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IRISH HERITAGE MONTH

HISTORY LESSON

Professor traces Irish roots in Rhode Island history

By James A. Johnson

Staff writer

Johnson@NewportRI.com

NEWPORT — History professor Scott Molloy helped close out Newport’s celebration of Irish Heritage Month with a nearly hourlong lecture on how the Irish fit into Rhode Island history.

Before a packed hall Thursday night in Salve Regina University’s Young Building on Bellevue Avenue, he tossed out “bits and pieces” of the stumbles and progress the Irish have made in Rhode Island.

“You can’t appreciate where you are now, if you don’t know where you’ve been,” he said at the event sponsored by the Museum of Newport Irish History.

Molloy said he has spoken to the museum four times before and described them as his favorite audience in the world.

“You folks, more than any other group I speak to, are knowledgeable about Irish history and yet you are still hungry for more facts and figures and interpretations,” Molloy said. “This is so different from almost any other place that I go. I always cherish and relish the fact that I get a chance to come back here.”

He thanked the museum members for their good works and for attending the lecture on such a miserable evening.

“Or as the Irish would say, ‘a beautiful day,’” he added in a reference to Ireland’s rainy climate.

Molloy, a professor at the University of Rhode Island, spoke from notes without the aid of a microphone on “Rhode Island Irish Socio-Economic Progress: The ‘Shanty’ to ‘Lace Curtain’ during the Gilded Age.”

Despite the reference to the Gilded Age, his talk focused on the Irish in Providence rather than Newport. Like in Newport, however, the Irish in Providence lived in what was then known as the Fifth Ward. That area stretched from what is now City Hall and the Cathedral of Sts. Peter and Paul to the waterfront and was mostly considered a shanty town.

In response to a question, he said “lace curtain” referred to people who were a little uppity and those in the shanty were on the poor side. He also described the difference this way: “The lace curtain were the people that

when visitors came over the pig went behind the couch and the lace curtain. In the shanty, the pig stayed in the parlor.”

On the bad side of the Irish, he talked about inebriation and fighting. The Irish often had large families and sometimes a baby would be left on a park bench. The parents were so poor they could not care for another child and were hoping someone would claim it and give the child a good home. That practice led to the building of an orphanage run by the Sisters of Mercy.

The execution of John Gordon in 1845 rated comment by Molloy. Gordon, an Irishman, was the last person executed in Rhode Island. His conviction and execution have been ascribed by researchers to anti-Catholic and anti-Irish bias.

Molloy identified two people in the audience who recently played a part in a move to pardon Gordon. Former state Rep. Peter Martin sponsored legislation that led to a pardon for Gordon in 2011. Ken Dooley of Newport is the author of the play “The Murder Trial of John Gordon.”

Molloy also told of Alfred M. Williams, a Brown University graduate who became a reporter for the New York Tribune after the Civil War and was sent to Ireland to cover the Fenian War. While there, he amassed a collection of Irish literature, which he brought back with him when he returned to Rhode Island.

He then worked for the Providence Journal, which sent him back to Ireland where he gathered more material for his collection.

When he died, his collection — regarded as one of the largest collections of Irish literature outside of Ireland — was given to the Providence Public Library.

The library is planning a major exhibit featuring that material next year — the 100th anniversary of the Easter Rebellion. Also featured in that exhibit will be an original copy of the Irish Declaration of Independence, signed by all the founders.

“Wow! This is worth a bus ride to Providence and then have a bite to eat and a good time,” Molloy said.

Molloy pointed to two Providence institutions known for having been anti-Irish Catholic in the 19th century: The Providence Journal and Brown University.

“You never get through an Irish lecture without kicking them around a little bit,” Molloy said.

He quoted several old Journal news stories expressing anti-Irish sentiments and noted that in the late 1890s, the Journal hoisted an Orange flag atop its building during the St. Patrick’s Day parade.

There were no Irish Catholics enrolled at Brown University until 1889. Thirteen were admitted that year but were not allowed to join any college fraternity, Molloy said. So they started a new one.

All 13 graduated, Molloy said, and 10 became doctors or lawyers. “They became the creme-de-la- creme of Rhode Island society,” he said.

The achievements of Irish at Brown were more important to the lace-curtain Irish than to the shantytown Irish who were still living in Providence’s Fifth Ward, Molloy said.

“The shanty and the lace curtain were no more likely to intermingle with each other than the Protestants and Catholics were in order to break bread,” Molloy said. “The buzz in the ghetto — any ghetto — was that the people down the street opened their own store. The kid around the corner got a job at the police department. The guy who used to be hog carrier and a helper has graduated to a journeyman bricklayer.

“Those were achievements. Those were successes.”

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