McCann, Hugh James

by Michael Kennedy

McCann, Hugh James (1916–86), diplomat, was born 9 February 1916 in Dublin, eldest son of Hugh J. McCann, later a district justice, and his wife Sophie McCann. He was educated at Belvedere College, Dublin, and at the London School of Economics (B.Sc. (Econ.), specialising in international relations). In 1933 McCann joined the Irish civil service, entering the Department of Lands. He transferred to the Department of Industry and Commerce in 1940 at the grade of administrative officer, serving (1940–41) as private secretary to the secretary of the department, John Leydon (qv), and (1941–3) as private secretary to the minister for industry and commerce, Seán Lemass (qv). McCann also served briefly in 1943 as a superintending officer in the wartime Department of Supplies.

His background in Industry and Commerce and Supplies made his appointment as commercial secretary to the Irish high commissioner's office in London, from 1944, almost a natural progression. He arrived in London when the city was under threat from Hitler's V-weapons, wearing an identity bracelet in case he was caught in a V2 attack. Returning to Dublin in August 1946 as a first secretary, he spent 1947 and the first half of 1948 at headquarters dealing with Ireland's foreign economic policy, an area in which the Department of External Affairs was making the running, taking control of the area from the more conservative Department of Finance. McCann was now closely connected with Ireland's involvement in the European recovery programme. This post and his posting in London showed the importance that successive ministers for external affairs now attached to the development of foreign trade and economic relations in postwar Irish foreign policy, issues which would be close to McCann in the 1960s.

He left Dublin in June 1948 for a six-year posting to Washington as counsellor at the Irish legation. A promotion followed in October 1954 when he was sent back to Europe for a two-year posting as minister to Switzerland and (concurrently, non-resident) to Austria. These two legations, Vienna in particular, were (given Ireland's lack of diplomatic representation in eastern Europe) significant listening posts in Irish attempts to gain an insight into the continuing Cold War, an issue for the political division at Iveagh House, particularly after Ireland joined the UN in 1955.

Returning to Dublin in October 1956 as assistant secretary, McCann was posted in February 1958 to the politically sensitive, high-profile, and most senior Irish diplomatic posting, ambassador to London. His five years in London saw significant improvements in British–Irish relations during the early Lemass years. A trade agreement was signed (1961), both states applied for membership of the EEC (1961), and British–Irish summits became more regular. ‘His performance’, Garret FitzGerald later wrote, ‘was impressive’ (Irish Times, 25 Nov. 1986). McCann's rise
through the ranks had been swift. After nineteen years in External Affairs, five of
them as ambassador to London, he returned to Dublin in January 1963 to replace
Con Cremin (qv) as secretary of the department.

From 1963 to 1969 under Frank Aiken (qv), McCann worked in a long-distance
relationship with his minister as Aiken increasingly focussed his attention on UN
matters, spending long periods in New York, leaving McCann to manage External
Affairs in Dublin. McCann knew how to work with the Department of Finance,
and how to overcome its mission to keep a tight hold on the purse strings; and,
in a period in which Ireland established no new diplomatic missions, McCann
safeguarded his staff and expanded the establishments of individual foreign
missions. In a ground-breaking move he slowly introduced promotion by merit in
the Department of External Affairs, replacing the existing system of promotion by
seniority. He approached this task with ‘a unique combination of tact, firmness,
fairness and humanity [and] achieved a remarkable result with little trauma’ (Garret
FitzGerald, ibid.). McCann's actions ensured that many talented young diplomats
such as Eamon Gallagher, Sean Ronan (qv), and Paul Keatinge (qv) rose to
positions of importance by the 1970s, with one of this group, Keatinge, succeeding
McCann as secretary of the department.

A defining aspect of Irish foreign and foreign economic policy in the 1960s was the
committee of secretaries (of Finance, External Affairs, Industry and Commerce, and
Agriculture) in which McCann was an active member. It had been usual for External
Affairs to guard itself closely within the Irish administrative system, in particular from
the Department of Finance. However, by the end of the second world war External
Affairs had grown in seniority; and by the time McCann became secretary, the
department was responsible for large sections of foreign economic policy. He had
been involved in the beginnings of this process while in Dublin and Washington from
1946 to 1954.

Despite Aiken's pro-UN perspective, from 1959 Seán Lemass had defined Ireland's
dominant foreign policy goal as EEC membership. With Aiken absent in New York
for extended periods, McCann worked closely with his colleagues T. K. Whitaker,
J. C. B. MacCarthy (qv), and J. C. Nagle (qv) on this committee, weaving a unified
approach to Europe, even if all four were not always in agreement. This was
not just coordination; it was the tactical refinement of a strategic policy set out
by Lemass. McCann was now working more closely with the taoiseach, Seán
Lemass, and Whitaker at Finance, than with Aiken. The brief of the committee
of secretaries also included the development of British–Irish trade relations and
the development of relations with Northern Ireland, but Ireland's admission to the
EEC was their dominant goal. McCann's eleven years as secretary saw immense
changes in the scope and nature of Irish foreign policy that radically changed the
Department of External Affairs. These culminated in EEC membership in 1973 (the
final negotiations taking from 1969 to 1973) and the expansion of Irish foreign policy
to encompass a global rather than a European environment. A sign of this change was that McCann’s department was in 1971 renamed ‘Foreign Affairs’.

Close to home McCann had, from a rather shaky start, to develop and manage Dublin’s response to the outbreak of the Troubles in Northern Ireland. His cool judgment as secretary was essential when briefing both the taoiseach, Jack Lynch (qv), who described him as ‘a tower of strength’, and the minister for external/foreign affairs, Patrick Hillery, during one of the most difficult and dangerous periods for the Irish state. Hillery prompted one of McCann’s most dramatic actions in this regard: his 10 September 1969 letter to twenty of Ireland’s most senior diplomats, looking for their personal views on the future of relations with Northern Ireland. The exercise showed how little External Affairs actually knew about Northern Ireland and how little contact there was with the area, but it proved to be a driving force in the establishment (1970) of the Anglo–Irish section in the department – dedicated to dealing with relations with the North and with London – which was to be the key section of the department for the next thirty years. McCann was not a Northern Ireland specialist, but he gathered a strong Northern Ireland team around him in senior positions in Foreign Affairs including Eamon Gallagher, Eamon Ó Tuathail, and Seán Ronan, and he himself played a role in the negotiations that led to the Sunningdale agreement (December 1973), suggesting formulae that brought the sides closer to final agreement.

In a manner unlike any of his predecessors, McCann worked directly with the taoisigh of the period, Lemass and Lynch, neither of whom (unlike de Valera (qv) as taoiseach) was also minister for external affairs. Aiken gave McCann great leeway, not because he was not interested, but because he implicitly trusted McCann. With the election of the 1973–7 Fine Gael/Labour coalition, McCann’s role as secretary reverted to its more traditional guise when Garret FitzGerald became minister for foreign affairs. McCann had expressed a desire to move to an ambassadorial posting in 1973, but at the request of FitzGerald he stayed on for an extra year to guide him through his responsibilities as minister during an extraordinarily active period in Irish foreign policy.

McCann left Dublin in April 1974 to become ambassador to France. This was no pre-retirement posting, but the crowning moment of his diplomatic career, and McCann gained access to and influence in the circles of high power in the French capital. As ambassador to France he was Irish representative to the OECD, and from 1975 concurrently ambassador to Morocco. McCann remained in Paris to 8 February 1981, when he retired. A diplomat of great vigilance and discretion (his departmental nickname was ‘Canny McHugh’), he was suave, polished, and poised. His strong professional demeanour was underpinned by a warm personality. In the words of Jack Lynch he was ‘a comprehensive civil servant and the complete diplomat’ (Irish Times, 22 Nov. 1986).
On his retirement McCann became a director of Independent Newspapers and chairman of the cultural relations committee of the Department of Foreign Affairs. He was taken ill after delivering an address to the Alliance Française in Dublin on 20 November 1986 and died shortly afterwards in hospital. He was buried in Shanganagh cemetery, Bray, on 24 November.

He married in Washington (1950) Mary Virginia, daughter of Gen. Thomas B. Larkin. They had four sons and one daughter.

----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------


Downloaded from http://dib.cambridge.org by IP 100.103.238.216 on Thu Dec 17 08:26:44 UTC 2020 Dictionary of Irish Biography Online © 2020 Cambridge University Press and Royal Irish Academy. All rights reserved. Not for commercial use or unauthorized distribution.