

Your Excellency, dear colleagues, ladies and gentlemen,

It is my great honour to see the book that I have co-authored about the college of the Irish Franciscans in Prague launched here. I am likewise honoured to be able to say a few words on the occasion.

I hope that you will not find it tiresome that I outline what brought us to the Irish Franciscans in Prague and how our book came about. I shall attempt to be brief.

Very few of the current inhabitants of Prague are aware these days that the name of the Hybernská Street in the Prague New Town derives from the Latin appellation for Ireland, which is also true of the Hybernia musical theatre that resides in the deconsecrated church of the College of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary.

The strongest contacts between Ireland and Bohemia paradoxically occurred in the period when the hegemony of the Catholic Church in Western and Central Europe had been broken and which gave rise to a number of independent churches. The two countries that were affected perhaps the strongest by the religious and the accompanying political intolerance were Ireland and Bohemia. While thousands of Catholics were leaving Ireland in order to avoid persecution, it was the non-Catholics who suffered the same fate in Bohemia.

Predominantly noble families of Irish soldiers were settling in Bohemia during this era; they were blown there by the tempestuous winds of the Thirty Years War, in which these Irish émigrés stood, as Catholics, on the side of the Habsburgs. Simultaneously, Franciscans of the Stricter Observance from the Irish Province arrived, and were called “hyberni” after the Latin name of their homeland. After the war, generations of Irish students – particularly medicals – attended the Prague university. The students became the subject of lifelong interest to Ludvík Schmid, a Czech medical doctor of the same university.

These close and intensive relations did not weaken until the gradual increase of political and religious tolerance which took place in the respective countries from the end of the eighteenth century. However, the links between Ireland and the Czech Lands did not disappear: at the time of the nascent transformation of the absolutist monarchy into a civic society in 1848, many Czechs keenly observed the Repeal Association in Ireland. In fact, a secret political association of the same name was founded in Bohemia. The famous Czech revivalist intellectual Karel Havlíček Borovský covered in his paper in some detail the current events in Ireland, and despite the considerable geographic distance between Prague and Dublin, news items from Ireland were often placed alongside those from Berlin, Paris or London. The destiny of Ireland continued to be likened to Bohemia on occasion, as attested by the first Czech volume about Ireland written by Karel Tůma in 1882 and entitled *A Suppressed Nation*.

Time does not permit me to detail the literary cross-fertilization between our countries, starting with Julius Zeyer on the Czech side and James Joyce on the Irish; I must return to our book.

In 1997 I was approached by Zdeněk Kalvach, an internist and geriatrician from the First Faculty of Medicine at Charles University in Prague, who asked me for assistance with the preparation of an exhibition concerning Czech-Irish relations. The exhibition was focused primarily on Irish medical doctors in Bohemia; however, it aimed also to provide a broader context in terms of history and culture. A number of volumes on medicine whose authors came to Prague from Ireland are lodged in the Premonstratensian library at the Strahov Monastery in Prague, where I have been working since the fall of communism as the keeper of manuscripts. Together with

Zdeněk Kalvach and a Charles University historian of medicine Petr Svobodný we came to discover numerous other books by Irish authors resident in Prague, and also transcripts of lectures by Irish friars who taught theology and philosophy at the Archiepiscopal seminary. The exhibition took place in the Trinity College Long Room at the end of 1997, and was followed by a bibliography of the works of Irish authors lodged at the Strahov library, which appeared in Czech in a collection of essays published by the University of Dublin.

While Hedvika Kuchařová and myself were compiling the bibliography, we realised in the process of identifying the authors how rich the imprint left by the Irish Franciscans in Prague was, and that it was almost completely unexplored. We were also became aware that Czech archives include copious sources which international scholars have not been aware of.

Our original plan was to write an article about the Irish Franciscans. Nonetheless, when we started gathering materials, the situation got presently out of hand, and we eventually arrived at the conclusion that the subject really requires to be treated in a book.

Hedvika and I thus examined all documents that were preserved in the torso of the archive of the college abolished in 1786 and attempted to look up all documents known to us in archives across the Czech Republic that related to the college. Our objective was to collect Czech primary sources of diverse origin and on the basis of this rather heterogeneous [heterodžinies] corpus of materials proceed to outline the history of the college. At that stage, our intention was mainly to make the information that we have discovered available to the public, without attempting to place the college in European context.

The result of our joint effort was a book published in 2001 in Czech. It was clear to us on the completion of the manuscript that the volume should appear in English as well, since it could provide a degree of unavailable information to readers and scholars in Ireland. Ever since the first considerations concerning the English-language edition of the book, our principal aim indeed was to facilitate evidence about the Irish Franciscans in Prague to those who saw the Prague college as part of the Irish diaspora and of their national history. The road to the English edition was not easy, however. The main obstacles included not only the lack of requisite language skills, but also the fact that the original volume had been geared towards Czech readers and was thus written from the perspective and in the context of Central Europe. The Czech volume was translated into English at first, but that in itself proved in no way sufficient. We have therefore subsequently attempted to adapt the text to the needs of readers in Ireland, adding to the original text and updating the information based on our most recent research. The book that we have the honour to launch here today is the result. We do not consider our work ground-breaking, and are aware that it is of necessity imperfect. Nevertheless, it is our hope that despite some of the edges being rough perhaps, it may still find its place among the many stones in the rich mosaic of Irish history. We hope that the book will provide a basis for further exploration, cooperation, and future research which will be closer to perfection than ours was.

Ladies and gentlemen, let me conclude by expressing our gratitude to all who participated in bringing our book towards publication and whose list is of course included in the book, but especially:

Ondřej Pilný, director of the Centre for Irish Studies who was *a spiritus agens* of this English edition,
the Karolinum publishing house and its editors,
the Irish Franciscan Province and the Departement of Foreign Affairs of the Irish government for financial support,

and last but not least I would like to remember two men, Franciscan friars and historians, who received me in the Franciscan Archives in Killiney with open arms: Benignus Millett who unfortunately passed away several years later, and Ignatius Fennessy.

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for your attention.

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