

Irish influence on the temperance movement

In May of 2011, the Irish Republic had two very important and historic visitors. Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II and US President Barack Obama were both officially welcomed by the Irish people to these shores for the first time.

The level of preparation was enormous, from security at the various sites both luminaries were visiting, to road upgrades, and carefully choreographed photo opportunities with politicians, business people, and other various influential figures.

Part of Barack Obama's visit was to a small pub in Moneygall, Co. Offaly¹ where both he and his wife enjoyed a pint and a half pint of Guinness, respectively, to the constant click and whirr of camera lenses. Queen Elizabeth was not spared the Guinness photo opportunity either, and at the Guinness Storehouse on James' Street in Dublin (site of the first Guinness brewery in Ireland) she was poured a pint of the black stuff, although unlike her US counterparts she didn't indulge.²

While the images conjured above were broadcast worldwide and were hailed by the media here as being vital for our tourism,³ they perhaps say a lot about our attitude to alcohol in our society here in general.

Ireland is a country where over half of all those who do drink have a harmful drinking pattern. We drink 20% more than we did 25 years ago and 20% more than the average European. Alcohol has a role in 41% of cases of deliberate self-harm, 97% of public order offences, and every 7 hours in Ireland someone dies from an alcohol-related illness.⁴

It may come as a surprise to some then, that Ireland had a starring role in the Temperance Movement in the UK and further afield in the 19th century.

Theobald Mathew was born in Ireland in 1790 and was ordained a priest in Dublin in 1813. He was known as a kind and sympathetic clergyman and was popular and looked up to by the poor and the wealthy alike. His chief concern was always the care of the sick and underprivileged in society.⁵

Around this time, drunkenness was becoming widespread and problematic in Ireland. In 1835, a Quaker called William Martin founded the Cork Total Abstinence

Society in an attempt to combat the issue. He made little initial headway.⁶

Prior to this, in Preston in 1831, Joseph Livesey was adopting a staunch anti-alcohol ideal, releasing regular pamphlets on abstinence, the roots of which grew into the Preston Temperance Advocate in 1834. His influence spread and he also released the *Teetotal Progressionist* from 1851–1852 and the *Staunch Teetotaler* from 1867. Livesey himself had taken his lead from Reverend John Edgar, a Presbyterian minister based in Belfast, who began preaching the benefits of teetotalism from 1829.

Meanwhile, on the other side of Ireland, the Cork Total Abstinence Society plodded onwards with few members so its founder sought out Father Theobald Mathew, a well-liked and much respected local priest who he hoped would drive the movement onwards.

In 1838 Father Mathew signed up and plunged headfirst into the abstinence crusade. Obviously this new movement had the fingerprints of the Catholic church on it given his background and this was a useful method for Father Mathew to convert new followers to his cause, holding meetings after services and recruiting new followers after Sunday mass who took 'The Pledge' to remain abstinent from alcohol. Estimates vary, but by 1843 about 250 000 people in Ireland had taken The Pledge.

Father Mathew then travelled through the UK for 3 months in 1843 with like-minded associates converting up to 600 000 people to the Temperance movement there.⁷

While drunkenness was bad, it was nothing compared to the Great Famine which struck Ireland between 1845 and 1849. Over 2 million had to emigrate and approximately the same number died. Father Mathew's focus switched from temperance to helping the poor, and momentum for his crusade was understandably lost.

Invited to the US in 1849,⁷ he was afforded use of City Hall, New York, which acted as a forerunner to his success in America. At his peak he had up to 500 000 followers there and dined in the White House with President Taylor. Things unravelled for him in America when his anti-slavery views were not popular and he returned to Ireland, cutting ties with the American movement in 1851. He died in Cork in 1856.

It is perhaps ironic that the country that

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produced Father Mathew is now so closely identified with all things Bacchanalian in the modern age.

One feels it will take more than a single charismatic religious figure to turn this particular tide.

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