

William O'Dwyer
From an Irish immigrant
labourer to becoming
the Mayor of New
York City



Above: O'Dwyer in 1945 (*image: Wikimedia*)

Left: O'Dwyer as a member of the New York City Police Dept 1917-1924
(*image: Wikimedia*)

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William O'Dwyer

William O'Dwyer who was the Mayor of New York city and Democratic Party Politician, has maintained a profound and lifelong connection to his birthplace of Bohola. Today, Bohola proudly preserves his legacy through the O'Dwyer Cheshire Home—built directly on the grounds of his family's ancestral homestead—celebrating him and his family as some of the most influential and philanthropic figures of the Irish-American diaspora.

William was born in Lismirrane Bohola on the 11th July 1890, to parents Patrick, a native of Cork, a national school teacher and Bridget (née McNicholas), an unqualified assistant teacher. He was the eldest of eleven children and educated in Bohola before attending St. Nathy's College Ballaghaderreen Co. Roscommon.

In 1907 he entered the Pontifical University of Salamanca in Spain to study for the priesthood. He left after two years but became fluent in Spanish. He emigrated to America and arrived on Ellis Island on the 27th June 1910. Like many Irish before him he began work as a labourer and waiter and other unskilled jobs before joining the New York Police Force when he became a US citizen. He studied law at night in Fordham University Law School receiving his degree in 1923.

William set up a successful law practice. In 1931 his sponsorship of the American tour of the Mayo Gaelic Team introduced him to many influential contacts including William Randolph Hearst who supported his appointment as King's County (Brooklyn) Court Judge before being elected as District Attorney. His prosecution of the organized gang "Murder Inc." made him a celebrity.

In 1941 William took leave and joined the United States Army during World War 2. He was a member of the Allied Control Commission for Italy; later he resigned his military commission to serve as executive director of the War Refugee Board. He achieved the rank of Brigadier General and earned a Legion of Merit Award.

After the war he ran a successful campaign and became the Mayor of New York City. He received over 50% of the votes. At his inauguration he celebrated to the song "*It's a Great Day for the Irish*". He did a lot of work for New York during his first term in office, for instance the construction of new schools, housing projects, roads and he even managed to locate the permanent headquarters of the United Nations in New York. In 1948 he received the Hundred Year Association of New York's Gold Medal "*in recognition of outstanding contributions to New York City*".

He was re-elected again in 1949 but was later confronted by a police corruption scandal. He resigned in 1950. Harry Truman, the President at the time, appointed him as US Ambassador to Mexico.

The accusations concerning his association with organized crime stayed with him for the rest of his life. He resigned as Ambassador in 1952 but stayed in Mexico until 1960.



William O'Dwyer's final resting place, Arlington National Cemetery
(Image: findagrave.com)

In 1916 William had married Catherine Lenihan whom he met while he was working as a bartender at the Vanderbilt Hotel and she was employed as one of the Vanderbilt's telephone switchboard operators. She suffered from ill health for most of their marriage. She died in 1946. They had no children. William was to remarry again in 1949 to Elizabeth Sloan Simpson, a socialite and model. The marriage ended in divorce in 1953.

William O'Dwyer died on the 24th of November 1964 at Beth Israel Hospital from heart failure aged 74 years. He is buried in Arlington National Cemetery.

O'Dwyer Cheshire Home in Bohola was opened in 1976 on the grounds of the O'Dwyer family home – a fulfilment of a dream of his brother, the late Paul O'Dwyer, who died in 1998.

Sources:

mayoireland.ie

dib.ie

westernpeople.com

ouririshheritage.org

cheshire.ie

***On this day.....
September 13, 1845,***

A British publication first reported on the Irish potato blight, an event that marked the devastating onset of the Great Famine.