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TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW OF
CONOR CRUISE O'BRIEN

BY

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THOMAS G. WEISS: This is the 4th of October, Tom Weiss interviewing Dr. Conor Cruise O'Brien overlooking Dublin Bay here in Howth. I don't think there is anyone else in our pool who has written on as wide a range of things as you have, from Katanga to Edmund Burke. And you have written memoirs. I just wondered whether you could extract from your own family background and your own educational experiences, what you think was most important in steering you toward the career that you chose, and in particular toward your concern with multilateralism and international cooperation.

CONOR CRUISE O'BRIEN: Yes, well, it's humdrum enough to begin with. When I had graduated in Dublin, I went in for the Irish civil service, which was at that time a very limited opportunity for intellectuals and the like. It was one of the few places where you could go and earn a living. So I went into that. Then, in time, I became preoccupied with Anglo-Irish relations, first—the relations between Catholics and Protestants in Ireland.

And then when Ireland was admitted to the UN—Ireland for the first six or so years of the organization had been kept out by the Soviet Union as not being a “peace-loving” state because it hadn't supported the Soviet Union. But we were admitted then, and there was a United Nations section set up at headquarters, and I was put in charge of that. I went to the General Assembly several years running. And then, when the Katanga imbroglio developed, Dag Hammarskjöld, who was then Secretary-General, asked my government to release me for service on the Security Council. He didn't specifically mention that he wanted me for Katanga because he thought that the government might have been hesitant about being involved in that.

But I went there, and then I went to Katanga and had various experiences there and resigned in order to be able to write a book. I resigned both from my country service and from

the service of the UN because civil servants are generally expected not to write about their own experiences when they are officially employed. So that was about it. That was the background.

Then I later wrote first of all about that Katanga experience, and then more generally about the UN and what I knew about it, mainly in a book called *United Nations: Sacred Drama*, which you may know. And I have returned to the subject over the years.

TGW: In secondary school or university, do you recall any courses or discussions or preoccupation with the first experiment in international cooperation, the League of Nations, or the ILO (International Labour Organization)? And what that meant, or did not mean, for postwar economic cooperation?

CCO: Yes, that was of considerable interest to Ireland because Eamon Develera, who was the most important political leader at the material time, happened to be in the chair of the League assembly at the time of [Benito] Mussolini's attack on Ethiopia. And he supported collective action against Mussolini. And if the collective action had been taken, it would have to have been enforced by the British Navy. They were the only people competent to enforce it. They decided not to enforce it, so it came to nothing.

So after that experience, Dev became rather disillusioned about collective security as it had been defined, as many other people did. And he was shaping his course toward neutrality, the course which he did follow. It was really a rather qualified form of neutrality, doubly qualified because at the opening of the war, he was in touch with the British representative in Dublin, Sir John Mathey. And he told Sir John Mathey that he would not allow Ireland to be used as a base of operations by terrorists like the IRA (Irish Republic Army) directed against Britain, and that he would deal very severely with anyone who attempted that. Indeed, he hanged some of them.

Now Sir John Mathey, who was a very, very able civil servant, thought well about it. He thought Britain had an interest in Irish neutrality, in that it would ensure that Ireland would not be used as a base for attack on Britain, and would do this at no cost to Britain itself. Whereas the alternative course, which [Winston] Churchill once seemed to favor, of occupying Ireland would be very costly, both in international relations, and in enforcement on the ground, and would in short be a disaster. So Dev worked very well with Mathey. The two men liked one another, appreciated one another, and felt they could trust one another.

Then after the United States entered the war, there was a further change in that Develera made it known to the United States that he would interpret Irish neutrality in a sense favorable to the United States. For example, when American warplanes crashed in Irish territory, they would be simply repatriated to the United States. Whereas, in relation to Germany, the old practice continued that when German planes crashed the people who flew them would be interned for the duration. And there were other changes along the same lines.

So it became benevolent neutrality towards Britain, from the time of America's entry into the war. That changed, of course, the climate in Ireland. If it would have been just helping the British, there would be a lot of people against it. But a lot of the people who were against the British would be favorable to the Americans. And that was felt. So I followed all of that quite closely, both at the time and then subsequently.

TGW: In your memoirs, you wrote, "I was brought up to detest imperialism." I guess that is not hard to understand. But I wondered how this made you feel when you arrived in New York at a special moment. Ireland was not the only country kept out of the UN. There were, beginning shortly after you arrived there, a whole series of newly independent countries that

were suddenly admitted. Did this make you feel somewhat sympathetic? How did you react viscerally to this new set of issues brought before the United Nations?

CCO: Well, I was favorably disposed to the countries, mainly in North Africa at that time, which were attempting to get away from their imperial ties. All throughout the Maghreb, this was the case at the time. I had quite close relations with a lot of the people, principally from the then French-ruled territories, both in North Africa and in Central, East, and West Africa. I got to know them quite well and was on friendly terms with them. I spoke in their favor. And this was one of the things which caused Dag Hammarskjöld to be interested in me. He was much a “horses for courses” person. He saw me as a horse who would be useful in certain circumstances, as being a westerner, but more well-disposed towards the emerging former colonial countries than most westerners were. So at the beginning, that was where the basis was laid for my later UN service.

TGW: Did it seem that there was an unstoppable move toward decolonization and self-determination at the outset of the United Nations? At least my reading of the documents and other people's as well seemed to suggest that this was going to take a long time—fifty or seventy-five years, 100 years. How did it seem to you?

CCO: When [Dwight] Eisenhower was president, he said he would be guided on African affairs by those who knew the continent. By this he meant not any Africans at all, but simply the British, French, Belgians, and Portuguese. And that was the prevailing doctrine until John Kennedy became president. Kennedy, of course, had enraged the French by writing a book in which he supported the Algerian claim for independence. In general, his idea was to push the former colonies in the direction of independence, and to see off the British and French, and then that the newly independent countries would look to America for support for their development,

and would become, if you like, a part of an unofficial and unavowed American empire. This was certainly very much how it looked to the British and the French, and there were very strained relations there, as of course emerged particularly at Suez.

TGW: You mentioned also in your memoirs that you arrived at a moment when the UN was going through this double crisis—the Suez and Hungary. But at just about the same time Bandung (Asian-African Conference) took place, the first meeting of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) did. Did this seem like something momentous? There seem to be a variety of views—an astounding development and everyone thought so at the time, and others who seem to claim that it really was on very few people's radar screens.

CCO: The latter. When we arrived there, what was central to everybody's minds was the dual crisis over Suez and Hungary. Bandung really looked like a kind of propaganda circus without much reality behind it. It was also the sort of time when people were talking about a United Africa, a united African continent, which became Kwame Nkrumah's obsession at a later time, and never had any reality in it at all.

TGW: There actually is a new United Africa movement underway. My guess is that it may have more or less the same fate as Nkrumah's.

CCO: There is no other fate it could have. I remember, at one conference I attended—it was in Ghana—one of the Arab delegates came out and addressed us about a United Africa and the need to rally behind the Arab cause. One of my Ghanaian students got up and said, "Mr. So-and-So, when Africa is united, wouldn't you have to stop being an Arab?" So blue smoke was seen to come out of the top of his head, of course. His Arab nationalism was real, but the African unity stuff was all guff.

TGW: One of the main themes in much of your writing and concerns about Ireland has been this mixture of religion and nationalism. If you replace that with ethnicity or different kinds of religion, is this a sensible way to look at politics in the United Nations, particularly in the last ten years?

CCO: Well, I don't quite know what you mean by politics in the United Nations. The United Nations is an institution which functions within well-defined parameters, and the parameters are not defined by any of the Third World countries at all. They are determined primarily to the extent of about 90 percent by the United States, working through its systems of alliances, including its relations with the other four permanent members. The whole thing, at the level of the Security Council or the Secretariat, and to a great extent also of the General Assembly, is dominated by the U.S.

But there was once a time when the U.S. could automatically get a two-thirds majority in the General Assembly. That was at the time when Americans talked about the Security Council as paralyzed by the Russian veto, and then defined the Assembly—then run by the UN—as the moral conscience of mankind. It is very convenient to have a moral conscience of mankind which automatically approves of everything you do. But that ended with the Middle Eastern crisis of 1956, when the Arabs found that they could deny a two-thirds majority to a U.S. resolution. So from that day to this, the General Assembly ceased to be the moral conscience of mankind. The phrase was never uttered again. It disappeared.

So the reality of the UN is this, that the most important organ is the Security Council, and subordinate to it, the Secretariat. And in both of these, in different ways, the United States is the supreme authority. You see this working now. Automatically, American resolutions go through. There used to be times when the Soviet Union and China held out, basically in an effort to be

bought off by the Americans. But now it is more they tend to woo the Americans through the UN institutions. So it is an environment in which, if the Americans don't like you or cease to like you, you had better go elsewhere.

TGW: It is not because of my accent and nationality, but I remember reading in a couple of things that you have written the term "American arm-twisting." I was just curious. What is the difference between arm-twisting and leadership?

CCO: Well, arm-twisting defined a particular—it is not just leadership. Leadership can mean a wide variety of things. Arm-twisting is quite precise. Arm-twisting is when a country—the U.S. is really the only one in a position to do it—sought to change votes by putting the heat on voters—riding some, threatening others, blackmailing others. And finally, if they couldn't be won round, going over their head to their government and getting them recalled through economic pressure and so on.

That was, as a matter of fact, most strongly felt at the time when Israel was being admitted to the UN, and the Arabs, with other countries, tried to form a block against that. The United States got after it in a really big way. After that, arm-twisting was less blatant, but it was certainly in use at the time of the Suez Crisis, and subsequently in more mitigated and harmless ways, which could be defined in your terms as leadership. But in the heyday of the arm-twisters, it was something much more concrete. You knew when your arm was being twisted.

TGW: Sometimes broken.

CCO: Yes.

TGW: You wrote that the Congo, that you had altered the course of the rest of your life. What did you mean exactly by that?

CCO: I was really rather very simple and material up to that time. I had been a civil servant. I was in a small country and governed by the rules that do govern civil servants, which inhibited me from talking out on political subjects. Then when I decided to leave the United Nations, I got myself recalled by my own government to the United Nations. That was prudent because I was really being pressed by the UN Secretariat. But this gave me a decorous way out. The Secretary-General, U Thant, wrote a tribute to my services and so on which was meant to be shown to Arabs, Asians, and so on.

But then I saw that I wanted to write a book about this, and I couldn't stay in my home service and write a book about my service. So I resigned and wrote my book. Since then I have been a completely free agent. I can say what I like about any matter. Nobody has a right to breathe down my neck. And I have found that very congenial.

TGW: Very few people have had so many different kinds of jobs, as well as being a free-floating intellectual. You have actually been a government civil servant, an international civil servant, a university professor, a politician, a minister. Have these all been fun in different ways, or do you look back on some with more regret than others?

CCO: I suppose the latter. I mean, the most purely enjoyable periods for me were my stints as a visiting professor in various very good American universities where I had good students and nobody breathing down my neck. On the other hand, in politics, when I went into Irish politics after I had resigned over the Congo, I joined the Labour Party and I found my freedom was also quite restricted. If I couldn't convince my colleagues that we were to go a certain way, I would have to constrict my own utterances so as not to collide with them. I found that troublesome and uncongenial.

My main concern began, over Northern Ireland, to try to stop the efforts of the Republic of Ireland to squeeze Northern Ireland into joining the republic, irrespective of the wishes of most of the inhabitants of the area. I did that, and I found that I was running into trouble with some of my most influential colleagues, and more than that, with John Hume, who is regarded in the republic as the one authority on the affairs of Northern Ireland. I didn't accept him in that, and I couldn't say I did. So for that reason, I was originally intended to be foreign minister and I didn't get foreign minister. I got appointed minister for communications. I was sore about that at the time, but in retrospect I think it was one of the luckiest things that ever happened to me. If I had been foreign minister, I would have had to do one of two things: either subordinate myself totally to John Hume and agree with everything he said, in which case I would be perjuring myself, virtually; or contradicting John Hume, in which case he would denounce me and my own party would drop me, because it was not possible to live in the republic and run into that. So that was a constraint.

Then I found myself, when the question came up of Ireland joining the European Community (EC)—I basically favored that, but my party decided to oppose it. And I was being spokesman for my party on foreign affairs. I was expected to speak against something which I really wanted to do. And I did this painfully. I did it in one tormented speech. But really that collision made me begin to feel that I couldn't stay on in party politics, that I wasn't basically a party politician. I would have to strike out for myself. But in the event, the electorate saved me the trouble by throwing me out.

TGW: This must make for some interesting conversations down the hill at the pub. I presume this view is still not very popular.

CCO: Well, that's a funny one. I had a kind of straw poll about this on the hill of Howth, walking around here, just after I had taken what was, for a person in the republic, the remarkable position of joining the United Kingdom Unionist, a body in which I am still honorary president. The day after I announced that, I was walking here on the hill—I regularly do; I'll be walking later this afternoon—and about twenty people came up to me. There wasn't one who attacked me over this. Rather more than half of them praised me for doing what I believed to be right and wished me luck. About 40 percent, I think, said, "We don't agree with what you are doing, but we know that your motives for what you are doing are good. And we hope it keeps fine for you." So that was rather satisfactory, I must say.

Living here ever since, I know that if I walk in the city, for example, I have sometime gotten, particularly in the past, one or two attacks from IRA sympathizers—not recently. But even in those days, a very typical intervention was this. A man came up to me, an elderly man. He looked over one shoulder, and he looked over the other. Then he addressed me in a sort of whisper, "You are a brave man. Keep it up," to be sure that nobody heard him. So there was a certain amount of that sort of thing.

TGW: I would have to say that in a self-confessional way that the one reason that I left the United Nations myself was a concern to be able to write. There is a certain pressure to be politically correct in lots of orders, including the United Nations. And it's not clear to me that it's necessary to be politically correct. And when I was reading through your memoirs, when you were reacting to the staging of your play, "Murderous Angels," I happened to think, "Ah, this was political correctness before we had the term." But I just wonder whether you think there is more room within the United Nations system to say things that go against the grain. It could

go against whatever grain happens to be popular—western, southern, northern, eastern. Is there more room than we think?

CCO: Well, one thing you can't do is to go against the grain of the people who put you there. That would be the elected political parties in democracies or, in most of the countries of the earth, the rings of bosses and accomplices of bosses that run the show. Basically I think everyone who addresses the UN Assembly is mainly looking over their shoulder. First of all, you know that, as so many people address the assembly, most utterances will go unrecorded in most countries. The places they will play is back home in your own country. They want to see what you have said. So a smart UN operator will say to himself, "First of all, I must say nothing that offends the United States. Secondly, I must say nothing that offends the folks at home." Then you will put in a part of your remarks aimed mainly at the UN record, which will put you right with Uncle Sam, and then another part, aimed at your own people, which may sound to them as if it is critical of Uncle Sam, but not so critical that Uncle Sam will notice it.

TGW: This is part of what you meant by the "sacred drama," I presume.

CCO: Yes, that's right. A funny kind of drama.

TGW: I read that a long time ago, and I picked up a used copy of it recently—very inexpensively, so you're not getting any secondhand royalties here on this. But it was fun to read one part. In spite of the many things that you have said about the institution that are not exactly flattering, you still say, "It's a desperately serious farce on whose continued run our lives may depend." Would you still say that, particularly after September 11? Is there a potential here that we can make use of?

CCO: Well, it's a very elastic institution. The people who bend it are mostly Americans, but on occasions it has been useful, in rather disreputable ways, at avoiding conflict. The classic

example, of course, is when the crisis in Central Europe, when Eisenhower was in power in America, the Hungarians revolted. The Hungarians had been urged to revolt by two sets of American broadcasting institutions, with the implication, but never actually the promise, that if they did revolt, the United States would back them up. Then they revolted. Eisenhower, rightly so, guessed that if he backed them up he might find himself having to fight the Soviet Union in Central Europe, a most unsuitable area in which to confront the Soviet Union.

So quite sensibly, he decided not to back them up. But he needed to put a good face on that to make it look acceptable. So he claimed, quite falsely, that the United States was bound by the United Nations, under the Charter, which is not the case, as he knew, having read the Charter. But he also knew that most Americans had never read the Charter, and had no intention of reading it, and that they were very glad to know that America couldn't intervene, that the United Nations wouldn't allow it. Then he went through the thing. He said, "We have got to follow the appropriate channels. We'll take this to the Security Council. We seek to settle it there." He knew what would happen there, and it did because the Soviet Union vetoed American intervention. Then he took it to the General Assembly, and the General Assembly loudly denounced the Soviet intervention. But they didn't do what they had once done before and could have done again. That was to, say, authorize resistance to the—it was the Chinese formerly—but the power seen as the aggressor. They just chided and did nothing else.

Then Eisenhower said that this showed the need for Charter revision so as to make it impossible for the United Nations to be defied. Of course, you can't have Charter revision because of the veto on Charter revision. Nobody really wants it, anyway. And so it went.

That was that circus. Then there was the later thing with [Nikita] Khrushchev, when Khrushchev's ships were approaching the United States and he was beginning to be terrified of

what would happen if they went on. He asked the Secretary-General to appeal to both parties, to the Soviet Union to withdraw its ships and to the Americans not to attack them. Of course, Kennedy had no difficulty in agreeing to that. He wasn't going to attack them when they were doing what he was telling them to do: retreating. So Khrushchev then made a very righteous speech in which he said, "We are obeying the United Nations. We are setting a moral example to mankind." And he was off the hook, except of course in his own country where they didn't appreciate what he had done—either running the risk or then backing away. But that was the best he could do for the time being.

And there have been other minor exercises along those lines. So I think it can be a kind of safety valve. And it is notable that no country has withdrawn from the UN since it was founded. Every country finds a potential utility in it, if it's only being able to protest against something that you have no power to change, but releasing the feelings of your own population and so on. So I think it is a rather leaky set of safety valves, but they are valves of a sort.

TGW: It's probably not surprising, since I am on a university payroll, that I think that ideas matter. But I was fascinated to see that this *Festschrift* in your honor was called *Ideas Matter*.

CCO: Yes.

TGW: Why do ideas matter? How precisely do they influence the behavior of governments and intergovernmental secretariats?

CCO: Well I suppose you can see some of the reasons in the book itself. Now I think I am going to have to stop because I am getting tired. I had a stroke a few years back. I made a good recovery from it, but my attention span begins to wane after thirty or forty minutes.

TGW: You have been very kind.

CCO: Then I will go for a walk.

TGW: A walk always does us all good.

CCO: I have enjoyed it, and if you care to send me the text I won't importune you with any great editing.

TGW: You should feel free to add or subtract, as you'd like.

CCO: What I might do would be to add a little section with a considered response to the question which I didn't answer—the last one.

TGW: Terrific. Thank you very much.

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