

How Alcoholics Anonymous Started In Ireland

This article is based on material provided by the General Services Office of Alcoholics Anonymous in Ireland, on material from the AA archives, and on three talks given by Conor F., Richard P., and Jimmy R. at the 21st Anniversary meeting of the Dublin Groups of Alcoholics Anonymous, held in November 1967.

Until the early nineteen-forties, the treatment of alcoholism in Ireland was based on keeping the bottle away from the alcoholic – i.e., a long period of confinement in a hospital or drying-out home was prescribed. Alcoholics were hospitalised for six months or longer in the vague hope that the patient would lose the urge to drink, as if his constitution would, in some mysterious way, be changed so he could exercise control if he started drinking again. The AA way – to keep the alcoholic away from the bottle by his own consent and to treat alcoholism as a total disease, not just a medical problem – didn't arrive in Ireland until November 1946.

Two events led to the start of AA in Ireland. First, an Irishman, Conor F. from the West of Ireland, joined the AA in Philadelphia in 1943. Second, in that same year, AA arrived in Australia. In Sydney, an Irish (non-alcoholic) priest named Fr. Tom Dunlea, who was running a Boys Town home, had noticed and been impressed with the success of AA there. In 1946, while back in Ireland, he gave an interview to the Dublin Evening Mail about the home and in the course of it also spoke about the success of the Sydney AA group. This interview was the first introduction of AA to the general public in Ireland.

The writer for the newspaper gave a rather blurred impression of AA or perhaps the problem was Father Dunlea's imperfect understanding. In any event, while the article offers some good insights about AA, it's also full of wild misunderstandings – a good example of the kind of confusion that existed in the public imagination in AA's early days:

“The members (of AA) live together, doing more or less what they please. No temperance advocates are admitted into the clubs, nor are what they called controlled drinkers. Ministers of religion, doctors, and social workers can all help, but like other non-alcoholics, they must keep severely to their own duties and never mention the subject of drink. Any subject which might upset the convalescent peace of mind the members, such as that of politics, is carefully kept out of the conversation.

“There are two characteristics to be found in nearly all alcoholics: hypersensitivity and egocentricity. They have to be treated very carefully. They are sick people and have to be treated as such. So AA concentrates on that and makes no criticism of the amount of drink taken by people and makes no effort to close saloons. All the members keep their names secret from public. A great spirit of friendship is engendered among all the members, and the Society can claim to be one of the few on earth, if not the only one, in which God can be discussed by Jews, Protestants, and Catholics in a manner which hurts no one's feelings...”

In spite of its errors, this article proved to be – as early member Sackville M. later wrote – “the touchstone for the creation of AA groups in Ireland.” One of the people who read it was Conor F., who was in Ireland on holiday with his wife during what turned out to be a very rainy season. Conor Remembered:

"I was down in County Derry, looking out at the rain day after day. There were two things left for me to do: go back to America or get drunk. My wife saw a little piece in the paper, in which Fr. Dunlea spoke of the necessity of having an AA Group in Dublin. My wife put the challenge to me and asked me why I shouldn't start a group. In fact, I had taken along some AA books and literature. I don't know why, but I had four or five Big Books with me."

Conor went to the Evening Mail, outlined what AA had done in the United States and what it hoped to do in Ireland. He gave a brief account of his own drinking and said that he came from County Roscommon and was endeavouring to start a group in Dublin. A box number was printed at the end of the article and an invitation: "Those interested, please reply."

Conor received a few answers, some ribald, some unprintable. One man wanted money to sign up; one woman inexplicably wanted to trade her double bed for two twin beds. Conor visited anyone who seemed in earnest; he got busy visiting doctors, priests, and others but met with no success. He was assured that no alcoholics existed in Southern Ireland and was advised not to waste his time in Dublin but to look for alcoholics in the North of Ireland. He was told that if alcoholics wanted to stop drinking, all they had to do was to join the Pioneer Association – Ireland's great temperance society. Most often, people told him that they had no wish to waste time on the usual crazy and short-lived ideas thought up by Americans. In short, he was getting nowhere fast and his holiday time in Ireland was running out.

Conor was near the point of conceding defeat when one morning he had breakfast with a sympathetic non-alcoholic friend, Eva Jennings, to whom he confided his difficulties. Jennings was a social worker and she advised him to meet a Dr. Norman Moore, head of St. Patrick's Hospital. She thought that Dr. Moore would not only be interested but helpful in a practical way.

This proved to be the case. Dr. Moore had learned something about AA from a Reader's Digest article, and he told Conor that he has a patient who might be a suitable prospect and offered to introduce them to each other. Dr. Moore said, "Mr. F., I will tell you what I will do. I will turn over this patient to you, and if you can do something for him, I will be convinced that your organisation has something."

The patient was Richard P. from Belfast in County Down. Richard described what happened to him:

"I came up to Dublin in November 1946 as a voluntary patient in St. Patrick's Hospital. When I say 'voluntary' that's not quite accurate because I'd been collected off the back streets of Belfast about four days before by my sister-in-law. She took me to the doctor who told me I ought to go to a very pleasant hospital in Dublin for a rest. I said I wouldn't go because I'd just worked out a new system for collecting some money from a man whom I thought could be milked rather easily, and it seemed a great pity not to use this system, which I thought would finance my drinking for another month or two.

But my sister in law said to me, 'I think you'd better go.' I said, 'I have no intention of going,' and then she said, 'By the way, how many checks have you cashed this week?' Well, I knew I had cashed about six, so to be on the safe side I said, 'I think two.' And she said, 'Have you a bank account?' And I said, 'Oh no, I've no bank account but I'll pay this money back somehow.' And she said, 'I think perhaps this may influence your decision to go to the hospital in Dublin.' And I said, 'Well, perhaps on second thought, I might go.'

Two days later, with a Methodist minister along as a sort of extra precaution, we got into a car to go down to Dublin. Well, the car broke down in Newry and I was ready to make a determined effort to escape. If I'd been let out of their sight for more than three minutes, I would have found my way back to Belfast without any doubt at all. But they knew my form pretty well by that time and they didn't let me out of their sight, even though it meant they couldn't have anything to eat; they just had to sit and watch me while the car was being mended.

So there I was at St. Patrick's Hospital. After three days Dr. Moore sent for me and talked to me about my past career – if you can call it a career! – and he said, 'I think you're an alcoholic.' I was absolutely livid, because I knew I ought to be in prison, I knew I ought to be shut up in a mental institution for life, but at least I wasn't an alcoholic. I thought this was the ultimate insult. I'd read an article about Alcoholics Anonymous in Reader's Digest and I'd been filled with pity and commiseration for those poor people who couldn't control their drinking.

But Dr. Moore said, 'I think you're an alcoholic. I'm pretty sure I can teach you to sleep, which you don't do very often at the moment. I think I can teach you to eat, and I might even, with a bit of luck, teach you how to think. But when I've done that, I shall have to let you out of this place and if anybody's willing to pay for you to come back, I'm quite sure you'll be back again within six months.'

That shook me a bit because I knew it was true. And then he said to me, 'However, I have just recently met a man who seems to be something like you are and who belongs to an organisation which has enabled him to stay apparently happy and certainly sober for quite a time. And he wants to start something of the sort in Dublin. If you'd like to meet him, I'll arrange for you to do that.'

Well, I didn't want to particularly want to meet this man at all. I thought, I have had enough of these lectures about drink; this is probably some new system of telling me how bad I am and what I ought not to do, However, if it gives me a chance of getting out of hospital for an hour or two, I shall certainly take it."

Richard was sent, with a male nurse as an escort, to Conor's hotel. He expected to get "the usual lecture" about how he'd wrecked his life and his family's life and how he mustn't do this and mustn't do that. But that was not Conor's response.

"To my astonishment, Conor merely said, 'Well, I understand you have a bit of trouble about drinking and so have I. I don't think drink now. If you'd like to talk to me about that, well and good; if you'd rather go across the road and get drunk yourself, it's quite okay with me. Go ahead and do it. Or we could talk about horse racing or anything else.'

I was flabbergasted by this. I think if he'd said, 'You mustn't go out' (the male nurse had left by this time) I probably would have gone and gotten drunk, but I decided I'd better hear what he had to say. Then he started talking about himself, not about me. And as he talked, I began to see that this was a man who spoke sense, a man who knew things from personal experience, not from what he'd read in a book or from any academic point of view. He was talking about real experiences, real feelings, real troubles, which I was still experiencing.

Conor told me I was always getting into trouble not because I was so bad but because these behaviour patterns were a symptom of an illness, an illness which he had, an illness which with the help of AA he managed to arrest, and that if I wanted to do the same thing he would talk to me about it. And I did want to do the same thing; straight away I saw that this was my chance to achieve some sort of life without having to admit that I was a weakling. So I hung onto every word that Conor told me and I left him in a state of astonishment, really, a feeling that here was a new world opening for me if I could only learn how to understand it and grasp it and live it. It was arranged that I could see him again, so I slept in the hospital at night, and in the daytime, we went around trying to get people interested in AA

Conor and Richard began to go through some of the responses to the announcement in the Evening Mail. Conor remembered:

I believe the first one we approached was a man by the name of Leo. WE went over to Leo's and I gave him the usual pitch as to what AA was trying to do and what it had done, about the article that was in the paper, and about the card that he had sent us. He listened, and when we were all through we got a blank stare from him, because Leo knew nothing about the article. He admitted he drank – though not to excess – but he had never sent in the card.

But Leo said, 'I'll tell you, men, I have a brother who could really use your program.' He said, 'My brother Matt who lives down on Dawson Street, if you contact him, I'm sure he will join.' We ambled off down to Matt. Matt was a typical Dublin man. He looked over his glasses and looked under them, and he looked us all around, and he listened. And we told him the story. And he admitted that he drank a little bit. He said, 'But I thought that I sent a card in for my brother Leo!' {Matt later stayed sober.}

Eventually, Conor and Richard collected four or five men, and the first closed AA meeting was held on November 18, 1946, in Leo's house. A week later, the first public meeting of AA was held in The Country Shop, a restaurant run by the Irish Countrywoman's Association (who displayed great courage in accepting the booking of an unknown and dangerously named association). Conor sat Richard down beforehand and told him he'd be the speaker:

I was appalled {Richard said} because I didn't know anything at all about AA except it was something that I wanted. And I said, 'I can't talk about this subject because I don't know anything about it.' Conor said, 'That's nonsense. At least you know more about it than the people who are coming who have never even heard of it!'

Conor explained the importance of that first open meeting:

"Richard was the first man, I believe, in the British Isles to stand up at a public meeting, to admit that he was an alcoholic, that he was powerless over the use of alcohol, and that he had joined the association of Alcoholics Anonymous. And it was when Richard made that statement, that was the very minute that AA started in Ireland.

About forty-five people attended that first public meeting and about twelve “joined up.” One of those who was at that first meeting and who stayed sober was Jimmy R. He remembered how he got there:

“I had read that first article in the Evening Mail about a group of Alcoholics Anonymous being started in Dublin, and I was interested but I forgot to put my reply into the Evening Mail office. So of course I started another day’s drinking and that was that. It was forgotten about.

One or two nights afterward I picked up the Mail again, and here was this damned article again! Now I took a dislike to this American. Who the hell did he think he was? What was he coming over to Ireland for, to spoil our drinking? It was the twenty-fifth of November and the meeting that night was in the Country Shop. Now I had a very important meeting to go to – it was a trade union meeting and my job was at stake. And I set out to go to this bloody meeting very much in fighting form because I had had a message from the union stating (which on previous occasions had to be postponed because of my absence), I would be fined £5. Five Pounds! Look at the drink you’d get for £5, and I wasn’t even worth £5! So I thought I’d have to go to this union meeting if they’d withdraw my card and I’d be out of a job and what am I going to do for drink? You see, drink was always in my mind.

I went down to the bus stop but because there wasn’t a bus waiting for me, I went into a pub which was conveniently located at the bus stop, and I had a few more. I was still going down to the union meeting – these could be lively affairs, especially when you’d got a few drinks in you. But I came out of the pub and believe me or believe me not, there still wasn’t a bus – a number 11, it should have been. And I said, to hell with them, and I walked down and got a number 10 bus and the number 10 stopped almost opposite the Country Shop. Then it happened: I remembered that that yank was going to be in there tonight and he was going to stop us from drinking! That’s what he thinks!

I went into the Country Shop that night determined to tell this fellow where to get off, and how to get back to America in the quickest way. I walked in the door and this Yank put out his hand. He said, ‘Good evening. My name is Conor. What’s yours?’ now the biggest bowsie – excuse the language – that ever walked couldn’t strike a man for saying that!

He said, ‘Sit down, make yourself at home.’ That’s all right, I thought, I’ll get him before the night’s out. He said he was almost three years sober – I didn’t believe it. Also on the platform was Richard and my good friend Matt, who has since passed on. Both of them were bleary eyed – they could have done with a drink! Well, they told their story and I said, ‘My God, if these fellows are alcoholics, so am I. And if these fellows are making an effort to do something about their drinking, I think I’d get along with them.’

Conor came up to me afterward and said, ‘What do you think of it?’ I said, ‘I don’t know what to think. I think I could do with it.’ He said, ‘Do you believe in a power greater than yourself?’ I had to think a minute but I knew what he meant. If he’d have said to me, ‘Jimmy, do you believe in God?’ I would have said ‘No,’ and that was what I was waiting for. Then I’d know this was just another screwy religion. But he didn’t say that; he said, ‘You ask that power, tomorrow morning

when you wake up, to help you get through the day without a drink.' And he said, 'You do your utmost to keep away from that first drink.'

I went home. My good wife didn't ask any questions because she knew if she did, she'd get a rude answer as she'd been getting for quite some time. I went to bed (terrible night) and I woke up (shocking morning). But for the first time in years, I remembered where I'd been the night before. I had been to an AA meeting. I had been offered something. I had been told what to do: ask for help. Now praying was not for me, so I think all I said was, 'Please God get me through this day.'

Conor commented: "Jim became very active and was the sparkplug in the early months because Richard was on the road travelling. He has his own AA room in his house with a Big Book and what AA literature was then available, and his wife was never out of tea and eats for those who dropped in." He added "O Happy Day that Jim missed that bus to the 'bloody' union meeting."

Though Jimmy R. stayed sober, many did not, and by the end of two or three weeks, there were only four or five men left in the group. Now there wasn't enough money to pay the rent for the meeting room in The Country Shop, and so for six weeks, meetings were held in a cinema tearoom. Then some money was raised and the group resumed their tenancy of The Country Shop, where meetings continued to be held until 1978 when it closed down. For years, The Country Shop was AA's official address; Dublin Group Number One gave its address on its letterhead as "c/o The Country Shop, 23 St. Stephen's Green."

In January 1947, Conor returned to the United States, and the young Dublin group almost came to a standstill since none of the original members had much idea of how to reach out to other alcoholics. However, a new member was to provide the shot in the arm the group needed. Sackville M. was a retired major from the British army who had joined AA and settled in Ireland. He became a force for good for the struggling group.

And struggles there were. The first group secretary to be appointed was given five shillings (then about a dollar) for postage and minor expenses. After about four months, he came in very much the worse for wear and broke up the meeting. The main anxiety of the group was not to try and help him but to find out if he had anything left of the postage money. Sackville and Jimmy managed to salvage the book containing members' names and addresses and together they started not only to put the little group back on its feet, but to put some life into it.

Two things were evident from the start: 1) Either the Catholic Church would be made an ally or AA in Ireland would be sunk. 2) Either AA publicized itself in Dublin or it would perish of dry rot.

As to the latter, Sackville got busy and began to send letters about AA every ten days or so to the Evening Mail, beginning with a point of interest and ending with a punch line, saying that an open meeting was held every Monday and that it was hoped people would come along to observe and listen to what was going on. Sackville later described the difficulties and isolation of those early days.

"We had no publicity worth mentioning; no doctor members; no country members; no women members; very few contacts with the clergy of the church, or with the medical profession. We had no literature of our own. We had no contact with any other group in the world and only a very tenuous one with New York."

Gradually, the attendance at the public meetings increased and news of AA started to percolate through Dublin. Soon the other two evening papers asked for letters too, on the understanding that their letters would be differently phrased. The police soon were able to direct people to the meetings. Membership began to grow, though the growth was painfully slow. A woman or two joined. Doctors and Magistrates came along – some to listen, others to talk to the members. In 1948, Sackville began publishing the AA magazine, *The Road Back*, which – like *The Grapevine* in the U.S. – forged a wider communication between members and groups, both reflecting AA growth and encouraging it.

AA was becoming respectable, but not yet in a very important quarter – the Church. The vast majority of the Irish population belong to the Catholic faith, so it became very necessary to acquire the goodwill of the Catholic clergy.

Fortunately, Sackville got to know one of the professors of theology at St. Patrick's College, Maynooth, the heart of the Catholic Church in Ireland. This man was the editor of the influential Maynooth College paper, *The Furrow*, and was to become a very great and valued helper to AA in Ireland. He arranged for the publication in *The Furrow* of a most favourable article about AA called "Drink and Compulsion." AA co-founder Bill W. later referred to the publication of this article as an "impressive step forward in AA's relations with the churches." Most important was the decisive influence the article had on priests throughout Ireland. For now when a parish priest was dubious about supporting the formation of an AA group in his parish, he could be referred to prestigious Maynooth College and its approval of AA.

In 1950, Sackville decided he should "make AA safe for himself" by retiring from the secretaryship he'd held since August 1947. He said at the time, "No group has ever grown up as a result of one man's work. But equally, few groups ever mature without some directing hand. It was my own good fortune to be cast for this role. I can truthfully say that the big winner in this whole transaction was, without any doubt whatever, myself."

By the end of 1950, AA had taken root in Ireland, though group and membership numbers were still comparatively small. Ireland was one of the countries on Bill and Lois's itinerary when they visited AA in Western Europe in 1950. They went to Dublin, Belfast, Cork and Limerick, taking to AA members and visiting meetings, as well as meeting such dignitaries as the Lord Mayor of Dublin. Everywhere, the Irish press was eager to meet Bill – a far cry from just three and a half years before, when *The Evening Mail* ran the first small announcement of an AA meeting. From Dublin, Bill wrote Dr. Bob about the excitement of seeing the beginnings of AA in Europe: "Like us in the early days, they can take nothing for granted... The usual debates whether God made man, or man made God, rage on. They fear all sorts of calamities which you and I know won't happen, and yet they press on. It makes us relive old times."

Richard P., the first person to join AA in Ireland, once said, "I have often thought that if Irish AA was a race horse, one could easily say of its pedigree that it was by Conor F. out of St. Patrick's – which would be a very good staying pedigree!"