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In the United Kingdom

My dear fellow, you will die in a ditch.[1]

John Pope Hennessy, born in Cork city, Ireland, in 1834, was one of eight children born to John Hennessy and his wife Elizabeth. He qualified in medicine and law, was twice elected to Parliament in London, and wrote a book that is still in print. He served as governor in six of the Queen's crown colonies and was knighted for his services. He died in County Cork in 1891 (on the same day as another great Irishman, Charles Stewart Parnell), was survived by his widow and two sons, and shares the family grave with his parents in a Cork graveyard. He was a man who seldom evoked indifference, contemporaries variously characterizing him as "quick of wit and repartee", "a turbulent despot", "a mongrel skinner from Cork", and "an aged place-hunter", and writers have used many expressive adjectives, including brilliant, child-like, hypocritical and malevolent, to describe him. The spectrum of appreciation for the man can be well gauged from combinations thereof encountered, ranging from "diminutive and arrogant" through "inveterate talker", "humane and warm-hearted" to "Mick on

the make", and "a man before his time" to "a stormy petrel". All of these (and any combination of them) would have made an apt title for this biography. That a man who died before he was sixty could be so variously described suggests a complex and exciting life—one certainly worth looking at more closely.

As our opening paragraph suggests, John Pope Hennessy was a man of many facets and we will try here to do justice to the complex personality he exhibited in his fifty-seven years. We are handicapped to an extent; almost certainly he would have been attentive to his legacy and harboured his papers, but, unfortunately, his widow destroyed most of them after he died.

He was born on 8 August 1834 in Cork. His father, John, was a hide merchant in the city, and his mother Elizabeth (née Casey) was the daughter of a local butter merchant. He had seven siblings: elder brothers Bryan and Henry; sisters Mary, Eliza (Lizzie), and Ann Dymphna (Annie); and younger brothers Charles (Cha) and William. The Hennessy family claimed descent from the indigenous Irish landed gentry and styled themselves as Hennessys of Ballyhennessy in County Kerry. An antecedent had married into the family name Pope—people of some substance in County Kerry—and the family would always insert "Pope" into their Christian name. However, while John continued using this double-barrelled convention (never using a hyphen) after he left Ireland,[2] his siblings did not. This may reflect his aspirations to elite society.

Although they lived in a modest house in Mount Verdon Terrace in the city, the family could not be described as poor, rather John Pope Hennessy was a son of the commercial middle class, which put some emphasis on education. His father's business must have been moderately successful for apart from sending Henry and John to university, the youngest two boys also attended school in England for some time, and all the family had visited London as tourists. It was certainly not a typical middle-class Cork family of the period. As a student, John read the *Times*

and works by other influential thinkers. He even had William Monsell, the influential Liberal Member of Parliament (MP) for Limerick county where he was a sizable landlord, as a dinner guest in January 1855.[3] Years later, in 1863, while in pursuit of his "aristocratic" heritage, John visited his kinsmen in Cognac, staying in the chateau of Auguste Hennessy (the doyen of that side of the family at the time), where he was regally entertained. He noted that their style of living was princely and grander than anything he had earlier encountered.[4]

John appears to have been a delicate boy, susceptible to bronchitis, and much of his early education was conducted by private tutors. Writing to his second son Richard (Bertie), many years later, he said:

> owing to the bronchitis I suffered from when young, I was not subjected to any long course of school training. I had a tutor who was not very exacting: and my three seasons at the hydropathic establishment of Blarney allowed my disposition for general reading and crude scribbling, including poor attempts at versification, to have full swing.[5]

But on his matriculation report in the Calendar of Queen's College, Cork, he is listed as John Hennessy from Dr Downing's School, while in a letter to Charles Gavan Duffy, a fellow Irish politician, he claimed to have attended the Mansion House School. Regardless of his training, John was an avid reader. In fact, many years later, as governor of Hong Kong, he stated that he considered himself to have been somewhat precocious in his reading interests, telling Gavan Duffy:

> from the age of twelve and during my boyhood I was a student of the *Nation* [organ of the Young Ireland movement] and of Disraeli's works. Those dear little volumes that your namesake printed, and the prophetic political novel, were my companions in

> the bohreens [laneways] about Cork when Fr. Michael O'Sullivan said that I was neglecting the classics in the Mansion House School. No doubt you are answerable for the gross ignorance of Greek that thousands of other boys of that generation in Ireland got involved in. But though I am sometimes ashamed of it, I am well satisfied with the cause, and would not exchange my national sympathies for the scholarship of Gladstone.[6]

His mention of Benjamin Disraeli's work here is but one example of his lifelong romantic admiration for the British politician. This admiration also highlights some very notable characteristics of John and his family: they were emphatically Catholic but not notably religious — none of his seven siblings went into religion — and strongly nationalistic. According to Bertie, in the rebellion of 1798 John's father "had shouldered a pack and trudged to Bantry Bay to meet Hoche and the French army of liberation",[7] which never landed and was used later by Napoleon in his attempt to enslave Europe. He knew many men who had seen how the Irish rising had been suppressed in 1798 and who told him unforgettable tales of the hanging and picketing of the "Croppies" by Yeomanry regiments inflamed by race hatred and religious bigotry.

In addition to his father's stories, John himself tells of seeing distressing sights of the famine of 1846–1847 as a boy in Cork, how as a twelve-year-old he saw the bodies of seven victims of starvation on the street not far from his father's home. On another occasion as he passed by a graveyard from which the lamentation of the grieving was heard, a bystander informed him, "That, sir, is the pleasantest music that has fallen on my ears in many a day" — in the previous year so many had to be buried without coffins that even the accustomed weeping for the dead had to be suspended.[8] As a twelve-year-old, we may doubt that he was addressed as "sir", yet the tenor of the tale rings true. These national sympathies would remain with him, in one form

or another, for the rest of his life, but they were of a subdued hue compared with those of many other patriots. Indeed, Cork, the third city in the country, was less anglicized than Dublin or Belfast, yet in those days before the Gaelic League, native Irish culture was in rapid decline, and most students like Pope Hennessy were not aware of any intrinsic contradiction in embracing English cultural norms and values. But that does not mean his future behaviour was unrelated to the national dimension of a distinct Ireland. His outlook and actions may not have been motivated by the ideals of a Casement—a fellow Irish servant of Empire who was ultimately executed for treason—but were more likely to reflect those of Gavan Duffy, one of the founders of *The Nation* who went on to become premier of the Australian colony of Victoria.

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In 1850, Hennessy was among the privileged youth in Ireland to enter university, and at the age of sixteen, he matriculated at Queen's College, Cork. In the college calendar he is listed in the freshman class of the science division of the faculty of arts. A future confidant and political ally, Justin McCarthy, was already a student of agriculture in the same faculty. But the decision to take advantage of this privilege was not an automatic one for John. To appreciate this fact, some familiarity with the position vis-à-vis tertiary education in the country at the time is needed.

Religion, as was often the case in Ireland, bedevilled the development of educational provisions at all levels. There was the state-supported Maynooth College, essentially a seminary for candidates for the Catholic priesthood, established in 1795, less out of enthusiasm on the part of Parliament for such education than a sweetener to discourage seminarians from attending colleges on the Continent where they might be exposed to nationalistic and revolutionary ideas. There were also two universities, Dublin University (its only college, Trinity College,

was established in 1591) and the Queen's University of Ireland. The latter consisted of three colleges, one each at Belfast, Cork, and Galway. The colleges operated from 1849, and from September 1850 as a degree-awarding university, with standard degree examinations held in Dublin. It was a state-managed secular institution (no female candidates were admitted) bearing some resemblance to the evolving University of London, and was an attempt to satisfy the university aspirations of Catholics and Dissenters (mostly Presbyterians)—the great majority of the country's population—who bristled at the Anglican elitism of Trinity College. Among the Catholics especially it was seen as a failure in this regard, and some elements called for a boycott of the "godless" university; apart from the absence of religion in the syllabus, the likelihood of such subjects as history and philosophy being taught by non-Catholics was seen as a threat to the faith of the students.

Just at the time of young Hennessy's entrance into the college, a synod of the Irish bishops, the first since the twelfth century, convened at Thurles and condemned the colleges but did not prescribe any penalty on Catholics availing of the opportunity. Pope Hennessy seems not to have had any qualms in attending. He would later become a strong supporter of the bishops and a strident critic of his alma mater, whose destruction he championed. Catholics were always a minority in the student body, and of the twenty-one academic staff in Cork at the time, only two were Catholics, including its president, Sir Robert Kane. But not all Catholics, the great majority of whom could not afford to send their sons to the Continent, were prepared to forgo such opportunities for advancement, the Hennessys among them.

John's elder brother Henry had studied civil engineering in the earliest years of the college, when it was still a two-year diploma course. He was a versatile man as his later career shows and was the librarian in the college at the time John was a student. This was not the only avenue open to him for tertiary education, there

was also Trinity College Dublin. Catholics were never formally excluded from this institution, but they could not become fellows (senior members) and there were requirements on all students to observe certain rituals of the Anglican Church that were inconsistent with instructions from the Catholic bishops. These, however, for some years were not enforced in practice and about six percent of the university's matriculants were Catholics,[9] one of whom around the time was a fellow Corkman from Midleton, Jeremiah Thomas Fitzgerald Callaghan, whom we shall have cause to meet again. Scholarships open to Catholics at Trinity College Dublin only became available in 1855, so even if such a family as nationally oriented as the Hennessys could overcome their reservations about such a bastion of Ascendancy (as the Anglican elite in Ireland were referred to) rule, the hefty fees would be a major deterrent.

The curriculum at the Queen's Colleges had some bias in favour of future employment in the imperial service, particularly the Indian civil and medical services, and the colleges provided an avenue for advancement for middle- and lower-class Catholics. In these early days, however, a majority of the students were non-Catholics; a notable graduate from the sister college in Belfast in 1853 was Robert Hart, a man who will enter our story again later.

In the early days of his freshman year, 1850–1851, John was one of the top three among the twelve first-year students who won a scholarship in the science division of the faculty of arts (worth £24, of which £8 would go to fees). This enabled him to immediately transfer to the faculty of medicine. He thus embarked on a degree course in medicine, a four-year programme. Teaching ranged over twenty-nine weeks in the year, with two university holidays, St Patrick's Day and the Queen's birthday.

Cork might have been seen in some quarters as an academic backwater, but talent in the college was not totally lacking. The professor of mathematics was George Boole, the originator of

Boolean algebra, and now famous as the father of the digital age. He had been appointed in 1849 as the first professor of mathematics. Boole was a mathematician of European stature, condemned to the backwater of Cork by his diffidence and the fact that he was self-taught, never having attended university. He undoubtedly had some influence on the young Hennessys. John's brother Henry, the librarian, would go on to carve out a career in academia, ending up a fellow of the Royal Society.

In his diary, John records Professor Boole approaching him when he was a student with the suggestion that he might apply for the Barrington Lectureship in political economy, a prestigious postgraduate qualification. Even though Boole served on the selection committee, nothing seems to have come of it. John did much of his studying and writing at home or at the Cork Institution, complaining of the rowdy conditions at the college library, and walked to lectures and hospital sessions when required. His academic performance was much admired; he got honours in five out of six subjects in his finals, came first in surgery and second in medicine, but the honours and prizes due him were almost sabotaged by a complaint from a Dr Thompson of the geography department that he should not be eligible because he had only attended five out of his sixteen lectures in that department. Pope Hennessy had considerable sympathy from the faculty, including Boole, but there was a regulation that a student should attend at least two thirds of the lectures in a course, and the question was referred to a board of University Visitors (a grievance committee composed of distinguished individuals from outside the university), before which he was represented by legal counsel. Following this, a four-hour meeting of the University Council decided unanimously in his favour, and the prizes and honours were restored.[10] The matter even made the Dublin evening papers. His success there did not endear him to the institution, however, and he would later become a vociferous

supporter of the Catholic clergy in condemning it. At a meeting of alumni in London thirty years later, he (now Sir John) struck a discordant note welcoming the abolition of the Queen's University and the amalgamation of the colleges into the Royal University, saying that they had not been so thoroughly national as they should and did not take the place they ought to have done in the guidance of Irish character. This was in sharp contrast to another graduate at the event who lamented that the Queen's Colleges were divorced from a university system that was congenial to their spirit and united to a university that was alien to their principles.

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Of his social life at the time we have but fragmentary records. In his diary[11] he writes of his friendship and rivalry in chess with Philip Barry, the son of a doctor at Rathcormac, whose home he often visited. Justin McCarthy wrote:

> Hennessy and I were boys together in the city of Cork, … we were friends and comrades and we grew up together. We spoke in the local debating societies; we were often oarsmen together in the same boat on the river Lee and in Queenstown harbor; we were constant visitors at each other's houses and were comrades in many a youthful adventure.[12]

National affairs, naturally, were a major topic in the debates McCarthy mentions, especially in the Cork Historical Society, of which Pope Hennessy was a founding member. This served as a recruiting ground for the Young Ireland movement (a revolutionary group calling for self-government in Ireland which, under John Mitchel, led a minor revolt in 1848), but the level of militancy at this time was rather mild, the earlier enthusiasm having been deflated by the failure of the 1848 revolt. The main publication was the weekly *The Nation*, founded

by Charles Gavan Duffy and others in 1842. This was part of Pope Hennessy's reading material then and throughout his future foreign travels.

McCarthy describes Pope Hennessy as "a singularly clever boy, full of courage and self-confidence, and inspired by an evident ambition to distinguish himself in the world".[13] However, McCarthy goes out of his way not to say anything uncomplimentary about the acquaintances of whom he reminisces and is thus a somewhat limited informant on the young Pope Hennessy — who he always refers to as Hennessy. This only confirms that the addition of "Pope" to his name, whatever the genealogical support, was a deliberate strategy to enhance his plausibility in whatever endeavours he undertook a move that, among other factors, gave rise to the "Mick on the make" label later cruelly pinned on him. His brother Henry never used it, and his sister Mary only in correspondence in the newspapers concerning his estate after his death. He used it from his student days but never formally made it a double-barrelled name using a hyphen, an affectation later adopted by his sons.

Accounts of John Pope Hennessy's career have very much concentrated on his political and personal conflicts and squabbles, but there was a side to him in his early years, as a scientific, which warrants some attention here. As a medic, it is natural that he would hold opinions on medical matters, and he did, especially on the living of a healthy life in the tropics and on sanitation generally, about which we will have more to say later. But his early interests in science ranged much further, probably encouraged by his older brother Henry who, in the *Philosophical Magazine* in 1845, was the first to suggest photographic recording of thermometer and barometer readings. In the same *Philosophical Magazine* — then, and still today, notwithstanding its name, a leading physics journal — in 1850 at the age of sixteen, before he matriculated, John Pope Hennessy had a paper, "Direct demonstration of the fortieth proposition