

McKiernan, Eoin

by Patrick Maume

McKiernan, Eoin (1915–2004), cultural entrepreneur and promoter of Irish studies, was born in Manhattan, New York city, on 10 May 1915, eldest of four children of Henry McKiernan (born in America of Cavan–Leitrim parents), foreman engineer, and his wife Delia (née Nagle), who had emigrated to New Jersey from Tullygarvan, near Lahinch, Co. Clare, and had been a domestic servant before her marriage.

Education and early influences When McKiernan was four the family moved to Cold Springs, a small town in upper New York state, beside the Hudson River and on the edge of the Appalachians, where Henry McKiernan worked on a pipeline bringing water from the Catskill Mountains to New York city. In this remote rural area, where the principal diversion was a family walk, McKiernan absorbed his mother's storytelling, piseogs and reminiscences, including a few Irish prayers and phrases. He later believed that if he had grown up in New York city he would never have developed his interest in Ireland. He always harboured a certain feeling that rural Ireland was the real Ireland, teasing Dublin friends by remarking, for example, that they lived in 'a charming city on the outskirts of Ireland' (Ó Glaisne; *Irish Times*, 3 July 1971); however, this feeling did not overwhelm his intellectual curiosity about Irish modernity.

McKiernan was twelve when his father died and the family returned to New York city. He read everything about Ireland that he could find in the public library on 42nd Street, and attended Irish-language classes organised by the Gaelic Society of New York, whose foundation pre-dated that of the Gaelic League. His enthusiasm attracted the attention of Fr John Monahan, a Tyrone-born priest, who raised money to provide McKiernan with a scholarship to spend a year in Ireland learning Irish. Aged fifteen McKiernan spent three months studying in Rosmuc, Co. Galway, then moved to Lahinch, where he spent the rest of the year on his maternal relatives' farm: 'I learned from my grandmother a fund of stories and folklore that is with me still' (O'Donovan, 105). Fr Monahan also provided a letter of introduction to Éamon de Valera (qv), whom the priest knew personally. This laid the foundation of a lifelong acquaintance; in later years McKiernan had a standing invitation to Áras an Uachtaráin during de Valera's presidency (and even to the Talbot Nursing Home when de Valera retired there). He always spoke of de Valera's strong awareness of the Irish–American link and the need to harness it for Ireland's benefit (which in McKiernan's opinion was matched among Irish politicians only by Frank Aiken (qv); in 1976, as part of its contribution to the American bicentennial celebrations, McKiernan's Irish American Cultural Institute commissioned a symphony in honour of de Valera (as symbolising the American–Irish connection) from the Irish composer A. J. Potter (qv).

McKiernan studied at the Cathedral College school in New York, asserting his commitment to Ireland by choosing 'Patrick' as his confirmation name, and then (after a brief period as a seminarian) at St Joseph's College, where he studied English and classics, graduating BA in 1937. Although this qualified him as a teacher, there was a shortage of teaching posts due to the depression. McKiernan went to work for the New York department store Macy's, where he developed administrative skills and was eventually put in charge of a managerial department with 700 employees. He was associated for a time with Joseph McGarrity (qv), and Séamus Ó Duilearga (qv) contacted him while engaged in (abortive) preparations for a visit to the USA by de Valera in 1939, and was impressed by his commitment.

In 1938 McKiernan married the Boston-born Jeannette O'Callaghan (d. 1996), whom he had first met when he was sixteen. Her father came from Rathcormac near Fermoy, Co. Cork (and had once been taught Irish by An tAthair Peadar Ó Laoghaire (qv)) and her mother from Goleen in west Co. Cork. They had three sons and five daughters, of whom Ethna Maeve became a poet and worked with her father (in 1976 she founded Irish Books and Media, based in St Paul, which became the principal American supplier of books on Ireland, and the American agent for many Irish publishers), and Kevin was a journalist and film-maker.

McKiernan left Macy's in 1940, having developed the ambition of returning to Ireland and buying a farm. He spent the period 1940–45 managing a 1,000-acre farm in New Hampshire, but eventually realised he would never be able to accumulate the capital needed to settle in Ireland as a farmer. He then took a masters in education at the University of New Hampshire and taught English for a while in a local secondary school. After completing a Ph.D. in English at Penn State University with a dissertation on 'The psychology of Nathaniel Hawthorne', McKiernan gained an appointment at the State University of New York at Geneseo, where he remained for twelve years and rose to be head of the English department. He also became a board member of the Experiment in International Living (EIL), a scheme that brought 2,000 American students to Europe every year, and succeeded in getting some students sent to Ireland, although the Irish government did not formally participate in the scheme. He later tried without success to get the Irish authorities to take a more active role in the EIL scheme: 'I couldn't persuade anybody – not Shannon Development, not the Tourist Board nor Aer Lingus. Ireland could have become the broker for all these trips, but the powers that be couldn't see it' (O'Donovan, 106–7).

As chairman of a national committee of the National Council of Teachers of English, McKiernan in 1957 spoke at a convention in Minneapolis, where he met Fr James Shannon, an Irish-American priest who was chairman of the College of St Thomas, a catholic institution in St Paul, Minneapolis. Shannon recruited McKiernan to be head of the English department at the College of St Thomas; as part of his employment package McKiernan secured a twelve-month paid sabbatical in Ireland. The McKiernans lived in Donnybrook in 1959–60, sending their children to local schools.

One product of this visit was a twelve-page pamphlet, *The will of a nation: Ireland's crisis* (first edition St Paul 1963; reprinted in Dublin in 1964 by Misneach). This pamphlet contrasted the achievements of 'unofficial' Irish-language revival groups, which McKiernan argued represented the will of the people to preserve a distinctive Irish national identity, with the failings of 'official' institutions which paid lip-service to the language while doing little or nothing for it. His friendship with de Valera did not keep him from noting that the Fianna Fáil-aligned *Irish Press* newspaper published less than one per cent of its daily content in Irish. He argued that the new challenge to national identity posed by television and by the necessary economic changes in prospect with the first programme for economic expansion must be met by putting the full technical resources and publicity methods provided by the twentieth century at the service of the revival.

McKiernan in August 1960 took up his post at St Paul (where he also taught an Irish language course and wrote a comparative study of James Clarence Mangan (qv) and Goethe) and continued to develop his plans for an Irish American Cultural Institute 'with a foot in each country to act as a conduit'. He attracted the sympathy of Patrick Butler, a St Paul Irish-American businessman who had made his money in iron ore and who was to be the new institute's first major backer. The Patrick Butler Family Foundation sponsored a series of sixteen television lectures on Ireland by McKiernan, which were recorded on kinescope (a primitive format whereby a camera was pointed at the screen on which a live programme was being broadcast). These were hired out to interested groups (a list of the films available is printed on the inside back cover of *The will of a nation*) and rebroadcast on some other midwestern television stations. The response was sufficiently promising for McKiernan to script a 53-episode television series, 'Irish diary' (again sponsored by Butler) that was broadcast in most major US urban centres in 1963 and 1964. McKiernan was startled to receive 30,000 letters from enthusiastic viewers – one, which he frequently quoted in later life, read: 'you've done so much for my soul. I was a domestic servant with more culture than the people I worked for. To them I was only Irish. The series was balm to my heart' (Glazier, 594–5).

Irish American Cultural Institute The McKiernans and Butler were already discussing plans for an Irish American Cultural Institute with the twin aims of educating the American public (including Irish-Americans) about Irish culture and contributions to American life, and supporting the arts in Ireland through grants and prizes. Every letter of enquiry was met with a reply describing the Institute (established in 1963 and formally incorporated as a non-profit association in 1964) and asking for a \$10 subscription. De Valera agreed to act as patron, as did succeeding presidents of Ireland. Princess Grace of Monaco was international chairman from 1972 until her death in 1982.

The IACI was distinguished from earlier Irish-American organisations by its primarily cultural focus, without religious or political objectives, and also to some extent by its base in the midwest away from the traditional Irish population centres on the east

coast. McKiernan tended to see the east-coast Irish – including his own earlier self – as somewhat myopic in their neglect of the Irish experience elsewhere in America. Despite his own religious and political commitments, he believed that Irish-America had suffered by defining itself in terms of politics and catholicism to the neglect of a broader cultural identity; this had bred an intellectually mediocre ghetto culture and (by reaction) equated advancement with the abandonment of Irishness altogether. Noting that American catholic colleges, despite the extensive support they and the church received from the Irish over the decades, took little interest in Irish studies as compared with other European ethnic groups such as Poles or Italians, McKiernan suggested that this was partly due to the loss of linguistic distinctiveness. For him the Irish language was the key to what made Ireland Irish, and though his interest in Irish culture did not confine itself to writers in Irish, he often remarked that the survival and revival of the language were essential to the aims of the Institute's founders: 'we would not have raised a finger except out of love and reverence for that language, the very source of Irish identity' (*Irish Times*, 13 February 1978).

The IACI's first awards, the Butler literary awards (three annual prizes totalling \$10,000; founded 1966), were made to writers in Irish, including Seosamh Mac Grianna (qv), Seán Ó Ríordáin (qv) and Máirtín Ó Cadhain (qv). The format was changed in 1972 so that the prize went to Irish-language and English-language writers in alternate years. McKiernan insisted that both in amount and in literary standards the prizes should be equivalent to other European literary prizes, commenting at one point: 'we do not believe such generous patronage for Irish artists#has been since the flight of the earls' (*Irish Times*, 22 September 1972). McKiernan took a keen interest in such developments as the establishment of Raidió na Gaeltachta, the spread of Gaelscoileanna, and the establishment of Teilifís na Gaeilge (latterly TG4) in 1994; he offered a prize for youth programmes broadcast on the latter.

McKiernan developed further prizes for Irish verbal, visual and plastic arts generally. At a time when Irish cultural funding was in its infancy, IACI awards were of considerable importance for many Irish artists. The poet Eavan Boland, one of many beneficiaries, commented: 'awards like this#are essentially money raised at a far higher level than this country could afford and which enable the writer to live in his or her country and to write there without having to go abroad. People like Eoin McKiernan have spent an awful lot of time buying time for others' (*Irish Times*, 21 September 1983). Major recipients of IACI grants included Gemini Productions under Phyllis Ryan (1923–2011), based at the Eblana Theatre in Dublin, the Cork Choral Festival supervised by Aloys Fleischmann (qv), and the Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing.

IACI programmes included the Irish Lecture Bureau, later the Irish Fortnight (1971–85; held annually in March) and Irish Perceptions, which brought Irish lecturers annually to the US to address American audiences, and the Irish Way (founded 1975, at the suggestion of Princess Grace) which brought fifteen- and sixteen-year-

old American high-school students to Ireland on six-week summer courses (a month studying Irish history and culture and some elementary Irish-language phrases, a week visiting historic sites, and a week staying with an Irish family). It also developed shared courses with UCG where it eventually established a visiting fellowship, sponsored scholarships for Irish craftworkers and heritage projects, and provided grants for academics researching aspects of the Irish-American experience.

In 1971 McKiernan left his position with the University of St Thomas to work full-time on keeping the IACI alive; it continued to function on a shoestring as a 'one-family operation' administered by the McKiernans until an American National Endowment for the Humanities grant in 1980 allowed it to upgrade its premises and equipment. By this stage IACI had 80,000 members and branches in twenty-seven countries. McKiernan stepped down as manager of IACI programmes in 1985 but continued to work for it as honorary chairman until 1988 and to promote such schemes as the creation of state forests in each Irish county in memory of Irish emigrants (funded by Irish-American subscribers in imitation of the 'Trees for Israel' programme) and the development of a humanities institute at Clonmacnoise.

Although his work was highly praised by Irish political figures and cultural institutions, McKiernan remained highly critical of both Irish-Americans and Irish politicians for their combination of romanticism, ignorance and apathy concerning the connection between Ireland and America – criticisms frequently expressed in his regular 1970s and 1980s column in the monthly magazine *Cara*, which also publicised the cases of the Birmingham Six and Guildford Four and of other Irish prisoners in Britain. McKiernan complained that the Irish government's response to Irish-American sympathy for the IRA had been to shun Irish-America altogether instead of trying to divert Irish-American sympathy into cultural channels.

In 1965 McKiernan founded *Éire-Ireland*, a quarterly journal of Irish studies produced by the IACI, which he edited until 1985. McKiernan insisted on the highest intellectual and production standards, and it became established as the premier Irish-studies journal in America. IACI also published *Dúchas*, a monthly newsletter sent free to all US members. Both IACI and *Éire-Ireland* moved their headquarters to Morristown, New Jersey, in 1995. The quarterly *New Hibernia Review*, founded by a former *Éire-Ireland* editor and published from the University of St Thomas since 1997 with McKiernan as honorary chair of the editorial board until his death, can also be seen to have been an outgrowth of McKiernan's work.

McKiernan was the recipient of many honours and awards: honorary life membership of the RDS (the first American to be so recognised); the John F. Kennedy gold medal of the Ancient Order of Hibernians; the gold medal of the Éire Society of Boston; and honorary degrees from the University of St Thomas, Marist College, New York University, and the NUI (D.Litt.). In 1999 he was named by *Irish-America* magazine as one of the 100 greatest Irish-Americans of the twentieth century.

Legacy He died 18 July 2004 in a nursing home at St Paul, Minnesota; he had been bedridden for several years but remained mentally alert to the end. He frequently expressed the fear that his work was too little too late; that Irish-America, having escaped the ghetto, was now being assimilated to the American mainstream without ever having come to terms with its experience, that Ireland was losing its identity to a commercial utilitarian mentality, that he would find no successor and his work would die with him. In fact his achievement possesses lasting significance. The expansion of Irish studies as an academic subject in the United States would probably have taken place without him, in response to the growing interest of affluent suburbanites in formerly embarrassing ethnic roots and the growth of higher education, but it would not have taken the shape it did; and many of the most significant figures of late-twentieth-century Irish arts benefited from his managerial labours.

Ir. Times, 3 July 1971; 22 Dec. 1980; 1 Sept. 1982; 14 July 1984; 7 Aug. 1986; 20, 24 July 2004 (obituary); Risteárd Ó Glaisne, *Cuairt Ghearr: splacadh ar na Stáit Aontaithe* (1975); Donal O'Donovan, *Dreamers of dreams: portraits of the Irish in America* (1984); Michael Glazier (ed.) *The encyclopedia of the Irish in America* (1999) (entries on 'Eoin McKiernan', 'Éire-Ireland', 'Irish American Cultural Institute'); *Ir. Independent*, 20 July 2004; *Sunday Independent*, 22 Aug. 2004; *New Hibernia Review*, viii, no. 3 (autumn 2004), 9–11