

Reagan's ancestral village was my last dateline as a correspondent for the Post.

Reagan's Homecoming Excites Irish Village

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By Peter Osnos

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What can this Tipperary village of about 300 persons expect to get from being the homeland of Ronald Reagan's ancestors? "A sense of standing," said Con Donovan, the amiable shopkeeper who has represented Ballyporeen on the county council for 24 years.

For a few hours on the first weekend in June, Reagan, en route to the western economic summit in London, will be paying homage to his roots and, incidentally, reminding millions of Irish Americans that he is one of them. But for a humble farming community whose name in Irish means "town of the small potatoes," the presidential visit is a very big deal.

Over coffee in the back of his store ("everything sold from a needle to an anchor"), Donovan said that he is hoping for a special allocation from the government to spruce up the derelict sites and older facades on the main street. The old crank-up telephones are being replaced by an automatic system. And plans are under way to accommodate the needs of what he called "the Reagan juggernaut" to Ballyporeen's simple sanitary, eating and sleeping facilities.

Preserving decorum in the unaccustomed glare of international attention seems to be a central theme.

"I hope south Tipperary will be prepared to avail of the onslaught," Donovan told his fellow councilors at a meeting earlier this month.

The price of mistakes, others at the session agreed, will be to make Ballyporeen look foolish. "We have had a small bit already and they should be given no more chances to make dirt out of us," said Councilor P.J. Maher, referring to jocular local news accounts such as an *Irish Times* story headlined "Ballyporeen Honors Its Big Spud."

Shortly after the 1980 election, Debrett's Peerage Ltd., the London-based genealogical specialists, traced Reagan back to his great-grandfather Thomas Regan, who was a dirt farmer in Doolis, a patch of rolling land adjoining Ballyporeen. Thomas' son Michael emigrated to England in the 1840s, married a Tipperary lass and crossed the Atlantic, settling in Illinois. For unexplained reasons, he added an "a" to his surname. Ronald Reagan came two generations later.

To mark their good fortune, the people of Ballyporeen staged an inaugural parade in pouring rain on the day Reagan took office in Washington. John O'Farrell, a leading local pub keeper—the town has six pubs—changed the name of an adjoining club where musical acts appear on weekends to the "Ronald Reagan Lounge."

O'Farrells have been pub keepers on this corner since at least 1810 and the entrepreneurial spirit flourishes. He started to sell, along with T-shirts and other items, small packets

of the old sod retrieved by hand from Doolis by his wife Mary. Upstairs under lock and key is a gift shop with Irish souvenirs that the couple hope to sell to tourists this summer and for as long as the appeal lasts of seeing where America's 40th chief executive came from.

"There is a tremendous sense of pride in knowing that someone could leave from here penniless and have a descendant become president," said O'Farrell as rough-hewn customers headed up to the bar for pints of dark Guinness stout at a hefty \$1.25 per glass. "Most of the price goes to taxes," he noted.

From the beginning of his administration, Ballyporeen longed for a visit by Reagan. Several times there were false alarms, particularly last fall when Secret Service men were reported to be checking out the area. On that occasion it was Reagan's son Ron who was coming to do research for a magazine article.

By the time the rumors proved to be true and while most townspeople were thrilled at the prospect, a certain amount of cynicism was expressed over Reagan's choice of an election year to make a pilgrimage. A columnist for the local weekly *Avondhu* wrote that for most people outside of Ballyporeen the announcement of the visit is "merely a source of sarcastic humor."

To counter that stance, Patrick Cooney, Ireland's defense minister, told a dinner audience that the president of the United States should always be welcome here. "We as a people owe a debt to that country," he said. "It offered a haven for our forefathers in times of great national distress and, indeed, for over a century it provided opportunity for young Irish people who did not have the like at home."

Part of the clucking over the visit is that invidious comparisons are invariably drawn between Reagan's Irish ancestry and John F. Kennedy's. Reagan is no longer Roman Catholic. His mother raised him as Protestant. Moreover, Kennedy had living relatives in County Wexford with whom he could commune when he came in 1963. There are no identifiable Reagan kin in Ballyporeen.

There isn't even a grave in the Templetenny cemetery with the family name. It is assumed that the stone sunk into the rich earth with the passage of time.

A plaque has been erected saying that this must be the place where Reagan's ancestors were laid to rest.

But the proof of Reagan's Irish blood is unassailable. It resided in the graceful hand of the scribe for the registers of Ballyporeen parish for baptisms and marriages. Translated from the Latin, its entry for Sept. 3, 1829, reads: "I baptized, Michael, son of Thomas Regan and Margaret Murphy of Doolis; godparents: William Regan and Catherine Walsh. Signed Fr. Martinus Redmond."

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