

Comerford, James ('Jim') Joseph

by Terry Clavin

Comerford, James ('Jim') Joseph (1901–88), nationalist, judge and parade organiser, was born on 7 January 1901 in the family home at Coolraheen, Muckalee, Co. Kilkenny, the only child of John Comerford, farmer, of Coolraheen, and his wife Julia (née Kavanagh), schoolteacher, from Coolcullen, Co. Carlow. A member of the Castlecomer district board of guardians and the Castlecomer district board, John Comerford had been active in the campaigns led by Charles Stewart Parnell (qv), and later supported the Irish Volunteers and Sinn Féin. In 1902 James's mother died and his father remarried, having a son and two daughters with his second wife, Elizabeth (née Shea), from Uskerty, Co. Kilkenny.

James attended Muckalee national school, and then Kilkenny CBS until 1915, and played Gaelic football. A husky youth, he enlisted in the Irish Volunteers in early 1914, then quit that autumn after the movement reconstituted for service in the British army. He joined the republican boy scouts, Na Fianna Éireann, in 1915, and became a member of Coon Company, 3rd Battalion, Kilkenny Brigade, when the local Irish Volunteers reorganised in March 1918. As the Volunteers/IRA insurgency intensified, he was elected second lieutenant (February 1920) and first lieutenant (November 1920). By 1921, he was working on the family farm by day and sleeping elsewhere by night.

On 2 May 1921 he was captured near his home by crown forces that were then ambushed unsuccessfully by the IRA. After being used as a human shield in the shootout, he was taken to Castlecomer barracks, where the RIC sergeant on duty knew his family and released him surreptitiously. During a raid for guns held by loyalists at Bilboa, Co. Carlow, on 15 May, he was blasted at close range, leaving his face pocked with pellets.

Amid attempts to shake up the ineffective Kilkenny Brigade, he became captain of the 86-man Coon Company shortly before the truce of 11 July 1921. His company was demoralised by the divisions within the IRA over the Anglo–Irish Treaty (December 1921), and dissolved after the Free State army assumed responsibility for policing rural areas in May 1922. Influenced by his admiration for Michael Collins (qv), Comerford supported the treaty, but sympathised with those who thought otherwise and sat out the civil war.

In November 1925 he left for New York, where he worked in grocery and department stores and in various factories before the 1929 economic crash obliged him to clean windows. Convinced of his need for further education, he attended night classes at Washington Irving High School, working by day as a store clerk, and in 1934 entered Columbia University, paying his tuition by working weekends and doing odd jobs.

He passed the civil service exam in 1937 and became a clerk in the New York City Board of Transportation, working the night shift in a subway change booth. In 1940 he graduated B.Sc. in public administration, and married fellow Columbia student Vera Carr, born in the Bronx to parents from Kinnitty, Co. Offaly. They had no children, and settled in a Manhattan apartment at West 107th Street and Broadway.

Continuing to work nights in the subway until 1948, he became assistant station supervisor (1940) and station supervisor (1944). In 1941 he received an MA in social science from Columbia, basing his thesis on over 250 interviews with subway workers. He entered the Fordham University School of Law, graduating LLB in 1945, and passed the New York state bar exam, being admitted to practice in 1947. In November 1948 he joined the legal staff of the New York county district attorney, Frank S. Hogan, gaining invaluable experience investigating loan sharks and mobsters in America's largest, most admired prosecutor's office.

Given a temporary posting as a judge in the domestic relations court (1953), he served there and in the children's court until his appointment in 1955 to the magistrates court (criminal). He became a judge of the court of special sessions (misdemeanours) in 1960, and of the New York city criminal court when it replaced the magistrates court and the court of special sessions in 1962. His tenure coincided with a spectacular crime wave, and he received a Ph.D. in public administration from New York University (1967) for his thesis on the burdens this imposed on New York's judicial system.

A blunt and summary judge, he favoured police testimony, disdained lawyers and sociologists who excused juvenile misbehaviour with reference to a 'generation gap', and once bawled a group of known pimps out of his court when they arrived to observe proceedings. His conviction in 1966 of Sidney Street for desecrating the US flag was overturned by the US supreme court, which ruled that the New York courts had failed to clarify whether Street was convicted for burning the flag or merely criticising it. By the time he retired in 1971, Comerford was one of the few New York judges that could not be accused of showing undue lenience.

Further to his involvement in various legal and catholic associations, he made himself indispensable to every significant Irish organisation in New York. He was assisted in his burgeoning extra-curricular duties by his wife who, first as a secretary and later as office manager in the Building Services Employees' Union, secured jobs for countless Irish in construction and as doormen or lift operators. Short, stocky and red-faced, Comerford maintained an Irish brogue and was garrulous without being charismatic, relying instead on his industry, forcefulness and organisational nous.

His presidency of the United Irish Counties Association of New York (UICA) during 1947–9 brought him to the fore of the city's Irish community and involved him in selling 11,000 tickets for the 1947 all-Ireland Gaelic football final held in New York. As chairman of the organising committee of the UICA-sponsored New York feis

(1949–57), he oversaw the rapid growth of this one-day festival of Irish culture, marshalling the tight scheduling necessary for an event that in 1953 boasted 6,000 competitors across 133 singing, music and dancing competitions.

In 1947 he became chairman of the executive council of the newly formed American League for an Undivided Ireland (ALUI), which pressed the US government to use its financial leverage over Britain for the purposes of unifying Ireland. He organised rallies and testified on partition before the foreign relations committee of the US senate (1948) and the foreign affairs committee US house of representatives (1950). In 1951 he returned to Ireland for the first time, and visited Northern Ireland to gather information on the discrimination suffered there by catholic-nationalists.

When Fianna Fáil leader Éamon de Valera (qv) came to New York in 1948, Comerford handled his engagements, and on Comerford's annual visits to Ireland from 1951, he always met de Valera. Comerford became the long-serving chairman of the US holding corporation that enabled and camouflaged de Valera's control of the Irish Press newspaper group. In return for keeping the company's disenfranchised Irish-American shareholders quiet, Comerford restrained de Valera's son, the Irish Press group managing editor Vivion de Valera (qv), from more aggressively diluting the Irish Press group's nationalist ethos.

After the ALUI campaign lapsed in the 1950s, Comerford found a new platform as chairman of the anti-partition committee of the Ancient Order of Hibernians in America (AOHA), and in 1972 boasted that the AOHA had funded republican paramilitaries in Northern Ireland. He held many positions in the AOHA, including editor of the organisation's newsletter, and was the first New Yorker to serve as its president (1962–4). In 1967 Pope Paul VI made him a knight of the holy sepulchre, an honour owing much to Comerford's adroit stewardship of New York's St. Patrick's Day parade.

Having joined the parade organising committee in 1935, and serving as grand marshal for 1957, Comerford was the event's guiding spirit long before becoming chairman in 1965. He viewed the parade as a religious, specifically catholic, event and so strove to uphold a level of decorum that contrasted with the wildness of the past. Deploring green-themed frivolities such as wigs, hats and dyed beer, he compiled a rulebook regulating the music, banners and dress code, and rejected all offers of commercial sponsorship, relying instead on affiliation fees and voluntary labour.

In 1961 he prohibited the Irish writer Brendan Behan (qv) from marching, branding him a publicity-seeking drunkard. Behan riposted that upon being banished from Ireland by St Patrick (qv), the snakes had gone to New York and become judges. A formidable public controversialist, Comerford refused to allow the divisively radical Irish republican Bernadette Devlin into the march in the early 1970s, had presidential candidates Robert Kennedy (1968) and Jimmy Carter (1976) ejected for

politicking, and clashed with celebrated journalist Jimmy Breslin, who he believed paid pranksters to spray orange paint along the route in 1957.

The dispersal of the New York Irish into the suburbs heightened the symbolic importance of the parade, which expanded dramatically from 1945. By the 1960s it was the world's largest annual civilian parade, capable in good weather of attracting 120,000 participants, proceeding for over six hours, and watched by well over one million onlookers. Comerford kept this operation running smoothly, directing his 2,000-strong army of volunteers with brusque aplomb.

Following lobbying by the stores lining the prestigious Fifth Avenue route – who were urging that either the parade be moved elsewhere or be held on the Sunday nearest 17 March – in September 1966 the mayor of New York, John Lindsay, suggested holding it in Central Park. Comerford swamped the mayor's office with letters and resolutions before meeting Lindsay on 13 October and battering him verbally into submission. They then held a joint press conference wherein Lindsay declared that the parade would retain its traditional route and date. That year Comerford also helped unseat a city councilman who advocated strict regulation of parades.

After the outbreak of the Northern Ireland troubles in 1969, he was a prominent supporter of the Irish Northern Aid Committee (Noraid), an IRA-linked fund-raising group, and hailed the Provisional IRA as true successor of the IRA of 1919–21. Excepting 1972 (the year of the 'bloody Sunday' shootings in Derry), he avoided explicitly politicising the parade, and the only political statement formally allowed was a banner – introduced by Comerford in 1947 – declaring: 'England, get out of Ireland'. Slogans and chants relating to Northern Ireland proliferated regardless, and tensions developed between Comerford and the Irish diplomatic corps, which vacated the viewing stand whenever one of the twenty or so Noraid units passed.

Embarrassed by the prevalence of intoxicated teenagers marauding around the parade, Comerford bowed to pressure from Cardinal Terence Cooke of New York by announcing abruptly in December 1981 that, to encourage a better atmosphere, the next parade would be on the Sunday before 17 March. The grassroots opposition to this decision was so overwhelming that he reversed course six days later, and the city authorities were shamed into properly policing the 1982 parade, which was the calmest in years. Emboldened, the many parade delegates radicalised by the Northern Ireland hunger strikes shed their long accustomed deference and demanded that Noraid founder and self-admitted gunrunner Michael Flannery (qv) be made grand marshal for the 1983 parade.

Despite regarding Flannery's installation as too provocative, Comerford acquiesced rather than suffer a public reverse. Uproar ensued, as the Irish government, the US military, several prominent Irish-American politicians, and many catholic schools boycotted the parade. Worse for Comerford, democracy had triumphed, and the subsequent grand marshal elections were conducted like party political

primaries with candidates using full-page newspaper advertisements and leaking endorsements to the media.

Retiring as parade committee chairman in late 1984, Comerford spent his last months in a Bronx nursing home, and died in Our Lady of Mercy Medical Center in the Bronx on 24 March 1988. He was buried in Gate of Heaven cemetery, Hawthorne, NY. In 1978 he published a meticulous, but rambling and idealised, 1,000-page memoir, *My Kilkenny IRA days: 1916–22*. His papers are in the Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University.

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GRO (birth cert.); *Ir. Press*, *passim*, esp.: 28 Mar. 1947; 21 Mar. 1970; 29, 17 Mar., 1, 31 July, 1 Aug. 1972; 16 Mar. 1974; 7 Jan. 1984; *Ir. Independent*, *passim*, esp.: 5 Nov. 1947; 1 Sept. 1960; *Ir. World*, 13 Nov. 1948; 1 Dec. 1951; 17 Oct. 1953; 4 June 1955; 23 Feb. 1957; 18 Aug. 1962; 1, 22 Oct. 1966; 30 Oct. 1971; 5 Aug. 1972; *Unification of Ireland: hearing before the committee of foreign affairs house of representatives* (28 Apr. 1950); *Ulster Herald*, 25 Aug. 1951; *Kilkenny People*, *passim*, esp.: 29 Sept. 1951; 16 Apr., 18 June 1955; 31 Aug. 1962; 15 Mar. 1968; 1 May 1970; 3 Sept. 1971; 8 Sept. 1978; 1 Apr. 1988; *Evening Herald*, 26 Aug. 1960; 16 Mar. 1977; *Connacht Tribune*, 8 Sept. 1962; 2 Feb. 1968; *Western People*, 15 Sept. 1962; *Munster Express*, 28 Oct., 11 Nov. 1966; 10 Dec. 1971; *NY Times*, 16 Mar. 1967; 18 Mar. 1971; 17 Mar. 1973; 12, 18 Dec. 1981; 17, 18 Mar. 1982; 20 Mar. 1983; 25 Mar. 1988; *New York Magazine*, 29 Apr. 1968; 13 Mar. 1972; *American Heritage*, Feb. 1969; Bernard Lefkowitz and Kenneth G. Gross, *The sting of justice* (1971 ed.), 282, 284; *Ir. Echo*, 18 Mar. 1972; 19, 26 Dec. 1981; 19 Mar. 1983; 2 Apr. 1988; *Ir. Times*, *passim*, esp.: 27 July 1972; 14 Apr. 1983; 28 Jan. 1988; *Sunday Press*, 30 July 1972; Tim Pat Coogan, *The Irish: a personal view* (1975); *Hibernia*, 10 Aug. 1978; James Comerford, *My Kilkenny IRA days: 1916–22* (1979 ed.); *Cork Examiner*, 15 Mar. 1982; John Joseph Concannon and Francis Eugene Cull, *The Irish American who's who* (1984); Tim Pat Coogan, *Disillusioned decades: Ireland 1966–87* (1987); John T. Ridge, *The St. Patrick's Day parade in New York* (1988); Andrew J. Wilson, *Irish America and the Ulster conflict, 1968–1995* (1995); Mark O'Brien, *De Valera, Fianna Fáil and the Irish Press* (2001); Dermot O'Reilly (ed.), *Accepting the challenge: the memoirs of Michael Flannery* (2001), 180–86; Mike Cronin, *The wearing of the green: a history of St. Patrick's Day* (2002); Mary E. Daly, 'Nationalism, sentiment and economics: relations between Ireland and Irish America in the postwar years' in Kevin Kenny (ed.), *New directions in Irish-American history* (2003), 263–79; J. J. Lee and Marion R. Casey (ed.), *Making the Irish American: history and heritage of the Irish in the United States* (2006); Dave Hannigan, *Behan in the USA: the rise and fall of the most famous Irishman in New York* (2014)

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