



## **Make President's Day Green**

by Marilyn Madigan

On this President's Day, let us remember the twenty-three Presidents with Irish Heritage. This is an underappreciated and overlooked part of the leadership of our Country. From Andrew Jackson to Joe Biden, twenty-three men of Irish heritage have been elected as the President of the United State guiding our nation through revolution, expansion, wars and other crisis like the events on 9/11

Prior to the American Revolution, Irish immigrants started arriving. They were seeking opportunity, freedom of conscience, and dignity. Most of those emigrating in the 1700s were from the Province of Ulster and know as the Scotch Irish. These individuals had a deep respect for education, faith, service, and an unwavering belief in liberty. These traits found fertile ground in the American experiment.

Andrew Jackson was the first Scotch Irish President. His parent emigrated from the Village of Boney in Antrim. He was born in 1767 two years after the family arrived in America on the border of North and South Carolina. He is one of three Presidents that had at least one parent born in Ireland. In Jackson, we see the influence of Irish resilience. Jackson rose from frontier hardship to the presidency, embodying the immigrant drive to overcome adversity.

At least a third of American Presidents can trace their ancestry to Ulster. James Polk descended from Ulster Presbyterians with Great Grandfather from Donegal and Great Great Grandparents from Derry. James Buchanan's parents were from Donegal and Tryone. He is the second of three Presidents that had a parent born in Ireland. Andres Johnson's grandfather was from Antrim. Johnson was the first President to be impeached but was kept in Office by the Senate. Ulysses S. Grant's Great Grandfather was from Tyrone. He was the first President to visit Ireland and was an Honorary Citizen of Dublin and Derry. As Civil War General, he led the nation through the Civil War, preserving the Union at its darkest hour; a testament to steadfast leadership forged by heritage and hardship. Chester Arthur's father was from near Ballymena Antrim. He was the third President that had a parent born in Ireland. Grover Cleveland's Grandfather was from Antrim. Cleveland was the first President to serve non-consecutive terms. Benjamin Harrison's Great-Grandfather was from Antrim.

William McKinley's Grandfather was from Antrim. He was a son of the great State of Ohio and is buried in Canton. McKinley was the third President to be assassinated. Theodore Roosevelt became the youngest President succeeding to the Office of President on the death of McKinley. Roosevelt's maternal ancestors came from Antrim. He received the Nobel Peace Prize for his mediation in the Russo- Japanese War. We can thank him for our National Parks and Forests.

As the nation grew, the Irish continue to come to our shores especially during the years of the Great Hunger. The Irish faced discrimination because of their Catholic faith but still many served on both sides of the American Civil War. The Irish influence has been documented in their roles in political machines, in civil service and in the labor movement even though it was a time when anti-Irish and anti-Catholic prejudice was still widespread.

Presidents with Irish Heritage continued to be elected in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. William Howard Taft a son of Ohio whose ancestors came from County Louth. He has the distinction of also serving as Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. Woodrow Wilson's grandfather was from Tyrone. He was the President at the time of the Easter Rising and did meet with Irish American leaders about the situation in Ireland. He founded the League of Nations. Harry Truman's ancestors were from Donegal and Tyrone. He became President following the death of Franklin Roosevelt during the final days of World War II and was responsible for making the decision to drop the Atomic Bomb.

Perhaps no presidency better symbolized Irish-American achievement than that of John Fitzgerald Kennedy. Kennedy was the great-grandson of famine immigrants from Limerick, Wexford, Cork, Clare and Fermanagh. He was the youngest and first Catholic to be elected President. His election marked a historic milestone, breaking religious barriers and affirming that Irish Catholics had fully arrived at the highest level of American leadership.

Lyndon Johnson became President after the President Kennedy's Assassination, the fourth to be assassinated. Johnson's Great grandfather was from Galway. He won the Presidency in 1964 by the widest popular margin in American History. His Presidency was dominated by the Vietnam War and he decided not to seek a second term. Richard Nixon's ancestors were from Kildare. He is the only President to resign from Office. On the resignation of Nixon, Gerald Ford became President. Ford's Great Grandparents were from Armagh and Down. He has the distinction of being the only President not elected either as Vice President or President. President Jimmy Carter's Great Grandparents were from Antrim. He was Awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2002 for his work to find peaceful solutions to international conflicts, to advance democracy and human rights and to promote economic and social development.

Ronald Reagan's Great Grandparents from Antrim and Tipperary

In 1984 he visited Ballyporeen Tipperary where they named the local bar after him. George H. W. Bush and George W. Bush the second father and son to be elected President have ancestors from County Down. Barack Obama's Great-Great-Great Grandfather from Offaly

First African-American Elected President. In 2011 visited his ancestral home Moneygal, Offaly. He received the Nobel Peace Prize Recipient.

The second Catholic elected President was Joe Biden who has openly embraced and celebrated his Irish ancestry. President Biden visited Ireland with stops in County Mayo and Louth, his ancestor homes. I had the privilege of attending a Breakfast for Catholic Leaders and the Shamrock Ceremony the last year of the Biden Administration. What a wonderful experience.

In total, these twenty-three presidents tell a powerful story of a people that overcame challenges in Ireland and American and rose to help govern a nation. Their Irish Heritage and values of faith, family, humor, and hope continue to shape American democracy.

As we approach the 250<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, we need to reflect on America's remembering the role of the Irish in the American story. On this President's Day, may we continue to honor the legacy of these Presidents in service, leadership, and commitment to our communities. Thank you, and may God bless Ireland and the United States of America.