospital, Kilmainham where President Hillery was the Guest of Honour. This dinner was very well attended thanks to the committee members getting great support from families and friends.



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To celebrate the Golden Jubilee in the North, Brian Garrett invited Sir Sonny Ramphal, Secretary-General of the Commonwealth to speak to the Association in the City Hall. No secretary-general had ever been in Belfast officially before. At the time there was a ban on all British ministers attending functions so none could be invited to the City Hall. However, Nigel Dodds who was Lord Mayor at the time welcomed us and helped to arrange a dinner afterwards in Hillsborough Castle. Those of you who were there will remember Ireland were playing Romania in the World Cup that night and I think there might have been more interest in how Ireland was doing than in the reception that followed the talk. We heard there was a radio in the kitchen and depending on who you asked you could be told they did not recognise the Republic or what the score was. The sergeant-at-arms recognised Enda McDonagh as a fellow RC and said he would keep him up to date with the game. Luckily most of the unionists had left by the time the sergeant announced to wild cheers that Packy Bonner had saved the day in a shoot-out. After the dinner that night in Hillsborough those of us who had been having pub-grub down the road were regaled by stories of how the Parliamentary Under-secretary who was in charge, I think it was Lord Lyell, was almost incapable and did not seem to know who his guests were, not even Sir Sonny Ramphal, but he got great encouragement from Conor Cruise O'Brien.

## **PROFESSIONALISING THE ASSOCIATION**

After the success of the Golden Jubilee celebrations Council decided it was time for the Association to become semi-professional. Further funding was sought and obtained and I was asked to take the position of a part-time administrator. In the early days Hugh Monro was enormously kind and supportive. He offered me office space in his offices in Sandymount and I worked from there until I set up my own office with word-processor and fax etc. at home. It was a great committee that met monthly in Hugh's office. Brigid Wilkinson was wonderful. She knew more than anyone about the Association and I always felt should have been president. Her advice was unfailingly helpful and accurate and I look back with joy at all the many times we travelled to Belfast and other places together. The two friends who did such stalwart work Ann Murphy as treasurer and Orla Rutledge as secretary worked well together and gave unstintingly of their time and expertise. Ann Murphy was the only person on the Southern committee who could handle Jimmy Fleming, the Northern treasurer. Jimmy thought every telephone call should be referred to in the accounts, he would get mad with me at times and talk about our unethical book-keeping in the south but I don't believe he ever addressed Ann in this way. He and Marjorie Gilligan



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who was northern secretary at the time had difficulty with the idea of an administrator from the south. I remember a particularly upsetting time at the start of the Annual Conference in Newcastle, Co. Down. The resentment was huge. However gradually they came to accept my position and calmed down.

This resentment of the south is still there. I am a member of the Northern Ireland fundraising committee for the Special Olympics and there are inevitably snide little remarks made and references to how they consider the Dublin office looks on them as Outer Mongolia. I have to say there is some truth in this but it is sad to see how little things have changed.

As now Council meetings were mostly held in Dundalk. I would like to pay tribute to Ruairi Brugha who never failed to attend even when it might mean driving from Kerry to Dundalk or Belfast. He understood the unionists more than others and they appreciated this, as indeed, they appreciated Hugh Munro in spite of his sometimes quirky interventions.

Twenty to thirty years ago there were few organisations running meetings like the Irish Association. It was easier to get good audiences. Relationship with the press was very good and there was nearly always press attendance at the meetings

## **SOME THEMES AND CONFERENCES**

We had concentrated mainly on the cultural side of things in 1988 so to counteract this it was decided to run an economic conference in 1989. Susan and David Hedigan planned this conference and it was held in the Berkeley Court Hotel in October of that year. They invited Kieran Kennedy, Director of the Economic and Social Research Institute, to open the conference. Peter Sutherland gave the keynote address and Dr. George Quigley, then chairman of Ulster Bank, gave a very interesting talk on Industrial Development. I remember getting a warm letter from him some years later in reply to a request from me. He said he was very sorry not to be able to take part but he was committed to hosting a Bank Conference. He went on to say 'I am particularly sorry because your invitation to me to speak at your conference five years ago was really the catalyst for the development of my own thinking around the area of North/South economic and business interaction - a topic which, as you know, remains close to my heart'

Another memorable occasion was the Spring Seminar, of 1990 held in the engineers' hall in Clyde Road. The topic was 'Articles 2 & 3 - after the Supreme Court Judgement in the McGimpsey Case'. The first session, chaired by Paddy McEntee,



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on the Constitutional Imperative went smoothly enough with Brian Garrett and Alban Maginness from the north and Gerry Danaher and Adrian Hardiman from the south. But the second session on the Political Challenge was more challenging to the chairman Jack Lynch. Chris McGimpsey and Ken Maginnis spoke from the unionist point of view while Eddie McGrady and Dick Roche of Fianna Fail spoke from the other side. Among the many present was Conor Cruise-O'Brien. He claimed to be a life-time member of the Association and attacked Eddie McGrady saying that he considered the SDLP to be a front for the Provos.

The Annual Conference of 1992 was on the Irish/American Connection. Professor Pdraig O'Malley of the University of Massachusetts spoke on Irish-American attitudes towards the conflict in Northern Ireland. But to me the most memorable session was the Sunday morning one when the writer Mary Gordon Enda McDonagh and Maureen Murphy of Hofstra University New York discussed 'The Silence of American/Irish Writers'. There was quite a heated discussion between Mary Gordon and Maureen Murphy as to what constituted an Irish/American writer. Did they have to have been born in Ireland or could they claim to be Irish by having an Irish background, or part-Irish parentage as was the case with Mary Gordon who is so proud of her Irish/Jewish descent.

Another lively conference was that held in Dun Laoghaire in 1994 when John Bowman was president. The theme was 'the Downing Street Declaration: Ten Months On'. Peter Temple-Morris spoke on British Expectations, Seamus Mallon on Nationalist Expectations. There was a pretty heated discussion going on in the bar as I tried to get everyone to board the bus for a reception in the British Embassy but we managed to get them all there on time.

An interesting conference on 'The Changing Face of Ireland' was held in Bangor, Co. Down in 1995. I remember particularly good talks by Gabriel Daly, Duncan Morrow and Fintan O'Toole.

In that same year John Taylor spoke in the Mansion House in Dublin.. In answer to a question from the floor he refused to admit that any part of him was Irish. As we walked over to the Dail restaurant afterwards some of us tried to get him to say he was a little bit Irish. He refused.

Amusingly it was different when Mitchell McLaughlin spoke in the Mansion House some time later. He said there was 'Britishness' in him because of his background. I doubt he could have said such on the Falls Road. It was good to think the Irish Association was a trusted platform.





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We used the Glenview Hotel for the Annual Conference for the first time in 1996. It was so popular with the Northerners we went back two years later when David Trimble's address was televised. In 1996 the theme was 'North/South: Common Strands'. Ivan Yates then Minister for Agriculture was the main speaker. Among others Andy Pollak spoke on his idea of a Cross-Border College which I am now happy to say is up and running successfully for the last few years.

President Mary Robinson was greeted as guest of Honour at the Glenview by her previous election-agent, then president of the IA, Senator Mary Henry. If I say it was great to work with Mary Henry as president I do not mean to take from previous presidents all of whom were interesting to work with in different ways. But Mary really gave a lot to the Association and was always there when needed. Maybe because two women were organising it but for the first time at that conference in Wicklow we had two panels of women. Some of you may remember, they were all politicians speaking on women in politics, three from the North, three from the South.

## **NEW DEPARTURES**

Mentioning Mary Robinson reminds me that we organised her first official visit after she was elected President. It was also her last before her inauguration. This was to Pavee Point where we had arranged for her to address travellers' organisations. At this meeting she said she would like to inaugurate an award for travellers' accommodation. This became the President Robinson Architectural Design Awards for Travellers' Accommodation and was organised and supervised by the Irish Association. The winners were announced by President Robinson in Aras an Uachtarain on 2nd February, 1993 and the designs were exhibited in the Ilac Centre in Dublin, in the library in Tuam, in the Linenhall Library, Belfast where Senator Maurice Hayes opened it and lastly in the main public library in Cork which I am sorry to say was the only place where I found a racist attitude to the travellers among the library staff.

In May of 1998 I organised a seminar on 1798 in Hillsborough Castle. It was run jointly with the British Irish Association of which I am still a committee member. Dr. Paul Murphy then Minister of State in Northern Ireland opened the conference. We had three Toms as speakers: Tom Bartlett of UCD, Tom Dunne of UCC and Thomas Pakenham. Seamus Brennan, then Minister of State in the Taoiseach's office, was the guest speaker at the dinner afterwards. It was a great venue and all the staff were very helpful.



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At the AGM in the same year Dr. R.B. McDowell spoke to us here. He spoke of the early days of the Association when meetings were held in his rooms in Trinity. There was a curfew on women being allowed into rooms after 6pm and he told amusing stories of smuggling the women members in.

### **SOME MEMORABLE OCCASIONS**

I suppose one of the most memorable meetings we had in Dublin was in March 1996 when we had members of the Orange Order talk about the Moderate Side of the Orange Order in Buswell's Hotel. Rev. Brian Kennaway who was then in charge of the Educational programme for the Order spoke alongside two younger members. The room was packed and the meeting went along pretty smoothly until a journalist from An Phoblacht started to get abusive. It was certainly not one of the easiest meetings to be chaired by Senator Mary Henry. However it did open doors to members of the Orange Order. Subsequently Brian Kennaway was invited to the British Embassy and to speak to other groups. Some time later when I suggested he might come to the Glenstal Ecumenical Conference in Limerick. He replied that he could not attend anything with ecumenical in its name. However after a few days he phoned me to say he would come. He did and enjoyed it very much making new friends with people like Sean MacReamoinn.

Brian Kennaway came to the Diamond Jubilee dinner which was held in Stormont which he enjoyed so much he then me asked who to contact there to arrange for an Orange Order celebratory dinner. A good number from the south attended this dinner where we met plenty of non-political Orangemen who were members because it was a good club to belong to. In spite of much orange-juice it was a jolly evening.

### **SCHOOLS' PROGRAMME**

In 1996 we applied to the Programme for Peace and Reconciliation fund for money to finance a schools' programme. The first tranche was paid in December 1996, 75% of the funding was provided by the European Union and 25% from the Governments of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. Earlier that December we had held interviews in Belfast for the position of administrator to run the schools programme. Gregory Irwin was selected to run what we called the Border Counties Initiative. The first meeting was held in February in Dundalk Grammar School, subsequent monthly meetings were held in Sligo Grammar School, St. McCartan's College, Monaghan, St Patrick's Academy, Dungannon and Portora Royal School, Enniskillen, other schools



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were brought into the programme in the following year. We would invite schools of a different persuasion from the host school to debate topics relating to the conflict in Northern Ireland.

Sometimes we asked speakers to give a talk to the children. One of the more interesting debates we had was in Fivemiletown, home of our founder Major-General Hugh Montgomery. We had decided to hold it in a local hotel as we were advised a neutral venue would be best in that town. We brought pupils from two schools south of the border to debate with two schools close to Fivemiletown. The students from the south could not understand why the pupils from the two northern schools could never meet to socialise together. They really found this strange and were not shy in saying so. It caused some tension at the time but when I was driving some of the girls back to their Catholic school they were full of plans about how they might meet up with the children from the Protestant school and said they would not wait for their teachers to arrange anything. A hopeful outcome to what had been a worthwhile project which ran for two years. The final meeting was held in a hotel in Monaghan and was attended by P resident Mary McAleese who would have addressed the Association more than once while she was a law lecturer in Queen's.

In June of the same year 1996 David Trimble spoke to the Association in Portadown town hall. Tensions in the town were pretty high at the time so I drove up the week before the meeting to check the hall and to ask the police where cars from the south should be parked. The police gave me directions to a car park and seemed relaxed about it, unlike the Jesuits who did not like my arranging such a meeting and sent messages to tell me to cancel it. In the event David Trimble got more hassle from his own people in the discussion after his talk. It seemed a long time since I had first met him while I was living in Belfast. He was then lecturing in the Law Department in Queens where I went to see him. He was helpful but not exactly friendly. The first time we invited him to speak in the south, at the Annual Conference in Malahide, he would not cross the border and we had to fly him from Belfast to Dublin via London. At least all that has changed now.

There were many occasions when we had capacity audiences. One was in Maynooth where we attracted over three hundred people, mostly students which was our aim. The second was when Albert Reynolds, then Taoiseach, addressed a large audience in Dublin Castle on the Downing Street Declaration. The Diplomatic Corps was well represented at this meeting as it was at the second meeting we held in Dublin Castle when the hall was filled to capacity to hear the address of the Secretary General of the Commonwealth Chief Emeka Anyaoku. This was to celebrate the Diamond Jubilee of the Association in 1998. In organising his visit I



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was greatly helped by the secretary in the Commonwealth Office Teddy Dormer. He was an Irishman and when he said he had grown up in Dublin I asked him if he had lived on Palmerston Road. It turned out to be the same Teddy Dormer who had lived two doors from where I had grown up and who I remembered playing with as a child. This meeting, at which Brian Garrett responded to the Secretary-General, drew a lot of attention in the media which led to some disquiet. I remember John Duffy was concerned that the impression had been given on RTE's Prime Time and in The Irish Times that we were promoting the Commonwealth.

We did have a number of people there who would have been in favour, mostly from Greystones, Co. Wicklow and Bandon, Co. Cork. One man from Laois still used Queen's County in his address. Previously Eamon O Cuiv had hinted at one of our meetings that he was in favour of Ireland rejoining the Commonwealth but I don't think it was a serious consideration.

I'm sure Senator Mary Henry would agree that one of the most difficult meetings we had was with Robert Ballagh and Bernard Cullen in Buswell's Hotel. Robert Ballagh had spoken first introducing his talk in Irish. Bernard Cullen replied in much more fluent Irish and talked for longer than Robert Ballagh had. This annoyed Robert Ballagh who claimed to have been the main speaker and he said Bernard Cullen had spoken for three times longer than he. To calls from Declan White to close down the meeting Senator Henry offered Robert Ballagh a chance to reply but he just got more annoyed and walked out. As Senator Henry followed me following Robert Ballagh out onto the street a woman called to Senator Henry saying it was the best meeting she had ever been at.

### THE FUTURE

So what of the future for the Association? After the Good Friday Agreement was signed some thought there was no longer a need for the Irish Association. Time has proved this to be wrong. Sadly we have seen an increase instead of a decrease in sectarianism in some areas. The founder's aim "to make reason and goodwill take the place of passion and prejudice' is still valid to-day. We do see republicans and unionists sharing a platform, we see them operating well on various committees and who would have thought even ten years ago that there would be a Northern Ireland Assembly with a Sinn Fein minister for health and a Sinn Fein minister for education. So things have moved on and let's hope will continue to do so though it has to be worrying that Jeffrey Donaldson has won support for a meeting of the Ulster Unionist Council to be held next Monday. David Trimble had opposed moves to hold this



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meeting but Jeffrey Donaldson managed to get enough support and says he is confident of victory. If David Trimble were to go the hardliners would take over and the future of the Peace Process would be in jeopardy.

An area affecting North and South which might be looked at by the Association is that of asylum seekers and refugees. As with the travelling community there is much discrimination against and much intolerance of these people. Reason and goodwill could help to bring these people into a more accepting community lacking the fear which breathes intolerance.

It is good to see the Annual Conference this year will tackle Religion and the Irish Problem, it should be a very interesting conference. Another theme that might be re-addressed is the economic one now that Britain has postponed membership of the Euro. It would be interesting to look at the continuing effect the two currencies have on the border area and how things might change when Britain hopefully accepts the euro.