



Historically Speaking

with Eastchester Town Historian
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The Most Interesting Man in the World

That Almost No One in Town Knows About



He was born and educated in County Silgo, Ireland. At the age of 17, after spending some time in France, he migrated to the United States. He moved to Eastchester and became a dedicated teacher in the Eastchester schools. He soon passed the bar exam and became a prominent lawyer and politician. He would be elected seven times to the U.S. House of Representatives and was known as one of the greatest orators to grace the halls of Congress. He would be actively involved in presidential politics for over four decades and made the nominating speech for Al Smith for President at the Democratic Nominating Convention in 1920. But his greatest claim to fame was that he became the mentor for possibly the greatest orator of the English language in the 20th century. Who was this man?

His name is William Bourke Cockran and a writer of fiction could not have made up a more interesting character. Cockran was first brought to my attention last year when Al Kawer, owner of Tuckahoe Paint and Glass, gave me an article published by Vince Bellew. Vince was superintendent of recreation in town for 50 years and mentioned Cockran in two of his columns in *The Eastchester Record*. Vince's mother had Bourke Cockran as one of her teachers at the old Waverly school in 1873. The old Waverly School was located at the corner of Tuckahoe Avenue and Main Street where Value Drugs

(formally Waverly Lanes) is today. Vince Bellew was told by his mother that as a young girl she remembered the teachers holding "classes at night on the school lawn and studying the stars in heaven. They would sit on the banks of the reservoir at the end of Tuckahoe Avenue and study marine life."

By 1876 Cochran had passed the bar and became a lawyer practicing in the village of Mount Vernon in the town of Eastchester (Mount Vernon would not become a separate city until 1892). Cockran's star was on the rise and he soon became prominent in New York City politics, Tammany Hall, and the national politics of the Democratic Party. He would serve seven terms in the House of Representatives, campaign unsuccessfully in 1892 against the nomination of Grover Cleveland at the Democratic convention for president, and at the end of his career in 1920 he would nominate Al Smith for President.

Cochrane was known as one of the greatest orators of his time and a person of independent character. In 1896 he briefly abandoned the Democratic Party because he could not support the soft money policy of William Jennings Bryan and four years later he returned to the Democratic fold because he could not support the imperialistic policies of William McKinley. He was an advocate of Irish independence, labor unions, and the working man. But his greatest claim to fame started with an alleged affair with one of the most beautiful woman in America.

In 1895, Jennie Jerome Churchill was recently widowed from her husband who some historians believe had died from the advanced stages of syphilis. Jennie and Bourke who also was recently widowed struck up relationship and later that year Jennie asked Bourke to introduce her 21-year son Winston to New York City society. Winston was on his way to Cuba as a war correspondent and stopped at New York City to see his Brooklyn born mother. This chance encounter would have a lasting and profound effect on Winston Churchill and the world.

Churchill modeled his skills as an orator on the correspondence and lessons he learned from Cockran. In 1932 Churchill wrote about Bourke Cockran, "I must record the strong impression this remarkable man made upon my untutored mind. I have never seen his like, or in some respects his equal...It was not my fortune to hear any of his orations, but his conversation, in point, in pith, in rotundity, in antithesis and comprehension exceeded anything I have heard."

Cockran had become the tutor of rhetoric for Winston Churchill. They would correspond frequently. Adlai Stevenson, himself a notable speaker and a two time Democratic candidate for president in the 1950's, in his last meeting with Churchill, reminisced about the impact that Cockran had on the oratorical style of the prime minister, "He was my model...I learned from how to hold thousands in thrall...Cockran was an American statesman who inspired me and taught me how to use every note of the human voice like an organ."

Cochran died in 1923, a day after he made his last speech before his seventh term in congress was about to expire. Churchill would go on to become prime minister of England. He would use the rhetorical style of William Bourke Cockran to keep millions in thrall to fight not just the Nazi menace in World War II but the red menace of the cold war.

In the next article Mike Fix and I will connect how a young Bronxville flier who volunteered to fight in the RAF made the ultimate sacrifice on November 7, 1941 at the age of 20.