

The Murphys: Life and Luxury in a New York Irish Family

BY MICHAEL BURKE

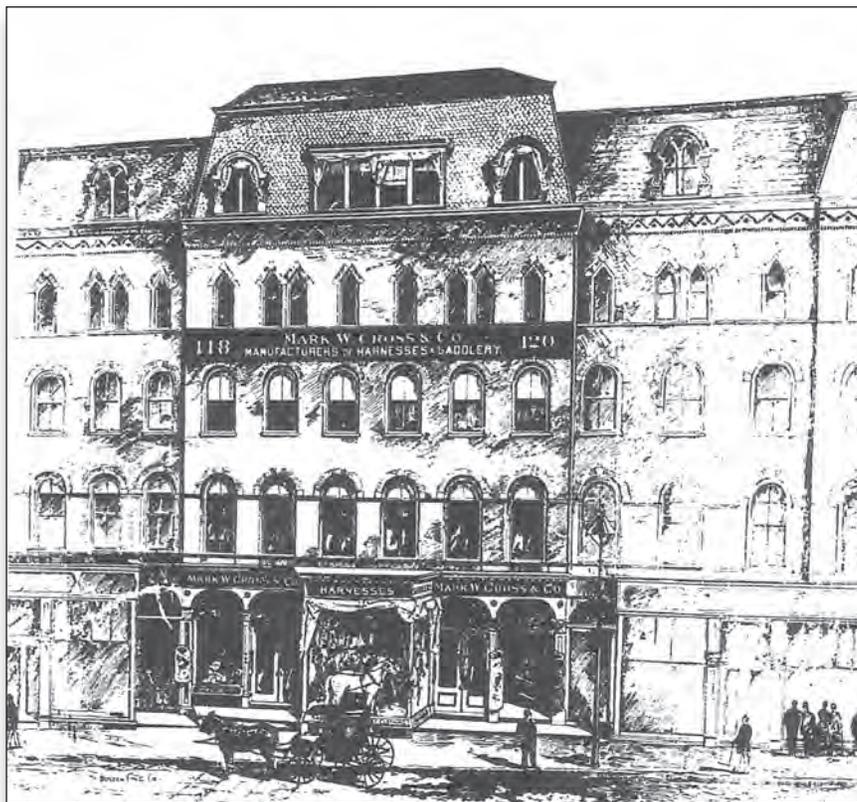


Illustration:

The first Mark Cross store, opened in Boston under Henry Cross. An emigrant from Ireland, he started the business in 1845. The sign on top says "Mark W. Cross – Manufacturers of Harnesses & Saddlery." At the suggestion of an employee, Patrick Murphy, the company's line was expanded to include a variety of leather goods. Later, Murphy bought the company, modified its name, and moved its headquarters to New York City. Courtesy of Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Although its streets were often unpaved, never mind coated with gold, nineteenth-century America was fertile ground for entrepreneurs who sometimes provided immigrated adventurers opportunities to amass great fortunes if they worked hard and had a bit of luck. Most of these immigrants, and their unique stories, are today forgotten. Among them are Patrick Francis Murphy and, later, his son Gerald and daughter Esther. The story of these Murphys, however, opens with that of another Irishman, Henry W. Cross.

Born in Ireland during the first half of the nineteenth century, Cross emigrated with his family as a teenager to London where he found apprenticeship as a saddle maker. Leather, especially as related to horses, was an important and highly regarded industry

in England, and English leather goods were sought after around the world. Young Henry developed a zeal for his work and was soon an expert leather craftsman. He decided to start his own business, and to do it in America. Arriving in Boston in 1845, Henry Cross immediately opened his saddlery business and named it after his son, Mark W. Cross. Due to the quality of his work and the fact that he imported the best equestrian equipment from England, his enterprise quickly prospered with a well-heeled clientele comprised of upwardly mobile Bostonians.

Among employees he hired for his rapidly expanding business was a seventeen-year-old second-generation Irish-American lad named Patrick Francis Murphy, born in 1855 and newly graduated from the prestigious Boston

Although his grandparents are from Connemara, Michael Burke did not develop an interest in Irish culture until late in life. Since then he has worked to make up for this shortfall, writing for New York Irish History and for Irish America magazine. He specializes in Irish-born Americans who were accomplished but who are virtually unknown today. He is currently working on the story of John William Mackay, silver miner and businessman. ©2017. Published with permission of Michael Burke.

Photo:
Patrick Francis Murphy in a photograph taken around 1900. Murphy was a native of Boston but realized that future opportunities for the Mark Cross company would be better if its management operated out of New York City, which had become the financial and commercial center of the United States. Courtesy of Library of Congress.



Latin School. Murphy was one of thirteen children of Irish-born parents and was considered exceptionally bright. He started as a bookkeeper and quickly moved up to a sales position. While he excelled at sales, he soon discovered that his niche was the art of marketing itself. He started making suggestions to the Crosses, which they could have ignored as the far-fetched notions of a young upstart, but wisely did not. As it turned out, every suggestion Murphy made increased revenue. The most important one was that their product line should expand from solely equestrian merchandise (which included polo equipment) to other leather products, such as luggage and what is now referred to in the retail business as “small leather goods,” i.e., wallets, notebooks, attache cases and handbags. Patrick Murphy was to have an uncommon future with Cross, but he would avoid his Irish heritage as he improved his economic and social circumstances.

CONTINUING SUCCESS IN NEW YORK

Soon young Patrick became the Crosses’ protégé and was sent to England to study first-hand the art of leathercraft. Not only did he come back thoroughly skilled, but while in England he negotiated for the Cross company the exclusive American distribution rights for the prestigious British leather producer, the London Harness Agency. Later, Murphy would set up a plant owned wholly by Cross in Walsall, West Midland, England, the center of the British leather industry. He came back to Boston an expert. When Henry Cross died, Mark took sole control of the business with Patrick Murphy as vice-president. When Mark died and no one in the Cross family wanted to be involved in the firm, Patrick borrowed six-thousand dollars from his own father and bought the entire business outright, renaming it the “Mark Cross Company.”

Murphy seemed to possess unusual intelligence and a natural business acumen not taught at the Boston Latin School. He quickly



realized that Boston, once the cultural and financial center of America, was rapidly being eclipsed by New York City. Boston, at that time, was composed of two main groups, the descendants of the original settlers, often referred to as “Brahmins,” and the newly arriving Irish. Although the original arrivals at Massachusetts were hardly the cream of the English crop, their descendents now considered themselves the upper crust and looked down on the Irish—and practically everyone

else. Murphy realized that he and his family, consisting of his wife, Anna (née Ryan), sons Frederick and Gerald, and daughter Esther, would always be second class citizens no matter what they achieved. New York would provide the business and social opportunities for them that Boston would not. In 1892 he moved his flagship store from Boston to the corner of Broadway and Murray Streets, at that time the most fashionable district in New York. Coincidentally, the recently erected structure was the headquarters of the newly established Commercial Cable Company, founded by John W. Mackay, multi-millionaire silver miner and cable magnate, born in Dublin, Ireland. As was to follow throughout Murphy’s career, his instincts proved correct.

The business took off. By 1893 two additional Mark Cross stores had opened, one in Boston and one in London. Later, branches



Illustration: (above)
 Logo for the Mark Cross Company, probably developed under Patrick Murphy and still in use for luxury leather goods. Courtesy of MarkCross.com

Photo:
 A studio photograph of Anna Murphy, Patrick’s wife, and their daughter, Esther. The Murphys also had two sons, Frederick and Gerald. In the early 1890s, the Murphy family moved from Boston to New York City. Patrick saw in the City better social and cultural opportunities for his family. Courtesy of Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

in Paris and Milan would be added. But the market-savvy Murphy came to realize that the “horseless carriage” was here to stay, and soon the need for equestrian equipment would drastically shrink. He therefore switched the focus of his operation.

While retaining his signature luxury leather goods, he minimized saddles and reins and added various high-end merchandise, including china, crystal, silver, decorative items, and certain men’s and women’s apparel. Mark Cross soon became known for innovative goods such as cocktail shakers, liquor decanters, and even the first thermos. The stores also carried a full line of Scottish made golf clubs.

Later, during World War I, the firm introduced the first wristwatch at the suggestion of a British Army officer. The company had always provided a mail-order service, producing an extremely well put together catalogue, which came to be considered a work of art. (Selections of catalogue issues remain in the permanent collections of several art museums today.) The chief designer of the catalogue was Patrick Murphy himself, often including phrases and sentences that he either invented or adapted from other sources, such as the now famous “Living well is the best revenge.” (The statement has been attributed to several sources besides Murphy.)

LIFE OF LUXURY ACHIEVED

By 1900 Patrick Murphy was an affluent New York businessman. The family owned a house off Fifth Avenue and would soon move to a grander home at 110 West Fifty-seventh Street. Murphy bought a large tract of land in the Hamptons and built a lavish “summer cottage” on it. He became a major force in the New York business community and a member of several important clubs including the Manhattan Club and Lambs Club in Manhattan, and the Southampton on Long Island.

He eventually added others and soon discovered that he had a natural ability for public speaking. He specialized in after-dinner talks, turning them into an art form with certain self-imposed rules, including never going

beyond seven minutes. His speaking invitations increased to the point where he was out at a business dinner practically every weekday night that he was in New York. On weekends he was frequently on the golf courses of Long Island, usually visiting the country club bar afterwards. As his business was now practically running itself, he spent much of his time at his office doing research to keep his talks varied and interesting.

In order to stay on top of his far-flung business empire he spent half the year traveling throughout Europe. He was the picture of the successful businessman: trim, handsome, bald and always impeccably dressed. His taste for luxury overlapped into a taste for beautiful women and soon, discreetly, resulted in a string of mistresses.

Neither Patrick nor Anna were what we would call today exemplary parents. Patrick was simply often not around and when he was, contrary to his outgoing business persona, he was somewhat distant, yet at the same time strict, with his children. Anna was a devout Catholic whom Gerald would later describe, ironically, as “Calvinistic.”¹ With Patrick often away, she fell into increasingly frequent depressions, casting a shadow on the whole household. After the birth of her daughter the depressions increased, combined with occasional anxiety attacks.

As a young boy, Gerald was sent to Blessed Sacrament Academy on West Seventy-ninth Street in Manhattan, where one of his schoolmates, Dorothy Rothschild (later Dorothy Parker), became his friend for life. His mother, however, decided that the school was not strict enough and sent him to a Catholic boarding school in Dobbs Ferry, New York. Gerald later said “The nuns flogged me with wooden laths for wetting the bed.”² Fortunately, his college preparatory school proved a better fit.

The Hotchkiss School, a private, non-sectarian school in Connecticut, specialized in getting its graduates into Yale, a service Gerald sorely required. His grades were so poor that his mother made him spend the summers studying, while she took the other



Photo:
Gerald Murphy as a young man in a photograph taken around 1913. Gerald was the Murphys' second son. He was educated in Catholic and secular schools, and followed his older brother, Frederick, to Yale University where he did well socially. Gerald met his future wife, Sara Wiborg, in Long Island's Southampton, where his family had an estate. Courtesy of Houghton Mifflin Company.

children on various vacations.

Older brother Fred was already attending Yale. (In later life, although he suffered from poor health, Fred dutifully worked at Mark Cross as long as he could.) He married Esther's lifelong friend, Noel Haskins, a socialite from an old New York family. They lived quietly, had no children, and when Fred retired early they moved to France where he died in 1924. Noel chose to spend the rest of her life in France.

Gerald had to take the Yale entrance exam three times before finally passing. It was also at this time that Gerald noticed something in his nature that he could not quite understand, which some of his biographers have implied was a latent homosexuality, and which was thought accountable in part for his occasional bouts of depression later in life. But it was during his last summer in high school, when he was remanded to Southampton to study, that something occurred which would eventually change his life—he became friendly

with his Southampton neighbors, the three Wiborg girls.

GERALD MURPHY AND SARA WIBORG

The Wiborg family was exceptionally well-off. The father, Frank Bestow Wiborg, the son of a Norwegian immigrant and a self-made man, began as a youth in the ink producing business, and soon became a partner in (and later sole owner of) the firm of Ault and Wiborg. Marrying Adeline Moulton Sherman in 1882, daughter of the very wealthy Major Hoyt Sherman, didn't hurt the upwardly mobile young man. Hoyt Sherman was a lawyer and banker who served as paymaster for the Union Army during the Civil War and later became a legislator in the state of Iowa. One of his brothers, John Sherman, represented Ohio in the House and was responsible for the 1890 Sherman Anti-Trust Act. The most famous person in the family was brother William Tecumseh Sherman, known for his infamous Civil War "March to the Sea."

Photo:
Sara Wiborg Murphy in a photograph taken around 1910. One of three daughters in the wealthy Wiborg family, she was five years older than Gerald Murphy and had known him for eleven years before their wedding. Gerald was devoted to her, and they were married in her parents' home by a priest from St. Patrick's Cathedral in December, 1915. They would have two sons and a daughter. Courtesy of Houghton Mifflin Company.



With his marriage and his increasingly successful business, Frank was set for life. On both sides of the Atlantic the turn of the century saw the enormous growth of print and the high quality ink from Ault and Wiborg sold extensively throughout America and Europe. They even commissioned French artist Henri Toulouse-Lautrec, one of their best customers, to do an advertising poster for them.

The major disappointment in Frank Wiborg's life is that he never had a son and had to settle for three daughters, Sara Sherman, Mary Hoyt, and Olga Marie. The "Wiborg girls" as they came to be known were very well connected due to their wealth and their mother's family. They eventually moved to New York City, where they easily fit into society, with a summer home in

Southampton near the Murphys. Their quiet, lonely neighbor, teen-aged Gerald Murphy, soon became a frequent guest and was befriended by all three.

The Murphy-Wiborg friendship lasted several years, with neither set of parents thinking much about it. Gerald graduated from Yale in 1912, where he did surprisingly well, at least in the social sphere. He was elected to the prestigious Skull and Bones Club, and his class voted him "Best Dressed, Greatest Social Light, and Thorough Gent." He also became manager of the Glee Club and was on the Prom Committee. Sara, meanwhile, continued with the pursuits of a typical heiress: repeated trips to Europe, summers at Southampton, and a full social life. They were all, therefore, taken aback when the recent Yale graduate Gerald and the older Sara

announced plans to wed. Both sets of parents objected, but not very adamantly, and the couple had their way.

On Wednesday, December 30, 1915, Sara Sherman Wiborg and Gerald Cleary Murphy were married in her parents' home in New York City by Father William Martin of St Patrick's Cathedral, eleven years after they had met. Sara was thirty-two, an unusual age for an incredibly wealthy and exceptionally beautiful debutante to wed. Gerald was twenty-seven. After a honeymoon in Havana and Panama they settled into their new home at 50 West Eleventh Street, a row house in Greenwich Village (still in existence) owned by the groom's father. Gerald returned to work at Mark Cross, reluctantly.

AFTER THE GREAT WAR

The newlyweds began their comfortable married life as a typical upper-class couple. Both wanted children, and on the day of their second anniversary their daughter, Honoria

Adeline Murphy was christened at their home. Oddly, Frank Wiborg had bought 50 West Eleventh Street from Patrick Murphy and presented it outright to the young couple, as either an anniversary present, a christening present, or both. The Great War, however, had recently begun and Gerald followed Fred into the United States Army.

He tried for an officer's commission but, confronted with delays, joined as a private, as did Fred. Gerald was thrilled to be accepted into flight-training school and looked forward to being a pilot on the front. He worked harder at this school than he ever did at Yale, passed his exams, and was commissioned a second lieutenant. While Fred saw action as a second lieutenant in the tank corps in France, Gerald was posted to various positions state-side. By the time Gerald was finally to be sent to the front, Germany had surrendered and he was sent home. Gerald dreaded returning to the drudgery of his work at Mark Cross, so out of the blue he announced his intention



Photo:

F. Scott Fitzgerald as a young man. During their time in France, the Murphys became known for their generosity and entertainments. They became friends with many individuals who were—or would become—famous for accomplishments in the arts and show business, including Fitzgerald. He dedicated his fourth novel, Tender is the Night, to them ("To Gerald and Sara... Many Fêtes"). Courtesy Doubleday, Page and Company.

to study landscape architecture at Harvard. The plan worked and soon the Murphys were settled with their daughter and newborn son, Baath Wiborg, into a large house in Cambridge, socializing with Boston's upper crust. Several unexpected things happened at this time. One was that, rather than waiting for his death, Frank Wiborg, now a widower upon the death of Adeline, divided his sizable fortune among his three daughters, in effect making Sara very wealthy. The Murphys were also becoming stifled by what they described as the "puritanism" of American life. The final straw came with Prohibition. As Gerald put it "...a government that could pass the Eighteenth Amendment could, and probably would, do a lot of other things to make life in the States as stuffy and bigoted as possible."³ Alcohol was not itself the major issue; Gerald, very much a social drinker, was described later by Calvin Tomkins as liking to drink, but hating drunkenness. The Murphys, now with a new member, Patrick Francis II, joined with an increasing number from their socio-economic class and, on June 11, 1921, departed for Paris to stay indefinitely, a move that would have an impact on all of them for the rest of their lives.

EXPATS IN PARIS

The American ex-patriot community in Paris was steadily growing during the 1920s. Gerald and Sara were no strangers to Europe. They came with no specific agenda, except to enjoy themselves and raise their family. This changed for Gerald, however, one day while taking a leisurely stroll down the Rue de la Boetie. According to Calvin Tomkins in his account of the Murphys' lives, *Living Well is The Best Revenge*:

Gerald Murphy stopped to look in the window of the Rosenberg gallery, went inside, and saw, for the first time in his life, paintings by Braque, Picasso, and Juan Gris. What he felt at this moment was the shock of discovery: "I was astounded. My reaction to the color and form was immediate. To me there was something in these paintings that

*was instantly sympathetic and comprehensible. I remember saying to Sara 'If that's painting, it's what I want to do.'"*⁴

Murphy's short lived career as a landscape designer ended that day and his career as an artist, which would last a total of nine years, began.

The Murphys' penchant for entertaining, frequently and lavishly, soon made them the most popular Americans in the city. The list of their friends and acquaintances was extensive and includes notables like John Dos Passos, George Balanchine, Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald, Pablo Picasso, Jean Cocteau, John O'Hara, Archibald MacLeish, and Serge Diaghilev, to name a few. Also included were Gerald's old friends: Dorothy Parker (from elementary school) and Cole Porter and actor Monty Woolley (from Yale). Another Irishman, James Joyce, who had few friends, was also on the list.

Sara, of course, with her extensive family connections in Europe, had numerous "old friends." Picasso, who seemed to have been smitten with the beautiful Sara, did five paintings of her. Fitzgerald's *Tender Is The Night* is dedicated to them, as they were the original models for the characters Dick and Nicole Diver. Apparently, Fitzgerald was also apparently smitten with Sara.

While they basically led a pleasure-oriented life entertaining and traveling, the Murphys also involved themselves in some work-related activities besides Gerald's painting. They helped restore the damaged sets of the Ballets Russes, and Gerald co-wrote a ballet with Cole Porter called *Within the Quote* which was performed in Paris in 1923. It later toured the United States. On one occasion the family traveled to Los Angeles so Gerald could consult on a film in production. Sara, of course, was busy raising three children, but she did have domestic help. Gerald was basically on an extended leave of absence from his nominal employment at Mark Cross.

FACING EXPENSES & DEMANDS

Gerald Murphy had a modest income from

securities and, compared to the United States, living in France was relatively cheap for upper-class Americans, especially in costs for servants which were much less expensive. The bulk of the Murphy's income, however, came from the interest on the money given to Sara by her father. But whenever they had a major purchase, Sara contacted her banker for a withdrawal. In effect they were living on both interest and capital. Having fallen in love with the Riviera, they spent some of her capital to buy and restore a seaside house in the Antibes which they named Villa America. This then became the center of their social life, a place hardly ever without guests. Gerald set up a studio for himself in one of the out buildings on the estate. It was at this time that he exhibited in galleries and had a show at New York's Museum of Modern Art. The Murphys are credited with the dubious distinction of founding the "summer season" on the Riviera. Prior to their arrival, it had been used exclusively as a winter resort for the European elite. (They were also known for coining the term "sunbathing.") They also used capital to purchase or construct a series of yachts. F. Scott Fitzgerald, who frequently had financial problems and was somewhat jealous of their fortune and seemingly care-free lifestyle, often asked Gerald what his income was. Gerald honestly answered that he did not actually know.

But even their vast resources could not protect them from the vicissitudes of life. As with many people 1929 proved a disastrous year for the Murphys. First, their son Patrick was diagnosed with tuberculosis, probably contracted on their trip to Los Angeles. They discovered later that a chauffeur they hired was afflicted with it. Naturally, the frantic parents consulted with every specialist they could find and brought him to a sanitarium in the Austrian Alps, where the whole family (and sometimes guests) boarded with him. They practically abandoned their Villa America because the hot humid weather of the French Riviera was considered unhealthy for those with tuberculosis, while the dry thin air and sunshine of the Alps might bring

about relief, if not a cure. For several years good news about Patrick's illness was often followed by bad news as the desperate parents searched for a solution. This illness, practically the first real misfortune they faced, placed a strain on each of them and on their marriage. Gerald, who had always considered himself more of a dilettante than a serious artist, gave up painting entirely.

The second blow in 1929, the stock market crash on October 29, had a disastrous effect on their finances. The Wiborg girls were all living on the fortune their father had given to them before he died. Also, the crash gradually affected the Mark Cross Company as the need for overpriced luxury items by so many who were now far less wealthy started to dry up.

On November 23, 1931, the elder Patrick Murphy died suddenly of pneumonia. Neither Gerald nor Esther made it back from Europe on time for the funeral, which was a large affair held in St. Patrick's Cathedral and attended by anybody who was anybody in New York. Patrick Murphy's ashes were buried in Southampton cemetery. In his will Patrick provided separately for his wife, and left the bulk of his estate, which mainly consisted of the Mark Cross empire, to be divided between his son and daughter, son Fred having predeceased him. In a strange twist Patrick left management of the company to his long-time secretary (and long-time mistress), Lillian Ramsgate. At first Gerald, as chairman of the board, didn't care, since he had done everything to avoid involvement in the Mark Cross organization. Soon, however, it was discovered that whatever skills Miss Ramsgate may have had, business management was not among them. To keep her from running the company entirely into the ground, Gerald, the Chairman, reluctantly took over as Chief Operating Officer.

A LESS KIND DECADE FOR THE MURPHYS

The 1930s were not as kind to the Murphy family as the 1920s had been. Though hardly as bad off as most of their fellow Americans—they had a large apartment on Sutton Place and enough servants to

run it—for the first time in their marriage, money became a concern. Gerald did not realize much from his father's estate since a great deal of it was tied up in the business into which he now had to put effort or suffer the consequences. Oddly, it turned out that Gerald did inherit some business talent, and he managed to keep the company alive. He also brought his art skills into the company. It was rumored that the blue Mark Cross bag used by Irish-American Grace Kelly for her role in Alfred Hitchcock's movie, *Rear Window*, was designed by Gerald himself. But Gerald, not pleased with his situation, summed up his life thus "I go to the office every day and lunch at Schraffts."



Photo:

The movie Rear Window was a 1954 thriller directed by Alfred Hitchcock and is considered one of his best films. It starred James Stewart and Grace Kelly who, in the scene shown here, can be seen opening a Mark Cross bag said to have been designed specially by Gerald Murphy for use in the movie. Courtesy of Paramount Pictures.

The crash also greatly depleted Sara's resources. They could no longer live on capital unless they wanted to die poor. Between their son's illness and their financial situation the Riviera was now out of the question. They put Villa America on the market but it took a long time to sell and not at the price they wanted. In addition Sara's sister Mary Hoyt (Hoytie) was also suffering financially from the decrease in her stock's value and poorly conceived business deals. Neither Sara nor Gerald particularly cared for her, and now they began fighting over the real estate left by Frank Wiborg. Before Patrick Murphy died he left the care of Esther's finances in Gerald's hands. Although brilliant in many ways Esther

had absolutely no sense with money and was soon practically broke. In addition to his own problems Gerald now had the burden of caring for, and eventually, supporting his sister.

As if the stock market crash and its subsequent effect on their financial situation was not enough, the Murphys soon encountered much more serious misfortune. They had moved several times and were now living in an apartment on East Fifty-first Street. For the first time in their married life they were struggling to keep up with bills. Patrick, incredibly weakened by his condition, stayed with them, while Honoria and Baoth attended private schools. While at school in Newport, Rhode Island, Baoth developed measles. Nothing much was thought of this until it developed into mastoiditis, a potentially fatal infection. He was rushed from the school infirmary to a hospital in Boston for surgery. Gerald was in their New York apartment while Sara, overcome with stress from their circumstances, had gone to Key West to recuperate at the home of their newly affluent friend, Ernest Hemingway, who was riding the crest of his first major success, *A Farewell to Arms*. The parents and many of their friends raced to Boston. However, things went from bad to worse when Baoth developed meningitis as a result of a bacterial infection contracted during surgery. He died on St Patrick's Day, 1935 at age sixteen. His ashes were buried next to his grandfather's in Southampton.

Despite the reversal of their fortunes, the Murphys continued to travel during the 1930s, including trips to places in Europe and the New York area. They also moved about Manhattan from apartment to apartment, all in fashionable areas. Due to Patrick's illness they now traveled separately because someone always had to stay with him. In the summer of 1935, Sara took Patrick to Saranac Lake in the Adirondack Mountains where they hoped the weather would help. They stayed there while Gerald, working at Mark Cross, and Honoria, who was now attending the Spence School, stayed in New York City and visited on the weekends.

**Photo:**

Esther Murphy was the only daughter and youngest child of Patrick and Anna Murphy. She apparently thought herself an heiress and was little concerned about financial resources. Openly gay, she was apparently very intelligent and a gifted writer, who regarded her social life as very important. She had two husbands, the last one a grandson of President Chester Arthur. Courtesy of Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Finally, Patrick's doctors told his parents what they knew but could not face—Patrick would never recover and his death was only a matter of time. It came on January 30, 1937, when Patrick lapsed into a coma. His parents and sister were in his room at Saranac Lake, each parent holding a hand as he became weaker and died with his family around him. As with his brother, he was sixteen years old. His ashes were buried next to those of Boath.

The deaths of the two children within two years caused profound effects on the rest of the family. Their happy, carefree, life was over, especially when the additional drastic change in their financial condition was factored in. The resulting stress caused some estrangement between Gerald and Sara, but their love proved genuine and they managed to get through it. They focused their affection and attention on their sole surviving child, Honoria.

PATRICK MURPHY'S DAUGHTER

Perhaps the most unique and unusual member of patriarch Patrick Murphy's family was his only daughter, Esther. Despite two rather strange marriages, she was openly gay for most of her life.

The Murphys were not actually in the upper echelons of the wealthy in New York; they were very well-off but not Vanderbilts nor Astors. But Esther always thought of herself as an heiress with unlimited resources and behaved as such. Her mother who, by the time she reached adolescence was clearly suffering from depression, wanted her daughter around much of the time. She went to private schools in New York City but did not attend college. She did, however, possess a fine mind, and her parents arranged for much of her education to be completed at home using a program based on a Harvard curriculum. Esther also seemed to have had a photographic memory. However, as she grew older, her social life became the

most important thing to her, and she attended numerous parties and events where she would dominate the conversation, expostulating on her views on history, politics, and current events. She may have inherited her speaking ability from her father, along with a taste for alcohol. But while Patrick was known to over-indulge on occasion, Esther did so frequently. She also managed to have many articles published and was considered a talented writer. Her work generally fell into the category of criticism. It is not surprising that she became a lifelong friend the critic, Edmund Wilson, whom she met at a wedding. (Wilson, who was also acquainted with Gerald and Sara, had a personality similar to Esther's.) Esther's last work was a biography of Madame de Maintenon, the secret wife of King Louis XIV of France, which she worked on for fifteen years and which remained unfinished at the time of her death.

Esther's love life, however, was an ongoing disaster. Her first husband, John Strachey, a cousin of Lytton of Bloomsbury fame, was an impoverished upper-class socialist politician and early member of Britain's Labor Party. They married on April 24, 1929. Although he claimed to genuinely love Esther he was open about marrying her for her money, demanding a large dowry from Patrick Murphy. He also maintained throughout their marriage his relationship with his former girlfriend, who later became the second Mrs Strachey. He was elected to Parliament, thanks mostly to Esther's financial contributions, had an unremarkable political career, and was remembered mostly for his essays on political theory. His marriage to Esther did not last very long.

The earliest infatuation of Esther's young life was the fabulously wealthy Natalie Clifford Barney, one of the most influential American expatriates in Paris and an accomplished writer, poet, and playwright. Natalie was an outspoken proponent of free love, which she practised extensively. Unfortunately, Esther's attraction for Natalie was unrequited. In addition, Esther had a rival during this period, the London-born Irishwoman Dorothy (Dolly) Wilde, daughter

of Willie and niece of Oscar Wilde.

For some unexplained reason Esther decided in 1935 to marry again. This choice was even more misguided than the first. She married Chester A. Arthur III, grandson of the twenty-first President of the United States, who used Gavin as his first name to distance any connection with his famous grandfather. Gavin may not have been best-husband material but was an interesting person in his own right. Some thought she considered his unorthodox lifestyle akin to hers. He abandoned the successful careers of his father and grandfather to pursue varied paths including going to Ireland and joining the Irish Republican Army, and then campaigning on behalf of the IRA in Boston for which he was arrested and briefly jailed. Strangely, he sided with the Irish cause much more strongly than Esther, who never really expressed an interest in her Irish heritage, did.

Gavin married three times but was also openly bisexual and would often bring his male lovers home while still married to Esther, who was his third wife. His eclectic interests involved utopian causes, astrology, and later in life, the California "hippie" culture, including the use of LSD. Gavin published a book, *The Circle of Sex*, about the relationship of astrology to sexuality. He worked at various things to finance his unusual lifestyle and was not above asking Esther for handouts even when they were separated. The couple eventually divorced in 1961, but Esther continued to use the name Esther Arthur for the rest of her life.

The last major romance of her life was with the writer Sybille Bedford, whom she met in New York City in 1943. They traveled extensively together but gradually drifted apart, although they remained lifelong friends. Gerald and Esther were never particularly close although they often shared the same social circles, especially in Paris. As Esther's homosexuality became more manifest Gerald and Sara gradually distanced themselves from her. She died of a stroke in her Paris apartment on November 23, 1962, financially destitute and supported by Gerald. Her ashes were eventually buried next to those of her father and her nephews in Southampton.

A LESS LAVISH LIFE

Sara and Gerald continued to live a relatively quiet life. They could not give up their life-time habit of entertaining, but now they did so less lavishly. They remained permanently in the New York City area. In 1942 they sold their last yacht, "Weatherbird." In 1949 they purchased a house built in 1700 in what was called Sneden's Landing (now Palisade) in Rockland County. They restored and refurbished it and renamed it "Cheer Hall" where they continued to entertain. In 1950 they finally found a purchaser for Villa America.

Despite Gerald's efforts, Mark Cross was still not doing very well—merely staying afloat. It was sold in 1948 to the Drake America Corporation. Gerald stayed on as President, at an annual salary of \$35,000.00, until 1955 when he retired for good. Sara and Gerald had a house built in Southampton on the remnants of what was once the Wiborg estate. The original mansion, the "Dunes," was torn down in 1941 with much of the land parcelled out. They spent winters in Manhattan, usually at a residential hotel and the rest of the year in Southampton. Honoria married William M. Donnelly, from a West Coast Irish Catholic family, who had served as an Army captain in World War II and went on to work in various high level government posts. They lived in Washington, D.C.

Gerald never again took up painting. As Calvin Tomkins explained in his account of the Murphys, Gerald, when asked why he had stopped painting in 1930 replied that he had simply realized his work was not first-rate "... and the world is full of second-rate painting."⁵ Apparently writer Rudi Blesh disagreed, and in his book *Modern Art USA* wrote of Murphy's work: "A series of semi-abstract canvases...complex in design...meticulous in craft, and...heroic in size." Blesh further commented that the paintings "strike an original note of their own, particularly in their complex design and in their wit."⁶ Douglas MacAgy, curator of the Dallas Museum for Contemporary Art, agreed and included several pieces of Gerald's work in a 1960 retrospective exhibition of neglected American

artists of the twentieth century. Two more exhibitions of Gerald's work were held post-humously, at New York's Museum of Modern Art in 1974 and at the Brooklyn Museum in 2008.

Shortly after leaving Cheer Hall and taking up more or less permanent residence in Southampton, in 1963 Gerald received troubling news. He was diagnosed with intestinal cancer. He was operated on to remove a tumor but he clearly understood that this would be only a temporary fix and not a cure. Predictably, the cancer soon returned. Gerald requested that there be nothing done to artificially prolong his life. A distraught Sara stayed by his side as he drifted in and out of consciousness. Throughout his life religion was never very central to Gerald, and when he had to have anything to do with a church he generally chose the Episcopal. He silently begrudged the fact that his mother insisted that all his children be baptized in the Roman Catholic Church.

During the initial stages of his final illness he had written to his old friend, Archibald MacLeish, concerning his opinion of religion:

My conception of God was hopelessly disfigured...by a rigorous institutional Catholic training, beginning at a convent at seven years. Sara's and my 'mixed marriage' as it was called by the church, was a nightmare of bigotry. But today the sight of a priest or nun affects me...I doubt if one recovers."

As her father lay dying, Honoria, now a practicing Catholic, asked if a priest could give him the last rites. Gerald, slipping in and out of consciousness, said he didn't care but, for some reason, perhaps because of his service in World War I, added "Get me an Army man."⁸ Honoria's husband, himself a decorated World War II veteran, located a chaplain friend. Gerald was unconscious when he received the sacrament. He died on October 17, 1964 at age seventy-six. Despite his Catholic last rites Gerald's funeral was held at an Episcopal church. It was attended by the few close friends who were available.

His ashes were buried in the family plot in Southampton Cemetery with the rest of his family. Sara stayed in New York City and Southampton until she could no longer live on her own and in 1974 came to live with Honoria and William in Virginia. She died there peacefully in 1975 at age ninety-one and, like all the others, her ashes were buried in the family plot.

When Gerald answered Scott Fitzgerald's question about what his income was, he was honest in saying he did not know. They lived a carefree life for years on their capital, mostly Sara's, without giving much thought to the future. They were shocked then when their longtime banker and financial manager, Copley Amory, gave them the figure of their actual worth in 1939—\$203,000—a hard figure, depressingly hard. Part of their financial problems arose from the enormous expenses of Patrick's illness, but another part came from living too well. Neither Gerald nor Sara died in poverty, but nor did they die under the same luxurious conditions in which, for most of their early married life, they had become accustomed.

As he became more successful, Patrick Murphy had distanced himself from his Irish roots. But Gerald, whose four grandparents were born in Ireland, frequently referred to himself as Irish. He never had an issue with Irishness (both sons were given Irish first names, at his insistence), only with Catholicism which, in those days overlapped with Irishness in many people's minds. Ironically, Gerald's daughter Honoria, baptized in the Catholic faith, never practiced it until she married William Donnelly, when she became an active Catholic and raised her three children as Irish-American Catholics. In a way then, the Murphy family came full cycle.

Sources

- Blesh, Rudi. *Modern Art In USA: Men, Rebellion, Conquest, 1900—1956*. Knopf, New York, 1956
- Cohen, Lisa. *All We Know, Three Lives*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 2012
- Donnelly, Honoria Murphy (with Richard N. Billings). *Sara & Gerald, Villa America and After*. Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York, 1984
- Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *Tender Is The Night*. Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1934
- Tomkins, Calvin. *Living Well Is The Best Revenge*. Viking Press, Inc., New York, 1971
- Vaill, Amanda. *Everybody Was So Young*. Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston and New York, 1998

Endnotes

- 1 Vaill, Amanda. *Everybody Was So Young*, p.2
- 2 *Ibid.* p.22
- 3 Tomkins, Calvin. *Living Well Is The Best Revenge*, p.21
- 4 *Ibid.* p.25
- 5 *Ibid.* p.148
- 6 Vaill, *op.cit.* p.343.
- 7 *Ibid.* p.343.
- 8 *Ibid.* p.358.