

Promoting Diversity in the Courts: Irish Heritage with Shane O'Donoghue

John Caher: Welcome to Amici, News and Insights from New York Courts. I'm John Caher.

We live in a nation of immigrants, and our Diversity Dialogue segment is designed to highlight people in the court system who bring unique experiences and different perspectives to everything we do behind the scenes and in the courtroom.

That diversity, as we've heard over the years from the more than 70 people who have appeared on this program, is not simply a matter of ethnic pride. The inclusion of people from every background provides our court system with a richness and insight that is unparalleled. I've learned a tremendous amount from people of different traditions, and I hope you have as well.

Today, we're going to learn about a people we have not discussed before, a people that endured genocide, ethnic cleansing, segregation, and religious persecution. They were dismissed as overbred subhuman barbarians, and in the census were not considered Black or white, but "other."

I'm referring to the Irish. And our guest today is Shane O'Donoghue, a management analyst with the Division for E-Filing and the child of Irish immigrants.

I'll ask Shane, a member of the Emerald Society within the courts, to go over some Irish history with us and explain, among other things, why the Irish refer to the incident that brought many of them here, not as a "famine," but a "hunger." And we'll discuss the Irish experience in America.

Shane, thank you for coming on the program. Let's start with your parents, if we could.

So your parents came over to the United States during an era known as "The Troubles," long after the Cromwell reign of terror and the potato "famine," a word I use in quotes. Can you briefly describe what that era was, when it was, and whether it was The Troubles that your parents came here to escape?

Shane O'Donoghue: Sure. First, thank you for having me on the program. I very much appreciate it.

The Troubles were a nationalistic and a sectarian war between the Protestants that were loyalists to England and the Catholics who were generally original Irish. The Troubles happened from 1968 to the second ceasefire agreement in 1998, which was also known as the Good Friday Agreement.

It really started as a civil rights movement that was heavily influenced by the Civil Rights Movement that the United States was experiencing. They had seen the things that were happening here in the U.S., like the Freedom Riders, Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X. All those things were happening simultaneously, and they were trying to mimic it. It was the Catholics that were living in the North who were trying to end the discrimination and obtain equal rights and the better treatments, really quality of life. They wanted better jobs, better neighborhoods, better communities, things like that.

The problem though, is the Protestants were pretty much on every level of government, including the police. And that would lead to a bit of uprisings, a bit of skirmishes with the police and the citizens. The English would eventually send soldiers in to quash this uprising to try to restore order. This was not received well by the Catholics.

This led to the creation of the new version of the IRA, which is the Irish Republican Army, which called themselves the Provos or the Provisional Irish Republican Army. This was a conflict that led into, I think it was like 52% of the casualty rate in that conflict was civilians. So it was really very unfortunate that the mass part of the casualties on that were civilians.

I know currently there's a lot of new information that's been released. I think the Boston College released a series of transcripts and video footage of people being interviewed that were participants in that war. I know that they kind of waited a long time to do it because they wanted a lot of people to have passed away. If you were in the IRA, it was a death sentence to talk about the IRA.

But also, I know currently that there's information out there now that paints Gerry Adams in a bit of a different light. Gerry Adams is currently the head of the Sinn Fein political party, which is the political wing of the IRA. And I know that there's an individual, Brendan Hughes, who was head of the, I believe it was D Company in the IRA, that was kind of on the front line.

He paints a picture that Gerry Adams allowed Bobby Sands, who was doing a hunger protest in Long Kesh, which is a prison, to die. And

apparently he allowed him to die, essentially to martyr him so that he could get Sinn Fein off the ground. So some people think he's a traitor, some people don't. It's hard to say. It's hard to Monday morning general a guerrilla war when I'm not the one pulling the trigger on my neighbors.

But my parents though, they did not try to escape The Troubles. They were already in the South. My father was trying to escape extreme poverty. And my mother, essentially, she was brought over with my grandmother who was trying to dodge the "Magdalene laundries" [workhouses run by the Church where "fallen women" were confined] .

John Caher: Let's go back to your father and the poverty.

Shane O'Donoghue: Sure.

John Caher: What were the roots of that?

Shane O'Donoghue: So my father was from Northwest Kerry in a very small, *very small*, not even a town, but he was from a farm, so they were farmers. They were there during all of the Great Hunger. They really didn't have much work. You can only do so much. He wound up leaving Ireland at 12 to go to England with two of his friends, who I think were like 13 and 14, to help build the tunnels that became the English subway system.

John Caher: Ok, so your father is a young teenager working in England. So how does he get from there to here, and when, and why?

Shane O'Donoghue: So, he was in England and did some time there and things kind of slowed up and then he went back to Ireland to see if there was any work there and there was no work there either. So he eventually came to New York City. He really left in search of work. There was really no work in England or Ireland at the time and he gets to America and he kind of meets two of his friends that he knew from Ireland and they get an apartment together and they start working in the union. He spent a solid amount of time, I think it was like 25 years before he went back to Ireland. During that time he met my mother and they both met in a bar, which is I feel a stereotypical Irish thing. But neither of them drink, which is ironic, and then from there they eventually got married, had me and did the American dream kind of thing.

John Caher: And then how did your mother get here

Shane O'Donoghue: My mother came here with my grandmother when she emigrated. She initially left Ireland because of poverty. She went to England and then

from England went back to Ireland and then to America in search of work.

John Caher: So, it's a very similar route to the one your father took?

Shane O'Donoghue: Yeah. They left there to come here in search of work. There was really no work to be found in America either for them. They kind of struggled. People didn't want to rent to them people. People didn't want to hire them. Eventually, my grandmother found a job and her husband, my grandfather, found a job. They became a super of a building and they also had to find other work as well to make ends meet. But once the work dried up, my mother was sent back with her siblings to Ireland to live with their aunt and they spent years back there they did a lot of their schooling back there. Then they came back to America, I would say in the mid-70s or early 80s. My mother stayed here for the duration; she's still here. They were able to become successful in America, where Ireland gave them no opportunities.

John Caher: Now, did your parents talk much about life in the old country?

Shane O'Donoghue: My parents did. My grandmother emigrated here as well, on my mother's side, she also spoke about it frequently. I did get a lot of the "I had to walk 15 miles to school uphill in the snow" kind of thing. It turns out for my father, it was kind of true, except it was just in the rain. It was like seven miles in the rain each way. He went to a school that was essentially just a hut in the middle of a field.

Where my grandfather on my father's side lived, their house was the quintessential cottage. The only difference was they didn't get a concrete floor until, I think, 1992. It was the same year they got indoor plumbing. They had dirt floors back then. My father would often talk about how it used to be so cold that they used to have to bring the farm animals into the house to maintain the warmth.

Houses back then were generally just dirt floors, two, three rooms max. You'd have an open fire that was just roaring up the wall. I've seen that firsthand myself in older people's houses there. But it's an absolute brutal way to live if you have the "luck" of being born in a first world country. When I went back there and I seen it firsthand, I was like, "There is no way that you can maintain a life like this," and they do without question, which is very impressive to me.

John Caher: Now, poverty was pervasive in the south of Ireland, wasn't it?

Shane O'Donoghue: Absolutely. Poverty was a very big problem back then. The country itself kind of went broke fighting the war for independence, so they couldn't really afford any social services or anything like that or anything to help the country. It was a very common story that people would leave, even up until the '80s and '90s, because there was no work.

John Caher: So even though your parents didn't directly leave because of The Troubles, they were living in an area that was in the midst of a 30-year war that left them impoverished.

Shane O'Donoghue: Absolutely. Even in the south, if you were close to the north, it could be at times unsafe because the Provos were back and forth from the north and the south doing trainings and things like that. A lot of their explosive trainings were done on farms in the south.

John Caher: And you mentioned Pedro Campos, and I'm kind of intrigued that Ireland was influenced by Hispanic and Black civil rights activists from other countries.

Shane O'Donoghue: Absolutely.

John Caher: And I'm also referring, of course, to Frederick Douglass who went to Ireland, my gosh, 1850s or something around there, and found a lot in common.

Shane O'Donoghue: Yes. So Pedro Campos was a Puerto Rican political figure during their independence movement from Spain. At the time, Puerto Rico was a colony of Spain. Ireland at that time essentially was a colony of England, so they had that similarity. And the United States eventually has kind of developed its own issue with what could be perceived to be colonies.

But the Irish needed help writing this [declaration of independence], so they had Eamon de Valera, who was kind of the head of their movement for independence, and who was, I believe, an attorney. But he was also needing help on how to word this correctly, and Pedro Campos, who was also an attorney, came over and was able to kind of set the groundwork for writing that independence declaration.

And I guess the way that they found each other was when the Irish went through the indentured servitude process, they found themselves in countries like Barbados. They found themselves all over the Caribbean. Puerto Rico was one of them. Puerto Rico had a very large Irish population after they were turned away from American ports and things like that, and they helped with the sugar imports.

John Caher: Oh, wow. Now, I mentioned a moment ago the Cromwell reign of terror. Can you give us a brief synopsis of what that was all about?

Shane O'Donoghue: I can. The Cromwell reign of terror is an interesting story because Ireland was kind of in the midst of a civil war at the time, the Eleven Year War. Cromwell was really there only from about 1649-ish to maybe 1653. The lasting effects though were felt up until the 1900s. Ireland was in a civil war and at the time, King Charles, I believe the First, was involved in a bit of a scandal in England. I know he killed an archbishop, and the aristocracy wasn't too pleased with him for it. The Protestant Pope had also told him that he should probably think about taking over Ireland. They call it the "Reconquest of Ireland."

Oliver Cromwell had just shut down a massive rebellion in Scotland. So the King of England said, "I got just the guy to send to Ireland." So he sends him over, and the first thing Oliver Cromwell does is he goes to the eastern part of Ireland and just absolutely slaughters everybody. Just an absolute massacre—man, woman, child, soldier, anyone who was a Roman Catholic. And he kind of says, "This is how it's going to go until you guys assimilate to our culture."

So the Irish try to fight back, but England has probably one of the greatest, if not the greatest, navies in the world, so it's hard to fight back when you're getting bombarded from sea.

John Caher: So that difficulty between the Irish and the English, was it primarily a matter of religious persecution or ethnic hatred or both?

Shane O'Donoghue: I'd say it's a combination of both. The English hated that the Irish would view themselves as Irish, that they didn't want to be a part of the English rule. They also hated the fact that they were not Protestants. The English were Protestants. The Irish were primarily Roman Catholics. If you were a Catholic, the Protestants did not like you. They sent over all these people to occupy Ireland to try to dismantle their culture, to dismantle their way of life. Really, their values, their day-to-day life, was ruined.

So they wound up taking the land that the Irish had, they took it from them, and they would give it to the aristocracy to become landlords, things like that. The Irish were essentially paying rent to live on their own lands. And it wasn't necessarily money. England didn't really have a lot of options when it came to growing their own foods, so they would outsource that to separate colonies, like India, Ireland.

John Caher: Now, not only did Irish get displaced from their land, they got displaced from their country. I know a lot of them were transported to Barbados as, at best, indentured servants. What can you share about that era?

Shane O'Donoghue: It was tough. So the difference between, I guess it would be indentured servitude and what you would commonly think of as slavery at the time is widely disputed. A lot of people say, though, it wasn't that similar.

The way it would go is you would be sent, if you were a political opponent or if you were a POW, Cromwell would take you, put you on a boat, they would send you to essentially a penal camp where you would work off seven years and you would eventually get your freedom papers, your rights to go about the rest of your life. What also happened though, is people who were in such bad dire straits would agree to go work on a plantation, a lot of the times sugar plantations or tobacco plantations, and they would agree to work seven years in exchange for their freedom papers to continue with the rest of their lives.

What you do see, though, is it didn't really end at seven years. So they were able to extend that time, the plantation owners or what I think they called the "grower class" back then, were able to extend those periods for any minor infraction. Initially, I believe they housed the Irish with the slaves, and it led to some rebellions, which they had trouble dealing with, and then they separated them.

From there, after they eventually did get their papers, they would leave or they would stay or they would go to other Caribbean countries. It was not good for them, though. The quality of life was poor. A lot of the times, it was brutal. The living conditions were very poor. There are some reports that the Irish were able to receive meat for food where the regular slaves were not. But either way, if you're working, getting beaten, living in poor conditions and you're not being paid, it's essentially a variation of slavery.

John Caher: Let's fast-forward to the "Great Hunger," as the Irish call it, the period in the mid-1800s when a million people died of starvation and related diseases, and more than 2 million emigrated, many of them over to the United States, of course. First, why do the Irish refer to it as the "Great Hunger" rather than "famine?"

Shane O'Donoghue: There was no famine. There was no shortage of food. There was no shortage of crops. There was no shortage of meat. The only issue was the Irish were charged to live on their land. So that was essentially the rent that was due every month to the landlords that were maintaining control

of Ireland, and they would have to turn this over. The only crop that they were able to keep for themselves were potatoes. And funny enough, potatoes are one of the only foods you can maintain an existence on. It has enough minerals, carbs to maintain life. So from there, what wound up happening was there was a rot, there was an infectious rot that spread between the potatoes, and I think it was 75% of their crops got decimated over the course of a couple of years. That led to a mass starvation.

The world was taking notice of this. The Sultan of Turkey at the time was trying to donate, I believe it was 10,000 pounds, to the Irish to help them buy food. But the Queen of England was only really donating two, so nobody could outdo her, so she wouldn't allow this to happen. So the Sultan said, "Fine, I'll donate 1,000 pounds." But then in secrecy, in the dead of night one night, he sends five boatloads of food to help them.

Then you look at the other side, which is America, the Choctaw Natives actually donated \$170 to try to help feed them, which is kind of interesting because the Native Americans at that time were going through their own problems, and they kind of pulled together to try to help the Irish. The Irish did try to repay them to an extent. They gave \$1.8 million in aid during COVID, but they maintain, to this day, kind of a close relationship.

John Caher: That's fascinating. One of the legends told in my Irish family is that of the so-called soupers, S-O-U-P-E-R-S. Tell us what the soupers were.

Shane O'Donoghue: So the soupers were essentially people who converted for bowls of soup. They would agree to leave Roman Catholicism behind to go to Protestantism. It was really set up by Protestant societies. They developed schools where starving children or people were able to be fed in return for converting to Protestantism. It kind of ruined the reputation of other Protestant groups who were trying to give legitimate aid without conversion. The Irish refused essentially to go to any soup kitchens or anything like that where they would choose their religion and their faith over being fed.

At the time though, if you were a souper, and you did take aid from the Protestants and you did go to these Protestant schools, you were immediately outcast. You were a traitor. If you're willing to take food from the Protestants, you're willing to give information and to essentially rat out your neighbors to the English. To this day, I know some families maintain essentially a grudge towards these other families. I have heard through my time there that these people were soupers and these people

would rat us out. We're talking about hundreds of years later, and they maintain those grudges.

John Caher: The Irish do tend to maintain grudges.

Shane O'Donoghue: That is absolutely true.

John Caher: So from the 1800s to 1920s really, there's this enormous dispersion of Irish, with a great many ending up on American shores. What sort of degradation or discrimination did they experience here?

Shane O'Donoghue: It was tough for them. When they would land here, nobody wanted them to be here, until they realized how powerful of a voting base they could be. They faced starvation. There was no work. At the time, America was majority Protestant, so to come over here as a Catholic, you were an outcast either way.

The Civil War was going on during that time as well. They were forced into gangs to kind of maintain safety in numbers. You'd see a lot of people turning to prostitution, theft, things like that just to survive on a day-to-day basis.

The American Army though, or the North I should say, had a unique way to acquire soldiers. They would meet you at the docks and they would say, "You look very hungry. If you sign these papers, we'll give you some food." And the minute you sign this, they'd say, "Here's your uniform. You're off to go fight in the Civil War now. Thank you so much for your service." And they would find themselves on the front lines a lot of the times because they were so expendable. They were coming in more rapidly than they could clothe into the uniforms. So it was very tough for them to find a place in the United States where they can kind of carve out a community for themselves.

John Caher: Now, during the same period, we saw the rise of the so-called Know Nothing party, a political movement that evolved out of fear that the country was being taken over by immigrants, mainly Irish and German, who were "poisoning the blood of the country," undermining the foundation of the nation, and taking jobs and resources away from native-born Americans. In fact, I believe there was a conspiracy theory that the Pope and his army were going to land in the U.S., overthrow the government, impose Catholic canon as the law of the land and move the Vatican to Cincinnati. But from your research, what was that era like, the Know Nothing era like, for the Irish?

Shane O'Donoghue: When you really look at it, it was just pure xenophobia. The Irish suffered a great deal under this. The Know Nothing party also called themselves the Native American Party, which is ironic because not a single one of them are Native Americans. It was designed to keep foreign influence from becoming the norm and the assimilation of the Irish community and the German community.

They really kind of blamed the Irish for everything. They blamed the Irish for the Democrats realizing what kind of voter base they had the capability of having. They also split after a couple of years. They really only lasted a few years, and they split because they argued over slavery. But they did not like the Irish, they did not like any variation of an outside culture, an outside custom coming in and uprooting what their Protestant norm was.

John Caher: But they did kind of elect a president, Millard Fillmore. I don't know if he was a member of the Know Nothing Party, but he was elected on the strength of that nativist campaign and pandering to fears of Irish refugees, right?

Shane O'Donoghue: Absolutely. Absolutely. He kind of kept quiet about his affiliations with the Know Nothing Party. He was a part, I believe, of, the Know Nothing Party's secret society. I believe it was called the Star Spangled Banner Group or something along those lines. He was supposedly a member of this. It was essentially fear-mongering. So he ran on fear-mongering, saying, "These people are going to take your jobs. They're going to take everything that you have and you're going to be forced to become a Catholic. The Pope's going to come." Things like that. "The Pope has an army waiting to infiltrate the United States."

It was very much fear-mongering, and the American public went for it. They voted him in. He became the president. I believe he lost to a Democrat right after, which had a large Irish voting base. But it was a tough time for the Irish. [Fillmore was succeeded by Franklin Pierce, a pro-slavery Democrat]

John Caher: I remember hearing my father and particularly my grandfather talk about the "No Irish need apply" signs in classified newspaper ads and signs at restaurants warning that Irishmen and dogs would not be served. And that was probably 80 years after the Know Nothings and Millard Fillmore. Would you say it was the election of John F. Kennedy, the first Irish Catholic ever elected president, in 1960, that with that, that the Irish finally arrived in American mainstream society?

Shane O'Donoghue: Absolutely. I think that the election of JFK kind of solidified the status of the Irish American. So they kind of said, "You've assimilated enough into the American culture that you are now deemed to be a regular." They still faced a bit of socio-economic issues where they were kind of stuck as blue collar. It was really just the Kennedys that kind of held a strong foothold in positions of power there. But the Irish definitely, at that point, were kind of accepted as Americans at that point.

The rumor was the Pope was a little nervous when they elected him because in every Irish household in Ireland, there's a picture of the Sacred Heart, and then there was a picture of JFK in there as well. They were replacing the picture of the Pope with JFK at the time. So I think the Pope was a little nervous!

John Caher: Did you grow up with a lot of Irish pride in your household?

Shane O'Donoghue: I don't know if it was pride. You were very acutely aware that you were Irish. You were aware that what happened, you were aware of what the history was. To an extent, you were kind of alienated to a group that was just like a lot of the people growing up that I was around were Irish. So my parents, all their friends, they were off the boat Irish as well. Their children were first generation, same as me.

I guess we did have a bit of pride because it was like we went through all these troubles and we went through all these problems, and finally, we've assimilated. Our children are American. We've landed in America, we've made a community for ourselves.

John Caher: Are there any particular traditions that your parents brought with them from Ireland that you've continued?

Shane O'Donoghue: I'd say a bit. I'd say dysfunctionality would be a tradition. Dark humor and sarcasm is almost an Irish tradition. GAA All-Ireland Sunday, which this year is July 27th, for the football and the hurling. Every Sunday, right now there's the league, so we pay attention to that very, very in-depth. But my mother is from Dublin and my father is from Kerry, so that is the biggest rivalry. So they pay attention to that.

John Caher: What do you mean by dysfunctionality?

Shane O'Donoghue: The Irish are notoriously dysfunctional. Sigmund Freud said, "You can't psychoanalyze the Irish." The Irish do everything kind of their own way. They're stubborn to the point where they're going to learn it either the hard way or the hard way. There is no easy acceptance for them. So they

learn everything through, "Don't touch the stove," so you touch the stove, you burn yourself, and that's how you learn.

John Caher: Somebody said, maybe it was Mark Twain, it kind of sounds like him, that the Irish are civilized but not domesticated.

Shane O'Donoghue: Absolutely. That is absolutely true.

John Caher: We're about to celebrate St. Patrick's Day, and we know how it's celebrated here with parades and green beer and whatever. What will be going on in Ireland on March 17th?

Shane O'Donoghue: In the major cities, there will be parades, there'll be celebrations, things like that. I know they light up a lot of the major buildings, churches, things like that, in green lighting. But I think those are more for the tourist attractions. Your average run-of-the-mill Irish, they hit a mass, they go to church, and that's about it. They go back home.

John Caher: Oh, that's interesting. Now, you told me offline that there's another holiday, an American holiday, that's actually a bigger deal over there. Will you share that story with our listeners?

Shane O'Donoghue: Sure. So I was in Ireland for the 4th of July. I was working over there and I was talking to some of the people. And I was in Limerick and I was also in Dublin. And Limerick had huge Lady Liberties, they had American flags everywhere. Dublin had a very similar vibe, a lot of American flags going around, a lot of 4th of July things.

And I was talking to some of the older people and I'm like, "Why do you guys care so much about the 4th of July?" And they're like, "Because you guys beat the English." So they appreciate the fact that we were able to beat the English as well. They fought their own battles to kind of maintain what they have against the English. A lot of the older generations do appreciate the fact that the United States was able to remove the English from their land as the Irish attempted to and somewhat succeeded.

John Caher: That's fascinating. Back to the court system, I believe you're a member of the New York State Courts' Emerald Society. What is it?

Shane O'Donoghue: New York State Emerald Society is kind of an Irish society. You don't have to be Irish to join. It's a group of people who have the same cultural or ethnic background. It's also more than that, it's moreso a community if you're looking for people to celebrate your wins with you and kind of help you pick yourself up from your losses. Some of the best advice that

I've ever received in my personal life and my professional life has been from members of the Emerald Society.

Like I said, though, you don't have to be Irish. If you're looking to come learn more about the Irish population, Irish customs, culture, things like that, you're more than welcome. Definitely reach out to our leadership. I know that they have Facebook, Twitter, X, whatever they're calling it these days. They have social media accounts. They're very accessible by social media, and everybody is welcome.

John Caher: Why is diversity important in a court system?

Shane O'Donoghue: It's incredibly important. It creates an atmosphere of empathy. Once you see that diversity and you can see what other people's socio and economical challenges are or what their cultural problems that they faced, what their stories are, you kind of have a sense of empathy for them, and you want to give them a helping hand. You understand why things are the way they are and how things can get better.

John Caher: And as we approach St. Patrick's Day, what would you like people to remember most about the experience and contributions of Irish Americans?

Shane O'Donoghue: Look outside. You go outside, look up. New York City, a lot of it is built by the Irish. You take a train, transcontinental, Irish. You go out to the West Coast, San Francisco, a lot of the Irish built it. The Irish put a lot of blood, sweat, and tears in making America what it is today.

John Caher: Shane, thank you so much for the insight and thank you so much for your time.

Shane O'Donoghue: Thank you, I appreciate it.