New York and County Kerry, 1851–1930

BY JOHN T. RIDGE

In November 1789 a comedy in two acts called *The Prisoner at Large, or, The Humours of Killarney* was presented at a theatre in New York. Direct from the London stage, it proved a big hit and was performed regularly in New York and other American cities for at least the next thirty years (*New York Daily Gazette*, November 26, 1789). The play marked the start of an American love affair with Killarney and County Kerry that surfaced again and again on the American stage from the nineteenth century to the early twentieth century. Plays set in Killarney or Kerry, like *The Colleen Bawn*, were often performed for audiences across the United States, and not a few plays carried the name of Kerry or Killarney in its title. Dion Boucicault's drama *Kerry*, Kate Kearney's *The Lakes of Killarney or the Brides of Glengarriff,* and Kate Emmett's music-filled *Killarney* were popular with audiences of all ethnic backgrounds and were taken on tour to the most remote part of the continent. For a time it seemed almost fashionable to have a play with reference to Kerry or Killarney, and a variety of plays like *Rose of Killarney, My Killarney Rose, Lily of Killarney, A Romance of Killarney, Four Killarney Girls, The Singing Girl from Killarney, and Killarney and the Rhine* entertained audiences with earnest but usually fanciful depictions of Irish life.

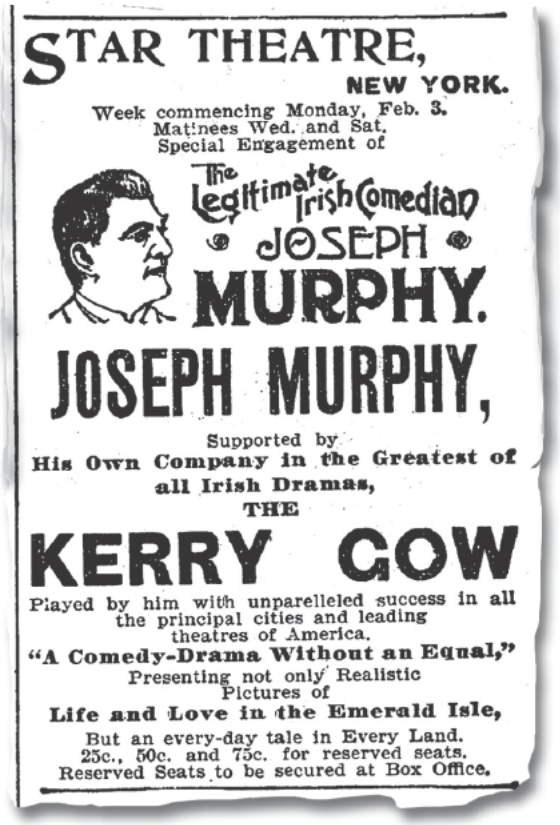
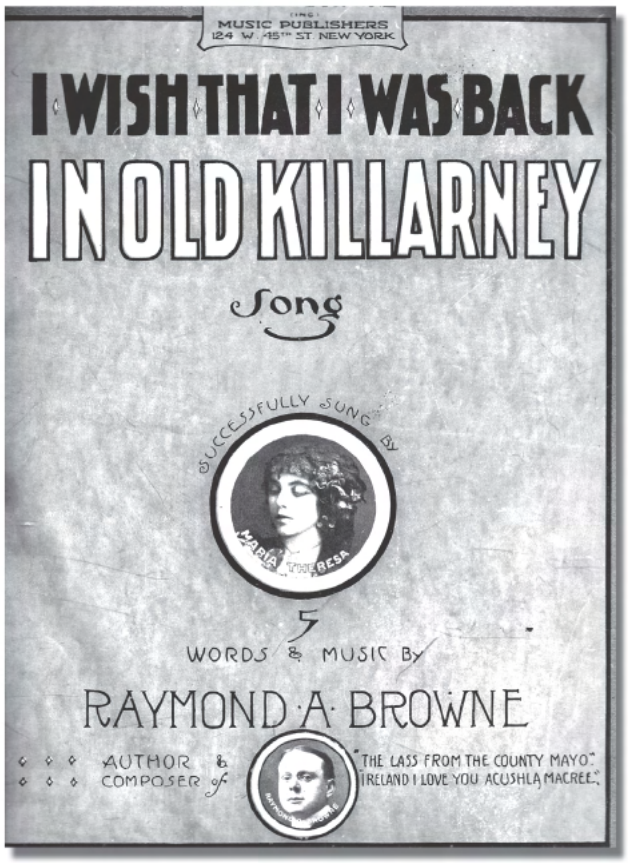

STAR THEATRE,
NEW YORK.
Week commencing Monday, Feb. 3.
Matinees Wed. and Sat.
Special Engagement of
The Legitimate Irish Comedian
JOSEPH MURPHY.
JOSEPH MURPHY,
Supported by
His Own Company in the Greatest of all Irish Dramas,
THE
KERRY GOW
Played by him with unparelleled success in all the principal cities and leading theatres of America.
"A Comedy-Drama Without an Equal,"
Presenting not only Realistic Pictures of
Life and Love in the Emerald Isle,
But an every-day tale in Every Land.
25c., 50c. and 75c. for reserved seats.
Reserved Seats to be secured at Box Office.

Illustration: *Joseph Murphy's* The Kerry Gow *was a staple of the American stage for over thirty years. Courtesy of John T. Ridge.*

A long lasting play, a staple of the late nineteenth-century stage, that was set in Kerry and made its debut in June, 1876 was *Kerry Gow*, with Joseph Murphy in the lead role as an Irish blacksmith ("gow" is a form of the Irish word for blacksmith). The "powerfully written" four-act drama bristled with wit and made a fortune for Murphy in the next thirty years as he repeatedly took it from coast to coast on tour. In 1912 *The Kerry Gow* was made into a silent movie, one of the earliest to be filmed in County Kerry (June 7, 1876, *Commericial Advertiser*, New York). Outside of Dublin, Cork, and perhaps Galway, no other county name became as familiar as Kerry did with the American public. Kerry as subject matter for the American stage was certainly reinforced by its famed natural beauty. Wonders such as the "Ring of Kerry" were a "must-see" for many American travelers doing the grand tour of Europe. Whereas many Irish towns and counties were only reported in a matter of fact manner, all too often describing poverty or political turmoil, Kerry enjoyed

a generally favorable treatment in the public mind thanks to scenery and the stage.

The American music industry also churned out dozens of songs featuring Killarney, Tralee, or Kerry in the title or in the lyrics in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Performers like Chauncey Olcott made careers built around some of these songs while Tin Pan Alley before World War I seemed never to have enough of these tunes invoking the romance and beauty of the county or individual towns in Kerry. "Killarney," written in 1857 by Edmund Falconer for the American stage, enjoyed new fame after John McCormack recorded it. McCormack also popularized "The Kerry Dance" and "The Rose of Tralee."



IMMIGRANTS FROM KERRY

The actual immigrant experience of most Kerry immigrants, however, was rarely as romantic as a play or musical score and, at the worst of times, during the years of the Great Hunger, the scene of immigrant arrival on the shores of America was more often a stark one. Today, visitors to City Hall Park on Lower Broadway in Manhattan (a place usually filled with European tourists—many of them Irish) enjoy through tourism the benefits that prosperity in the Old World now brings them. But the scene here in the years of starvation in Ireland was dramatically different. City Hall Park 160 years ago was a vastly different place for newly arrived passengers from Kerry. According to one newspaper of the day:

> *It is really lamentable to see the vast number of unfortunate creatures that are almost daily cast on our shores, penniless and without physical energy to earn a day's living. Yesterday, groups of these hapless beings were to be seen congregated about the Park and in Broadway, looking the very picture of despair, misery, disease and want. On enquiry, we ascertained that they had arrived here by the ship* Sir Robert Peel*; and that they had been, for the most part, tenants of the Marquis of Lansdowne, on his county Kerry estate—ejected without mercy by him, and "shipped" for America in this wholesale way. Among them were grey haired and aged men and women, who had spent the heyday of their life as tillers of their native soil, and are now sent to this country to find a grave. This is too bad—it is inhuman; and yet it is a act of indiscriminate and wholesale expatriation committed by the "liberal" President of the Council of Her Majesty Queen Victoria's "liberal" ministry. (*New York Herald, *March 23, 1851)*

The evictions that caused many immigrants from County Kerry to come to New York so suddenly was doubtless an important factor as to why these immigrants organized so early and so successfully societies composed of people from their native place. It comes as no surprise then that three of New York's earliest Irish town societies (the Kenmare Guard (1857), the Kenmare Hurlers (1859) and the Kenmare

Illustration: *Killarney was a favorite subject for sheet music early in the twentieth century. Courtesy of John T. Ridge*

Benevolent Society (1870)) were named after the principal town closest to the Landsdowne evictions. Tyler Anbinder in an essay published in the *American Historical Review* on the Five Points traced many County Kerry immigrants to this area using the records of the Emigrant Savings Bank. He estimated that seventy-five percent of the Kerry marriages in the local Roman Catholic Church were former residents of the Landsdowne estate. He also estimated former Landsdowne tenants numbered about one-thousand persons just in the Five Points (Anbinder, Tyler, "From Famine to the Five Points: Lord Landsdowne's Irish Tenants Encounter North America's Most Notorious Slum," *American Historical Review*, April, 2002). It should come as no surprise then that the only street in downtown New York named after an Irish town is Kenmare Street—which was named after the birthplace of the mother of Tammany leader, Tim Sullivan.

Illustration: *Officers of the Kerrymen's Patriotic and Benevolent Association for 1914. Courtesy of John T. Ridge.*

The Kenmare Guards was a target-shooting company of some fifty muskets under a Captain Fogarty which held their first practice in Flushing in October, 1857 (*Irish American*, October 10, 1857). The Kenmare Hurlers held meetings on Worth Street, and in March, 1859 they paraded with a sign on a wagon top with "Kenmare Hurlers" in large letters and then proceeded to a ferry crossing to Hoboken where they held a practice. The Kenmare Hurlers issued a challenge to all other teams to meet them. No challengers came that day, so they divided their players in two and played against one another (*Irish American*, March 26, 1859). An obscure group called the "Kerryonians" also existed in the 1850s and met in Worth Street. It was described as a "small gang which seldom roamed beyond Centre Street and did little fighting" (Herbert Asbury, *Gangs of New York*, 1998, p. 20).

While circumstances may have hastened the emigration of Kerry people from the Kenmare area to New York, an independent, defiant spirit remained with many of them in their new hometown. In an obvious response to the "No Irish Need Apply" advertisements in the American press, one immigrant, signing himself "Kenmare" in his own ad in the *New York Herald* in 1857, attempted to turn the tables on those who didn't want the Irish:

Board — Wanted By a Young Man, A Furnished room, without breakfast in a plain, private family, where the advertiser may consider himself, to a certain extent, at home. Those who object to foreigners need not reply. Address Kenmare, Herald Office (New York Herald, *March 6, 1857).*

THE KERRYMEN ORGANIZE

A feeling of county solidarity developed in part from social gatherings in New York that occurred among the immigrants from the same place in Ireland. The *New York Herald* reported in 1872, for example, that in the United States Hotel at the popular beach resort of Far Rockaway "the Kerry and Cork people swarm by the hundred" (*New York Herald*, September 9, 1872). Other Irish counties like Cavan and Longford favored different hotels. Such gather-

ings places were relatively few in number and knowledge of just where to go to meet other immigrants from the same county was known only by word of mouth. But a more organized means to regularly bring together Kerry immigrants was needed.

The inspiration to found the Kerrymen's Association in 1881 came after a number of letters appeared in the Irish-American weeklies urging Kerrymen to form an association. The formal appeal, signed by eleven Kerry-born immigrants who represented a variety of places in the county, was dated March 25, 1881. It invited all Kerrymen in New York and Brooklyn to a meeting at Academy Hall, 307 Third Avenue in Manhattan. While in later years, sketches of the Kerrymens' organizational history refer to the sudden death of a Kerryman destined for a pauper's grave, the March 25th call makes reference to "rapacious tyrants" in Ireland, the landlords, and the need to help the people at home. It further called for help from Kerrymen in New York who were "willing and ready to assist them to the best of your ability, both financially and physically, in their efforts against landlordism or any other ism" (*Irish Advocate*, June 4, 1908; *Irish American*, April 2, 1881). As a result of the Academy Hall meeting, however, the formal objects of the society included not just an obligation to help the people of Kerry at home, but "to afford assistance in deserving cases to such Kerrymen and their families in New York as may need temporary assistance" (*Irish American*, April 9, 1881).

Although county societies had been founded as early as the late 1840s in New York, the early societies were not firmly organized. The New York Irish weeklies referred to the Kerrymen in the 1890s sometimes as "the first Irish County Association organized in the city" (*Irish World*, April 18, 1891). This statement, however, is not true as there were several county societies with long pedigrees that seem to have been more or less continuous from the mid-nineteenth century, but all of them seemed to suffer from periods of inactivity that made them appear at times all but dead. Even the Kerrymen had an earlier organization. At a Kerrymen's picnic in 1887 the decorations included "the old banner of the organization which bears the date 1851" (*Irish World*, June 25, 1887). The Kerry Association of 1881 brought such enthusiasm to the idea of the county societies that it became the organizer of just about all the other county societies organized or re-organized in the 1880s and might be accurately described as the rejuvenator of the county society idea.

The choosing of the name "Kerrymen's Patriotic and Benevolent Society" came only after discussion at the organizing meeting in March, 1881. It was, in fact, initially proposed that the name of the new society be called "The Nun of Kenmare's Mutual Aid Association." A committee, chaired by John C. Hennessey, a Kerry-born editor at the *New York Times*, rejected this proposed name and selected the name the society still bears today.[1]

Kenmare still seems to have played a big role in the early years of the New York Kerry community. The Kenmare Benevolent Society was the only society of Kerry origin active in the city in the 1870s and 1880s. Death announcements for the wakes or funeral services of members appeared from time to time in the "mortuary" column of the *New York Herald*. Like all Irish benevolent societies at the time, a death benefit was paid to the widow of the deceased. A delegation from the Kenmare Association attended the Kerrymen's Annual Ball in 1887, still the only Kerry town society mentioned in the period before the wave of organizing Irish town and local societies began in earnest in the late 1890s. The original Kenmare society faded away sometime after 1887, and a new group was not formed until 1906 (*Irish World*, February 26, 1887). In 1890 the Kerrymen's P. & B. Society paid benefits in the event of a death of a Kenmare society member to the amount of $75 for interment and $50 to the widow (*Irish World*, January 25, 1890).

Michael D. Rohan, a native of Tralee, was elected temporary president at the inaugural meeting of the Kerrymen's P. & B. Society. He was sometimes referred to as "the father of the organization," but it was John P. Sheehan who became the group's first regularly elected presi-

Photo: *In 1904 the O'Connell's football team changed its name to the Kerry Football Team. Courtesy of John T. Ridge.*

dent (*Irish World*, August 27, 1881). Presidents in the first few years were elected for short half-year terms. In just over a year the Kerrymen had 150 members (*Irish World*, July 29, 1882).

By early July, 1881, a delegation of representatives of the Kerry Land League landed in New York on a fund-raising mission, and on arrival were met by a delegation of the Kerrymen's P. & B. Society who escorted them to the Westminster Hotel (*Baltimore Sun*, July 4, 1881). On July 20th a large meeting, at which the mother of the Irish leader Charles Stewart Parnell was present, was held at the Cooper Institute under the auspices of the Society. One of the Land League delegation members from County Kerry, Reverand M. O'Connor, lectured on the agonies of the Irish tenantry, some of which he had personally witnessed as a pastor in a rural area of some fifteen years:

> *It has always been England's policy to keep Ireland dependent, and the result of that policy is she has no manufactures, no industries and no commerce worthy of mention. Her sole dependence was agriculture and this was interdicted by the landlords. The law gave the rich landlords absolute power over the life and death of the tenants. He could raise rent and evict tenants at will. Evict the Irish tenant and there was nothing left for him but the poor-house or an emigrant ship (*Irish American*, July 30, 1881).*

The close connection to the land situation in Ireland continued within the Kerrymen's association, and this was renewed by a stream of visitors from home, usually members of the clergy. In October, 1882, Reverend Dennis Reardon of King Williams Town spoke at a Society meeting "on the present condition of the old homes of our members" (*Irish American*, October 21, 1882). Two visiting Kerry priests, Fathers Garvey and Dillon, were made honorary members of the association in 1886. Father Garvey, of Kilorglin, addressed the members on the meaning of the special feeling of attachment to their native county, stating that although he loved the plants that grew "in Innishown as well as those that grew in the wilds of Dingle,

he still felt that home and home recollections brought him more and more near to home when amongst those who hunted over the same heather" (*Irish World*, January 9, 1886).

Few Irish organizations have been as blessed with the almost immediate success of the Kerrymen's Patriotic and Benevolent Society. One indicator of this success was the Kerrymen's Games, sometimes referred to as the "Kerrymen's Picnic," which became an annual summer event initially held at Jones' Wood on the East Side of Manhattan. The first Games, held in August, 1881, featured athletic events like standing jumps, a two-mile walking match, a three-legged race, a go-as-you-please race, a hop-step-and-hop race, a sack race, a one-hundred yard run, a half-hour flat race, special races for boys, and a game of Gaelic football. Outside of a few gold medals, the awards were very practical prizes were like clocks, extension tables, and chairs that were donated by Daniel Shea's Furniture Company (whose owner was a member and sometimes officer). At the following year's Games more "handsome and useful household articles" were featured prizes. Success of the Kerrymen's Games astounded even the most optimistic observers. It was said that "few could believe a handful of gentlemen who met at Academy Hall on the last Sunday of March last could as rapidly recruit their numbers as to achieve the success they had on Tuesday, but it goes to prove that the Irish people, when properly handled, can be made to unite for any given purpose" (*Irish American*, August 13, 1881). Music for the first Games and for subsequent "picnics" was furnished by the 69th Regiment Band.

The 1887 "picnic" combined both sport and patriotism. After about a dozen Irish police officers (Royal Irish Constabulary) had resigned from their positions and come to New York rather than participate in evictions of Irish tenant farmers, the Kerrymen organized a tug-of-war between them and a team of Kerrymen members. The winning team received a cash prize of $100. In 1891 the annual picnic moved to Lion Park, 104 Street and Eighth Avenue, before settling in at Sulzer's Harlem River Park just above 127th Street.

Professional runners began to be a feature of the Kerrymen's Games by 1890 (*New York Herald*, July 29, 1890). So good was the talent appearing at the annual games that the New York Herald said in 1892 that it was the occasion for "the best professional footrace witnessed in this city in years" (*New York Herald*, July 26 1892) .The *Jersey Journal* in 1898 stated "the annual athletic games of the Kerry Association has drawn the best lot of entries of any outdoor games given so far this year" (*Jersey Journal*, August 3, 1898). Most of the champion athletes of the metropolitan area never missed a chance to compete in the Kerry games. Prizes for the games were so attractive that they were displayed at Young's Department Store at Broadway and Houston Street preceding the event.

In the 1920s when a Manhattan picnic ground was no longer available, the Kerrymen's Games became an indoor festival held at an indoor Manhattan hall.

The annual ball of the Kerrymen's Patriotic and Benevolent Society also got off to a good start. By 1887 the organizers were complaining that Tammany Hall had been too small for the huge numbers that attended the ball. The grand march of the society, an intricate parade of couples performing various carefully orchestrated maneuvers, included a "K. P. B. A." letter formation of marchers to the cheers of crowds in the galleries and boxes. Annual balls did not end until the final dance number ("Home Sweet Home") was performed at six o'clock in the morning (*Irish World*, February 26, 1887).

In addition to the New York organization, there were Kerry societies in the late 1890s in Brooklyn, Yonkers, San Francisco, Boston, Philadelphia, and Chicago. Most of these Kerry societies flourished at one time or other, but they were ultimately not continuous as was the society in New York. The Brooklyn Kerrymen were organized in 1891in a wave of Irish-county society formation in that formerly independent city—but the society faded after the emergence of greater New York City in 1898.

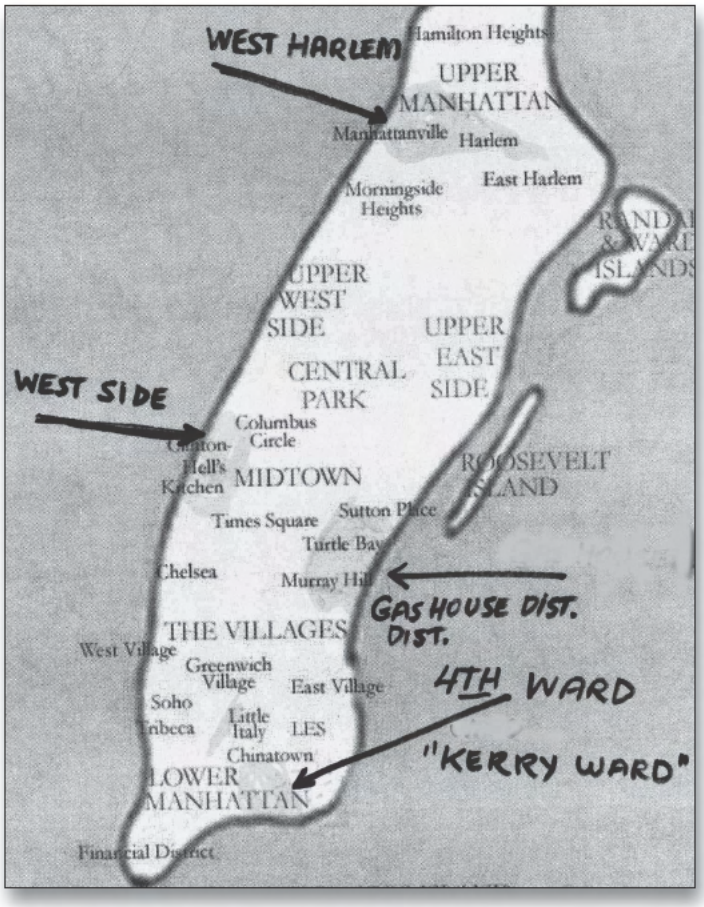


Illustration: *During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Manhattan had several neighborhoods with concentrations of Kerry immigrants. Courtesy of John T. Ridge.*

New York had a Kerry Ladies Association by 1896, and over the next few decades dozens of local and regional Kerry societies flourished in the city. There were social clubs for Kilgarvan, Sneem, Waterville, Valentia, Cahirciveen, Killorglin, Castlemaine, Castleisland, Dingle, Castlegregory, Tralee, Kenmare, Ardfert, Listowel, Knocknagoschel, Rathmore, Killarney, Ballybunion, Duagh, Tarbert, Faranfore, and many other localities. There were regional societies for the Iveragh Peninsula and others named for North, South, and East Kerry but, curiously, none for West Kerry. There were also societies that were more or less mainly Irish speaking like the South Kerry Gaelic Society, the St. Brendan's Gaelic Society, and the aforementioned Iveragh Society. Irish speaking societies, or partially Irish speaking societies, composed of people from the same area in Ireland were a rarity in the history of Irish organizations, and in New York only the Donegal people had an Irish-speaking similar society, the Craobh Colmcille (*New York Irish History*, vol.1, p.5).

The Kerry Association seemed to have a much stronger commitment to helping immigrants than most of the other county organizations. This was particularly the case with the Home for Irish Immigrant Girls, the receiving center and lodging house for arriving Irish immigrants located at State Street in the Battery district of Manhattan. Kerry was the only county organization that specifically ran fund-raisers for the home while it was operating, and in March, 1896, a musical and minstrel entertainment at Tammany Hall was given to benefit the home. Two thousand dollars, a large sum for the time, was raised for the immigrant girls. *The Irish World* commented "the Kerrymen are entitled to very much credit for the aid they brought to this most worthy institution. Other county organizations should follow the good example set by the Kerrymen" (*Irish World*, March 28, 1896).[2]

THE GATEWAY THROUGH DOWNTOWN MANHATTAN

The plight of the tenants in Kerry and elsewhere in Ireland was not something that ended with the Great Hunger or by the actions of the Land League. Accounts of evicted tenants or former tenants forced to emigrate from the poorhouse were frequently noted in the daily and weekly Irish-American press. During the summer of 1883 many newspapers carried news of the so called "Kerry Paupers" who were arriving in New York harbor with passages paid by the British government in order to be rid of responsibility for their care. The Anchor Line, perhaps the worst of the immigrant carriers, was chosen to carry most of these assisted immigrants:

> *The steam-ship* Furnessia, *of the Anchor Line, which arrived yesterday from Liverpool, brought 28 families of assisted immigrants, and the* Anchoria, *of the same line, from Glasgow, which also*

arrived yesterday brought three more. The total number of assisted immigrants on the Furnessia*, which stopped for them at Tralee Bay, was 128, and on the Anchoria, 19. Nearly all these families came from County Kerry. They did not look as good as the immigrants who had paid their own passages, but they had no appearance of being paupers. Some of the families were quite large. The people were well supplied with baggage and were comfortably clad. None of the men were apparently too old to work. The heads of some families were widows, but they seemed able to care for themselves. The head of each family made an affidavit in which among other things, it was stated that he or she had never been in the workhouse. From £2 to £8 10s. had been given to each family by the Poor Law Guardians to each family in addition to their passage tickets. Those whose friend lived some distance from New York had railroad tickets to their destinations. All claimed to have friends that were living in this country and exhibited letters in which they were urged to come to America (*New York Times*, July 31, 1883).*

The early years of the New York Kerrymen's organization reflects the geographic history of Kerry settlements in the city. The organization thrived on the Lower East Side in and near the old Fourth Ward, an area once so full of people from that county that it was known as the "Kerry Ward." The first meeting place was Pythagoras Hall on Canal Street at the point where the Manhattan Bridge now enters Manhattan. The lower East Side to the northeast of City Hall was the district where O'Donovan Rossa, the West Cork-born Irish nationalist, ran for political office in the 1870s. Much of his campaign was directed towards the Kerry and Cork residents of the streets near the East River and, as if he were something approaching their clan chieftain, he used the Irish language to cement the bond with the large population of southwest Munster origin.

Jobs kept many of the Kerry people in the downtown area. Kerrymen dominated much of the downtown printing trades, particularly the newspapers, and it was probably no accident that John C. Hennessy of the *New York Times*, one of the founders of the Kerrymen in 1881 and its president in 1884, would have had some influence in that trade. The paper handlers union, a powerful organization at the turn of the century, was usually officially represented at Kerry social functions in the first decades of the twentieth century. Events of the paper handlers, such as their own annual picnic in 1908, commonly featured a Gaelic football match headlining the Kerry team.[3] Lists of officers for this union at the time were dominated by surnames associated with Kerry (*Irish American*, March 25, 1881 and *New York Times*, December 16, 1903).

Although eviction had brought many emigrants from Kerry to New York, it apparently did not slow them down on their rise up the economic ladder. In the annals of downtown Manhattan's Emigrant Savings Bank (known widely at one time as the "Irish bank") from the mid- to late-nineteenth century, there are 4,789 references to County Kerry in the records of depositors. This number is second only to Cork (7,382) and ahead of Limerick (3,353), Galway (3,246), Tyrone (2,205) and all the remaining counties of Ireland. Kerry's share of the depositors is about nine percent of the total population (Ancestry.com; New York Emigrant Savings Bank Records, I850–1883, Index, Transfer, Signature, and Test Books, Deposit-Account Ledger).

Immigrant arrivals from Ireland at the Battery's Castle Garden in downtown Manhattan for the year 1882 also present interesting statistics. There were vast differences among the various Irish counties regarding percentages of arrivals from each county who stayed in New York City as opposed to those who were heading to other locations. A small county like Longford had almost seventy percent of the immigrants staying in the city, but of a sample of 2,100 Kerry immigrants landing

in 1882 indicates that only thirty-three percent declared New York City as a final destination. There were a few favorite destinations for the remaining Kerry immigrants: Massachusetts got twenty-one percent, Connecticut eleven percent, Illinois nine percent, Pennsylvania five percent, Ohio three percent, with the remainder were scattered over the United States (*Irish Nation*, 1882).[4]

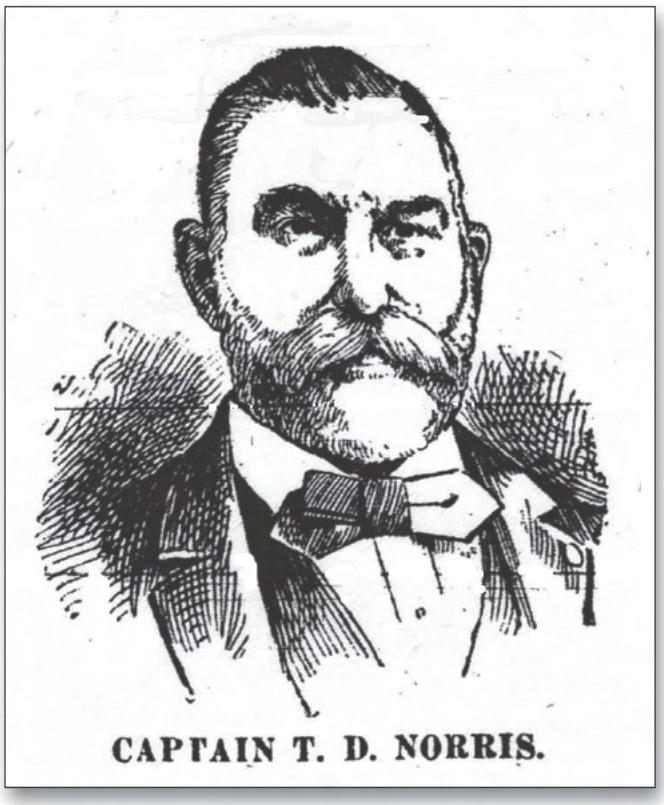
According to the sixth annual report of the Home for Irish Immigrant Girls, 3,783 immigrant girls were received at the Home during 1890, with 397 or 10.6 percent coming from Kerry. The county furnished the second largest number of immigrant women received by the Home of all the Irish counties for that year and was only surpassed by Cork with 476 (*Irish World*, March 4, 1891). Two years later immigrant girls from Kerry numbered 345 (8.7%) out of a total of 3,983 Irish girls received at the Home in 1892. Kerry was again second in number only to Cork, which sent 399 women (*Irish World*, October 21, 1893).

Partial records exist for Irish immigrant arrivals for both New York and Boston in this period, and they indicate the number of New York Irish immigrant arrivals vastly outnumbered those for Boston, a much smaller port. While the number of Irish immigrants identifying their county of origin is only a random sample rather than an absolute number, the ratio between New York and Boston for any given county would still tell us which port was most popular for each Irish county. What these numbers do show is that the ratio of landing Irish immigrants for New York to Boston is more than ten to one for counties like Donegal and Tyrone—but when it comes to Kerry immigrants the number arriving in Boston slightly exceeded the number arriving in New York (Boston at 6,118, New York at 5,377). While these figures are not the actual number of immigrants that arrived in America at the two ports, it still tells us which port was more favored for each Irish county. Interestingly, Kerry is the only Irish county where Boston apparently exceeds New York in immigrants. This shows that Kerry immigration was heavier to Boston—and New England—than immigration for any other county.[5]

Breaking down the arriving Kerry immigrants according to district origin in Kerry, we can see a similar ratio between Boston and New York arrivals. When immigrants from individual Kerry towns are examined in detail in the immigration records, it appears that the ratio of New York to Boston as an entry port was not uniform for all of the county. In general, Kerry north of the Slieve Mish Mountains and north of the line from Castlegregory to Castleisland, favored New York over Boston. All of Kerry south of the Slieve Mish Mountains (with the exception of the Cahirciveen and Kilgarvan areas) favored Boston as an entry port. (These conclusions are based on a sample of about two-thousand Irish arrivals for the ports of New York and Boston for selected towns in the county.)

The flow of emigration from any given town in Kerry or from any other place in Ireland can be traced to the minutest detail if the sample base is big enough. A list of some 1,143 arriving immigrants in New York (circa 1900) has been compiled for the town of Castlegregory by researchers in Kerry. Almost forty percent (38.6) of these immigrants listed a New York City destination of which about twenty-two percent headed for Brooklyn and the remaining seventy-eight percent were headed for Manhattan. Of the immigrants not heading to New York City, Holyoke, Massachusetts attracted about twenty-one percent and about fifteen percent were headed to other New England locations (Springfield, Mass., Waterbury etc.). Castlegregory immigrants remaining in New York favored the Westside of Manhattan from the area just south of West 14th Street to the west 40s and again with pockets in the west 70s and in the vicinity of West 125th Street. Samplings taken from the immigration records reveal that immigrants from further out on the Dingle peninsula were more likely to favor Boston as a port of entry, and a large share of them headed for Springfield, Massachusetts. While patterns of emigration can be seen for just about every locality in Kerry, there are surprising differences between individual

towns, even those close to one another. The patterns that emerge show just how strong the pull of those who had come first to America influenced others to follow in their lead (see *Immigrants from Castlegregory, Created for Kerry, Ireland* at Roots.web.com; Ellis Island.com; and Ancestry.com).



KERRY AND THE IRISH LANGUAGE

Many Kerry immigrants were native Irish speakers, and some of the arrivals in the late nineteenth century were Gaelic-speaking monoglots. Some of them like Mary Coffee from Shimmin, aged 104, were older immigrants arriving to join children already in America, but others were immigrants in the prime of life. Thomas O'Sullivan from Dingle, aged 21, arrived in 1899 with a note in English pinned to him:

> *My name is Thomas O'Sullivan. I have $5 in my pocket. I am going to my sister, Ellen, at 32 Sharon Street, Springfield, Mass. I speak only Gaelic. I expect to land in New York—God help me. (*Irish World*, April 15, 1899).*

In the 1880s and 90s it was fairly common to read accounts of Irish speakers landing in the city and requiring the help of translators to help them reach their destinations. In 1886 Timothy O'Sullivan, aged 30 and a Kerryman, had to be helped by the resident translator at the immigrant depot in Castle Garden in order to make connections to go to his brother-in-law, a resident in Westerly, Rhode Island. In 1895, Mary Coffee was met at the immigrant office by a daughter who took her to her residence at Plainfield, Connecticut. Army Captain Thomas D. Norris, one of several natives of Kerry serving as translators, was an American Civil War veteran from the 69th Regiment who frequently provided help to arriving immigrants or occasionally help for witnesses with testimony in courtrooms. Norris was one of the founders of the Irish language movement in New York in the 1870s and was one of the founders of the Irish language society, the Philo-Celtic Society of New York, where he served as teacher and writer for its publications (*Brooklyn Eagle*, Jan. 14, 1900).

The Kerry Ladies Association took up promotion of the Irish language as their particular cause in 1904. At that time most of New York's Irish organizations, except for those specifically organized to promote the language like the *Cumann na Gaelige*, ignored pleas of the Gaelic Revival Movement in Ireland. The Ladies Association had one big event of the year, the dance on the Saturday before Christmas, the proceeds from which were used for the Irish Language Fund of the Gaelic League. The Kerry Ladies' program specified that every second dance would be "an Irish dance" and Irish language songs were also a feature of all their socials in this period (*Irish Advocate*, December 17, 1904). Authentic Irish music was played all night long in the "jig hall" and for most of the night in the main hall. Once the formal grand

Illustration: *One of the pioneers of the Irish language movement in New York was Captain Thomas D. Norris. Courtesy of John T. Ridge.*

march was over at midnight "the bulk of the crowd sought out the jig hall, where old time dances of their county were in full blast. Here the hearts of the exiles were at home and they didn't do a thing to the floor but welt it" (*Irish Advocate*, December 31, 1904).

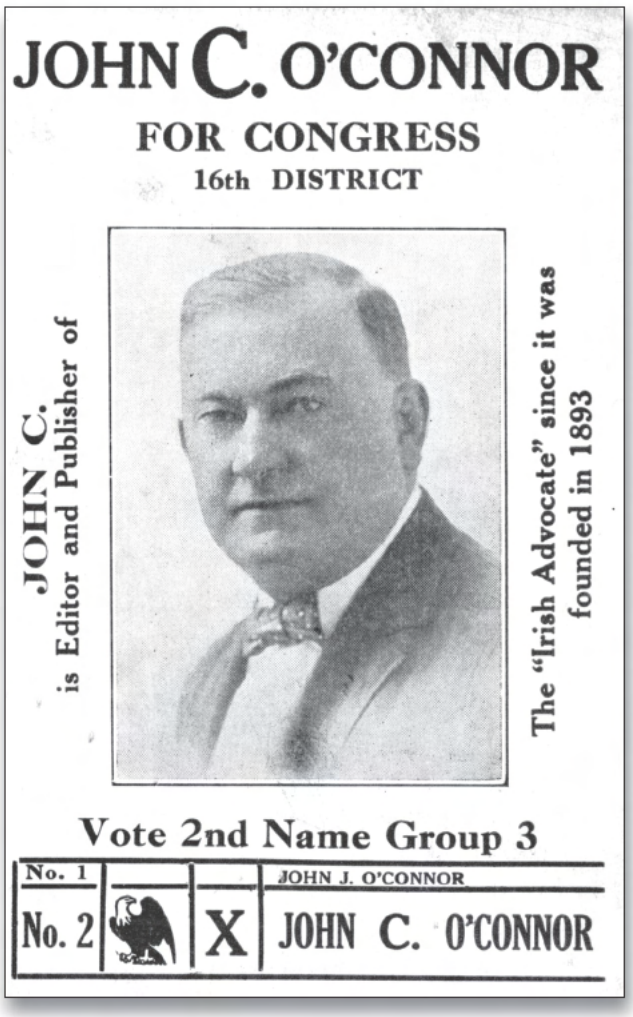


Photo: *John C. O'Connor, founder of the* Irish Advocate, *filled his newspaper with information about Kerry and Kerry people. This campaign card is from one of his runs for a Congressional seat in the years following World War I. Courtesy of John T. Ridge.*

THE IRISH ADVOCATE

Just as the Kerrymen's Patriotic and Benevolent Society became a refuge for many immigrants from the county, a newspaper soon appeared that came to inform and unify the Kerry community through its columns. It is indeed probable if there had not been a Kerrymen's P. & B. Association, the weekly Irish New York newspaper the *Irish Advocate*, founded in 1893 by Kerryman John O'Connor, could have prospered in New York despite two already established Irish weeklies. The new newspaper emphasized the social aspect of New York Irish life and reported far more comprehensively the local events of the New York Irish organizations than the other contemporary newspapers, the *Irish-American* and the *Irish World*. It was not unusual for the *Irish Advocate* to list the names of every single person present at a dance or social event, sometimes hundreds of names. Naturally, John O'Connor covered the news about his Kerry neighbors best , and his newspaper articles carried personal details about Kerry immigrants that only someone very familiar with its people and places could know.[6]

The *Irish Advocate* included items not normally found in the other New York Irish weeklies. There were few newspaper accounts specific to the journey from Ireland of immigrants from Kerry at the turn of the nineteenth century, but an extract from the diary of J.A. Leahy, aged eighteen, was published in the *Irish Advocate* four years after his arrival New York in April, 1908. The Leahy extracts were the type of detail about Kerry and its immigrants that would have been missing from the other weeklies. Arriving in New York on the White Star liner *Oceanic*, Leahy, from Ballylongford, was on his way to stay with an older sister in Manhattan. He was somewhat untypical of Irish immigrants of the time as he had a higher degree of education than the average, and his occupation was listed as "clerk." He wrote an account of his leaving Ireland that probably reflected the experiences of most Kerry immigrants in his time:

Queenstown, April 13, 1908, Thursday—I awake at 6:30 a.m. and realize that this is my last morning in dear old Ireland. I do not know whether I feel happy or sad and, in fact, I experienced both moods at about the same time. Happy in the belief that I was sailing to my "Mecca", sad in the thought that I was leaving behind all my love ones in the "Old Kingdom," perhaps never to see them again and clasp them to my heart. Again happy to know that I was going to join sisters I had not seen in years,

and also, that I would again set foot in Ireland—once more pay a visit to all my boyhood haunts.

*I look back over my railroad journey from Listowel on yesterday. Every railroad stop on the way to Queenstown presented us a picture of heartrending grief and sorrow. Parents tearing themselves away from their children: brothers, sisters and sweethearts, embracing even until the train actually pulls out. I thought to myself how many of those partings were to be the last of this earth (*Irish Advocate, *January 6, 1912).*

GROWTH AND CONTROVERSY

It was obvious that the County Kerry society was so successful that it represented something unusual in the New York Irish community where social organizations commonly had a short history. The Kerrymen seemed to have had no problem attracting a crowd to their events, and its membership level quickly was higher than any other county organization. The majority of Irish societies in contrast generally struggled, desperately trying to maintain interest on the part of their members. This may have been because Irish counties were internally divided geographically and lacked the strong cohesion and sense of place among people from Kerry. The geographic lines for some Irish counties were so drawn that large towns in adjacent counties offered a bigger social and commercial pull than centers within the counties themselves. Some counties were in part divided by water or hilly ranges that disrupted the close social connections from one section to another and produced economic and social divisions as well. Within the Kerry P. & B. Society, it was not uncommon for five-hundred members to be present at important elections. In 1913 the organization was said to have seven-hundred members, and by 1915 the figure had risen to one thousand: "a large percentage of which comes from the 'City of the Churches' (Brooklyn)"

Photo:
The Oceanic, *J.A. Leahy's ship, had a transatlantic route from Liverpool to New York. Launched in 1899, it carried 700 passengers and for several years was the largest passenger ship in the world. Courtesy of Library of Congress.*

Photo: *The St. Patrick's Day Parade in 1958. The Kerry contingent in the St. Patrick's Day Parade was always one of the largest county turnouts. Courtesy of John T. Ridge.*

(*Irish Advocate*, October 7, 1911; July 5, 1913; September 11, 1915).

Kerry social events like the mid-summer festival in 1912 and the annual ball in 1916 attracted six-thousand people. These were extraordinary numbers and dwarfed attendance numbers among the other county association. In the years just before World War I leaders of the Kerry organization felt confident enough to host a formal dinner, a step up the social scale. Among Irish organizations in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a formal dinner was an event that marked a group as particularly prosperous. An example was the annual banquet held by the Kerry society in 1912:

> *The Kerrymen's Society can muster the largest gatherings of any of the Counties at its social and athletic affairs, and it is reasonable to suppose that they can shine equally strong at a banquet. Of course, a banquet will necessarily attract a different element than a social or an athletic attraction, and it will appeal to an older and more well-to-do people from the Counties. The Kerrymen have plenty of talent among her own sons to make a gathering like this attractive enough for the best from the county. Kerrymen are in every line of business in New York; they can be found in all the professions and there is quite a number of them in the city, state and federal service. In the New York City Police Department alone, there are at least 500 Kerrymen of which four are police captains, and a score of lieutenants, sergeants, etc. (*Irish Advocate, *March 2, 1912).*

Perhaps the geographic position of County Kerry itself, at the extreme southwestern tip of Ireland, jutting out into the Atlantic on peninsulas and headlands contributed greatly to the sense of community among its immigrants. Indeed, inhabitants in several parts of the county considered themselves "the last parish to America," and perhaps organizing the Kerry association in New York was nothing more than a logical extension of the sense of community carried to the next place. The suf-

fering of the people of Kerry during the "Great Hunger," and the recurrent evictions and bitter struggle over land probably heightened the sense of uniqueness that kept them closer in the new world. The still strong position of the Irish language in the late 1800s, where half the immigrants probably had a working knowledge of the old tongue, made the exile community even more unique. The *Irish Advocate* commented:

> *It is safe to say that among the Kerry people as among no other people is the love of the Irish language and the Irish dances an inheritance and not an acquisition. And driven as they were into the confines and fastness of Western Europe, they kept and still keep alive with their language and dance the untainted spirit of Irish Nationality, no, not the doubtful nationality of the compromise and sycophant but the unyielding spirit of the rebel (*Irish Advocate*, August 28, 1915).*

The Kerrymen's organization stood as an outstanding example of everything that was steadfastly and uncompromisingly Irish. Its strong public profile made the society the target of criticism that other smaller Irish societies escaped. In 1901 the passion of the "Gaelic Revival" was sweeping Irish circles in New York, and columnists like those of the *Irish World's* weekly Gaelic column were starting to single out what they considered to be the failings of New York's Irish societies. The larger Irish social events, as suggested earlier, commonly featured two halls for dancing—a main hall where a mixture of Irish and American popular dances were performed and a lower hall, sometimes referred to as the "jig hall" where traditional set and country dances were performed. A formal program published for these events regularly covered only dancing in the main hall. Consequently, titles listed in programs were drawn from songs of the Thomas Moore genre or comic songs from the American stage. The programs included only a small part of what was played during the evening because dozens of songs and dances of ancient origin were played as well. The Kerrymen's dance program for its 1901 picnic appeared to lack a true Gaelic Irish program for someone only reading the titles of the two dozen or so program selections.

Organizers of the Kerry picnic and the leaders of the other Irish New York societies knew that a certain degree of cosmopolitanism had to be introduced at Irish social functions because not just Irish people were present. Irish immigrants did not live in a vacuum, and they brought their friends and American-born relatives with them, people who were not necessarily familiar with ceile dancing. Some attendees were also of non-Irish background and attended only because they knew that Irish social events were cheerful and lively evenings that everyone seemed to enjoy. An accommodation, therefore, was made to broaden the appeal of the main hall so that almost anyone would find something to their liking. As Paul Jones, a longtime officer of the Kerrymen's society put it in a letter to the *Irish World*:

> *No student of the course of events will deny that the encouragement and support of the American public—or that portion of the American public which is friendly to the Irish cause—is essential to the success of any Irish movement or organization; but that sympathy and support will not be secured if our attitude toward the customs of American social life is dictated by the narrow and illiberal spirit which permeates the utterances of your Gaelic contributor.*
>
> *Ireland needs all her friends; her enemies, both here and on the other side, are ever on the alert that they may detect something that might be construed to indicate disloyalty on our part to the Republic; its customs and traditions; therefore it becomes us, in our efforts to uplift the land of our fathers, to pursue a course which experience and prudence would sanction. Enthusiastic Irishmen should be careful not to give offense to those who wish us well (*Irish World, *August 31, 1901).*

A scathing reply to Jones came early the following year in a "Gaelic Notes" column written

in response to the announcement of the upcoming Kerry dance:

> *The desire to please somebody else, generally ending in pleasing nobody, amounts almost to a national fault. The eloquent declaimer quoted could not mention one other people in this city or the country who boycott their own national speech, music and customs at their public affairs, and some of these other people "please the American public" much better than the Kerrymen. The "American public" knows little, and cares less, about the Kerrymen.*
>
> *The "American public" does not go to the Kerry hall. On the other hand, German musical and entertainment events, that are purely German, are largely patronized by Americans of non-German extraction. The idea of Americans being pleased by Irishmen boycotting their own wealth of national music for Bowery and coon trash is too grotesque to be put forwrd by anybody save the class who are so unintelligent and slavish that they are ashamed to put an Irish dance on the programme or to dance it anywhere else than in the basement, reeking with smoke and filth. (*Irish World*, February 2, 1902).*

This was not the last time a columnist used his position to attack the society. After a hard fought football match in 1913 that saw the Kerry team victorious, the columnist (from the losing county) attacked the alleged behavior of the Kerry supporters for running on to the field after the match was over. Obviously, it was a barely concealed case of "sour grapes" from a partisan of the defeated team that just couldn't manage to be fair. A reply to the charges came from J. M. Griffin, the chairman pro-tem of the society's outing committee, who skillfully and with humor defended the honor of his county against charges of behaving like "roughs" for their enthusiastic celebration at the point of victory. Griffin wrote:

> *I cannot, Mr. Editor, but think that the gentleman in question has some painful misgivings as regards Kerrymen. He tells us in a part of his epistle that when the last Kerry goal was scored on Sunday "hats (male and female)" of the Kerry followers went flying in the air. I have heard, Mr. Editor, of sex distinction between animals, but never yet between hats. Will the "able" scribe (perhaps I should say "capable") kindly inform us how to discern a male from a female hat? Or are we only to conclude it is Kerry "roughs" that wear them? (*Irish Advocate*, July 5, 1913).*

War and its Aftermath

On receiving news of the 1916 Rising in Dublin, the Kerrymen acted immediately. While many of the county societies took a cautious or even condemnatory approach to the event, there was no doubt where Kerry stood. At a meeting called on short notice 250 members turned up to greet with applause that the Irish Republic had been proclaimed that day. A donation of $1,000 to aid the revolution and an accompanying resolution passed unanimously. The resolution clearly expressed their views:

> *Resolved, That We, the Kerrymen's Association of New York in meeting assembled, sincerely endorse the Irish uprising and wish it godspeed. (*Irish Advocate*, May 13, 1916)*

World War I was a disaster for New York's Irish societies, and for Kerry it was no different. In a way the Kerrymen's Patriotic and Benevolent Society may have been harder hit because of the traditionally close relationship with the 69th Regiment (which used the Kerry society and other Irish county organizations as its recruiting grounds). Over one-hundred members of the society were "over there" with the 69th Regiment in France. Several officers in the 69th were former officers of the association including Major Timothy J. Moynihan and Captain J.P. Clifford. The *Irish Advocate* carried a long series of letters from Kerry soldiers in the ranks of the American Army and followed them from basic training until, for several unfortunates, war injuries or death on the front ended the fighting.

Membership fell off rapidly during the war and was slow to recover. Despite the active participation again of many of the 69th Regiment veterans, the new Kerry president in 1922 could only pledge "to increase the membership of the society to two-hundred members during the ensuing year" (*Irish Advocate*, October 7, 1922).

However, immigration, which had been declining before World War I and had been almost completely cut off during the hostilities, increased dramatically later in the 1920s and soon the city became a center for Irish activities of all sorts. The social events of the Kerrymen's organization returned to their former size and in 1925 Henry P. Lannen, the vice president, could announce before the St. Patrick's night dance that "there will be no Irish left in the Bronx that night—they'll all be at the Kerry Ball in Turn Hall." By 1930 the Kerrymen could again boast once more that "it has the loyal support of 1,000 members" (*Irish Advocate*, October 11, 1930).

It was stated in 1911 that "the Kerrymen and Kerry Ladies of New York, of whom it is estimated there are over twenty-thousand" were reluctant ever to miss social occasions like the annual picnic (*Irish Advocate*, July 29, 1911). This figure was probably right on the mark considering the Irish-born population of the city in 1910 was 252,672, twenty thousand or even twenty-five thousand was as accurate an estimation as possible of the Kerry-born population (*Abstract of the Census-Population* [1910], United States Bureau of the Census, p. 210). Recent figures show a population of Irish ancestry in New York City in the year 2000 of 421,646; therefore, a number about forty-thousand would reflect the portion of Kerry ancestry. In the nation, there are over thirty-six million Americans of Irish descent, but allowing for the fact that earlier Irish immigration may not have been as heavy from County Kerry, there still would be about three million Americans of Kerry ancestry in the United States—a remarkable number for just one corner of a small island. The vast majority of these three million Americans of Kerry ancestry will not even be aware of their connection to the county. Eventually, for the majority of Irish-Americans, affiliation with the place in Ireland that their ancestors lamented over and longed to see once more will be nothing more than a couple of hidden genomes percolating in their DNA.

Illustration: *A World War I recruiting poster for the 69th Regiment, which had a close relationship with the Kerrymen's Society. Courtesy of Library of Congress.*

Notes

1 John Collins Hennessy was born in Listowel in 1833 and was descended from a long line of Irish revolutionists, one of whom was associated with Robert Emmet. Two of his elder brothers were incarcerated and died in prison during the 1848 Rising. Hennessy studied for a time for the priesthood, but soon became a private secretary and then postmaster at Listowel and in Waterford. His connections to the Fenians were finally discovered four years after the Fenian Rising forced him to flee the country in 1871. In New York he found that Michael Hennessy, a relative, was commercial editor of the *New York Times*, and he joined the staff soon after. In addition to being its Washington correspondent, he served that newspaper as city editor and as night city editor (*New York Times*, December

16, 1903). Hennessy was elected president of the Kerrymen in October 1884 (*Irish World*, October 18, 1884). His son, John C. Hennessy, also worked for the *New York Times* beginning in 1872. He became editor for several New York and Providence, Rhode Island newspapers.

2 The Home for Irish Immigrant Girls was in a building located in the Battery District used as a reception center for young women arriving from Ireland. It was run by a staff headed by a priest appointed by the Archdiocese of New York. Unescorted women or those needing help were brought to the Home for an overnight or a few days stay until arrangement for their further care or employment could be arranged. For more information, see articles on the Home by John Ridge in *New York Irish History*, vols.14 and 15 (2000 and 2001).

3 The paper handlers' union had their own picnic and advertised it every year in the *Irish Advocate*.

4 *Irish Nation*, Immigration Arrivals for January-December 1882, based on author's compilation of more than thirty-thousand Irish immigrants listed by county of origin.

5 Ancestry.com. See entries for New York Passenger Lists 1820-1957 and Boston Passenger Lists 1820-1943. The two port records are only partial records of Irish immigrants who arrived in each city. Although one cannot make a hard and fast comparison of statistics between the two ports, it is very suggestive that, for the numbers we do have, more immigrants from Kerry arrived in Boston than in New York. This is not true for the other counties, some of which had relatively few immigrants arriving in Boston in comparison to New York. By sampling the destinations of immigrants from various Kerry towns (Listowel, Tralee, Dingle, Cahirciveen, Killarney, Kenmare, and smaller communities surrounding them), it is possible to trace a definite pattern from individual towns and regions such as north Kerry or south Kerry. It all seems to prove that immigrants followed in the steps of those who went before them.

6 A son of John O'Connor, Jim O'Connor, was often in the 1980s at the newspaper's tiny office at 38 Park Row, coincidentally just across the street from City Hall Park, conducting the business of his rapidly fading publication. Because for many years the *Irish Advocate* had covered the activities of Kerry immigrants in the city so well, Jim O'Connor could reminisce at length about the Kerry connections his family and newspaper maintained. His father, John O'Connor, lived in Manhattan in the East 40s near the river (then called the "gas-house district") in a section which up to World War II was filled with Kerry immigrants, hundreds of them. The O'Connors claimed the inhabitants were close or distant relations. Whenever there was a birth, a party, a christening or a death, the newspaper columns frequently covered the festivities at length. The gas-house district was such a tight-knit home for his clan that John O'Connor twice ran for a seat in the U.S. Congress in the decade after World War I. He lost, but he did remarkably well for an Irishman on the Republican ticket in a district which later, when most of the Irish had left and the upper class moved in, became for decades a safe seat for Republicans known as the "silk- stocking district."

Jim O'Connor, whose nephew was the late Hollywood actor Carroll O'Connor (famous for playing the television character "Archie Bunker"), wrote a column after World War II for the *Irish Advocate* in which he liked to talk about his ancestral county and their experiences in the city. He also had a strong geographic sense of just where one would find Kerry people in America. The more he talked, the more I realized that immigrants from Kerry followed a pattern of settlement that was not just accidental. Jim explained they could be found in large numbers right up the Connecticut River Valley in cities and towns like Hartford, Thompsonville, Springfield, Holyoke, Chicopee, Northampton, and in dozens of nearby towns. Kerry people could also be found in other Connecticut towns like New Haven, Bridgeport, Waterbury and Norwich—all towns where mills and factories in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries needed vast numbers of unskilled laborers. Other Massachusetts cities like Worcester, Boston, and the mill towns north of the latter in the Merrimac Valley and in nearby New Hampshire had their sizeable contingents of Kerry immigrants as well. When the Kerrymen's Patriotic and Benevolent Association in New York held their grand reunions in the city in those days of heavy immigration, delegations would come down by train from all the principal Kerry settlements in New England for the rare opportunity to see old friends once again.