

Mother Ireland

“Brother, can you spare a dime?” This question is less a question and more a lament about the desperate economic conditions in the United States during the Great Depression which began in earnest with the Wall Street Crash of 1929. America had been to Irish people since the Great Hunger of the 1840’s the Golden Door to opportunity and prosperity. Of the 5,814,000 immigrants from Ireland from 1842 to 1925, 80.8% came to America . But, starting in 1929, America was different. The Great Depression, even though it was a world wide depression which also affected the Irish economy, led many Americans who had Irish roots to reverse the direction of their emigration to seek shelter in Mother Ireland.

Frank McCourt’s best seller *Angela’s Ashes* has made his emigration from America to Ireland very well known, This article will touch on McCourt’s story and tell the lesser well known but similar stories of immigration to Ireland of three other Irish-Americans: John Montague, the great contemporary poet, and Bill Burnett and Dan McLoughlin, both Nassau County , Long Island residents.

Frank McCourt was born in Brooklyn in 1930 of Irish born parents. The loss of jobs in New York City and McCourt’s father’s excessive drinking, according to *Angela’s Ashes*, drove the family to Ireland when McCourt was four years old. The family settled in Limerick to be near the mother’s family in hope that family and community support would help them weather the economic storm. Controversial is the description in *Angela’s Ashes* of an unfeeling family and cold hearted community which drove the McCourts more deeply into poverty. McCourt’s description of his family’s plight in Limerick makes a reader think of Ireland not as Mother Ireland, protecting and nurturing her children, but as “Mommy, Dearest” Ireland, rejecting and denying her children. Frank McCourt survived, of course, returning to America when he was eighteen to become a New York City high school English teacher and then the author of best selling books.

Frank McCourt’s story is atypical. John Montague, Bill Burnett and Dan McLoughlin thrived in the arms of Mother Ireland. They had nourishing and enriching childhoods in spite of Ireland ’s own economic depression. Cities such as Limerick where Frank McCourt lived suffered more in the 1928-1932 period because the government curtailed welfare programs. In the countryside, agricultural production in that same period continued its decline from the peaks of the legendary agricultural years of 1915-1921 when most of Europe was at war and Ireland was the bread basket for much of Europe . However much agricultural output and income declined, a farm family could feed itself. A great deal of labor on the farm was unpaid or nominally paid. A high proportion of farm production was consumed on the farm. The families of John Montague, Bill Burnett and Dan McLoughlin knew that their children would be well fed and smothered with love in the bosom of Mother Ireland.

John Montague was born in Brooklyn in 1929 in St. Catherine’s Hospital on Bushwick Avenue . In 1925, his father James left County Tyrone for America when life became

uncomfortable for an Ulster Catholic who had been involved on the Republican side in the turbulence of Ireland after the Easter Rising of 1916. Suffering the woes of the Depression, the father sent his three boys to Ireland in 1933, two to their maternal grandmother and John to his spinster aunts. His life with his aunts was that of a typical Ulster farm lad. Like so many who lived on Irish farms in the Depression, John was an “assisting relative.” Montague’s supportive family helped him to seize the educational opportunities available to him in Ireland , American and continental Europe . One of John’s books is *Born in Brooklyn*, and, although American born, John Montague is identified as Irish, such as when the critic Derek Mahon called him “the best Irish poet of his generation” and when he is compared to Frank O’Connor, Mary Lavin and Sean O’Faolain. Montague said of his immigration from Brooklyn to Ireland , “I think of those few years from four to eleven as a blessing, a healing.” Mother Ireland had adopted this immigrant.

These Americans seeking protection in Ireland during the Depression were part of an unusual change in the emigration/immigration pattern in Ireland . Under the impact of the Depression, overseas emigration fell and was replaced by a movement homeward. Between 1931-1938, emigrants overseas numbered 8,480 while immigrants from overseas numbered 15,859.

Bill Burnett and his brother Robert and their mother Gertrude Meheen Burnett were part of the 15,859 immigrants. Bill was born in Manhattan in 1928. His mother had emigrated from Westmeath in 1926. His father William was of Scots heritage and had a license to operate a newsstand near Bloomingdale’s in Manhattan . He lost the business in the Depression and in 1932 when Bill was four and Robert two, the two boys with their mother went to her family farm in Westmeath. The family did well on the Culvin Lane Farm. Bill remembers the collie and the hound dog and the trees. His grandparents were so happy with Bill’s presence that they asked his mother if she would permit him to stay in Ireland permanently. Bill’s grandfather told him some stories of Black and Tan intimidation that resonates today with Bill when he reads about colonial governments. Bill and Robert returned with their mother to the Bronx in 1935 to rejoin a father who had started a successful radio repair business. Since he had no schooling in Ireland , Bill started the first grade in *Bill Burnett America* at age seven. He had a brogue and his classmates called him the “Big Mick” and a “narrowback.” Bill had a long career as a steelworker, working on the television antenna on top of the Empire State Building and on the World Trade Center, among other New York landmarks. Bill’s Ireland was a nurturing Ireland which strengthened him for the future.

Unlike Bill Burnett, Dan McLoughlin and his twin sister Eileen preceded the 15,859 emigrating to Ireland between 1931-1938. Dan and Eileen, born in Harlem in 1926, went to County Leitrim in 1928 to live with their maternal grandparents and their Aunt Rose and Uncle Tom “ City ” Lavin. When their mother’s illness in America created a family crisis, their father, a Roscommon man, saw Ireland as a safe harbor for his children. Dan has fond memories of Drumshambo, County Leitrim . He remembers being an “assisting relative” on the farm with a border collie as a pet. He went hunting with his uncle and collected eggs from the chickens. Dan and Eileen were fascinated by the

active coal mine in the area. They would take excursions into the mine, always stopping before they lost sight of the light at the end of the tunnel. They loved the echo their voices made in the mine shaft. Eileen, years later, was active in establishing a museum of mining at the mine site in Leitrim.

Both brother and sister went to first grade at the O'Rourke School, a one room school house. Dan can still recall some of the poetry he had to memorize. When they returned to America in 1934, Dan and Eileen had to repeat the first grade. Dan's classmates, almost 100% first generation Irish, called him "Irish." His Irish relatives and neighbors paid Dan to hear him speak with his pronounced brogue. Having been raised on a plain diet in Ireland, Dan, when he was first served chocolate pudding, asked, "What is that dirty old stuff?" Indeed, Dan and Eileen needed a period of time to acclimate to American culture. Eileen became a teacher and Dan drove the same Madison Avenue bus which Ralph Cramden (Jackie Gleason) drove for many years on television.

Rural Ireland during the Depression years was a place where children could prosper physically and emotionally surrounded by loving relatives. Frank McCourt's experience, as related in *Angela's Ashes*, is remarkably different from the stories of John Montague, Bill Burnett and Dan and Eileen McLoughlin. Ireland for the most part fulfilled her role as a nurturing place: she was Mother Ireland.

(Written by John Walsh and originally published in September 2002)

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