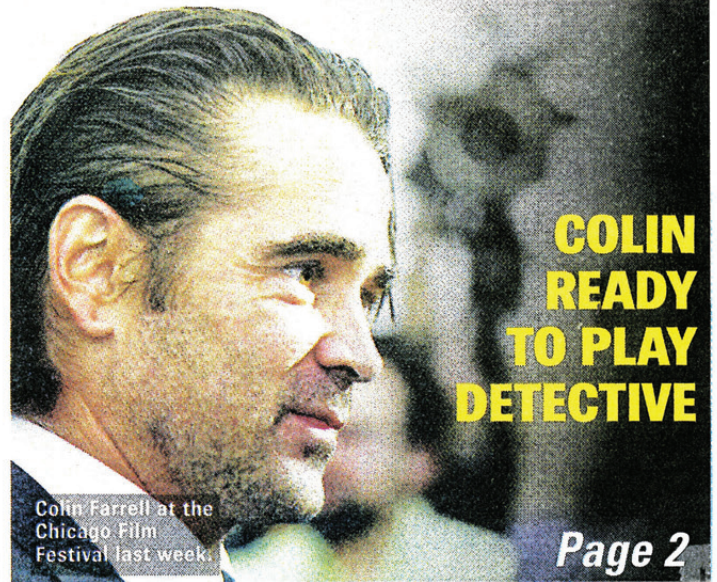


# IRISH VOICE

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CELEBRATING 27 YEARS 1987-2014



## John J. Hughes' Historic Legacy

By Cahir O'Doherty

IRISH history often has to be salvaged from the dismal forces that have conspired to obscure it — deep cultural or religious hostility, lack of sufficient funds, political upheavals, even the passing of time itself.

To paraphrase James Baldwin, when you have to struggle every day to snatch your dignity from the forces that range to deny it, actually telling your story can be the most revolutionary thing of all.

No one knew this better than Archbishop John J. Hughes. Born in 1797 and raised in Co. Tyrone,

thanks to the penal laws of his era he suffered persecution for being both Irish and Catholic in Ulster. But still he persevered and eventually flourished and his life and work transformed the 19th century.

Now thanks to the Archbishop Hughes Commemorative Committee and a collaboration between the Friendly Sons of St. Patrick and the Ancient Order of Hibernians, a new memorial has been commissioned to honor Hughes' extraordinary life and legacy — and what a legacy it is.

A reception was held in Hughes' own former residence on Mulberry

Street in Manhattan on September 30 to announce the creation of the new monument and to reveal that it would be created by award winning artist Rowan Gillespie.

Gillespie is probably best known in Ireland for his sculpture titled *Proclamation* at Kilmainham, which reprises the signing of Irish Proclamation of Independence (signed by seven of the leaders of the Easter Rising of 1916).

For Hughes, Gillespie has created the three sculptures to commemorate the sheer scale of his life and work, which will be unveiled by

Cardinal Timothy Dolan at a ceremony to celebrate the 200th anniversary of the building of Saint Patrick's Old Cathedral in 2015.

As so often in Irish history, it was America that showed Hughes the opportunities that Ulster had snatched away. Mother Elizabeth Ann Seton, America's first Catholic saint, argued in favor of his admission as a student to Mount St. Mary's in September 1820. Access to the education that had been denied him for so long changed his life.

John Hughes, the modest gardener, would go on to become the formidable Archbishop John J. Hughes, and his story is the story of the Irish in America in the 19th century.

Without him, a figurehead with the strength to push back against the anti-Irish bigotry that exploded in the years after the Great Hunger, the cause of Irish liberty in the face of discrimination would have been much harder won.

To date it's mostly historians who realize how much we are in debt to the Tyrone man. But thanks to efforts led by

the Hughes Commemorative Committee and by Turlough McConnell of McConnell Communications, Hughes legacy will be recalled and celebrated through three remarkable new sculptures created by Gillespie.

The list of his achievements underlines what a trail blazer he was. Hughes established schools, hospitals, orphanages and charitable institutions in New York City to assist the Irish immigrant population. He was a founder of the Emigrant Savings Bank (still in operation in 2014) and other banking institutions that were geared toward serving Irish immigrants.

Hughes also laid the foundation stone of the now iconic St. Patrick's Cathedral on Fifth Avenue, and he founded St. John's College, which later became Fordham University.

In the 19th century St. Patrick's Old Cathedral in Soho was close to the center of the hard-scrabble neighborhoods the Irish had arrived in fleeing the disaster of the Great Hunger.

That proximity kept Hughes intimately famil-

iar with the challenges facing the Irish, and for decades his cathedral was at the center of the religious and social activities of the suddenly exploding Irish immigrant groups.

"Hughes had dealt with bias and prejudice in Ireland and he was ready to deal with them here in the U.S.," McConnell tells the *Irish Voice*. "He successfully took on the Know Nothings, so by the time the Famine Irish arrived they already had a champion waiting for them."

In particular the influence of Daniel O'Connell, the great 19th century Irish political leader, on Hughes' life and work fascinates McConnell.

"Here you have a man who was radically influenced by the great emancipator. He understood that New York's development would be achieved through educating and assisting the Irish emigrants. Public health, education, banking, all the tools that aid personal independence were his legacy to the Irish of New York. He richly deserves to be remembered and celebrated for it."



Sculptor Rowan Gillespie, Monsignor Donald Sakano (pastor of St. Patrick's Old Cathedral) and William C. Duggan, chairman of the Archbishop Hughes Commemorative Committee.