

Tea with JFK and why Dunganstown matters

As a symbol of the 'American Dream', few locations surely fit the bill more suitably than the Kennedy Ancestral Home in Dunganstown.

The humble single storey cottage, situated off a quiet, narrow country lane four miles from New Ross, was first visited by 30-year-old Congressman John Fitzgerald Kennedy in 1947.

Exactly 100 years earlier, Jack's great-grandfather Patrick boarded a boat in New Ross bound for Boston via Liverpool.

Little did Patrick know that his leaving Ireland was, in effect, the beginning of a great Irish-American family's journey that would carry JFK all the way to the White House a half century ago.

"When my great-grandfather left here to become a cooper in East Boston, he carried nothing with him except two things: a strong religious faith and a strong desire for liberty. I am glad to say that all his grand children have valued that inheritance."

These were the words uttered by President Kennedy when speaking in the yard at Dunganstown on June 27th 1963, his second and altogether more publicised visit to the homestead.

Driving down that very lane recently, one could only imagine the fervour and excitement of the occasion, when Josephine (Ryan) Grennan hosted the world's most powerful man.

But JFK's 1947 visit was, in many ways, more significant and is recalled in 'An Unfinished Life', Robert Dallek's magnificent study of the 35th President of the United States.

While officially on a Congressional mission to examine how the Marshall Plan (then a year away from implementation) could help a ruined post-war Europe get back on its feet, Jack's first Irish port of call was West Waterford.

In the splendid surrounds of Lismore Castle, Jack was re-united with his sister Kathleen Harrington, the widow of William Cavendish Harrington, who died in action during World War II.

Despite William's death, Kathleen had opted to stay on this side of the Atlantic; with the Devonshires giving her "free run" (to quote Dallek) of the 12th century castle I also recently visited.

There, the rakish Jack (six foot tall, weighing only 10 stone) met with former British foreign secretary and future Prime Minister Anthony Eden and, among others, Pamela Churchill, by then divorced from Winston's son Randolph.

Pamela, invited by Jack, travelled with him in Kathleen's station wagon on a 50-mile trip to New Ross. Once in the town, with a letter from his aunt Loretta serving as his only point of reference, Jack stopped to ask for directions to the Kennedy house.

Parking outside a small farmhouse down a winding road just outside New Ross, its yard populated by chickens and geese,

Congressman Kennedy found 'home'.

There, he enjoyed tea with Josephine Grennan and her family, a day which Mrs Grennan fondly recalled when interviewed by Joseph O'Connor on behalf of the John F Kennedy Presidential Library in August 1966.

"We didn't know he was coming," she said of JFK's first visit. "He just called in during his stay in Lismore."

The 'discovery' of Dunganstown, which included driving his young cousins around New Ross that day, lit something inside JFK, something, no doubt due to his father's influence, he'd never truly embraced until that point: his Irishness.

Writing of that first visit, Dallek stated: "For most of the family, these Kennedys of New Ross were something foreign, something best ignored or forgotten. But not for Jack."

Come his second and altogether more famous trip, Kathleen Grennan again served tea to her cousin, the former Congressman and Senator who had graduated to become the leader of the free world.

"We always felt very at home with him from the time he stepped out of the car," she said. "It was just as if he had been here the couple of days before."

Demonstrating the grasp of memory that any politician worth his salt must possess, the President recalled the photo that he, Kathleen, her mother Mary Kennedy, had posed for back in 1947. "He still remembered," Kathleen proffered.

JFK proved "even more homely" during the '63 visit, she added. "You know, being the President, I suppose you think that maybe he'd be a little more..."

Interjecting, O'Connor suggested: "Standoffish, maybe?"

To which Mrs Grennan replied: "Yes, or more businesslike, but he was just a normal man coming in to...It's just a..."

O'Connor: "Just a friend visiting?"

Mrs Grennan: "Just a cousin visiting."

Leafing through the transcript of the O'Connor interview, Kennedy's legendary charisma bounds off each page; his affection for his Dunganstown roots both heartfelt and genuine.

Many who mock and malign what goes on in Washington each March 17th do so because it's an easy annual target.

And while Irish-American political muscle may not be as flexed as once it was, the 'green vote' clearly retains notable pulling

power in the West Wing.

President Obama's Irish lineage is currently being disputed by the denizens of Moneygall and Kilkenny, Vice-President Joe Biden is fiercely proud of his Irish roots, while Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's affection for Ireland is undisputed.

Few foreign offices are afforded an annual date in the White House to rival that which is devoted to An Taoiseach. That this tradition clearly has its own roots in JFK's revelatory 1947 trip illustrates why Dunganstown still matters in 2010.