

IRISH CULTURAL SOCIETY WRITING CONTEST 2022

HELPFUL HINTS

Dear Student Writer,

Thank you for choosing to enter our writing contest. For this year's contest we are asking you to bring to life the eleven iron workers from the famous photograph showing them sitting atop a beam high above Manhattan. A copy of the photograph is a part of the materials about the contest which we sent to your school. It is also on this web site, www.irish-society.org. Of course, we are an Irish organization, so we ask you to put a strong Irish component into your entry.

Our contest asks you to use one of the men on the beam to tell us about himself and about the other ten men. Your ability to create brief, believable sketches of the men will be challenged in this contest. But first, let us pause for a few paragraphs to present research information about the background of the iconic photograph.

The photograph, sometimes called "Lunch atop a Skyscraper" but which we will call "Men at Lunch," is so well known that doing research on the photograph has been made easy. Very helpful to you is that a documentary film entitled "Men at Lunch" has recently opened in New York City. Trailers of the film can be found on Facebook and You Tube and elsewhere. Search under "Men at Lunch" and you will discover many references. Find the *New York Times* article "How a Galway Pub Led to a Skyscraper" (November 11, 2012) for an informative interview with the creator of the film. This article provides speculation about the identities of several of the men on the beam, including two Irish immigrants. Perhaps you can get to see the documentary.

Wikipedia, as usual, presents useful material under "Lunch atop a Skyscraper" and smithsonianmag.com explores the specifics of the photograph. Author Peter Quinn uses the photograph of the iron workers on the cover of his book of essays, *Looking for Jimmy*. His essay "Looking for Jimmy" in the book has a wonderful analysis of the photograph with an Irish slant. Mr. Quinn's essay can be a brilliant springboard for your entry.

The research is the easy part of your task. For any writing project, of course, it is the creative side of your entry which will lead you to the winners' circle. You and all of the writers in the contest will have to make many choices. It will be the choices you make which will separate your entry from all of the others.

You have to decide who your narrator is. **We require that your narrator to be an Irish immigrant.** He will introduce himself, and he will tell us about the other ten men. Your narrator's personality will be revealed through what he says about himself and the other men. You may want to look again at the Robert Browning poem "My Last Duchess" as an example of how a narrator reveals his personality as he talks about someone else. The interviewer's personality will come through by virtue of the comments he makes about the other men.

Remember, your narrator is your creation. He does not have to be a nice person, nor does he have to like, respect or admire the other men. However, he can be a generous-hearted man with admiration and respect for the men who share the dangerous work of iron workers building a skyscraper.

We require that at least one other man on the beam be an Irish immigrant. We suggest your entry will be strengthened if it recognizes that immigrants from many nations helped to build New York City. Authentic sounding Irish, Polish, Italian, Greek names and the names common to the people of other nations will add color to your paper. Not all laborers, of course, were immigrants. So, too, **your group of men should reflect the diversity of the labor force in the 1930s.** Important to note here is that Native Americans are legendary iron workers. Search for *American Indian Iron Workers* and *Mohawk Indians—Ironworkers/Skyscrapers* for information you will find useful in the creation of one or more of your men.

Please do not overlook the **visual details of the photograph.** You may want your narrator to refer to some of the details associated with the men, such as the newspapers, the bottle, and the clothing. What was the news of the day? What are the contents of the bottle? Does your narrator have anything to say about the cigarettes, the shoes, the hats, the work clothes?

One question you must answer is, *to whom is your narrator speaking or writing?* The answer to this question will help you to create the tone of your narrative. Is he speaking to a grandchild about the “old days” or to adults? Is he writing notes to accompany a copy of the photograph he is sending to his family back in Ireland? Consider the time of the narration: Is the narrator telling his story soon after the photograph was taken or is he reflecting back months or years after the event? Consider where the narrator is: Is he looking at a framed copy of the photograph on a wall in a diner, restaurant, social club, family living room, and so on? The possibilities are endless. Any choice you make will be a good one—be true to it.

You have many choices to make. We urge you to take chances with the creative part of your entry. There are readers out there who want to be entertained by a story which gives life to anonymous men in a photograph seen by millions but questioned by few.

Have fun!!!

I hope these notes are of some help to you. Your teacher will give you even more valuable assistance. Every writer needs an editor, so use your friends and family as your preliminary audience. Contact me if you think I can help: webmaster@irish-society.org.

With respect,

John Walsh
Contest Manager