

Memories of John and Julia Keogan

BY BERNARD S. KEOGAN

Introduction by Bill Keogan

In 1974 my father, Bernard S. Keogan, wrote down some memories of his parents who had emigrated from Ireland during the nineteenth century. The memories are presented here mostly as he wrote them; I have made only a few minor editorial changes. My father's recollections of his parents' personalities and day-to-day activities present the experiences of a particular immigrant family—coming to America, working, raising a family, and persevering in the face of death. When interweaved with other such narratives, such as those available in the Glucksman Ireland House Oral History Collection at New York University, these stories form the textured fabric of social history.

My grandparents, John Keogan and Julia Callahan, seem to have led fairly typical lives for Irish immigrants to New York. Julia arrived at age sixteen in 1881. As the oldest child in a large family, it is likely she was sent to America both to reduce the number of people the family needed to feed and to be a source of income for the family (see below). She worked as a domestic for nine years after she arrived in America. When John came to New York, early on he may have worked on the horsecars. He seems to have been a steady man, if somewhat severe. After marrying in 1890, John and Julia had ten children, six of whom survived to adulthood.

The big change in the family's life came when John died in 1907, leaving Julia to raise their children. From my father's description below, Julia seems to have been a fairly cheerful person, who dealt with her husband's death by taking up laundry work for a

time. Later, Julia was supported by her two eldest sons, who never married. They eventually purchased a house in Queens and lived with their mother until her death in 1944.

My father writes that Julia and her husband John were religious and passed their Catholicism on to their children. When thinking about this, at first I was a bit surprised

that none of the five sons who survived into adulthood became a priest. Upon further consideration, I saw that economic practicalities played a part in this. It was only in the next generation that three of their granddaughters would enter the religious life. Similarly, education seems to have been viewed mostly in economic terms. Even before John's death, there was no thought of their older children completing high school. At least three of the first four children took short commercial training

and then went to work. Only one of Julia's children eventually completed college and then went on to law school.

My father, though an avid reader, would only get his GED in his fifties, after which I believe he took a few college courses. Again, it would be some of John and Julia's grandchildren who would go to college, and then mostly into education related fields.

My father told me that his mother never visited Ireland after she left and had no inclination to do so. We had no contact with any relatives in Ireland. My father did not belong to any Irish American organizations. We did not listen to Irish music or read Irish newspapers. I did wear a green tie on St. Patrick's Day, but was taken to watch the parade only once, and my mother had to explain to me why a number of groups had banners that



Bernard S. Keogan was born in Brooklyn in 1904 and worked most of his life as a printer, eventually being employed in a small branch of the United States Government Printing Office in the Morgan Station postal facility in Manhattan. He was an avid reader and in his later life a world traveler.

In 1970 he moved to Lakehurst, N.J. He died in 1987. In a small family manuscript he recorded the memories, provided here, of his parents who emigrated from Ireland to New York during the 1880s.

Bill Keogan, his son, is a longtime Roundtable member and an associate professor on the faculty of St. John's University Library in Queens, N.Y. He has written two earlier articles for New York Irish History.

He has also penned numerous book reviews for Catholic Library World and contributed material to a number of reference books.

©2012. Published with permission of Bill Keogan.



Photo (opposite page): John Keogan and his wife, Julia Callahan Keogan. Photo probably taken in the early 1890s. Courtesy of Bill Keogan.

Photo (left): Bernard Keogan (right) and his brother Charles, c.1920. Courtesy of Bill Keogan.

said “England get out of Ireland.” It was not until I was in college that I started to become interested in Irish history and culture.

Memories of Bernard S. Keogan

My mother Julia was born on March 1, 1865 in Ireland in a village called Coolkill (it isn't on every map), about a mile from Kilnaleck (which is) in County Cavan—one of the three Ulster counties not in Northern Ireland. She told me that she was the oldest of seventeen children. Her father's name was Philip Callahan, and her mother's name was Moira (Mary) Smith. In school in Ireland she went to the “first book” and probably no further. She could write her name. She could write numbers and add. I don't know if she could subtract. I'm fairly sure that she couldn't multiply or divide. I have seen her study sales ads in newspapers, and she seemed to get something out of them.

Julia came here when she was sixteen in 1881 and worked for a family. She made \$6.00 monthly, and most of that went back to her

family. She lived with the family for whom she worked and probably did anything that had to be done: washing, ironing, cooking, housework, etc.

MARRIAGE AND HER CHILDREN

As I mentioned, Julia came to the United States in 1881. She married my father in 1890 when she was 25. My father John Keogan died on October 19, 1907. Julia died at age 79 on June 28, 1944. John and Julia Keogan had ten children:

	Born	Died
John	4/27/1891	3/19/54
Thomas (Frank)	7/1/1893	5/8/66
Mary	4/30/1895	1980
Phil	2/24/1897	8/15/44
Rose	7/4/1899	9/24/1900
Charles	5/30/1901	4/26/60
Edward	11/25/03	7/3/07
Bernard	9/23/04	1987
Patrick	? Died in childhood	
One more	?Probably stillborn	



*Photo:
In the mid-1920s,
Bernard Keogan (at
center, standing)
worked for Alpert
Press at 138
Livingston Street in
Brooklyn. Courtesy of
Bill Keogan.*

When I was young it seemed that my mother's days were filled with work. To do a load of wash, she would have to heat water on a coal stove in big boilers. There was no hot water or central heating. The clothes were boiled in the boilers, then dumped into a washtub and scrubbed on a washboard and rinsed in an adjoining washtub. They were then run through a wringer and hung on wash lines. Everything was done by hand, and since there were six of us, the washes were big ones. Ironing was on the same scale. The sheets were ironed. There were lots of things to be starched. Curtains were stretched. The irons were heated on top of a coal stove. Lots of hours were spent at these two jobs.

There was also lots of sewing (on a foot pedal machine) and darning. Cooking was also a large scale job—again on a coal stove and with no mechanical implements (beating dough, for instance). We didn't have electric lights until I was about seventeen, and before that we had gas light. But the cooking was done on coal.

Since my mother had so much to do, the children were trained to do much of the

house cleaning. It was our job to clean the dining room, living room and bedrooms. My mother did the kitchen herself. We also did most of the shopping for groceries and meat.

Besides running her own house, for about seven years after my father died, my mother would go out at least two maybe three days a week doing washing and ironing for various families. During that time, I think we were also helped by charitable organizations.

There was no thought of sending my sister and brothers to high school. John, Phil and Charlie took business courses after elementary school, which lasted (I think) about six months, surely no more than a year. Mary took a secretarial course for two years. When my time came, we were in much better circumstances, and a great deal of effort was made to induce me to continue in high school, but I detested it, played hooky, and caused so much trouble that at last they let me have my stupid way, and I went to work.

Julia didn't read or write much, so these things could not be part of any recreation. She didn't deliberately go to visit people, but was very hospitable and enjoyed having

my aunts and other friends come and visit her. When I look back at it, I think if I had all the young people that we brought into her house, it would drive me crazy. Not her. She welcomed them. They knew it and came often, and we had many happy times. We didn't have a radio until 1928, and when it did come, I can't remember her being a fan, at least up until the time I left in 1935. I was an avid movie fan up to the times when they began to show the garbage that goes by the name of movies now. I pushed my mother into going with me a number of times, but she never showed very much interest.

So for recreation, I think she would do some part of her job she liked doing, and since the refrigerator was always full of puddings and cake, that's what she did in her spare time. In the evenings, if no visitors were there, she would doze in a comfortable chair.

My wife Eleanor and my mother got along marvelously. After we were married we went to my mother's house for dinner nearly

every Sunday. I wonder now if we didn't impose on my mother and brothers by going there as we did. Neither of us had any feeling of being unwelcome, and I am sure that if we had the slightest inkling, we would have stopped. What stopped this routine was that my mother got sick, and instead of caring for people which was her lifelong habit, she had to be cared for herself. She had hardening of the arteries, which stopped the blood from flowing to her head. As a result she was mentally incompetent the last three years of her life. My brothers John and Frank, who never married and lived with my mother, had a terrible time taking care of her. For the last two years, Aunt Rose, one of my mother's sisters, came and stayed there from Monday through Friday, and my brothers would see to their mother on the weekend. That's why I thought so much of Aunt Rose and tried to do what I could when her time came. I certainly didn't give her anything to compare with what she did for my mother, but no one else did anything

Photo:

Horsecars were an important source of employment for some Irish immigrants during the period of John Keogan's arrival in New York. But by the end of the 1800s they were being replaced by electric-powered trolleys. The last city horsecar had its final run on Bleeker Street in July, 1917. Courtesy of Library of Congress.





at all, so I don't feel too badly.

CHARACTERISTICS OF JULIA KEOGAN'S PERSONALITY

My mother was cheerful. I think she had a hard life. She was the first child in a large family, and I'm sure she had to help with the farm work (there were six acres) and the house work. Then, when she was still a child, she came to America. Since she was uneducated, she had to do the same kind of work here and continue to help her family by sending money home. Then when she married my father, there wasn't much money, but lots of kids and loads of work. My father and brothers all died of bad hearts, and I have the idea that my father was sick a long time before his death. So that must have been an agonizing time.

My mother told me that when my father died, she had \$125 in the bank, and my brother John was in the hospital. The doctor told her John had consumption of the bone and wouldn't live six months. I don't know if there was any welfare at that time, and I never heard any of the family say that they received that kind of help, but they did say that the St. Vincent de Paul Society helped by giving them clothes and shoes. At any rate my mother had to work and the other family members too as soon as possible after graduating from school.

So the first fifty years of her life were times of poverty, anxiety (five deaths in the family), worry (lots of sickness), and hard work. Yet she came out of this without becoming sour and maladjusted and was a cheerful person right up to the time of the sickness at the end of her life.

As I mentioned before she didn't go to visit other people much, but enjoyed having others come to visit her. She was easy and comfortable with visitors, young or old, and always very hospitable. Julia was religious. This was deep-seated in her and never to be questioned. It was instilled in her by her family and relatives and by her being an Irish woman. She passed this on to us, and I hope I have passed it on to my children.

From all I ever hear her say, my mother had great respect for her husband, and thought of him as a good father and a fine man. As for her children, I'm not conscious of her having favorites among us. Perhaps she was a little harder on my sister. She was strict with us, but there was lots of love and understanding and patience. There was never any outward show of affection. We didn't kiss, or call each other by fond names, or even shake hands. Nevertheless, there was a good family spirit. Of course there were spats and arguments, but on the whole, we got on well with each other.

Though my mother was unschooled, I

Photo: Laundry work and ironing, like that done by Julia Callahan Keogan, was labor-intensive to the highest degree. Heating water and irons was done on coal or wood stoves, and washing, scrubbing, and ironing were done by hand. Courtesy of Library of Congress.

never thought of her as being stupid. Somehow, she learned all the things she needed to know to run a house and a large family, and she was contented doing it. She had good instincts and good qualities and was trained in a hard school, and these saw her through.

My mother never lost her brogue. She seldom called me anything but Bernarrd, never Bernie. Occasionally when fooling she might call me Barnie Owen or Briany Gajoy. I can't remember if I ever asked her the significance of these two names.

My brother John was always John, not Johnny or Jack. My brother Frank's real name was Thomas. He was named after my father's brother. For some reason, my mother did not like Uncle Thomas, so Frank was called by his second name, Francis. My sister Mary was never anything but Mary. Phil was sometimes called Philip, but mostly Phil. Charlie, mostly that, occasionally when fooling, Charless.

She used the words "hell" and "damn." I can't recall her using such expressions as "son of a bitch," but she might have. Never any obscenities. She used to laugh at my pronunciation of "cow;" she claimed I said "caow." She probably picked up some Americanisms. One I remember was "boy-oh-boy." Her rendition was "byes-a byes." The word "impossible" she pronounced "unpossible."

JOHN KEOGAN—BIRTH AND FAMILY

He was born in Killeshandra, County Cavan, Ireland on May 9 1860. Monetarily, his parents were a little better off than their neighbors. His parents were Thomas Keogan and Rose Smith. They had two sons, Thomas (the elder) and my father (John). After my father was born, his father (my grandfather) was killed by falling off a horse.

His mother married again, this time to Terrance Brady (about 1865), and their children were Kate, Margaret, James, Philip, and Bernard.

Thomas and John Keogan and their sister Kate Brady came here before the rest of the family, who followed later. When the rest of the family came, they went to live in Ansonia, Connecticut, but my father and his brother seemingly stayed in New York. There was a good relationship between my father and his mother and her other children, his step brothers and sisters.

MARRIAGE AND FAMILY LIFE

My parents were married in 1890, and my father lived till October 1907, when I was three years old. There were ten children; six lived to adulthood, two died young, and I think two others died in childbirth as I never heard much about them. I think one of my

father's jobs was working on the horsecars. At the end I know he worked in a brewery, Miles Ale.

My cousin, Mary Lane, of Ansonia Connecticut, told me that his (John Keogan's) mother (our grandmother) was well read. On that basis I assume that she saw to it that her children had at least a basic education, and if this is so, my father probably went through elementary school. Definitely, he could read and write.

JOHN KEOGAN'S PERSONALITY

When writing about my mother I said she thought my father a fine man, a good husband and a good father. I don't think that those of his children who grew up under his jurisdiction felt the same. From what little they said about him he was stern and would



Photo:
Street scene in Killeshandra, Co. Cavan, where John Keogan was born. Photo probably taken during the late nineteenth century. Courtesy of Emerald Isle Gifts.



Photo:
Bernard Keogan in the
early 1930s. A printer
by trade, he was an
avid reader. Courtesy
of Bill Keogan.

punish them for any infraction of the rules.

I know that he gave them of his time on his day off. In those times people worked ten hours a day, six days a week. Yet on Sunday, when you would think he would want to rest, he would take them, and any other children who cared to go along, about two miles away to an undeveloped section called Calvary Hills, where they could romp and enjoy themselves. Then, on Sunday night, he would take them to vespers, and as they couldn't romp there, they didn't like it as much.

He was very religious, as witness the vespers above on Sunday. My sister told me he read the Bible every Sunday for fifteen minutes, and others outside the family have mentioned his religiosity. He didn't drink, and I think I was told that he didn't smoke.

Mary (my sister) said he wasn't a do-it-yourself man. If there were repairs to be made, my mother would have to do them herself. Mary also said his recreation at home was reading the newspaper. My father died when he was forty-seven of some kind of heart ailment. According to my Aunt Rose, one of the symptoms was water in the legs. All of my brothers died of bad hearts; Phil had a coronary. Mary seems to be following in my mother's footsteps; at seventy-nine (now) her heart seems to be okay, and fortunately no mind trouble. That seems to be about as much as I know of my father. The sources are my cousin Mary Lane, my mother, my sister Mary, my Aunt Rose, and family talk.

Further Reading

Ciment, James. *Encyclopedia of American Immigration*. Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 2001.

Coffey, Michael, and Terry Golway. *The Irish in America*. New York: Hyperion, 1997.

Diner, Hasia R. *Erin's Daughters in America: Irish Immigrant Women in the Nineteenth Century*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983.

Dolan, Jay P. *The Irish Americans: A History*. New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2008.

Jackson. *The Encyclopedia of New York City. Second Revised and Expanded Edition*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011.

Shannon, William Vincent. *The American Irish*. New York: Macmillan, 1963.

Kutler, Stanley I. *Dictionary of American History, 3rd edition*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2003.