

Conan O'Brien

Occupation: Talk show host
Interviewed by Claire Barliant

Before his television debut as host of the Late Night with Conan O'Brien show, O'Brien wrote for The Simpsons and Saturday Night Live. Originally from Boston, he now lives in New York City.

"I'm a hundred percent Irish. My family has been in this country since just before the Civil War, but I'm still a hundred percent Irish, which means that I'm dangerously inbred. We come from Dungarvan, right on the water in the Southeast, and from Kerry. We settled in central Massachusetts. Unlike most Irish, we didn't settle in Boston. On my father's side they became farmers. My grandfather on my mother's side was called "Hooper," because he knew some dance steps. He was a policeman in Worcester, Massachusetts. His wife, Maudie, was a schoolteacher. My father's father ran a small bank in Southbridge. Every name in the family tree is Irish. So all we did was settle in Central Massachusetts and everybody just kept marrying other 100 percent Irish people so I think I must be more "100 percent Irish" than most people living in Ireland.

My parents both became professionals and moved to Boston; they originally came from Worcester. So I'm really the first generation to grow up in Boston.

I don't think I'd be doing what I'm doing if I weren't Irish. I tell people that my imagination, my sense of humor, and my ability to talk for long periods of time even though I have nothing to say are all uniquely Irish qualities. I think Regis Philbin and Rosie O'Donnell are sort of proof of that. When I was growing up, I think I was aware from the time I was born that I was surrounded by a lot of funny people

who were all talking at the same time. That's in my bones. We used to sit around the table on Sundays and ridicule everybody we knew and tell stories and make things up—all to see who could get the biggest laugh. My mother always got the biggest laugh, always unintentionally. She's a sympathetic creature. It's cultural, it's something in the genes. Everybody in my family is funny in a very visual way. They describe things and they create images. That's kind of what I do on the show a lot, and that is very Irish. I think I owe my livelihood to the fact that I'm from Ireland.

I'd like to think my ancestors would be proud and excited about where I am today. I think particularly my grandfather, Hooper, would have loved the whole thing. I think they would enjoy the fact that I make a living being funny. People become romantic about their pasts, it's the later generations that have become romantic about it. The people who left Ireland didn't think returning to Ireland would be all that great. So I think if you went back through each generation they'd be less misty-eyed about the whole thing. It's the seventh or eighth generation Irish who start getting



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all nostalgic about the green island and say, "Oh, let's go back." Of course things are much better now in Ireland than they used to be so we can afford to be misty-eyed and jump on an Aer Lingus flight and fly over there and have a Guinness and slap people on the back. But go back 8 generations and they had a quite different view of the whole thing.

I took a trip back and flew into Shannon, and drove east to Dublin. I went to Dungarvan. It was funny because I stopped when I saw the sign that said "Dungarvan" and I pulled over in my little rental car and I got out, knelt on the ground and started kissing it because I thought: that's what you do when you finally return to the town you're from. And I'm kissing the ground and an old gentleman standing there said, "What are you doing?" I said I'm kissing the ground because I'm from Dungarvan. He said "You know there's another Dungarvan right up the road." It turned out I was kissing the wrong ground. Now, if you want to talk about humiliation, that's humiliation.

My connection with Ireland felt genetically right because of the fog and the rain. I have very Irish skin, and I used to live in Los Angeles, and I would always be uncomfortable, and getting sun-burned. I realized when I was back in Ireland that this was where I'm supposed to be. It rains every

day, you can't see the sun. Immediately I felt this relief, like, oh, this is where my skin is supposed to be. The other thing I noticed is that if I lived in Ireland for a year I'd die of a heart attack, because everything you order there has butter, and cream. Here in America we've been weaned from that in the last 10 years. But I went back there and they'd pretty much pour heavy cream into everything. If you get an ice cube in Ireland,

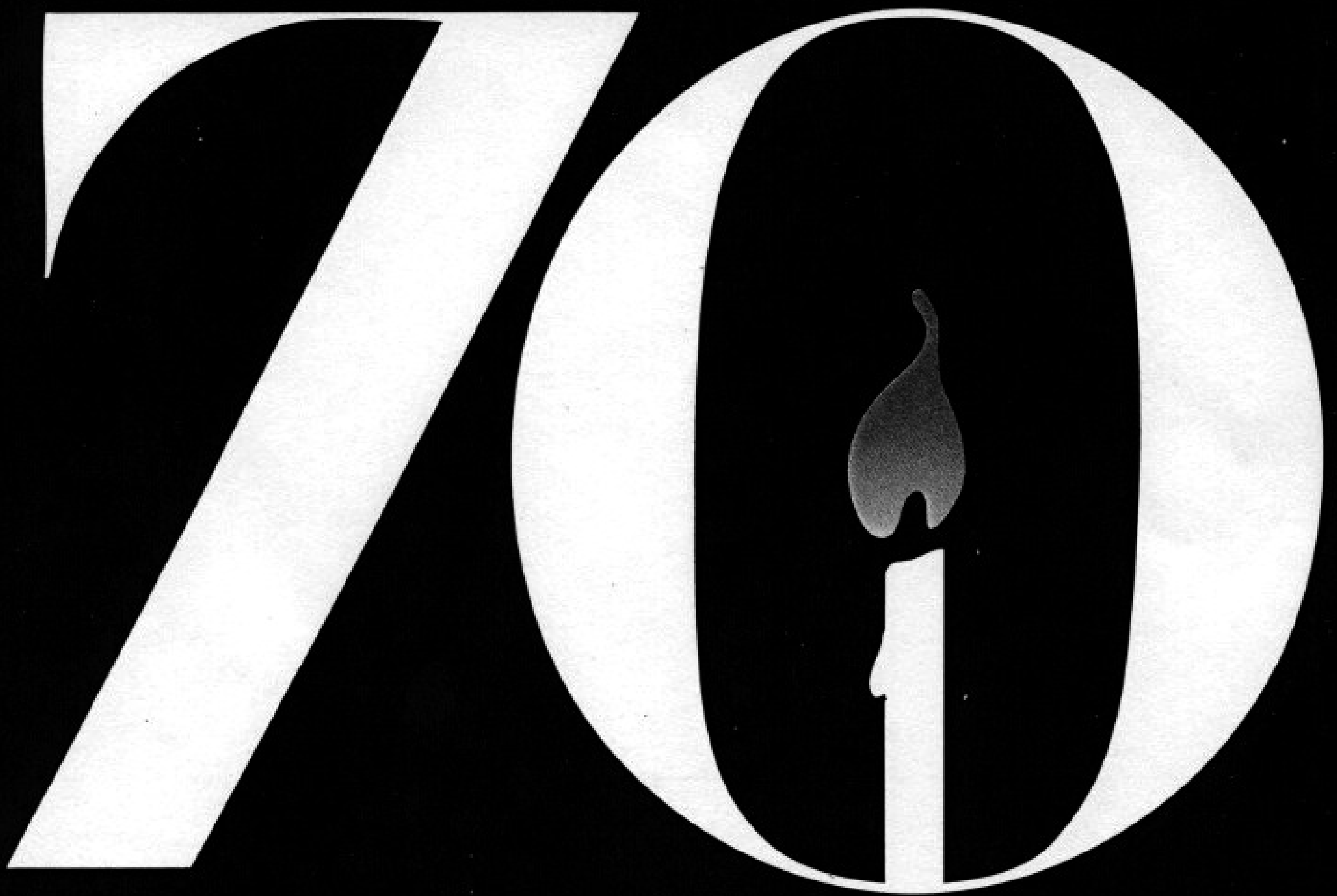
there's a layer of fat running through the middle of it.

One of the things I like specifically about Dublin was that it's a very young town. My show is broadcast in Dublin, so people knew who I was and they would say, "Oh, hello Conan." But they don't put you on a pedestal. People in America are so taken with celebrity that they elevate you a little bit, but in a false way. Of course, not so much in New York. In Ireland, it was very refreshing because it was kind of like, "Oh Conan, what are you doing in town? What brings you to Dublin?" Very casual, and not impressed, which matches my own low self-esteem, so it felt right. They'd just come up and start chattering with you, which was kind of nice.

There is a very Irish quality of being suspicious of anyone putting on airs. We don't like people who think too much of themselves. The Irish pity people who have fallen low, and are immediately distrustful of people who are raised high. We like everybody just at our level. Just because of what I do I'm highly suspicious of all celebrity; but it gets me a good table at a restaurant. "

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