

IRISH AMERICA

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The image Maker

JOHN SAUNDERS

From Irish broadcaster to President & CEO of global PR giant FleishmanHillard

"The biggest gift
you can give to
other people
is your energy."

— John Saunders

TRAVEL

Ireland's
Ancient East

HISTORY

The
Fabulous
Murphys

THEATER

Dinner With
"The Dead"

MOVIES

Ruth Negga
in *Loving*

WILD IRISH WOMEN

Dead Shot
Mary Sweeney

JANUARY 31, 2017

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John Quinn

The Forgotten Irish

John Quinn, the unpretentious Irish American lawyer who funded the Irish literary renaissance by supporting Ireland's leading writers of the day (including W.B. Yeats and James Joyce), is less well-remembered for his involvement with Irish nationalism and his friendship with Roger Casement, the Irish-born diplomat who was knighted by King George V in 1911 and executed for his role in Ireland's Easter Rising in 1916.

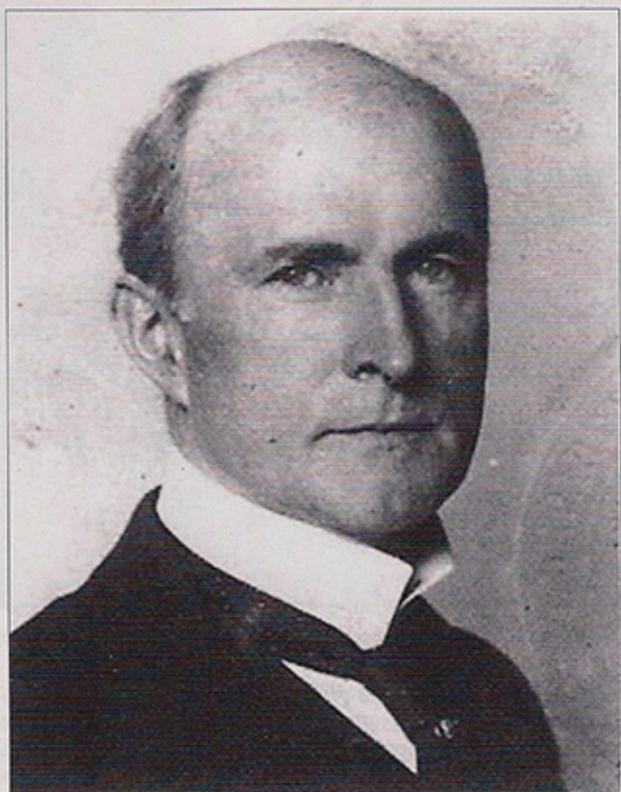
By Peter Quinn

John Quinn defies easy categorization. The son of Famine-era immigrants, he was born and raised far from Irish American urban centers like New York and Chicago in Fosteria, Ohio.

At 19, he left Ohio to serve as a private assistant to the Secretary of the Treasury. From there, he leapfrogged to Harvard Law School. Still in his mid-20s, he descended on New York in what his biographer describes as "Algeresque fashion" to make his fortune in the thickets of corporate law. Undeterred by barriers of religion, ethnicity, and class, he did so in rapid fashion.

Quinn is primarily remembered as a pioneering, perspicacious advocate of literary and artistic modernism. A close friend of Ezra Pound's, he purchased original manuscripts from James Joyce, Joseph Conrad, T.S. Eliot, and W.B. Yeats, in the process serving as supporter and patron. He defended Joyce's *Ulysses* in the New York courts against obscenity charges. Among the earliest American collectors of the works of Van Gogh, Picasso, Matisse, Brancusi, et al., he sponsored the Armory Show of 1913, a turning point in the history of American art that shocked New York audiences and raised public awareness (if not acceptance) of abstractionism and the avant-garde.

Less well remembered is Quinn's involvement with Irish and Irish American nationalism. What-



ever social disadvantages or prejudices he might have faced, he made no attempt to disguise or distance himself from his Irishness. Neither did he try to hide his contempt for what he saw as the narrow-minded provincialism and cultural parochialism prevailing in much of Irish America. He was especially bitter over the raucously hostile reception of J.M. Synge's masterpiece *The Playboy of the Western World*, a controversy that left him with a lasting animus toward "that old fool," John Devoy.

Quinn took a keen interest in the reinvigorated effort of the Irish Parliamentary Party to bring about Home Rule. He fulminated over the uncompromising militancy of Sir Edward Carson and the Unionists, while at the same time decrying John Redmond's cautious, irresolute response as certain to encourage "braggarts, boasters, and treason mongers." Quinn's position never changed. He supported a united, self-governing Ireland that maintained its tie to Great Britain. In 1922, at the outbreak of civil war over the Anglo-Irish Treaty, he wrote to Douglas Hyde, "I would

TOP RIGHT: Irish American nationalist John Quinn.

RIGHT: Sir Roger Casement.

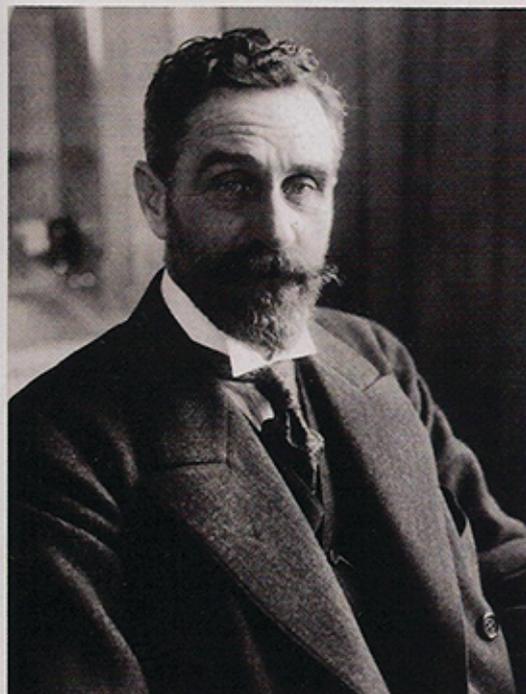
American Nationalist

not shed the blood of a single Irish wolf-hound for the difference between a republic and free state.”

Despite his adamant opposition to physical-force nationalism, when Pádraig Pearse paid a visit to him in New York, Quinn was taken by his intellect and sincerity. “However much one may differ from his political beliefs,” he wrote in the wake of Pearse’s execution, “one must admire his ideality [sic], his undaunted spirit, and the purity of his motives.” Quinn’s initial reaction to the Easter Rising itself was less kind. A staunch supporter of the Allied cause, he found himself depressed and repulsed “by the horrible fiasco in Ireland.”

The execution of the Rising’s leaders affected a change. Quinn’s nationalist sentiments, stoked by British intransigence and the courage with which Pearse and his companions went to their deaths, were ignited by the fate of Sir Roger Casement. Quinn met Casement in 1914 when he came on a fundraising trip for the Irish Volunteers. An admirer of Casement’s idealism as a defender of human rights in Africa and South America, Quinn hosted him in his apartment and put him in touch with potential sources of funds.

Though their friendship was tempered by



Quinn’s dismay at Casement’s unabashedly pro-German sympathies, the death sentence handed down in an English court led Quinn to put aside his enmity for the Central Powers and mount a campaign to spare Casement from hanging. Casement’s treason in trafficking with Germany, Quinn argued, had to be balanced against his motives as an Irish patriot. Quinn wrote a long memorandum to the British Foreign Office arguing for commutation of Casement’s sentence. He gathered the signatures of prominent Americans and pressured the State Department to send a cable.

Quinn’s efforts were to no avail. Casement was hanged in London’s Pentonville Prison on August 3, 1916. Ten days later, on August 13, Quinn published an elegy in the *New York Times Magazine* in which he wrote:

“Roger Casement is dead. Tried in an English court upon the charge of treason, convicted by an English jury, sentenced by English judges, judgment affirmed by an English court of appeal, hanged in accordance with English law, his body buried in quicklime in a nameless grave, his case is now transferred from the English courts and English public to the court of history and to the judgment of the world.”

Soon after the execution, Quinn learned that in the interests of dampening calls for sparing Casement’s life, the British government had stealthily circulated diaries detailing his “degenerate” behavior as a closeted homosexual. Furious at what he saw as a vile smear directed against his dead friend, Quinn threatened to take the matter public and expose the diaries as forgeries. Presented with convincing evidence the diaries were authentic, Quinn dropped his plan. Still, he wondered, how did Casement’s private sexual behavior justify his being hanged for high treason?

For his part, John Quinn never renounced Roger Casement’s friendship. He never recanted his admiration nor questioned the sincerity of Casement’s sacrifice. He knew the man’s courage and the cause he sacrificed his life for. Was Casement a patriot or a traitor? Was he one with those in the Dublin GPO whose “excess of love bewildered them till they died?” Was he to be numbered in their song? John Quinn had little doubt what final judgment history and the world would reach. **IA**



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The Image Maker

Continued from page 42

me to FleishmanHillard. And, we won the Derby account. In 1990, FleishmanHillard Saunders, was founded, and it grew to become Ireland's number one public relations agency and one of the firm's most successful offices.

Tell me about your Irish American experience.

It's lots of things, but I like to think there's a common thread of a generosity of spirit that goes through Irish America, and it's why Irish America is so helpful to the Irish coming over. I certainly wouldn't be doing what I'm doing today without people like Charlie McCabe at Manufacturers Hanover and Don Criqui at CBS television, Dennis Long and Mike Roarty, the president and director of marketing of Anheuser Busch. And later on people like Dan Rooney at the Pittsburgh Steelers. He brought the Steelers to play the Bears in Dublin and we worked on that game. Everywhere I turned people helped me. And not just in small ways, in very significant ways.

The generosity of Irish America has made such a huge difference in my life. I don't want to generalize, but I think my generation of Irish had talent, but sometimes I think a lot of us lacked confidence. The Irish Americans had confidence. I made my first trip to New York in 1978, before that most of my trips out of Ireland were to the U.K. where you were not made to feel that good about yourself if you were Irish. Now, that has all changed and we stand shoulder-to-shoulder with the U.K., but back then it was somewhat different. For me it was like you get off the plane here in New York and within the first 48 hours realize that for the first time in your life not only was it okay to be Irish, it was good to be Irish.

What's the secret to being a good PR person?

I'm a great believer in it being real, and my mother, who professes not to understand a lot about PR, will say, "we all end up getting the reputations we deserve, whether it's in our personal lives or professional lives." And to my core, I believe FleishmanHillard gets the reputation we deserve and I want us all in the firm to work to make sure that our clients get the reputations they deserve. Sometimes companies are made of great engineers, but they're not great communicators, so we try to help them be understood. Also, very importantly, is when we can turn to a client and say, "That's not good; you



Chatting about the movie *Philomena* Dame Judi Dench.

really need to change your behavior. The firm needs to change its behavior." I think we do our best work when we're working for people who are trying to treat their staff well and treat their customers well. And they are the companies that I would want to be associated with.

There is a profound change happening in business. I see it breaking out everywhere, where companies are really trying to find out what's their purpose, and it's coming for many reasons, but it's very much coming from their staff. It's coming from millennials who are purpose-driven in a way that maybe people of another generation weren't and they're asking why are we doing this? What's our legacy? I think these are all very important subjects.

What's the difference between PR and advertising?

The big difference between what we in PR do and what advertising does is they are paid and we are earned. We are trying to persuade audiences of our argument, or the argument of the client, through content, through video.

There's a phenomenal shift towards the back-to-basics idea that content is king; companies that are succeeding online have to have really good, quality content, and if it's not done in a way that's attractive, people won't read it.

The blogosphere has created huge opportunities for people in terms of storytelling, too. And who better to tell the stories than PR people?

It seems that integrity is a priority for you.

Well, I wouldn't want to in any way claim exclusivity over it. I think most of us are brought up by our parents or family or friends to do the right thing, and I do think trust and reputation are hard earned; the reputation of great brands is hard earned and it can be blown very easily.

So much of the time now people are looking for the story behind the brand, or they want to know that a brand comes from an ethical owner. That's an increasing phenomenon of our time. And I think in the same way with my staff and me, I have to ask, "Am I just about vacuous words?" or, "What do I stand for?" I don't get to make that decision; companies don't get to make them – other people decide what your reputation is. I'm very conscious of that and therefore one has to be authentic. I do my best to engage with everybody in my life in a way that's based on treating everybody as a peer.

What do you see that unites people globally?

First of all, as a big sweeping generalization, I think the biggest gift you can give to other people is your energy, your personal energy. I think no matter where they are around the world people like being around people who are upbeat. There are some nuances in that; I think there are some countries where it's a little darker, but I think people like that. And people are always trying to do better.

I remember being in Tehran 14 or 15 years ago and talking to people there and I would repeatedly ask, "If you couldn't be in Iran, where else would you like to be?" And every single one said America. America has the sense of positivity about it. Energy, being positive, I think people are attracted to that.

The other thing that is really important for us all to learn, I need to learn it myself, is that God gave us one mouth and two ears so that we would listen twice as much as we talk. And everybody wants to be listened to.

What has your first year as CEO been like?

I was responsible for 15 percent of the business and the next day I had oversight of 100 percent. That's a big responsibility and in this job it's important to stay fit – mentally fit, physically fit – you owe it to people. I see my position as a joyous responsibility. People are looking to me to give leadership. I try to do that with very regular communication with staff. I try to show empathy toward people. It's a very competitive market and the achievements in terms of this year would be that we're going to have a very good year. We have a couple months to go, but, unless we screw it up, this will be the best year in the 70-year history of the company.

Thank you.

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