

***A Unique Relationship': Celebrating 90 Years of Ireland-U.S. Relations
The First Decades of Irish Diplomacy in America
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**“Professor Timothy Smiddy’s Tenure as Irish Free State Minister
to the United States”**

Now that Dr. Whelan has gotten Professor Smiddy appointed, let us examine his overall record as Minister in the U.S. from 7 October 1924—ninety years ago today—to early 1929. We will look at the themes of Smiddy’s tenure as head of the Legation in Washington, and we will consider what Smiddy’s activities—and the instructions he received from the Department of External Affairs—have to tell us about the Free State government’s view of its position in the world during the early years of its existence.

An examination of the diplomatic correspondence passing between the government in Dublin and the Legation in Washington during the period reveals a pre-occupation with three major concerns. Number one was the desire to publicize the status and stability of the Free State government. Second was the need to counter the activities and propaganda of the Free State’s opponents in the United States, and by extension, its opponents in Ireland itself. And the third was the need to maximize the commercial and financial well-being of the Free State by stimulating economic ties with the U.S.

Given time constraints, I will limit my comments today to the first of the above-mentioned themes, which represents a continuation of work Smiddy performed in the U.S.A. prior to his official recognition as Minister. When Smiddy first

arrived in America in 1922, he had no formal diplomatic standing. Rather, he was essentially a propagandist for the pro-Treaty viewpoint in opposition to Republican spokesmen in the U.S. Even after the Irish Civil War and Smiddy's subsequent accreditation to Washington, however, the Free State's position was far from secure, given the continued refusal of anti-Treatyites to accept the legitimacy of the government in Dublin. Under those circumstances, a central part of Smiddy's mission as Minister continued to be to emphasize for American audiences that the Free State was a sovereign and stable member of the international community.

Thus, in early 1925, the new Minister reported with satisfaction to Desmond FitzGerald, the Free State's Minister for External Affairs, that the recent registration of the Anglo-Irish Treaty by the League of Nations—a sign of the Free State's independence from the United Kingdom—was being given extensive publicity in both the U.S. and Canada. In the same letter, Smiddy reported that he was constantly stressing in newspaper interviews the constructive work of the Dublin government. He was also booked for a number of lectures during the first three months of the year, which would provide a platform for “placing a favourable interpretation before the American people on the work of the Government.”¹

Along the same lines, some months later Smiddy reported to FitzGerald that in August 1925 he had spoken at a conference on Commonwealth affairs held at Williamstown, Massachusetts, on the general subject of the relationship of the

¹ Letter, T.A. Smiddy to Desmond FitzGerald, 2 January 1925, on-line version of *Documents on Irish Foreign Policy*, Volume II, number 300. Available at <http://www.difp.ie/browse-volumes/>. (Hereafter cited as *DIFP*, vol. II, no. 300.)

Dominions to Great Britain and the Crown, with special reference to the status of the Free State as defined by the Anglo-Irish Treaty. Smiddy reported that the general theme of the conference—both in his talk and in presentations by other speakers—was the “evolutionary character of the British Commonwealth and the extent to which it depended on the ‘will’ of its constituent units.” Smiddy noted with satisfaction that an editorial in the New York *Sun* newspaper had commented, in response to the conference, that the Commonwealth’s “present status exists *not at the pleasure* of the British Empire but at that of its constituent States. The question therefore is not what the Imperial Government ought to concede to” the Dominions but what the Dominions would insist upon taking as their right. [Emphasis in the original.]²

Similarly, in February of 1926, Smiddy reported on a series of lectures he had given at a number of universities and civic groups in the Midwest. Once again, he focused primarily on the achievements of the Dublin government and the international status of the Free State. The overall reaction of his listeners, he said, was “their surprise to learn of the ‘sovereign status’ of the Irish Free State and that its Minister at Washington had the same diplomatic status as that of any other sovereign nation, and that he was in no way subservient to the British Embassy” insofar as affairs relating solely to the Free State itself were concerned.³

Smiddy’s views on the importance of enhancing the Free State’s image in the United States were shared at the highest levels of the Dublin government. For exam-

² Smiddy to FitzGerald, 7 September 1925, *DIFP*, vol. II, no. 329.

³ Smiddy to FitzGerald, 4 February 1926, *DIFP*, Vol. II, no. 375.

ple, in August 1925, ahead of a delegation of Dáil deputies to the U.S., Michael MacDunphy, Assistant Secretary in the Free State's Department of the President, wrote to Joseph P. Walshe, Secretary in the Department of External Affairs, to stress the importance President William T. Cosgrave placed on the impression the group made. Specifically, Cosgrave wanted to ensure that the deputies were not seen as being in the U.S. for fundraising purposes. "The President," MacDunphy wrote,

considers that the time has come for breaking down the tradition of subscription-seeking with which Ireland has so long been associated in American minds. This condition of things, which in the past was more or less inevitable owing to our political circumstances, is no longer defensible, ... and is certainly not in accord with our dignity as a State. He thinks that good pioneer work could be done by the delegation in regard to this matter, by bringing it home to friendly Americans that the time is past when the appearance of persons or delegations representing the Irish Free State in America was tantamount to [a] call for subscriptions for some charitable or political object. If the friendly feeling...which has hitherto expressed itself in the form of generous support for every collection organised for the benefit of Irish or pseudo-Irish interests could be diverted to the much more useful and dignified channel of contribution to the economic development of this country by supporting our industries, very valuable work will have been done both for our prestige and for our prosperity.

The accepted tradition of a race of starving peasants and needy politicians must be replaced by the realisation of a self-reliant Ireland with great potentialities of prosperity, governing herself with dignity and efficiency, ...asking no favours, but ready and willing to trade her products, the quality of which is famed throughout the world.⁴

In early 1928—a couple of years after Cosgrave expressed those sentiments—the president himself would get the opportunity to make a dignified impression on American observers, as he would make an official visit to the United States. Cosgrave's American tour would represent the most significant event in relations between the U.S. and the Free State during Smiddy's tenure as Minister.

⁴ Michael MacDunphy to Joseph P. Walshe, 24 August 1925, *DIFP*, Vol. II, no. 327.

Smiddy himself had first suggested such a tour in July 1925 in a letter to Desmond FitzGerald.⁵ It was not until the summer of 1927, however, that the visit truly began to take shape. In June and July of that year, Smiddy visited Chicago, where he was approached by a committee of the city's Irish Fellowship Club, who expressed to him the organization's eagerness to have as its principal guest the following St. Patrick's Day either the president or vice-president of the Free State's Executive Council. Smiddy advised Cosgrave in a confidential report on the discussion that he was convinced that such a visit would produce excellent results and that "the magnitude and publicity of the reception would help to weaken the influence of [Eamon] de Valera," who had recently completed an American tour of his own. Assuring Cosgrave that he need not fear any hostile reaction from anyone in Chicago, Smiddy asked if a formal invitation from the Fellowship Club was likely to be accepted.⁶

Some months later, Joseph P. Walshe pressed the issue further in a memorandum to Diarmuid O'Hegarty, the Secretary to the Executive Council. "A short visit from the President or Vice-President to Washington, Chicago, and New York..." Walshe asserted,

would provide a splendid opportunity of getting in touch with most of the influential Irish-Americans. They want tangible evidence of our State's existence and nothing will bring it home to them more definitely than seeing the President or Vice-President received by President Coolidge in Washington and honoured by the people who run the United States. The opportunity is now put into our hands by The Irish Fellowship Club of Chicago....

⁵ Smiddy to FitzGerald, 2 July 1925, *DIFP*, Vol. II, no. 320.

⁶ Confidential report, Smiddy to William T. Cosgrave, 21 July 1927, *DIFP*, Vol. III, no. 105.

Walshe added that there was no doubt that the great body of Irish-American opinion was on the Free State's side, that such opinion would only require a little nursing to become active, and that wealthy Irish Americans were ready to invest their money in Ireland if given the proper encouragement and publicity.⁷ A few days after Walshe sent his memorandum, the Executive Council agreed that the president should visit the U.S. in January 1928—rather than waiting until St. Patrick's Day.⁸

The visit itself lasted from January 19 to early February. In advance of the tour, Smiddy laid out the planned itinerary for the new Free State Minister for External Affairs Patrick McGilligan. In addition to Chicago, Cosgrave and his party—including Desmond FitzGerald, who by that time was the Free State's Defense Minister—were to travel to Washington, D.C.; Philadelphia; Ottawa, Canada; and New York. Planned highlights of the visit were the Irish Fellowship Club's banquet in Chicago, where 3,000 to 4,000 guests were expected; a reception with President Coolidge; a dinner with Vice President Charles G. Dawes; a dinner in Cosgrave's honor, hosted by Secretary of State Frank B. Kellogg; a luncheon with Chief Justice William Howard Taft; and a luncheon with the Bond Club of Wall Street, where Cosgrave was to discuss the financial position of the Free State with investment bankers. The Free State president was also to appear on the floors of the U.S. House

⁷ Extract of memorandum, Walshe to Diarmuid O'Hegarty, 8 December 1927, *DIFP*, Vol. III, no. 123.

⁸ Extracts from a meeting of the Cabinet, 13 December 1927, *DIFP*, Vol. III, no. 124.

of Representatives and Senate and to be presented on the floor of the New York Stock Exchange.⁹

Given the importance of publicity to the success of the visit, Smiddy arranged for Cosgrave's talk to the Fellowship Club to be broadcast coast to coast.¹⁰ In the speech, the president expressed his pride in the fact that it had been reserved for his generation to see the dawning of Irish freedom, "[its] brightness... somewhat obscured by what we trust is but a passing cloud, which covers a part of our historic northern province." He alluded to the Civil War, noting the difficulties and dangers the Free State had faced in building up new national institutions, "a process which in our country, like too many others, was unfortunately not a wholly peaceful one." He then went on to outline the economic policies of his government, extolling the fact that the Free State was a creditor nation; explaining the new country's tariff policy, which was designed to increase employment at home; and touting the Shannon Electrification Scheme, which sought to modernize the country. He also summarized the government's efforts to restore the Irish language and made it clear that the Free State constitution was non-sectarian. He concluded the speech by emphasizing the central theme we have been focusing on. "The Irish Free State," the president intoned,

is a sovereign state with all the powers, duties, and responsibilities inherent in sovereignty. We make our own laws upon all matters[,] entirely free from any dictation from without: we make our own treaties and conventions. We

⁹ Smiddy to Patrick McGilligan, Irish Free State Minister for External Affairs, 9 January 1928, *DIFP*, Vol. III, no. 127; Smiddy to McGilligan, 13 January 1928, *DIFP*, Vol. III, no. 128.

¹⁰ Smiddy to McGilligan, 13 January 1928, *DIFP*, Vol. III, no. 128.

are co-equal partners in the group of nations known as the British Commonwealth. We have the same freedom that Great Britain has, that Canada has, that South Africa has...

Now I do not want you to take all these things I have told you on the strength of my statement. We want all of you who can do so, to come and see them for yourselves. ...You can read the measure of our independence[,] but to realise the change to the full you should come over and see. I can assure you of a hearty welcome.¹¹

Smiddy's tenure as Free State Minister to the U.S. continued for approximately another year after President Cosgrave's visit. Throughout that period, the Professor made frequent reference to the tour and the extent to which it brought home to American audiences the full extent of the Free State's independence. Writing in May 1928, for example, Smiddy reported that on a subsequent trip to Chicago, he had met many prominent citizens of Irish extraction who had not been involved with Irish political movements but who expressed great pride in the fact that Ireland was gaining enhanced prestige in the U.S. "They attribute the acceleration of this tendency," he said,

to the recent visit of President Cosgrave and Mr. Desmond FitzGerald who, by their appearance, behaviour, manners, and addresses gave the average American an opinion of Irishmen which was not in conformity with the views that they had heretofore held, and impressed them with a sense of dignity and refinement which has made the better class Irish in this country feel very proud.

I have been informed by several people in Chicago that the President's visit there has done a great deal to weaken the adherents of Mr. de Valera and...has impressed upon many followers of de Valera the fact that the Irish Free State is a sovereign country.¹²

¹¹ Speech by William T. Cosgrave at the Drake Hotel, Chicago, broadcast by national radio in the United States of America, 21 January 1928, *DIFP*, Vol. III, no. 129.

¹² Memorandum by Timothy A. Smiddy on visit to Chicago, 14 May 1928, *DIFP*, Vol. III, no. 140.

I will conclude my comments here, as I think President Cosgrave's visit and its aftermath illustrate especially clearly Smiddy's and the Free State government's preoccupation with emphasizing the sovereign status and functionality of the Free State in their dealings with the U.S.

As I continue my own study of Smiddy's tenure as Minister, I hope to focus more closely on the other two concerns mentioned at the beginning of this presentation: namely, the attempt to counter the activities and propaganda of the Free State's opponents in the United States, and the effort to enhance the commercial and financial well-being of the Free State by stimulating economic ties with the U.S. The first of those additional themes, of course, is directly related to the effort to publicize the Free State's sovereignty. The two are more or less mirror images of one another. The last-named theme, however—concerning the economic well-being of the Free State—is different in kind, and it became increasingly important for Smiddy and his successors. That emphasis on increasing economic ties with the U.S., I believe, marked a growing maturity and confidence on the part of Irish foreign policymakers. Over time, as Irish officials became more secure about the reality of independence and the stability of their state, self-conscious efforts to tout the Free State's international standing became less necessary. Instead, the policymakers were able to turn their attention to less abstract, more practical, and arguably, more productive matters.