



A paper presented to the 23rd Australasian Conference of Irish Studies, Sydney University, November 2018 by Peter Burke.

Chemistry in Motion –The special relationship between Eamon de Valera Taoiseach/President of Ireland and Hon Peter Fraser Prime Minister of New Zealand.

At 2.37pm on the 12 December 1950, Hon Peter Fraser, arguably New Zealand’s greatest Prime Minister, died in Wellington. He was just 66 years and 3 months old. What followed was one of the biggest State Funerals seen in the city. His body lay in state at Parliament, people were given time off work to pay their respects to him, flags flew at half-mast and 863 wreaths were sent to his family. Tributes flowed in from all around New Zealand and overseas including the King and Queen. Prime Minister Nehru of India said he was deeply grieved by Fraser’s passing and noted his progressive ideas and constructive statesmanship. Tributes came in from the Secretary General of the United Nations, the Prime Ministers of Australia and South Africa to name a few.

Notably some of the greatest outpouring of grief came from the leaders of a country which Peter Fraser grew to love in his long and brilliant political career as a leader, both nationally and internationally.

“I wish to convey to you my profound personal sorrow and that of the people of Ireland on the death of Mr Peter Fraser. I deeply regret the passing of this great New Zealander whose statesmanlike achievements won him respect and friendship everywhere and whose amiable qualities are warmly remembered in this country.” (Cable from Sean T O’Kelly, President of Ireland to the Governor General of New Zealand 12 December 1950.)

The next day on page 4 of the Irish Press the headline read: ‘Ex-Premier of New Zealand Dead’. It carried the text of further tributes from Irish leaders including the Taoiseach, J.A. Costello, who sent the following message to the Prime Minister of New Zealand saying: *“I wish to express to you and to the government of New Zealand our deepest sympathy on the passing of Mr Fraser. The passing of this great statesman who never ceased to show friendliness to Ireland fills with a sense of loss his many friends in this country.”*

And finally Sean McBride, the Irish Minister of External Affairs had this to say: *“I would be grateful if your Excellency (Freyberg) would convey to the relatives of Peter Fraser the deep sympathy of my colleagues and myself in their sad bereavement. His character and personality transcended the political arena and commanded the respect of the Irish people who valued his friendship. They sincerely condole with New Zealand in losing a great New Zealander. As one whom he counted among his friends, I feel a sense of personal loss at his death.”*

These are extraordinary tributes coming from the leaders of a country 18,000 kilometres away and poses the question why? I hope that over the next little while I can provide the answer, albeit by way of what is as an executive summary.

The reason for this outpouring of grief and praise is, I believe, due to the special relationship which Peter Fraser and the great Irish leader Eamon de Valera developed during their long and successful political careers. This paper shows how the pair met and developed a deep respect and affection for each other which in turn forged a strong and everlasting relationship between Ireland and New Zealand. It looks at their respective political careers and how much they had in common in terms of policy – both foreign and domestic, the way they worked in the political environment, their leadership style, their personal foibles and attributes and some of the passions they shared.

My discovery of this story came about when researching the book *‘True to Ireland, Ireland’s ‘Conscientious Objectors’ in New Zealand in WWII’*, which will be published next year. This paper draws on information in the book.

So let’s look at their respective backgrounds and some of the key highlights in the careers of de Valera and Fraser leading up to their first meeting in 1935.

Peter Fraser was born on the 28th of August 1884 to Isabella and Donald Fraser in their small house on the Hill of Fearn near the village of Tain at Ross-Shire in the Scottish Highlands. Peter, in his early days known as Pat, was one of 4 children – 3 boys and a girl. His mother belonged to the McLeods of Sutherlandshire and her father has been a victim of the Sutherlandshire clearances which saw small crofters evicted from their land by heartless landlords. Both his parents spoke Gaelic. The treatment of Fraser’s agrarian ancestors would later be one of the reasons why he and de Valera got on so well together. Before their children were born the Frasers’ spent time in Canada where his father joined the North West Mounted Police. Later one of Peter Fraser’s brothers would emigrate to Canada, his sister would go to live in South Africa and his other brother would become a trade union leader in London. Another clue to Peter Fraser’s move into politics lies in the fact that his father Donald, a boot maker, was a leading member of the Scottish Liberal Party and something of a radical. His father’s shop became known as the ‘House of Parliament’ because of the fiery debates that often took place there.

The Frasers were poor and Peter received a ‘basic working class education’ and had little interest in sport. But while at school he was known for his debating skills – something he would hone to his advantage in later life. As a young man he attended night school to further his education while working during the day as an apprentice carpenter. After that job fell through he headed to London where he also worked in the construction industry and at the same time he joined the

Independent Labour Party. He had prepared well for a career in politics. On 10 November 1910 Peter Fraser set sail for New Zealand where he felt his future aspirations in life would be met primarily as a trade union activist.

On the other side of the Atlantic, on 14 October 1882 Eamon was born in New York to Catherine Coll and Juan Vivion de Valera. Interestingly he was also at times called George and Edward. Catherine Coll was originally from Bruere, Country Limerick and her husband is described as being an artist born in Spain. According to Coll her husband died in 1885 leaving her and her son in 'poor circumstances'. At the age of two, Eamon de Valera was taken to Ireland by his uncle Ned and was reared by his grandmother, Elizabeth Coll in Limerick. Even when his mother remarried in the mid-1880s young Eamon did not go back to live with her. In a sense he was an orphan.

His education was good in comparison with Fraser's, with Eamon de Valera winning a scholarship to Blackrock College in Dublin. At college he discovered rugby and in 1905 while at Rockwell College in Tipperary played fullback for his College in the senior Munster competition. (Incidentally Munster remains the only Irish provincial rugby side ever to beat the All Blacks more than 40 years ago.) Dev excelled as a student winning several scholarships and carving out a career in mathematics. At the same time he became an activist in the Gaelic League where he met Sinead Flannagan – a teacher and four years his senior. They married in Dublin on 8 January 1908. His involvement in the Gaelic League was the catalyst for his further politicisation and in November 1913 he joined the Irish Volunteers where he quickly rose through the ranks and within a year was Captain of the Donnybrook Company.

So you can see that both de Valera and Fraser headed down a path of political activism and, interestingly, both rose to prominence in 1916.

While Australia and New Zealand were commemorating the first anniversary of the disastrous Gallipoli campaign, on April 27 1916, Eamon de Valera was commanding the volunteer forces at Boland Mill in Dublin. After the Rising was put down he was arrested, court martialled and sentenced to death, but this was commuted and he was sentenced to penal servitude for life.

On 7 July 1916, Peter Fraser was part of a group of trade unionists who formed the Labour Party in Wellington. The party came about through the amalgamation of trade union organisations and the Social Democratic Party and one of the reasons for its formation was its united opposition to conscription in WWI. This was also fuelled by the anger of a number of high profile New Zealand trade unionists to the way the British crushed the Easter Rising in Ireland. A number of unionists from the West Coast of New Zealand were prominent, which is seen by many historians as the birth place of the Labour Party. Two years later Peter Fraser was elected to Parliament as MP for Wellington Central and held the seat until his death in 1950. He also served a term as President of the Party in 1920/21. A year after entering Parliament he married Janet Kemp – nee Munro, from Glasgow and, unsurprisingly, she was also a political activist.

Fraser was opposed to conscription and WWI on principle, which led to him in December 1916 being sentenced to 12 months jail in New Zealand for sedition – for speaking out against

conscription. Fraser never registered as a conscientious objector and would never have been called up anyway because he was deemed medically unfit because of his poor eyesight.

So in 1916 both Fraser and de Valera were prisoners of His Majesty at the same time, with de Valera languishing in a British jail for his role in the Rising, and Fraser for opposing conscription to a British war. This was the only time Fraser was in jail, whereas Dev spent a lot more time behind bars until he embraced the political system in 1926.

I am not going to give a history lesson on what happened to de Valera and the events that subsumed Irish politics from April 1916 to March 1926. Suffice to say most people here know well the events of the Troubles, the Treaty, the Civil War and de Valera's various roles in these.

From 1916 until 1932, both men pursued their political objectives with vigour and zeal. Fraser was an influential person in his party and became deputy leader in 1933 while de Valera was elected to the Dail in 1923 where he effectively had to bite his tongue over having to take the 'Oath of Allegiance', which he described as 'an empty political formula'.

The next event of significance was de Valera's resignation from Sinn Fein and the founding of Fianna Fail and the party's success at the polls in 1927. In 1932 he made a breakthrough when his Fianna Fail party, with the help of the Irish Labour Party, managed to win the election which saw de Valera become the President of the Executive Council of the Irish Free State. Dev was now in charge.

Three years later, on 6 December 1935, the Labour Party in New Zealand was elected into office and Peter Fraser became Deputy Prime Minister under Michael Joseph Savage, who to this day remains the most revered and loved politicians in the history of New Zealand. The country had endured the depression and wanted a change and the people delivered that with Labour winning 53 of the 80 seats in the Parliament. Savage, ably supported by Fraser and his colleagues, drove massive social and economic reforms at an astounding pace.

So let's recap for a moment. What I have done so far is paint a picture of two men, born in countries foreign to the ones they would lead. One formally educated, the other a self-made man. Both revolutionaries in their own right who were prepared to go to jail for their beliefs, both from humble beginnings and men who married women who were activists like themselves. Men who were never swayed from the goal of doing what they thought was best for their people.

Now let's look deeper into what these two men had in common and how this led to them taking an instant liking to each other when they met in the four meetings known meetings they had in 1935, 1941 and two in 1948.

- ✓ Both were journalists – de Valera founded the Irish Press – Fraser was the editor of the Labour party newspaper – the Maoriland worker (so of course was Churchill).
- ✓ Both were abstemious and essentially non-drinkers and perhaps that is why they were something of a misfit in terms of world leaders such as Churchill. They did not like big fancy dinners
- ✓ They were both quiet individuals – almost loners
- ✓ They treated their staff well but worked them hard

- ✓ They were passionate about the indigenous language of their respective countries – Dev about Irish and Fraser was a strong supporter of the Maori people and their language.
- ✓ While Fraser wasn't Irish he was in every sense of the word a Gael and the Irish said so.
- ✓ Fraser's folks had suffered at the Sutherland land clearances so both men knew what it was like to be deprived of their ancestral land. This I believe is one of the reasons why Fraser was so sympathetic and in tune with the Maori people in NZ because he saw them suffering in the same way as his folks had with their land being taken from them by the English.
- ✓ De Valera and Fraser were close to the Columban Missionary Society - Dev through his connections at Maynooth and Fraser through befriending the Columbans in Wellington. My godfather, Fr Jim McGlynn was a Columban priest, who was specifically invited by Fraser to a reception for when Dev visited NZ in May 1948.
- ✓ Both were jailed for opposing the British
- ✓ They were born in countries other than the ones they eventually led
- ✓ Both were founders of their respective parties and supported social reform
- ✓ While de Valera was qualified academically, Fraser was a highly intelligent self-made, self-educated man
- ✓ Both had poor eyesight which was a pity because they both loved literature.
- ✓ While Fraser was not a Catholic, many of his friends were and he was a frequent visitor to Catholic schools and institutions and died in a hospital run by nuns. One of his best friends was a famous NZ poet, Eileen Duggan, who was Catholic.
- ✓ During the war Fraser visited Rome and his wife Janet, was instrumental in bringing 725 Polish orphan children to New Zealand in October 1944. This was done in conjunction with the Polish Red Cross and the Catholic Church and was another example of the Frasers strong connections with the Catholic Church.
- ✓ New Zealand and Ireland had similar foreign policies and both stood up for the small nations. Both Ireland and NZ opposed the Italian invasion of Abyssinia in 1936.

So given those similarities it is not surprising that the two men would have quite a bit to talk about in way that was unique to them.

There were also some differences:

- ❖ De Valera was seen as a polarising person and not loved by all Irish people. Fraser on the other hand was generally liked by all people and was seen as a unifying person, an extremely competent Minister and Prime Minister and regarded by many as NZ's greatest, although not necessarily the most popular Prime Minister of all time. Savage was the most popular.
- ❖ Fraser was a Presbyterian and Dev a Catholic, but Fraser was never bigoted and was loved by Catholics and especially the Irish.
- ❖ Peter Fraser never fought in any battle unlike de Valera
- ❖ Dev played Rugby, embraced the GAA and loved sport – Fraser was indifferent to sport – work was his life.

But these differences seem small compared to the many similarities and common interests that they had. The difference didn't seem to matter.

So now to those meetings.

On 29 May 1935, Peter Fraser and his wife Janet were preparing to leave for the UK, their first trip home since Fraser left in there in 1910. He was still in opposition at the time, but as Deputy Leader of the party was chosen to go to London. The reason for going was for Fraser to attend the Empire Parliamentary Association Conference in London and also the British Trade Union Congress in Margate. There was a special farewell social hosted by the Wellington Central Branch (Wellington Central was Frasers electorate) of the Labour party at which he was presented with an attaché case and Janet a travelling bag. A few days after this farewell, the pair boarded the SS Mongolia bound for London via the Suez Canal and arrived there at the end of June.

It was a special trip for the Frasers' and they were welcomed by friends in London. Also travelling with the Frasers was Mark Fagan, a member of the Legislative Council, the so called 'Upper House' which was abolished in 1951. Fagan was Australian born, of Irish descent, a coal miner from the West Coast of NZ, a militant unionist, opponent of conscription, a Catholic and member of the Labour Party – perfect travelling companion for Fraser.

There is very little documentation about Fraser's attendance at either of the two conferences he attended. His personal diary of that year makes no mention of the sessions or any aspect of the trip. It is known that while in London he met with politicians, went to Smithfield Market and had talks with various NZ primary producer boards.

But all that aside, the largely uncelebrated and unpublicised aspect of his trip to the North Atlantic Archipelago (sometimes mistakenly referred to as the British Isles) was a visit to Dublin to meet Eamon de Valera.

There are many likely reasons for the side trip to Dublin including that Mark Fagan, who was with Fraser, had relatives in Co. Meath and Fraser had been an active member of the Irish Self Determination League in NZ. By virtue of being the MP for Wellington Central, Fraser had many Irish Catholic contacts and friends some of whom may have played a role in setting up the meeting with de Valera. It is clear that even before he left NZ and met de Valera ***Fraser has a 'soft spot' for Ireland and Irish Catholics***. In fact just days before he left on his trip to the UK (Wednesday April 24), Peter Fraser attended the Golden Jubilee celebration of St Patrick's College Wellington – one of many visits he paid to the college.

In their book, *Tomorrow Comes the Song* a biography of Peter Fraser, Bassett and King note that Fraser and de Valera 'had a cordial discussion about social and economic issues. From subsequent discussions it becomes clear that de Valera liked the social reforms that the Labour Party were to enact during their term in office. At the Empire Congress the issue of Italian aggression in Abyssinia was discussed and New Zealand openly opposed this, while other Commonwealth nations acquiesced to this. Ireland and de Valera joined with New Zealand in opposing Mussolini's aggression so was a topic that they would have discussed.

No doubt the pair would have talked about their respective political lives and clearly they got on well. While Fraser was a dutiful politician and supporter in terms of the Commonwealth, he and the Labour Party were not afraid to speak their mind on issues, even if it differed with the English establishment politicians. Fraser certainly did not buy into the English, and especially Winston Churchill's, demonisation of Eamon de Valera.

Quite to the contrary, when he returned to New Zealand from his trip in October 1935 he made public his favourable views on the Irish leader which were later recounted in a book by one of his colleagues James Thorn:

“He (Dev) is not the harum-scarum, impulsive person he has been painted. On the contrary, de Valera is a soft-voiced and quiet gentleman who went calmly about his actions and always seemed to have the responsibility of his position in the forefront of his mind”

This was a strong rebuke by Fraser for the English critics of de Valera and a clear indication of his support for the Irish leader and Ireland and a sign of how Fraser would act to support Irish people living in New Zealand. In particular a group of Irishmen who refused to be conscripted into the army but who wished to stay in New Zealand and work in industry, That is what my book – True to Ireland is about.

The next known meeting between the pair took place on 20 August 1941.

Much had happened in the intervening years since 1935:

The Labour Party in New Zealand had come to power in December 1935 and implemented far reaching social and economic reforms at a scorching pace.

In 1938, much to the annoyance of Winston Churchill, Neville Chamberlain handed back the Treaty Ports to Ireland, seeing off the last vestige of British occupation.

In September 1939 New Zealand quickly followed Britain and declared war on Germany while de Valera declared Ireland neutral, well actually friendly neutral to the Allies.

In October that year Fraser was sent to London to attend the Commonwealth Ministers Conference and to plan the war and to appoint Bernard Freyberg as the head of the NZ Division in the Middle East. Fraser was chosen for this task because the NZ Prime Minister, Michael Joseph Savage was dying. Savage died on March 27 1940 and within days Fraser was elected by the Labour Party to succeed him. Fraser now had the enormous task of prosecuting the war without the benefit of an experienced or talented cabinet.

On 3 May 1941 Fraser was once again heading for the UK along with Carl Berendsen, the Head of the Prime Ministers Department, and his Private Secretary Mr C.A. Jeffrey. They travelled via Singapore and the Middle East, then to London and eventually Dublin. Fraser's trip was focused on talks with Churchill and his war cabinet and to meet New Zealand servicemen and women in the various war theatres. Fraser arrived in the Middle East in time to witness one of Churchill's military follies – the invasion of Greece and Crete which ended in disaster and cost the lives of nearly 700 New Zealanders and saw another 2,180 taken prisoner. It was another Gallipoli for New Zealand and a huge disaster in terms of manpower for the country, which

eventually worked to the advantage of the Irishmen wanting to stay in New Zealand. It could have been a lot worse had not Fraser been on the spot and insisted that the Royal Navy evacuate more Kiwi soldiers from Crete.

Fraser then went on to the UK where he toured air bases and military bases where Kiwis were stationed and also had the obligatory meeting and dinner with Winston Churchill at his weekend residence at Chequers. Fraser was not in the Churchill mould of being a big drinker and a fastidious eater, but it seems he coped with the situation.

Churchill's 'unusual' eating habits are the subject of a complete book in which it lists his favourite champagne as *Pol Roger* - nothing less, and also plover eggs, which he would go to great lengths to acquire. But if Churchill hated the Irish, it seemed he liked their food. Ironically, Irish stew was one of his favourites- even reheated. It's said that Winston Churchill 'was easily satisfied by the best'. Just what Fraser was served at Chequers is not recorded, but the chances are Irish stew was on the menu.

On 24 August 1941 Fraser flew to Baldonnel aerodrome near Dublin on board a BOAC De Havilland DH.91 Albatross Transport Frobisher aircraft, which could carry up to 22 passengers. At the time this four engine passenger aircraft, constructed mainly of wood, was considered one of the most modern medium range aircraft, and it's construction is similar to the famous Mosquito military aircraft was based on its design. According to Carl Berendsen, the windows of the aircraft were frosted over, presumably to block out any possible light from showing which might attract the attention of enemy aircraft. This trip to the Irish Republic would have been carefully planned to avoid any diplomatic spat with the UK, not to mention the risk of the aircraft being deliberately or accidentally shot down.

In Dublin Fraser and de Valera had, as one might expect, a most convivial few days together, briefing each other on what had happened in each other's country since they last met there in 1935. One can assume that Fraser also mentioned his Catholic and Irish friends back in Wellington and one would assume the topic of the 'Citizens of Eire' - the Irishmen appealing their conscription was raised. It is well documented that Fraser had been personally briefed on this. One could assume that in turn that Dev would likely have briefed Fraser on the economic situation in Ireland and how his policy of 'friendly neutrality' was working out. Dev, with his Irish charm that Fraser would have loved, probably told some stories of his past life and one can imagine there was much laughter at the meeting or meetings. There is no record of how long Fraser was in Dublin and what he did but his party may have taken in at least some of the sights of this beautiful Irish city.

In their book on Fraser - *Tomorrow Comes the Song*, Bassett and King, say of the meeting in Dublin with Fraser that:

"Eamon de Valera regaled Fraser's party with stories about the revolution."

While Carl Berendsen in his memoirs commented on the meeting:

“We were entertained by the remarkable Irish leader, Eamon de Valera and then at Adare in the West before leaving from Foynes via Gandar for Chesapeake Bay and Baltimore in our huge 160 foot wingspan Boeing Clipper (flying boat) with its eleven cabins.”

Berendsen, who was an intellectual and was quick to criticise lesser mortals, must have been impressed with de Valera to describe him in the way that he did. After their meeting with Dev, Fraser and Berendsen would have likely travelled by train from Dublin to the town of Adare in Co. Limerick, and either stayed there or at Foynes, a small village on the Shannon estuary near the city of Limerick where all the flying boats going to and from the United States departed during WWII. Flying boats were the only reliable means of air travel between Europe and the USA as the larger land based passenger aircraft had not come into service. Today there is a flying boat Museum at Foynes, founded by the famous Irish actress, Maureen O’Hara and her husband Captain Charlie Blair. The official book of the museum tell great stories about the early trans-Atlantic flights and also lists the many notable people who flew out of Foynes during WWII such as Bob Hope, Gracie Fields, Douglas Fairbanks junior and yes - Peter Fraser.

The Clipper Flying Boats were the epitome of luxury with all passengers having their own bunk as well as their seat. There was also a ‘honeymoon’ suite on these aircraft. Incidentally the famous drink – Irish coffee was invented by a chef, Joe Sheridan at Foynes to warm the cockles of the hearts of passengers who had flow the near 24 flight from the USA to Ireland.

This second meeting between Fraser and de Valera says a lot about the regard in which Fraser held the Irish leader, but as James Thorn said of Fraser: “**Friendship with Ireland was a design that he (Fraser) never overlooked**”.

It would be interesting to know how the man who held de Valera in contempt, Winston Churchill would have thought about Peter Frasers ‘friendly’ visit to Dublin.

The next meeting of these two great leaders was to be in New Zealand, seven years’ later in 1948 when de Valera was no longer Taoiseach and John A Costello was, but Fraser was still the Prime Minister of New Zealand. Sadly by then Fraser’s wife Janet had died in March 1945, just before the end of WWII.

While in opposition de Valera was still obsessed with the partition of Ireland and decided to go on a private speaking tour of the United States, Australia, New Zealand and India to garner support for his cause and make the Island of Ireland ‘a nation once again’. Some commentators saw this as something of a political stunt, while others saw it as a legitimate crusade.

In Wellington New Zealand, the newspaper, the Evening Post, reported that 3000 people were at Shannon Airport in Ireland to farewell de Valera and Frank Aiken on the first leg of their journey to the USA. A few weeks later the same newspaper reported that the pair were visiting Australia and were likely to spend time in New Zealand. Stephen Kelly of UCD in a paper published about de Valera’s anti partition campaign claims it attracted little interest in the USA, noting that ‘Irish Politics has ceased to become an issue to the mass of Americans’. De Valera’s visit to Australia was at the invitation of his long-time friend, Archbishop Daniel Mannix and his visit there lasted

from 28 April until 24 May. During his stay in Australia, Dev told a gathering of 20,000 people in Melbourne that ‘partition was deeply resented by his people’.

The visit by de Valera and Aiken to New Zealand was originally planned to be a private speaking tour until Peter Fraser was alerted to the fact the Irish leader was in Australia and planning to come to Aotearoa. A Father Murphy in Auckland sent a telegram to Fraser on 4 May and asked if any official welcome was being planned for de Valera and Aikens visit. On hearing that de Valera was coming to New Zealand, Peter Fraser made the instant decision to turn a private visit into a State Visit and in the following weeks there was a flurry of activity as Dev was officially invited to New Zealand and government officials worked with Irish Societies to organise a series of events.

In theory the visit was about de Valera’s anti partition campaign, but the government involvement was not in support of this, rather it was more about Peter Fraser honouring a personal friend and world leader.

Within a week the wheels of bureaucracy had spun into action and arrangements were made for a luncheon for de Valera and Aiken on 25 May at the Hotel Waterloo, to be attended by members of Cabinet and Under Secretaries to be followed that evening with an official welcome for the pair at the Wellington Town Hall and an official government reception at Parliament the next day.

Fraser had a personal hand in determining the invitation list for the official reception insisting that he wanted a wide range of people, including Maori leaders, Catholic leaders, academics, members of the Irish Societies and clergy. He specifically mentions my godfather, Fr. Jim McGlynn, Archbishops Peter McKeefry and Thomas O’Shea and well known Catholic writer and poet, Eileen Duggan. Among the Maori leaders was Princess Te Puea who had been, like Fraser, an outspoken critic of conscription in New Zealand in WWI. Peter Fraser was making sure that all his special Catholic friends were going to be there for this one and only visit of Eamon de Valera to Aotearoa.

When de Valera and Aiken arrived in Auckland by air from Sydney on 25 May, they were greeted by a large crowd of well-wishers with Irish flags and greetings in Gaelic. The pair stopped there long enough to change aircraft and fly to Wellington.

The Wellington Town Hall was decked out with banners and Irish flags and packed to capacity with 1600 people for the official welcome for the Irish leaders. In fact, not everyone could be accommodated at the venue and loudspeakers were set up outside so that people could hear the singing and speeches. The clergy were out in force but so was everyone with a ‘green connection’.

Peter Fraser said it was a great pleasure to welcome a great statesman and such a distinguished visitor to New Zealand. He also said they were honouring Ireland which the two men had done so much for and added that he hoped that Ireland would remain in the Commonwealth.

De Valera greeted the audience in Gaelic and Maori but quickly took the opportunity to raise the partition issue which he described as ‘a grievous wound that was deeply resented by the people

of Ireland'. The event was perfect political stage for de Valera, but it's fair to assume that the crowd was not there to hear the speech on partition as simply to see in person this great Irish leader. As an aside, the New Zealand national anthem at the time, God Save the King, was sung at the beginning of the welcome, while the Irish National Anthem, A Soldiers Song was the final item.

Next day, de Valera and Aiken met Government Ministers and officials and talked to the news media before the official reception at the Grand Hall in Parliament Buildings. This and all the events were widely reported in the new media and at the reception at Parliament, Peter Fraser is quoted as saying that he admired the 'democratic outlook, courage and foresight' displayed by the Irish leader. In response de Valera said it was a privilege to meet so many prominent New Zealanders and 'New Zealand has been a pioneer in social legislation and to a large extent Ireland has shared her social ideals as well as her political ideals'.

The final function in Wellington for de Valera was a private one specifically for members of the Irish Societies. It was held at venue called St Francis Hall, a hundred metres or so from Parliament. The hall was owned by the Catholic Church who later demolished the building and sold the land to the British Government, and it is now the site of the UK High Commission.

That night the speeches were less formal and the mood relaxed and there was time for people to mingle and chat with Dev and Frank Aiken. Sadly it would seem that my parents missed the de Valera celebrations. My brother Francis Joseph died at the age of just two weeks, days before Dev arrived. It was a traumatic time for my family.

The next day the pair drove north and spent a night at the tourist city of Rotorua to see thermal activity.

Finally they spent a day in Auckland where there was again a large Civic reception hosted by the Archbishop James Liston. Liston was born in New Zealand of Irish parents and when he was the assistant Bishop of Auckland he told a St Patrick's Day celebration in 1922 that the men and women who died in the 1916 were murdered by 'foreign troops'. This angered Auckland Civic leaders and Bishop Liston was charged with sedition but later acquitted by an all-Protestant jury. Liston, de Valera and Aiken were of the same political persuasion. It is unlikely that de Valera gained much real support for his partition cause, but his visit certainly drew Ireland and New Zealand closer together.

The last meeting between Eamon de Valera and Peter Fraser took place just six months later in Dublin. It was at the end of another long tiring four month journey by Fraser to Europe to attend the British Commonwealth Prime Ministers conference and also visiting Germany and France.

On 12 December in London, Peter Fraser had tea with the King and Queen and in the middle of this, Princess Elizabeth, later to become Queen herself, invited Fraser to see the newly born Prince Charles. At the end of his London visit six days later, Peter Fraser flew to Dublin for a State Visit. This time, two hours after leaving England he saw the Irish Coast and the 'forty shades of green' of the Irish landscape and then landed at the new Dublin Airport.

Here he gave a brief news conference at which he said he'd accepted the invitation to Dublin to 'see how things were going' and 'to see an old friend (de Valera) whom I have known for fourteen years'. It was to be a busy programme of official meetings and functions, which is all set out in Fraser's diary held by National Archives in Wellington.

Fraser, along with the New Zealand High Commissioner Bill Jordan to Britain stayed with the President of Ireland, Sean T O'Kelly and his wife at Arus an Uachtaran. The first night they attended a State Dinner at Iveagh House, the headquarters of the Department of External Affairs hosted by the Taoiseach, John A Costello. There is no mention of whether de Valera was a guest at this function.

On Sunday Fraser and his party had a brief sightseeing foray into the Wicklow Mountains south of Dublin before meeting up with Dr James Ryan, a former Minister of Agriculture in the de Valera government. They then had lunch with Sean McBride, the Minister of External Affairs.

That night Sean T O'Kelly hosted a dinner at Áras an Uachtaráin, his official Presidential residence where both Fraser and Jordan were staying. In his diary, Fraser made specific mention of the fact that his friend Eamon de Valera would be present at this function.

Given that O'Kelly was one of 'Dev's men' it's likely this function may have had more Fianna Fail people present, and effectively was Dev's unofficial state dinner for Fraser although maybe a little less formal than the official state dinner.

The next day there was an official meeting with McBride in the morning and lunch with members of the Irish Labour Party. Fraser's diary spells out the next event thus: '3pm *Ceremony conferring honorary degree of Doctor of Laws at National University of Ireland by Chancellor, Mr Eamon de Valera at Iveagh House*'.

This was the final chapter in the de Valera/Fraser relationship and was widely reported in the Irish press.

According to reports in the Irish Times and the Irish Independent, the ceremony at Iveagh House was attended by a 'who's who' in Irish politics: President Sean T O'Kelly and his wife Phyllis, the Taoiseach John A Costello, the Tanaiste, William Norton, as well as Sean MacBride, the Minister of External Affairs, Daniel Morrissey, the Minister for Industry and Commerce, the Minister for Health, Dr Noel Browne and the Lord Mayor of Dublin, John Breen as well as Lord Rugby, (AKA Sir John Maffey) Britain's 'Representative' or Ambassador to Ireland, the Canadian High Commissioner to Ireland Hon William Turgeon, the President of Maynooth, Rt Rev Monsignor Edward J Kissane, Frank Aiken who was de Valera's Finance Minister when he was in government and who came with him to New Zealand in May 1948. There were also a number of other parliamentarians and officials present at the ceremony.

Professor Michael Tierney, Senior Pro Vice Chancellor and President of the University College of Dublin, presided over the ceremony and began the proceedings by saying that if they could not claim Mr Fraser as an Irishman, they could certainly honour him as a Gael. Professor Tierney then went on to outline Fraser's political history and the fact that he had been a member of parliament in New Zealand since 1918, was a founder of the New Zealand Labour Party and that

he had ‘won his way to his present eminence by sheer hard work starting at the bottom of the ladder’. He described Fraser as a man of ‘high culture and real intellectual distinction with a serious interest in music and drama that was not acquired within the walls of a classroom or lecture hall, but in the harder school of the waterfront and the mill’.

Professor Tierney spoke of Peter Fraser’s presence on the international stage and his stance at the San Francisco Conference where he ensured that the ‘rights of smaller nations were safeguarded’. Tierney noted that the ‘glorious record of New Zealand in the war (WWII) will always be connected with Mr Fraser’s name’. He also referred to Peter Fraser’s special relationship with the Maori people saying: “There is no one else in public life in his country who has enjoyed the confidence and affection of the Maori people to such an extent as Mr Fraser and they have given proof of this by conferring on him the title – ‘Father of our people’.”

Finally Tierney makes further special reference to Peter Fraser when he said:

“Mr Fraser is thus worthy by reason both of his personal qualities and action of the highest honour we can pay him. He deserves it further as the democratic leader of a great and gallant nation which we in Ireland have very special ties in kinship and common interest. Mr Fraser has already stressed himself that these ties are more real and intimate than any expression of them in changing constitutional forms. We Irish are proud to have had some share in the growth and development of a noble, generous and progressive people”.

Other than reporting that Eamon de Valera as Chancellor of the National University of Ireland, (NUI) conferred the Honorary Degree of Laws on Fraser and showing a picture of the signing ceremony no other mention of speeches is made of the event. One might assume that Peter Fraser and other dignitaries also spoke. Despite extensive research, I have been unable to trace the actual citation of the awarding of the degree. But what is clear from the media reports is the high esteem in which Peter Fraser was held by politicians of all persuasions in Ireland. This hour long ceremony was the last time Fraser and de Valera would meet. Both men had honoured each other in their respective countries. History had been made with dignity, genuine affection and made beautifully.

At 4.30pm that day Fraser briefly met with a man by the name of ‘Slim Byrne’ – an ex-West Coaster and then at 5.00pm Fraser was guest at a reception of the Diplomatic Corps in Dublin hosted by Sean MacBride.

At 6.45pm Fraser spoke to the Irish people on Ireland’s national radio network, Raidio Teilifis Eireann (RTE) during which he talked about New Zealand’s social services. This was another first for Fraser and shows just how highly regarded he and New Zealand were in Ireland in that he was invited to speak to the Irish nation at, what would have then been, peak listening time.

After his broadcast on RTE Peter Fraser and Bill Jordan had a final dinner with Sean T O’Kelly at Aras an Uachtarain before driving the next day to Belfast to meet with the Six-County Premier Sir Basil Brooke and Governor Earl Granville before going on to London, Scotland and back to New Zealand via Canada.

When Fraser arrived in London on Christmas Eve he sent a telegram to Sean T O'Kelly and his wife expressing his thanks and kindness to him for his hospitality. "I greatly enjoyed my stay with you and it will be long remembered. I extend to you both and your household my sincere good wishes for a happy Christmas and a prosperous New Year."

The visit to Ireland would have been one that Fraser enjoyed, especially having time with Eamon de Valera. Ireland was clearly impressed with him because immediately after he left, MacBride sent a cable to New Zealand's Acting Prime Minister, Walter Nash in Wellington saying:

Peter Fraser has created a feeling of understanding and sympathy between the two countries even stronger and deeper than had ever existed before. In the course of his short stay, Peter Fraser met representatives of every section of our national life, on all of whom he created a deep and abiding impression.

The legacy of these two great statesmen, created in troubled times, lives on to this day. Both men stood up for the smaller nations of the world at international forum and both nations have never failed to exercise their independent thinking in terms of policy both at home and abroad. The two peoples share much in common and while there is always competition on the sporting field and in international trade, animosity has never existed. For his part Fraser did so much to break down the evils of bigotry and to create a nation where equality is a way of life. De Valera gave his people their country back and did much to foster social reforms in the same way as Peter Fraser.

Their chemistry was pivotal in both New Zealand and Ireland achieving their unique nation hoods.

The final act in consummating this relationship was Ireland opening an Embassy in Wellington and New Zealand an Embassy in Dublin. The legacy of the two great politicians lives on. The Chemistry has worked.

Peter Burke

30 November 2018