

## President Kennedy in Galway

Saturday, June 29th, 1963 may have been dull and overcast, but the city of Galway presented a colourful spectacle amid scenes of unprecedented enthusiasm. It was covered in Tricolours and the Stars and Stripes, in bunting and banners, in window boxes of flowers and newly painted buildings. There was a carnival atmosphere. Some 600 gardaí were up early, lining the streets ahead of the crowds that began to arrive from 7am. There were journalists here from all over the world to cover the event.

As his helicopter circled the skies above the Sportsground, the President would have been aware of a massive Irish flag on the pitch below. A closer look saw the flag shimmering strangely. It was composed of 320 children from the Convent of Mercy, under the control of Sister Assumpta. They were dressed in waterproof capes and hoods that were either green, white, gold or brown; green, white and gold for the Irish flag, while the children in brown formed the flagpole. On landing, JFK met some members of the American Legion, and was introduced to the Mayor, Paddy Ryan, who in turn introduced him to other dignitaries. As he made his way to the awaiting motorcade, Kennedy waded into the crowd so that he could thank the children from the Mercy School, whose nervousness disappeared when they saw how friendly he was. He asked them to sing for him and they obliged with a rendition of "Galway Bay".

JFK and the Mayor then got into an open Cadillac flanked by secret servicemen, and made their way to Eyre Square. Paddy Ryan's mother and his family were outside the gates of his house and the President stopped the car, and got out to talk to them and their neighbours.

It was estimated 100,000 people turned out to see him. In Eyre Square the mayor made a speech of welcome in Irish and JFK's reply was memorable and...

"If the day was clear enough, and if you went down to the bay and you looked west and your sight was good enough, you would see Boston, Massachusetts. And if you did, you would see down working on the docks the O'Dohertys, Flahertys and Ryans and cousins of yours who have gone to Boston and made good. I wonder if you could, perhaps, let me know how many of you have relatives in America, whom you would admit to? If you would hold up your hands". The atmosphere was electric as a slew of hands rose up all over the Square. There was music and dancing and singing before the motorcade moved off for Salthill. It seemed as if JFK wanted to shake hands with every Galwegian on the route, and his secret servicemen had a tough time making sure nobody held on too long, as the moving car might damage them. His helicopter was waiting in the car park near Seapoint, and again, it seemed as if half of Salthill wanted to climb into it to say goodbye to the President.

He left a tumultuous cheering crowd and a warm glow behind him. Five months later he was dead, and many Galwegians mourned his death like they would an old friend.

Our photograph today shows the President shaking hands with and talking to some of the Mercy girls, and it gives us an idea of the excitement and the warmth of the welcome he received. The photograph is one of many in a book just published entitled "JFK in Ireland, Four Days that changed a President". It is written by Ryan Tubridy and it captures beautifully the affection Kennedy felt for his Irish heritage, and how the people of Ireland took him into their hearts during what JFK described as the best four days of his life. In all good bookshops. Highly recommended.

TK

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