



## Norris, David (b. 1944)

by Linda Rapp

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David Norris began his career as a scholar, specializing in the works of James Joyce, but his involvement in the glbtq rights movement in Ireland led him to challenge the country's repressive laws. As a senator, Norris has continued to work valiantly for equality for all Irish citizens.

David Norris is the son of an Irishwoman and an Englishman. The couple had been living in the Belgian Congo, where his father was employed as an engineer, for fifteen years when Norris was born on July 31, 1944. Some six months later his mother went home to Ireland with Norris and his older brother, the plan being that her husband would soon join them. Instead, his job responsibilities kept him in Africa until his death six years later.

A voracious reader and diligent student, Norris was accepted to Dublin's Trinity College, where he continued to excel, winning the prestigious Foundation Scholarship in 1965 after his second year of studies.

### **Joyce Scholar and Preservationist**

Upon receiving his bachelor's degree Norris became a lecturer at Trinity, where he remained until 1996. His specialty is the works of James Joyce, whose writing he eventually began performing in critically acclaimed one-man shows. Wearing a white suit and dark glasses and sporting a cane, Norris brings Joyce to life for his audiences. Norris has sometimes used his performances to raise money for worthy causes. Among those benefiting from his generosity have been AIDS patients, battered women, and a disabled woman from the west of Ireland who needed a modified van.

Norris brought the same sense of excitement to the classroom at Trinity, where he was renowned for giving lectures that were remarkable for their depth and erudition as well as enjoyable because of his enthusiastic and flamboyant delivery.

Norris combined his passions for Joyce and for architectural preservation in a project that resulted in the establishment of the James Joyce Cultural Centre in Dublin. Norris had bought a house on the once-stately North Great George Street in 1978 and lovingly restored it. By 1982 twelve other houses on the street had been torn down owing to their state of disrepair. Norris stepped in to convince the Dublin Corporation to spare Number 35, the only remaining Georgian residence, which had been built in 1784, so that it could house a museum celebrating Joyce.

For over a decade Norris worked to secure private and public funding, as well as money from the European Union, to realize his dream. On June 10, 1996 Irish President Mary Robinson opened the center, which now attracts 30,000 visitors per year.

In his devotion to all things Joycean, Norris has also been a strong supporter of Bloomsday, June 16, the date upon which the events of Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) occurred. Norris has called that work "probably the greatest novel written in the twentieth century--certainly in English--and one of the greatest works of

creative imagination ever."

Regarding his promotion of Bloomsday celebrations, he stated in 2004, "I told Bord Failte [the Irish Tourist Board] thirty years ago that Bloomsday could be a Dublin Mardi Gras. Now, not only do we have a successful day, we also have a week of events, something which is key to drawing tourists."

Norris was an active and avid participant in the celebration of the centenary of Bloomsday in 2004. On that occasion he stated, "Bloom is right: insult, revenge, hatred--all these things are pointless and enmesh people in endless feuds and bloodshed. To understand the common humanity of people, struggling to make their relationships, their homes and families, to survive and create social networks and an understanding of the arts . . . I think Joyce's message in that is very clear."

### **Gay Rights Activist**

Were these achievements all that Norris had contributed to Ireland he could be proud, but he has accomplished much more. He became involved in the Irish gay rights movement early on and continues to work to gain equality for glbtq Irish people.

Ireland in the mid-1970s was not a society in which homosexuality was much discussed, let alone generally accepted. Norris showed the courage to step forward publicly by becoming a founding member of an organization called the Irish Gay Rights Movement. The association soon divided into two interest groups, one that offered social opportunities and the other that campaigned for legal reform. Showing typical dedication, Norris worked for both.

Norris was among the founders of the Hirschfeld Centre (named after the pioneering researcher and activist Magnus Hirschfeld), a facility that opened on Saint Patrick's Day 1979. It provided entertainment, with a movie theater and a disco that occasionally drew celebrities including Elton John. The center also offered a library and social services.

The building that housed the Hirschfeld Centre was seriously damaged in a fire of suspicious origin (for which no one was ever charged) in 1987. After extensive fundraising and restoration efforts, it eventually reopened and now again serves as a glbtq community center.

### ***Norris v. State***

A priority for Norris was ending legal discrimination against gay men, and so, with several friends, he established a foundation to overturn Ireland's laws on homosexuality. Taking the lead, Norris resolved to bring a case against the state. He called upon barrister Mary Robinson, his former Trinity classmate, to represent him.

Reluctant at first in the face of such a daunting challenge, Robinson was won over by a letter in which Norris vividly described the pain and isolation that he had felt as a young gay man growing up in the repressive social climate of Ireland. Moved to tears, Robinson agreed to take on the case. The legal battle would stretch on for years and propel both Norris and Robinson onto the national and world stage.

Under statutes dating from 1861 and 1885 homosexuality *per se* was not illegal, but sexual activity between men was. In *Norris v. State*, Norris and Robinson argued that the laws violated the privacy rights of gay men.

The suit, filed in 1978, was not heard in court until 1980. Witnesses from several countries--the president of the American Psychiatric Association among them--testified on Norris's behalf. The state called no witnesses, and although the judge, Justice McWilliam, conceded that the negative stereotypes of gay people lacked any basis in fact and that a "surprisingly" large number of Irish citizens were gay and

therefore suffering from them, he ruled against Norris on the grounds that the constitution held that marriage and the family were the foundation of Irish society and that the prevailing Christian morality opposed same-sex sexual relations.

Over two years passed before the appeal was heard, and another six months before the Supreme Court ruled 3 to 2 to reject it. Chief Justice O'Higgins stated that Christian teaching condemned homosexuality and that the Constitution should uphold that belief. Dissenting Justices Henchy and McCarthy found the argument of the individual's right to privacy persuasive and also pointed out that the European Court of Human Rights had already ruled against the 1861 and 1885 laws in a case from Northern Ireland.

### **Appeal to Council of Europe**

The case then moved to the Council of Europe. The European Commission on Human Rights ruled the case admissible in 1985 and heard it the following year. In May 1987 the Commission returned a preliminary judgment that Irish law was in breach of the European Human Rights Convention for failing to safeguard individual privacy.

The state of Ireland chose to reject this finding, propelling the case into the European Court of Human Rights, where the matter was heard in April 1988. The following October the court ruled in Norris's favor, finding that Irish law violated Article 8 of the Convention of Human Rights and calling upon Ireland to undertake legal reform in this area.

### **Senator**

As his case had meandered at a frustratingly slow pace through the various courts Norris not only continued his teaching at Trinity and his activism on behalf of glbtq rights and architectural preservation, but also entered the realm of electoral politics. After several unsuccessful campaigns he won election to the Irish Senate in 1987, becoming the first openly gay member of that body.

As a senator, Norris has tackled a number of issues including social welfare programs, protection of Ireland's minorities, urban transportation, and historic preservation, as well as abuses of human rights around the globe, particularly in Timor and Tibet. In 1990 he commented, "I believe I have an obligation to speak on behalf of other people who cannot. It would be utterly wrong and very boring if I only spoke out on gay issues."

Nevertheless, implementing the reforms demanded by the European Court of Human Rights was a high priority for Norris--and an extremely difficult task, for the legislature was in no hurry to deal with the issue. Only after pressure from the Council of Europe did Ireland announce in May 1992 that legislation to decriminalize sodomy would be put forward.

No such action occurred, however, and so the following November the Council of Europe imposed a six-month deadline for the achievement of the reforms mandated by the court.

Norris remained in the lead of the fight. One of his actions--profoundly moving for its simple humanity--was to arrange a meeting between Minister of Justice Maire Geoghegan-Quinn and another important political figure who had a gay son so that they could talk "as one mother to another."

Geoghegan-Quinn announced her intention to submit a bill in February 1993. The measure finally passed in June. President Mary Robinson signed the measure into law, bringing a happy conclusion to the quest that Norris and she had begun so many years before.

On the historic occasion Norris wrote, "I will, for the first time in my life, feel that I am a full and equal citizen of my own country."

Nor was he alone in that sentiment. As it happened, the law was adopted just in time to make Dublin's annual pride festivities a moment of especially great celebration. Journalist Mary Holland described the atmosphere as one of "exuberance and delight" combined with "an enormous, palpable sense of relief." She further observed that "one would need to have a heart of stone not to have been moved by the great waves of happiness that surged through the centre of Dublin" on the jubilant occasion.

Norris has continued to address issues of concern to the Irish glbtq community, including workplace discrimination, which was banned in October 1993, and immigration rights for foreign partners, which have so far been denied.

### **Long-Time Relationship and Its Dissolution**

Norris's own relationship with his longtime love, Ezra Yizhak Nawi, fell victim to the stress of forced separation. The couple met in Dublin, where Nawi, an Israeli, was vacationing. Unable to obtain a work permit and deported, Nawi made do with annual month-long visas, and Norris spent vacation time with him in Jerusalem. The situation, Norris said, put "an intolerable strain" on their relationship, which ended in 2001 after twenty-six years.

Norris commented, "I would prefer not to see other people having to go through the heartache that I have had to endure," adding that if he and Nawi had been able to marry, they might not have broken up.

### **Civil Partnership Bill**

For years Norris worked to repeal Article 41.3.1 of the Constitution, which asserts a state interest in safeguarding the institution of marriage as the sole basis of the family, an article that has been widely interpreted to preclude any recognition of same-sex couples.

After considerable effort Norris succeeded in having a Civil Partnership Bill accepted for hearings in the legislature in 2004. The measure would allow gay and lesbian couples (as well as opposite-sex couples who choose not to marry) to enjoy the same rights as heterosexual spouses. These include equivalent status in matters of taxation, pension rights, the ability to inherit, and recognition of the partners as next of kin, as well as immigration rights for foreign partners.

The bill had a second reading in March 2005, but stalled for several years.

Norris stated in 2004 that "It would bring my career in this area to a satisfying conclusion if my name were on the Bill that finally and definitively removed discrimination." That satisfying conclusion was finally realized in 2010.

In 2009 and 2010, Norris's proposal for a civil partnership bill was developed and refined. The bill that was finally signed into law on July 19, 2010, provides a wide range of protections, rights, and obligations for same-sex couples in areas such as pensions, taxes, social welfare, domestic violence, inheritance, and joint tenancy. It grants all the rights and responsibilities of marriage except the right to adopt children.

The bill, modeled on the U.K.'s civil partnership legislation, was, despite opposition from the Roman Catholic Church, passed without a vote in the Dáil and with an overwhelming majority in the Seanad at the beginning of July. It went into effect on January 1, 2011.

Although by the time the civil partnership bill came to a vote, Norris had come to the conclusion that marriage equality could be achieved, he nevertheless deserves great credit for his work on behalf the milestone legislation. Its passage is a fitting honor for the courageous campaigner who has worked

unstintingly to bring dignity and equality to the glbtq citizens of Ireland.

### **Presidential Campaign**

In 2011 Norris declared his candidacy for the presidency of Ireland. He quickly became the front runner in the electoral race and it seemed possible that he would become not only Ireland's first openly gay president, but one of a handful of openly gay heads of state in the world.

However, in August 2011, when it was reported in the press that Norris had intervened in a court case in Israel in which Nawi had been charged with statutory rape, the senator ended his campaign for the presidency.

The case, heard in 1997, stemmed from an encounter in 1992 between Nawi and a fifteen-year-old boy. (The age of consent in Israel is sixteen.) Nawi pleaded guilty and was awaiting sentencing when Norris wrote to the Israeli court, asking for clemency.

Norris's involvement in the case came to light when John Connolly, an Irish-born resident of London, wrote about it on his blog. Connolly told Pat Flanagan of *The Mirror* that "a leading Irish trade unionist" had given him a tip and that he had publicized the incident because he saw Norris as an opponent of Israel. "I have no regrets about what has occurred," he declared after Norris's withdrawal from the campaign.

The revelation that Norris had asked for clemency for someone accused of sex with a minor was particularly disturbing in Ireland, given the fact that the country has been roiled by news of clergy abuse of children and its cover-up by the Roman Catholic hierarchy.

In announcing his decision to quit the race, Norris stated, "I do not regret supporting and seeking clemency for a friend, but I do regret giving the impression that I did not have sufficient compassion for the victim of Ezra's crime," adding that his "motivation to write the letter was out of love and concern" and fear that Nawi might take his own life.

After the revelations Norris lost the backing of several legislators. Without the official support of the requisite number to qualify as presidential candidate Norris ruefully bowed out of the race on August 2, 2011.

However, several weeks later polls showed that Norris remained a viable candidate, so he re-launched the presidential campaign. When the votes were counted on October 27, 2011, Norris had finished fourth. He congratulated the Labour Party candidate, Michael Higgins, on his win and pledged his support.

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