

The Irish Emigrant Chaplaincy

Patricia Kennedy, author of *Welcoming the Stranger: Irish Migrant Welfare in Britain since 1957*, recounts the work of the Irish chaplains in London and Birmingham, remembering especially Fr Paul Byrne OMI among other memorable figures.

Many thousands of people left Ireland during the economic gloom of the 1950s to work building the motorways in Britain and staffing the hotels of London's West End. The Irish Emigrant Chaplaincy was founded in 1957 with the goal of ministering to the Irish abroad; the Oblate Missionaries of Mary, together with the Columbans and the Dublin Diocese were the backbone of the chaplaincy. One of the leading lights of the chaplaincy, and its longest serving contributor, was Fr Paul Byrne.

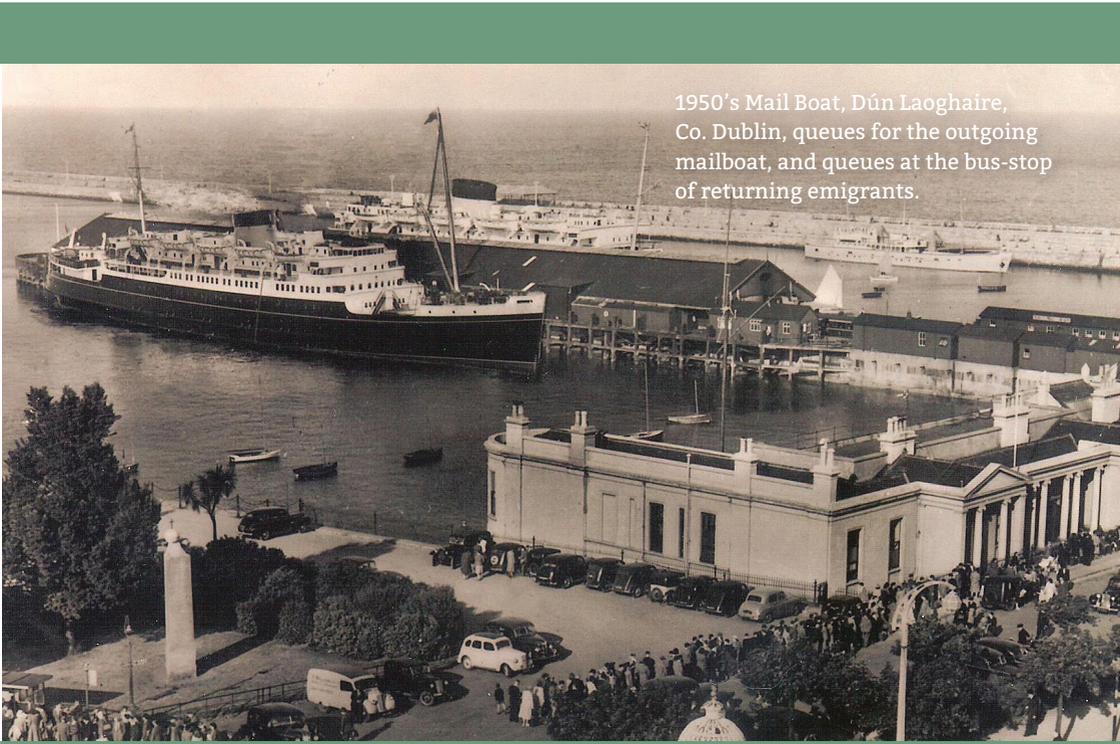
Paul Byrne's contribution crossed seven decades. As a young priest he sold First Communion dresses in Birmingham to raise money for the Irish centre there. Paul was director of Catholic Housing Aid Society (CHAS) in Birmingham.

In 1969 when Eamonn Casey left London to take up his role as bishop of Kerry he made an arrangement with SHELTER which led to the foundation of Shelter Housing Aid Society (SHAC). Eamonn explained that he knew in passing his work on to Paul and Fr Frank Park that he was handing it over to safe hands '... who would give a new impetus to the housing work'. He explained that they were '... very enthusiastic, capable and would bring new energy'. Paul

became national director of CHAS and founding director of SHAC and a founder of the Family Housing Association in Birmingham. These were to become some of the most important housing organisations in Britain, which grew exponentially under Paul's stewardship and influenced the direction of housing policy. In 1976 Paul received an OBE for his work in housing.

Paul's influence can be seen throughout the chaplaincy. Paul served on the committee of the Irish Commission for Prisoners Overseas (ICPO) as well as in other strategic roles within the chaplaincy. He chaired Emigrant Advice Network and was a trustee for the London Irish Centre. With others he lobbied for decades for the Irish government to take responsibility for its own people abroad. This resulted in the establishment of the Task Force on Policy Regarding Emigrants, which Paul judged as one of the significant achievements of the chaplaincy, and he served as a member of the task force. In October 2003 Paul retired as director of the Irish Episcopal Commission for Emigrants (IECE), but continued in his efforts to campaign for the policies recommended in the Task Force Report to be implemented.

The chair of the task force Paddy



1950's Mail Boat, Dún Laoghaire, Co. Dublin, queues for the outgoing mailboat, and queues at the bus-stop of returning emigrants.

O'Hanlon thanked both Fr Paul Byrne and Fr Alan Hilliard who had travelled with him throughout Britain, the US and Australia to show him the plight of the Irish abroad. He poignantly described Paul Byrne, no longer a young man, living out of a suitcase striving to achieve justice for emigrants. The report Paul described '... as arguably [making] the most significant contribution in years to a policy on emigration and the funding of services. It is a real acknowledgment of the worldwide diaspora, making them part of a nation and providing a blueprint for their comprehensive care'. He was delighted with what he called the radical recommendation that a new unit, the Irish Abroad Unit be established within the Department

of Foreign Affairs. Paul was replaced by Fr Alan Hilliard as director of IECE in 2003 and in 2004 the Irish Abroad Unit was established. In 2004 he received the prestigious James Larkin Justice Award from the Irish Labour Party.

In 2014 Minister of State Jimmy Deenihan was appointed first minister of state for the diaspora. In 2015 Minister Deenihan thanked the Chaplaincy and stated: 'the Chaplaincy has been a patient, committed and empathetic voice for the voiceless Irish and its support has made a huge impact in many lives'.

Paul continued his involvement until he was no longer able. He served on the board of the IECE until he became ill. He died in 2018. ♡