

Return to Ulster

Justice Kirby Collection

Date: 14 May 1998

Author: The Hon Justice Michael Kirby AC CMG Justice of the High Court of Australia

Type: Speech

Organisation: University of Ulster

Event: Conferring of Hon D Litt

Location: Belfast, Northern Ireland

The Honourable Justice Michael Kirby AC CMG Hon D Litt*

It is a great privilege to receive the Honorary Degree of Doctor of Letters from the University of Ulster. Because of my family's links with Ireland, and specifically with this part of Ireland, it has brought enormous pleasure to me and to my family, far away. I want to thank the University.

About a third of all Australians trace their family's origins to Ireland¹. In my case, I can do so on both sides of the family. On my father's side, the roots may be traced back to Limerick, lately made famous by the popular book *Angela's Ashes*. On my mother's side the family sprang from County Antrim². This was symbolised in her childhood by the name which her father, William Spotswood Knowles, chose for the family home in Sydney. It was "Ballymena". That lyrical sound was a mystery in our childhood as we would visit my mother's parental home and as I would listen to the soft distinctive accent of my grandfather, speaking to me in the pure voice of Northern Ireland.

My parents are, by God's grace, still alive to know of this occasion. They are in their eighty-third year and it has brought joy to both of them, and especially to my mother. It is hard to explain, inappropriate to the occasion and excessive to the time allowed, to tell you the way we feel. For to us, this is not simply a high University honour, although that it is. It is also the renewal of our family links with this part of the world. It seems in a sense to rekindle my connection with my grandfather, long since gone. It re-establishes a personal association with the place from which my forebears came and where they spent many days and nights more than the three generations of us in Australia. As well, this honour seems to vindicate the courage that took my grandfather to the far side of the world a hundred years ago. What would he have thought if an angel had whispered in his ear that such a remarkable honour would come about in a century's time? As he sailed out of Belfast, in his wildest imaginings would he have conceived that the circle would be closed in this way, a hundred years on?

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of our exploring
Will be to arrive at the place where we started
And know the place for the first time³

My grandfather's father was William James Knowles. He died in 1927. According to a recent review of his life⁴ he was known as "the father of Ulster Antiquaries". He was a member of the Royal Irish Academy and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland. Like his great grandson he is revealed as being a member of every conceivable society and committee to which he could gain admission. Fellow of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain

Return to Ulster

Justice Kirby Collection

and Ireland; Member of the Belfast Naturalists' Field Club. Founder of the Ballymena Naturalists Field Club. Founder and President of the Ballymena Archaeological Society. He was born at Fenagh, near Cullybackey in 1832. He married Jane Spotswood of Bellaghy. One of his daughters, Matilda Cullen Knowles was to become one of the leading botanists of Ireland. Another, Margaret Knowles, was to feature prominently as a painter and illustrator⁵. According to family legend, some of her work hangs in the National Gallery in Dublin. We have family paintings by her at home in Australia. His sons William (my grandfather) and Hugh left for Australia and there founded their families. William was a respected journalist. His wife Margaret Rushe Knowles was a great lover of poetry. According to my father, who loved them both, they were a gifted and civilised couple who struck him as feeling somewhat out of place in the rude environment of Australia during the Depression years, when he first met them.

I am proud to receive this Degree and the fact that it is a Doctorate of Letters is specially precious. It is in literature, verse, prose and communication that the Irish, from all parts, excel. If I had my time again, it would be literature and history that would attract me; not law - however honourable that vocation. Curious the way genetics works. It will not be suppressed even by a lifetime of law's discipline.

This is only my second visit to Belfast. I came here a decade ago on an eventful day. The day began with the Judges in the Four Courts in Dublin. It concluded with a dinner in company with the Lords Justices of Northern Ireland. That visit was to give the MacDermott Oration for the Queen's University, named after John Clarke MacDermott, one of the great Law Lords who derived from Ulster. Between the two occasions, in South and North, I made a quick visit to Ballymena, Cullybackey and Ballycastle. Knowing that it was in Cullybackey that my grandfather was born and lived, I asked the driver to pause for a moment. I entered the pharmacy. I asked if they knew anyone from the Knowles family in those parts. Astonishingly, and in the way that can only happen in Ireland, at that moment a member of the family, Mrs David Knowles, entered the shop. I am proud that Jane Knowles and David Knowles are here today. In the space of a few hours, Margaret Knowles had arranged to attend my evening lecture in Belfast. It was through her that I met Wallace Ewart, a Professor of this University. Later they came to Australia with their daughters, Judith and Kathryn. I am glad that Judith is here with her husband, Neil Cree. I know that Kathryn's thoughts are also with me. A link was established through the meeting a decade ago which will endure. To our great sorrow, Margaret died. But I am glad on this occasion to honour Wallace Ewart and his new wife, Wendy-Jane. I also honour Mrs Kathleen Lamour (nġe Knowles) who is the oldest member of the Knowles family and who does me the great honour of attending this ceremony. I am also proud that other members of the Knowles family, Mac and Nora McRoberts from Ontario in Canada are here with me on this occasion. In a sense, we are a little symbol of the great diaspora of the brave young men and women of these parts who went huge distances to make their fortune and now come back in search of their past and of their identity.

I am here in Belfast for a conference on human rights organised by the British Council. Normally an address of this kind would be full of serious thoughts of fundamental rights - of the wrongs of the past and the hopes for the future. This is certainly a critical time for Ulster, for Ireland and for the United Kingdom. To say the least, it is an interesting time to be here in

Return to Ulster

Justice Kirby Collection

a conference on human rights. Human rights is the bond which men and women in all parts of the world share as their fundamental entitlement. But for me this ceremony is a precious family moment. Although most of my family living are on the opposite side of the earth, I know that they are with me in spirit, as are my ancestors from Ireland. From our love of family and close ones we should be able, in the human community, to build love for one another more generally. Our love should not be so rationed. It should transcend proximity as well as distance. It should triumph over difference and bring us together. At the core of human rights, as of religion, is human love.

In the name of my great grandparents, my grandparents, my parents and my family - and on my own behalf - I say a heartfelt thanks to the University of Ulster for this honour. Far away and years from now I will remember this moment.

ATTACHED: PHOTO OF WILLIAM JAMES KNOWLES
BALLYMENNA CIRCA 1882

THE UNIVERSITY OF ULSTER BELFAST, NORTHERN IRELAND

THURSDAY 14 MAY 1998

RETURN TO ULSTER

The Honourable Justice Michael Kirby AC CMG Hon D Litt

* Justice of the High Court of Australia. President of the International Commission of Jurists.

1 P O'Farrell, *The Irish in Australia*, NSWUP, Sydney, 1987; P O'Farrell, *Letters from Irish Australians 1825-1929*, NSWUP, Sydney and Ulster Historical Foundation, 1984.

2 G H Bassett, *County Antrim 100 Years Ago - A Guide and Directory 1888*, Friar's Bush Press, 1888 (reprint 1989), 291.

3 T S Eliot, *Little Gidding in Four Quartets*, London, Faber, 1944.

4 Iner Dempsey, "the Most Incongruous and Incompatible Trades", *Causeway*, September 1993, 26 at 27f.

5 Obituaries on the two sisters, who died within a week of each other in 1933, appear in *The Irish Naturalists' Journal*, July 1933, Vol 4, No 10. See also *The Irish Times*, 3 May 1933.

??

Footnote continues

7.

4.