

# The Donegal Colony in Brooklyn— Part II

BY JOHN T. RIDGE



**Photo:**  
*Many immigrants from Donegal learned valuable lessons about American society in the ranks of the old Brooklyn volunteer firemen. They were the center of political life as well and a power base for Hugh McLaughlin, Brooklyn's powerful Democratic boss. Courtesy of John T. Ridge.*

In Part I of “The Donegal Colony in Brooklyn,” the settlement of immigrants from this small part of northwest Ulster was traced from its beginnings in the Irishtown neighborhood. From this bridgehead neighborhood, the wave of immigrants from Donegal spread south to the area north of Prospect Park where a virtual Little Donegal existed for almost a hundred years. The community was brought together by the influence of the Donegal Association of Brooklyn and by a concern for political developments in the home county, especially during the time of the Land War agitation and the fight for Irish independence. For a brief time from the 1920s to at least the late 1960s, many Irish immigrants found their way each weekend to “Donegal Hill” in Prospect Park. As perhaps the largest group from any county in the borough, the legacy of Donegal should be better known and remembered.

This concluding article brings to light previously uncovered characteristics of people in the Donegal community in Brooklyn. In particular, it looks at their social affiliations, their work and pursuit of success, the special traits of Donegal Protestants, some notable individuals, and the special importance in being from Donegal.

## MAKING A LIFE IN BROOKLYN—AFFILIATIONS

Judging from obituaries in Brooklyn daily newspapers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the majority of Donegal immigrants led rather ordinary lives. The most frequently mentioned details centered on their parishes, their occupations and their leisure time affiliations, most often the Holy Name Society, and an organization such as a political club, almost without exception affiliated with the Democratic Party. Less common was membership in a fraternal group like the Elks, the Catholic Benevolent Legion, the Donegal Society, the Ancient Order of Hibernians or the Knights of Columbus. Surprisingly, the Royal Arcanum was cited at least once. Although strictly speaking not a masonic organization, its ritual, regalia and organization by lodge were very reminiscent of that Order. Many of the immigrants who had arrived at mid-nineteenth century or earlier were listed as former members of the Volunteer Fire Department, an organization with almost as much political clout as a regular party organization. Women rarely had any affiliation at all, and then, if any, it was with a Rosary Society or the Donegal Society's Ladies' Auxiliary.

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**Photo:**  
*Patrick J. Carlin (1850–1925), born in Ramelton, Co. Donegal, was the most successful and prolific of Brooklyn's many contractors and builders from that county. Carlin constructed scores of major public buildings in the borough, Manhattan, and in the Northeast.*  
 Courtesy of John T. Ridge.

It is evident that there was a strong tendency to hang on in the old neighborhood among the Donegal Brooklyn population. Annie McCann was a resident of the old 5th Ward (Irishtown, just east of the Navy Yard by the river) for fifty years. The Moville native during all this time had lived in only two houses, at 18 and 22 Evans Street.<sup>1</sup> Three Donegal-born women, Mary Duffy, Margaret Gallagher and Mary McCallig lived in the 9th Ward (northeast of Prospect Park) for between fifty and sixty years, forty-five years of that time in one house on Dean Street. All of these women were members of St. Joseph's Parish.<sup>2</sup> Catherine Kelly Rice, widow of a New Utrecht farmer, lived fifty-two years in Brooklyn.<sup>3</sup>

#### WORK AND THE PURSUIT OF WEALTH

Many Donegal immigrants never got very far from the water that brought them to New York. The various harbor activities gave them employment for life. James McLaughlin lived in the Williamsburg section near the docks where he was a stevedore.<sup>4</sup> Anthony McGarvey was a shipbuilder whose son and namesake was the general superintendent for the Robbins Drydock and Repair that continued to employ a Donegal contingent right through World War II.<sup>5</sup> John Mullin, who was a Union Army veteran, was employed in the Navy Yard when he passed away in 1916.<sup>6</sup> When Owen Faren died in 1877, his family claimed he was 116 years old. Faren had a long maritime career and at one time in the 1820s captained his own small vessel between England and America.<sup>7</sup> Some of the Donegal men worked on the tugs like John McLaughlin of the "Red D Steamship Company" who came to Brooklyn in 1861.<sup>8</sup> Another immigrant from Donegal, Thomas Campbell, was for many years in the transportation business in the port and finished up a harbor master.<sup>9</sup>

Frequently, employment in the city's water department is listed as the occupation of many Donegal immigrants. The answer to the reason why was perhaps as simple as a game of checkers. Patrick Boyle (1836–1916) was an old time volunteer fireman. According to one source, "He was a close friend of the late Hugh McLaughlin, and often was seen playing checkers or dominoes



with the former leader at night in the headquarters of the Exempt Firemen in the old City Hall." Boyle was a foreman in the old water department which became a place of employment for many fellow immigrants from his native county.<sup>10</sup>

Accidents, some related to work, accounted for a seemingly high number of deaths. Ambrose Dunleavy, a motorman on the BMT subway, died from injuries sustained in an accident on the job.<sup>11</sup> Patrick Canning was fatally run down by a horse and wagon on the corner of Liberty and Nassau Streets in Manhattan in 1913.<sup>12</sup> A few years later, in 1924, James J. Brennan from Ardara was run over on Thanksgiving night by an automobile that sped away from the scene.<sup>13</sup> Ballyshannon native John McIntyre died from a leaky gas stove in his apartment.<sup>14</sup> Not surprisingly, the waters around the city claimed not a few by accidental death. Frank Shields, in 1896, was described as "strictly temperate and by all accounts a model young man," but after an



**Photo:**  
The house band at the Erin's Isle Ballroom during the 1930s. Courtesy of Martin Enright.

evening ride to Canarsie his body was found in Canarsie Creek under mysterious circumstances.<sup>15</sup> James Quigg, who worked for the

**TWELFTH ANNUAL DANCE of the  
CO. DONEGAL LADIES' AUXILIARY  
SATURDAY EVENING, MARCH 7, 1936**

**At ERIN'S ISLE BALLROOM**  
Bedford Ave. and Fulton St., Brooklyn

Committee—Kathleen McCafferty (Chairlady), Mrs. J. McNamara, Mrs. J. McShane, Mrs. T. Boyle, Bridie Byrne, Rose Melley, Rita Mills, Mrs. P. McNeilis, Mrs. Melley, Mrs. Kennedy, Mrs. Beattie, Mrs. Shevlin.

**ADMISSION 35 CENTS**



**Illustration:**  
The Donegal Ladies Auxiliary in 1936 was just one of several Donegal organizations that held entertainments at the Erin's Isle Ballroom, owned by Donegal-born Owen Kelly. Courtesy of John T. Ridge.

**Photo: (bottom)**  
Ruins from a 1932 fire in street-level shops in building housing the Erin's Isle Ballroom. The Ballroom was not destroyed but some patrons had to be carried down a fire ladder. Courtesy of John T. Ridge.

New York Dock Company, fell off a pier to his death in 1914.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, James W. McGee, an accountant, was believed to have been stricken with vertigo when he fell to his death at the foot of 40th Street in 1922.<sup>17</sup>

Certain employment activities appear frequently in the obituaries. Café owners, variously called hotel or restaurant owners, but never bar owners, could be found all over the borough. Dennis Cassidy, a Buncrana native, was initially a lumber dealer before opening a tavern in the lower Park Slope area.<sup>18</sup> James Bradley, came to America about 1893, and opened his café, a center for Democratic Party politics, at 3rd Avenue and 48th Street.<sup>19</sup> John T. McCaffrey kept a tavern at Myrtle Avenue and Steuben Street and had been a Brooklyn resident for forty years up to his death in 1930.<sup>20</sup> Bernard Sweeney was the proprietor of a hotel at Vanderbilt and St. Mark's Avenues up to his passing in 1906.<sup>21</sup> Edward Meehan up to 1928 owned a restaurant at Flatbush Avenue near Sterling Place that was well placed between the Donegal neighborhoods in Park Slope and the 9th Ward east of the avenue.<sup>22</sup> Owen R. Kelly owned Erin's Isle

*Photo:*  
Although the Tirconnail  
Pipe Band was  
primarily a Manhattan  
organization, its  
founder John O'Boyle,  
and many others, were  
Brooklyn Donegal men.  
Several fund-raisers for  
the group were held at  
Brooklyn's Erin's Isle  
Ballroom at Fulton  
Street and Bedford  
Avenue. Courtesy of  
John T. Ridge.



Ballroom at Fulton and Bedford Avenues, which was the most popular Irish dance hall in the borough in the 1920s and 1930s. Erin's Isle hosted many Donegal social events and fund-raisers for Donegal-related causes.<sup>23</sup>

Perhaps surprisingly there were a number of pawnbrokers of Irish birth or origin in Brooklyn. The Donegal surname of Friel or Freel (it was spelled both ways) was well-known thanks to a number of individuals engaged in the loan making trade. In 1879, Joseph J. Friel started his business on Grand Street in Brooklyn's Eastern District, later changing location to two locations in the Bushwick and Bedford Stuyvesant areas. At the time of his death in 1914, his forty-two years in business made him the oldest pawnbroker in the borough. James J. Friel was another "old-time Brooklyn pawnbroker" of the Eastern District who passed away in 1921 who left "no near relatives."

The most famous of the surname was Patrick Henry Freel. The Brooklyn *Times Union* remembered him in 1898:

*Pat Freel, as he was commonly called, was known to every woman and child in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Wards. He came from Ireland and settled in Williamsburgh close on to fifty years ago. He was born in Donegal. He came to this country so early in life that while the basis of his character was Irish, its development and embellishment was wholly American. America was, at that*

*time, the El Dorado of all Irish youth, and while they scarcely believed the wild traditions that the precious metals could be picked up in the streets, all of Pat Freel's friends, as well as himself, fully believe that in that far-off land there were opportunities for wealth never dreamed of in their native land. He had received but little education, but he had plenty of application and an indomitable perseverance. He landed here with a very small capital and soon hired a small store on Grand Street, near Fourth Street and hung out a pawnbroker's sign. He prospered from the start. He gave his whole attention to his business, was good-natured and strictly honest. His reputation for fair dealing was proverbial. He was popular with his patrons and many men who subsequently became well known in various walks of life found Pat Freel an accommodating friend in frequent hours of need. As his business prospered he found that he required larger quarters and about twenty years ago, moved his establishment to Grand Street near Bedford Avenue, where many politicians and sporting men were among his regular patrons. Personally, prosperity never changed him. Up to his final illness he was the same unostentatious Pat Freel that Williamsburgh knew fifty years before.<sup>24</sup>*

Although a son, his heir, survived him for a few years, a vast fortune estimated at about one million dollars soon was inherited by the only daughter, Mary Frances Freel, who became “perhaps one of the wealthiest women in Greater New York” following the death of her brother in 1898. Like a true nineteenth-century romance, she immediately married her great love, a young doctor of modest means named James E. O’Donohue whom she had been prevented from marrying by her brother. Her brother had tried to match her unsuccessfully with the offspring of another wealthy Brooklyn pawnbroker family named McAleenan.<sup>25</sup>

As in the case of Mary Francis Freel, the elusive pot of gold was earned by means other than work in some cases. Readers of the daily press in Brooklyn would have found very little about Donegal from day to day or even week to week. But for immigrants, Donegal was still at the center of their lives and, judging by their death notices in the dailies, their places of birth was one of the last things they wanted people to know about them. Other than the grim passing of hundreds of people from all parts of the old county, it is probable that the legal notices indicating inheritances produced the second most common mention of Donegal. The legacy was like the lottery ticket of old, and people, perhaps none more so than the struggling immigrants, dreamed of having all their cares ended with a sudden and unexpected inheritance.

The case of Neil Dougherty of the Parish of Rye, Co. Donegal, is one of the saddest of all legal procedures ever to have been presented in the Brooklyn courts. Dougherty had a grocery store on the corner of Schermerhorn and Court Streets and lived over the store. He was unmarried and somewhat of a miser, but his clear intention was to do something for his home parish back in the old country. He died in 1874, at age 75, leaving a will and an estate amounting to about \$75,000 in cash and property to Rev. McDavitt, pastor of the parish church in Ireland, for the founding of the “Dougherty American Institute.” He died without relatives and at his funeral and interment at Holy Cross Cemetery, none were present. Initially, the will passed the first legal hurdles of probate, but soon a combination of lawyers and “relatives” started to appear to lay claim to the estate. Eventually, there were more than one hundred claimants, at least one in every state in addition to Ireland, England, Australia and New Zealand. The case dragged on from year to year as decisions were made and soon reversed. Appeal after appeal and delay of every kind dragged the process down to the summer of 1884.<sup>26</sup> When the Dougherty estate was at last settled, there was only \$6,353.44 to be distributed. Extraordinary divisions of the money were made. Anne McGeehan, for example, received a one-twelfth portion of one thirty-second part amounting to \$83.68. Similar, if slightly larger, amounts



**Photo:**

*Four Donegal immigrants left for Ireland in 1933 to collect more than forty thousand dollars in winnings in the Irish sweepstakes. Immigrants from Gweedore, the heart of Irish-speaking Donegal, three of the four were unemployed sandhogs. Courtesy of John T. Ridge.*

were distributed among some thirty relatives. Needless to say, there never would be built a Neil Dougherty Institute in Donegal.<sup>27</sup>

There were many other examples of legal manipulation. Alexander Healey, a farm laborer working in Flatbush, disappeared about 1856 and was never heard from again by his bank, the Brooklyn Savings Bank. An Albany lawyer, acting on information provided by a New York State legislature investigating dormant accounts, was provided with account numbers and other details that enabled him to defraud the bank of the entire amount. The Public Administrator of Kings County sued the bank for false distribution and was finally able to collect the amount for distribution to the proper heirs in County Donegal.<sup>28</sup>

William McDermott passed away in 1885, but he left a will leaving \$30,000 to two brothers and a sister in Donegal. Unfortunately, McDermott had only been able to communicate his will by sign language following an attack of paralysis, and, despite a local priest, James J. Gallagher, of Brooklyn acting as executor and trustee for the Irish relatives, fifteen nieces and nephews residing around New York suddenly surfaced to contest the will in the surrogate court.<sup>29</sup>

Something of a legacy, although probably less stressful than a probate court, was the luck of four Donegal immigrants, three of them brothers from Gweedore, who won the Irish Sweepstakes in 1933. While one of the four was working in one of the small chain grocery stores that employed many Irish immigrants, the three brothers were unemployed sandhogs. Consequently, they christened themselves the "four chisellers." The immediate benefit for the group was a triumphant return to the old country where the four were able to tour in style.<sup>30</sup>

#### DONEGAL PROTESTANTS IN BROOKLYN

While most Donegal immigrants in Brooklyn were Catholics, Irish Protestants were a significant presence in the Donegal colony in Brooklyn. Although there is no way of determin-

ing their actual numbers, it is probable, judging from their frequent listing in death notices in the Brooklyn daily papers, that they formed a proportion similar to the population as in the old country. In County Donegal, the percentage of Protestants to the general population was just under 25% and was divided just about evenly between Church of Ireland (known as the Episcopal Church in America) and Presbyterian. There also were small numbers of Methodists and independents. According the 1901 and 1911 Irish Census, the religious breakdown was as follows:

1901			1911		
Denomination	Number	Percentage	Denomination	Number	Percentage
Roman Catholics	133,955	77.4	Roman Catholics	130,574	77.7
Church of Ireland	16,823	9.7	Church of Ireland	15,454	9.2
Presbyterian	15,208	8.8	Presbyterian	14,945	8.9
Methodist	1,736	1.0	Methodist	1,631	1.0

Of the three Ulster counties that became part of the Irish Free State in 1922, only Monaghan at 73% had a lower percentage of Catholics in the 1901 Census. Cavan, the other county of the three, had the highest percentage of Catholics at 80%.<sup>31</sup>

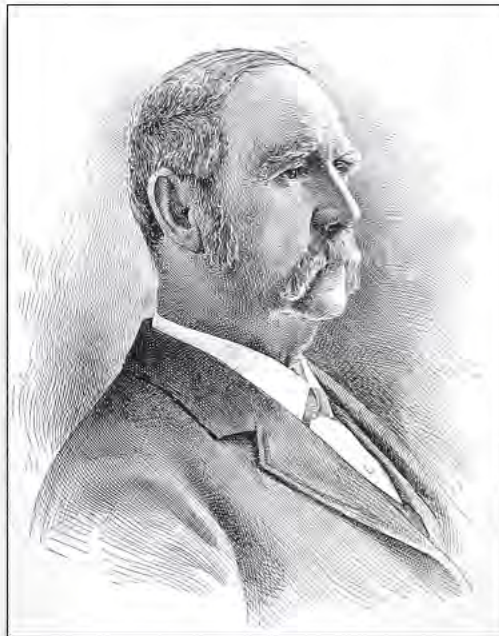
While relations between the religious denominations were generally good in Donegal, there were still disturbances, mostly involving the celebration of the Loyal Orange Order, a Protestant political and social organization. The two communities otherwise worked side by side, bought and sold farm animals and produce with one another and often acted as good neighbors. Beyond the commercial and community relations, the Protestant and Catholic communities were divided politically, socially and in some ways economically. While neighbors of different religions may have been invited to attend family events such as weddings and funerals, social life was largely separated into gatherings within their own religious community. Religious societies tended to keep from socializing with one another and may have been intended to be that way. The formation of groups like the Orangemen and various masonic societies for Protestants and groups like the Hibernians and Catholic devotional societies occupied so much of the time of

their members, there was little time left to reach out beyond their respective communities.

Religion continued to play a big part in the lives of Donegal immigrants in Brooklyn. Hundreds of death notices and obituaries often gave reference to membership in societies that were strictly sectarian. Almost without exception, a specific church affiliation was mentioned. Catholics joined parish societies, such as the Knights of Columbus and the Ancient Order of Hibernians, or sometimes an Irish nationalist association. Protestants were often active in their congregations for an extended length of time and often served as trustees, vestrymen or in other church offices. More than half of Protestants were members of one or more of the various masonic societies such the regular masonic order, the Royal Arcanum, Knights Templar or the International Order of Odd Fellows. While very few were actually mentioned as members of the Orange Order, the organization was widely organized in a half dozen Brooklyn lodges.

The Orange parades in the post-Civil War period heightened the division in the Irish religious community. In 1871, an Orange parade in Manhattan resulted in the militia opening fire on the crowd along the parade route. A Donegal Catholic immigrant named Daniel Campbell, a lighterman (i.e., a barge worker), who had been a spectator of the parade, was particularly incensed over the events and was still ranting about it in the Brooklyn bars he visited a few days later. One of the taverns he frequented was located on Furman Street on the waterfront and owned by an Irishman named Galvin who had married a Protestant. Bad blood had existed for some time between Campbell and Galvin, and it was brought to a head when Galvin quarreled with two English sailors on the premises. Galvin also threw Campbell out, but a fight ensued between the two. Allegedly, Campbell accused Galvin of being an Orangeman and after Campbell threw a bench through the storefront window, Galvin pursued him with a butcher's knife, stabbing him fatally. Galvin's lawyers leaned heavily on the defense that Campbell's religious bias had provoked the attack and it was just a case of self-defense. The jury did not buy this argument based on the fact that a knife in the back was

hardly evidence of non-aggression. Galvin was sentenced to several years in the penitentiary for manslaughter.<sup>32</sup>



**Illustration:**  
Hugh McLaughlin, son of Donegal immigrants, was an often-feared political boss, but would spend time playing checkers in the clubhouse with Donegal-born supporters.  
Courtesy of John T. Ridge.

The Orange Riots in 1871 brought to a head the worst of sectarianism. The day-to-day relationship between immigrants from the old country, according to Supreme Court Judge William J. Carr writing to the *Brooklyn Standard Union* in 1914, was much more harmonious:

*As a mere child I noticed at our funerals numbers of Irish Protestants who came from the neighborhood of my Donegal parents. As a child I never heard under my father's roof a word of hatred or intolerance against his Protestant neighbors here or in Ireland.<sup>33</sup>*

William J. Carr was a protégé of Boss McLaughlin and grew up in Assumption Parish (Jay and York Streets) in the heart of the old Donegal neighborhood that brought many Donegal-affiliated politicians to office. He was the son of Cornelius (native of the Parish of Inver) and Mary, née Gallagher. He was nicknamed the "lawyer's lawyer" for his legal expertise.

Protestants from Donegal in Brooklyn represented every variety of Irish political opinion.

The most prominent on the nationalist side was Thomas Ainge Devyr (1806–1887). The *Brooklyn Eagle* obituary stated:

*Surrounded by the evil conditions of the time and country in which he lived, he early became convinced that absolute ownership of land was the great and fundamental evil of society. In 1836 he published a pamphlet in which he declared that the only title of a man to the land lasted in his natural wants. In 1837 he went to London to advocate what he described as man's inherent right to the soil. He found employment there as editor of the Irish department of the Constitutional, a radical morning paper on which Thackeray and Dickens were employed. After the failure of the Chartist uprising at Newport, Mr. Devyr, as one of its leaders, was compelled to seek a home in the United States, narrowly escaping arrest on the charge of high treason.<sup>34</sup>*

Thomas Ainge Devyr settled in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn in 1840 where he established a weekly newspaper. He continued publishing, becoming editor and proprietor of the *Fenian Brotherhood* in 1867 and later a staff editor of the *Irish World* from 1876 to 1881. He also constructed a large dock for his contracting and docking business and was prominent in Williamsburg real estate, at one time owning more than 400 lots in the area.<sup>35</sup>

At least two of Devyr's five sons and two daughters were also born in Donegal. One of them, Rienzi Devyr, was also a large real estate owner in Williamsburg, and together with his brother Tom was one of the early stars of Brooklyn baseball in its formative years. His sister Cecilia became a prominent member of the Shaker community and used her literary ability to promote the cause of her community. Better known was Mary A. Devyr who as "Madeline S. Bridges" was a well-known poetess and magazine writer.<sup>36</sup>

Reverend William Morrison, rector of All Saints Church, Seventh Avenue and Seventh Street in Park Slope, was born near Gartan, Co. Donegal. His family were supporters of

the Jacobite cause, and after the collapse of the last Stuart rebellion in Scotland in 1745, they fled to Ireland "for political reason." The family remained liberal in Irish politics, and the reverend's father was an early backer of the British Liberal Party and continued to "support Mr. Gladstone when he adopted his home rule policy for Ireland." Reverend William Morrison made a nostalgic trip home to his native place in 1903 and sent letters back to his Brooklyn friends about his four-week holiday in Donegal. While decrying the poverty of his native place and the fact that the country seemed to be over-policed, the liberal traditions of his family combined with his American residency caused some local unease:

*I preached one Sunday in the old parish church at a hamlet called Church Hill. Dean Bailey of Raphoe (since deceased) had charge of the parish, and I was greatly amused when my old time friend, Hugh Hay, Esq., told me how fearful the good dean was least, being an American, I should seriously, in all probability, disturb the peace of the church by the introduction of American ideas, which were one with the English. I preached all the same, and I trust I disturbed nobody.<sup>37</sup>*

The Orange Lodges in Brooklyn represented the opposite to the moderation of the liberal Protestants like Morrison. John Edgar Walker, a Health Department chemist and native of Rahan, Dunkineely, was at age 19 already the Grand Master of one of Brooklyn's biggest lodges, the Greenpoint Purple Heroes. Over the next fifteen years, he held office of one sort or other and frequently had charge of the social events of the society. Curiously, there is no record of any Irish music or entertainment at any of the dances and entertainments during this time, but "highland flings" or "Orange selections" were usually on the program. Walker was also a member of a semi-secret society of anti-Catholics called the Sons and Daughters of Washington which was active in the post-World War I period.<sup>38</sup>

Like their Catholic fellow immigrants, most Brooklyn Donegal Protestants took little interest in Irish politics, but concentrated on raising families and contributing substantially to the





growth of the borough. If American politics interested them, they seemed have been more inclined to be Republicans than Democrats. Several of the Democrats were members of the old volunteer fire department which possibly served as a common ground for everyone regardless of religious affiliation. Walter Long, born in Donegal in 1826, settled in the old 5th Ward near the Navy Yard about 1843. His carpentry shop served for a time as the headquarters for Hugh McLaughlin, son of Donegal immigrants,

and leader of the Democratic Party in Brooklyn for many years. His friendship with McLaughlin, and the many fellow Donegal immigrants in the area, helped him succeed as a builder of many houses in that section of Brooklyn. He served for many years as an inspector of buildings for the City of Brooklyn. He was active in the work of Irishtown's St. Michael's Episcopal Church. Another friend was James Furey, who fled Ireland after the 1798 Rebellion and soon afterward settled in Brooklyn where he helped to found St. James in the neighborhood of Irishtown where a cluster of Donegal settlers were located.<sup>39</sup>

Almost all the Brooklyn Donegal Protestants were affiliated with a local church, the Presbyterian being the most popular. The Episcopal Church had the perhaps the best-known Donegal-born clergyman, the Reverend William Morrison, but the Episcopalians in newspaper obituaries, in contrast to the relatively equal numbers of the two congregations in Ireland, did not match the number of the Presbyterians. Donegal Protestants in Brooklyn were active in a wide variety of congregations: Methodist, Baptist, Unitarian, Reformed and in independent congregations like the Gospel Mission. Many of these immigrants took an active part in the affairs of their churches, some of them serving in offices such as church treasurer, vestryman, trustee, or committee chairman. A few of these individuals took part in the actual foundation of their congregations and maintained work for their churches that was often

*Photo: Seamus MacManus (1869-1860) enjoyed a long life, much of it spent in the United States, making a large contribution to the reputation of County Donegal. Courtesy of John T. Ridge.*

**IRISH FOLK-LORE**

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*From "The Amadan of the Dough."*

*Illustration: Despite Seamus MacManus' reputation for presenting an image of Ireland based more on reality than fictional themes, one of his most popular books was a collection of Donegal fairy tales. He came often to Brooklyn to promote this and other of his literary efforts. Courtesy of John T. Ridge.*

shared by other family members, for as long as sixty years or more.<sup>40</sup>

Although the number of obituaries of these Donegal Protestant immigrants is comparatively small, they seemed to have made a substantial impact on the development of Brooklyn. Andrew Colvin owned a dairy in the Irishtown district where he settled about 1860.<sup>41</sup> A fellow immigrant nearby, Robert Atchison, had first worked on river boats on the Mississippi in the 1820s before coming to Brooklyn to start a carting business and to become one of the pioneer organizers of St. Michael's Episcopal Church near the Navy Yard.<sup>42</sup> Charles McCrodden was an oysterman who kept beds at Canarsie Bay to supply the insatiable appetites of the city for a favorite snack of old New York.<sup>43</sup> Joseph Lowrey, a Bath Beach Hotel owner and real estate holder, left an estate of \$318,000 in 1901.<sup>44</sup> William McElhinney, a wholesale milliner with a business in Manhattan, was for thirty years Sunday school superintendent and President of the Board of Trustees of his Brooklyn Presbyterian congregation.<sup>45</sup> Andrew Mowbray, a native of Ballintra, established a livery business in downtown Brooklyn in 1876 and was the first trader of horses in the borough. His very successful business was patronized by many prominent individuals of the day. Mowbray was also an acquaintance of Sir Thomas Lipton, whom he called an "Irish Knight" in praise of Lipton and his racing yacht, "The Shamrock." Although mildly unionist in his Irish politics, he was the author of a romantically nostalgic poem about his "native land" on the occasion of his visit to Ireland in 1909.<sup>46</sup> Like their Catholic fellow immigrants, Donegal Protestants were engaged in a wide variety of occupations including a compositor, a gilder, a machinist, a dry goods salesman, brewery employee and a merchant tailor.

#### OTHER DONEGAL NOTABLES

No one popularized County Donegal at the turn of the twentieth century as much as the prolific writer and poet Seamus MacManus. MacManus wrote mainly about his home county in a way that awakened the sense of place and culture. The weekly *Brooklyn Life* described his stories "as illustrating the wit, the cleverness, the humor and the pathos of the emotional Irish charac-

ter."<sup>47</sup> Moreover, they dealt with real people and not with banshees and other subjects from Irish folklore. MacManus was a frequent visitor to Brooklyn where he was welcomed in the parlors of the literati for intimate evenings where he read his poems and stories. In 1899, he was given a farewell reception at the home of Mrs. Robert Teir Davidson in Bushwick Avenue:

*The affair was chiefly literary and artistic. Mr. MacManus read selections from his recently-issued book, "Thro' the Turf-Smoke," and that most popular of his poems, the quaint "Caera big Yeilish" ("Dear Little Sheep"). Mrs. Davidson sang some delightful Irish ballads and Miss Lottie Davidson played Irish melodies on the violin, with piano accompaniment. Mr. George Debye made a humorous speech of congratulation and farewell to the guest of the evening.*<sup>48</sup>

MacManus returned to Brooklyn frequently. The Brooklyn newspapers printed excerpts from his work and he was called upon to give formal lectures around the city. MacManus was popular with the sympathizers of the *Sinn Fein* movement, advocates of independence for Ireland, and consequently appeared on platforms sponsored by societies like Brooklyn's Gaelic Society, a group promoting the study and cultivation of the Irish language. In 1912, MacManus lectured in downtown Brooklyn at the old Imperial Theater before an audience that included the president and many members of the faculty of St. John's College (then in the borough, now St. John's University), and language revivalists.<sup>49</sup> While MacManus was known both in America and around the world, several individuals achieved much more modest fame for their artistic achievements.

In the next decade, an individual from Donegal who achieved more infamy than fame arrived in Brooklyn. In 1924, a new pastor came to the prestigious Janes Methodist Church in Brooklyn's Bedford-Stuyvesant. He was forty-four years old Thomas Hugh Gallagher, a gifted preacher and organizer who was at the peak of his ministerial career. He had, in just four years, doubled the size of his previous church's mem-



bership in Portland, Oregon, but was anxious to get back to the east where he had spent at least two years at New York University, earning a graduate degree. The Reverend Gallagher was born in Ardara, Donegal, and had arrived in New York at age 16 in 1896. He settled at first in Philadelphia before entering a number of theological schools in many locations across the country. Within weeks of his arrival in Brooklyn he announced a lecture on the subject of the Ku Klux Klan. He spoke glowingly of the organization:

*All members of the Klan are pure Americans, not "half-breeds" like myself. Every Klanner is an American born citizen. Each candidate for membership must signify his belief in the Constitution of the United States, in free speech and a free press. The Klan is, however, primarily a religious organization that believes in God and Jesus Christ. It seeks no religious intolerance. It does not oppose, however, any gesture toward united church and state in America.*<sup>50</sup>

In his talks he tried to present in what appeared to be a reasonable, moderate approach:

*The Klan has a very fine purpose—the Americanization of our country. If it has been unsuccessful it is the duty of the*

*Protestant Churches in America to unite in another grand move towards this goal. I invite you Hebrews and Catholics to join our ranks.*<sup>51</sup>

Gallagher argued that the Klan was against no race or religion as long as they were “law abiding.” He went on to say:

*I am not a Klansman. I could not be a Klansman. I was born in Ireland. I could not be one if I wanted to. All that I say here to-night is the result of observations which I have made of the workings of the Ku Klux Klan over a number of years.*<sup>52</sup>

The *Standard Union* headlined a Gallagher talk in 1925 as “Klan is discussed by Irish Preacher.”<sup>53</sup> In this talk, he was even more enthusiastic about the Klan.

Gallagher frequently addressed political subjects and must have built up a number of enemies, a fact he alluded to in his addresses. He strongly opposed Al Smith’s campaign for president in 1928. In February, he spoke at his church on the subject “Al Smith Will Not Be Elected President.”<sup>54</sup>

Reverend Gallagher gave a presentation at his church just before St. Patrick’s Day in 1925 about his tour of Ireland that was complete with illustrations of scenery and accompanied by “inspiring stories and songs.”<sup>55</sup> The Irish trip provided material for later lectures and on one occasion it was announced that they were open to all. The newspaper announcement stated “that if you have one drop of Irish blood, it will be of interest to you.” A lecture in 1926 was entitled rather cryptically as “Lessons from Pugilistic Ireland.”

In 1929, a visiting Irish clergyman and guest of Gallagher, the Reverend William Rooney, a former pastor of the Ardara Methodist Church in Donegal, was part of the church program on several occasions when Ireland was a topic of discussion. Notice appeared the newspapers that “the church invites Ulsterites of any denomination to hear the speaker.”<sup>56</sup>

Reverend Gallagher began to tire of New York after a few years in Brooklyn. He regarded New York City as the sin capital of the

**Photo:**

*The Reverend Thomas H. Gallagher from Ardara came to Brooklyn’s prestigious Janes Methodist Church as pastor in 1924. He gave Sunday afternoon lectures praising the Ku Klux Klan and crusaded against what he considered was the bad influences that made the city the capitol of sin. Courtesy of John T. Ridge.*

country. One of his lectures in 1929 was titled, "Why Do I Remain in New York?" In 1931, he left Brooklyn and eventually settled down in Louisville. His old Brooklyn church, the Janes Methodist Church, is today one of the largest black congregations in the borough.

**THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING FROM DONEGAL**  
Going back to the old country, while in no way matching the numbers of the incoming migration, was an important pastime of aging Donegal immigrants. William Moran, a sergeant in Brooklyn's own 14th Regiment, had in 1864 gone back to Culdaff, Donegal, "where he went to improve his health" after service in the Civil War. Unfortunately for Moran, his native place did not help very much towards his recovery and he died in May of that year.<sup>57</sup> Like Moran, Charles McNeely, Superintendent of Brooklyn's Penitentiary, traveled to Ireland in 1870 with the same foreboding of doom. No sooner had he landed, he became seriously ill and barely made it to the house of his brother in Mount Charles where he passed away speaking "lovingly of the friends he had left behind him in Brooklyn and regretted that he could not see them once

more before he died." The details of McNeely's death were obtained from his eldest son directly after his arrival from Donegal and, significantly, the interview with the press was conducted at the house of Hugh McLaughlin, the political boss.<sup>58</sup>

In 1902, three friends who had all done very well in Brooklyn returned to Ireland for a holiday. Joining retired Under Sherriff James Dunn and Phil Casey, owner of a then-famous handball court and known among sportsmen as the "father of handball," was Tom Meehan. Meehan was a successful lumber dealer who emigrated from Donegal thirty years before. The three friends arrived in Meehan's hometown where Meehan promptly pointed to a grand house of mansion proportions and recently constructed as the house where he was born and raised. The two friends instantly and laughingly doubted the story and quickly found an aged farmer to lead them to the real Meehan homestead which turned out to be a very old house barely large enough to accommodate two people as the place where all the Meehans were raised including "a divil of a young son, who went to America and was never heard from again hereabouts." A com-

**Illustrations:**  
*Donegal Tweed did more than any other term to popularize the name of the old Irish country. Brooklyn department stores advertised (1953) high priced women's tweed for the upper-class shopper. Sturdy tweed clothing from Donegal could be purchased for a cheaper price to warmly clad youngsters for the cold winter. Courtesy of John T. Ridge.*



Our Donegal Tweed Ulster  
with the Zip-in Fur Lining at '65

**WARM WOOL DONEGAL TWEED**  
**BOYS' 22<sup>90</sup> COAT**  
**& SLACK SETS**

**15<sup>90</sup>**

All wool quilt lined donegal tweeds and alpaca lined nylon blend gabardine; all with zip fly, bib top slacks and beavertex collars. Brown, navy, blue. Sizes 3 to 10.

pletely deflated Meehan was forced to admit he may have been a bit weak in the memory department.<sup>59</sup>

In the first decade of the twentieth century, there seems to have been a large increase in the number of emigrants returning home for a summer trip to visit the land of their birth. The weekly New York *Irish Advocate* noted the departure of hundreds of Donegal-born passengers aboard steamships that provided speed and comfort for the first time to travelers of modest means. These trips were sometimes highly celebrated events. In 1907, the friends of Bridget Quinn assembled in a Brooklyn hall to bid farewell at a party that included dancing, singing and violin, banjo and mandolin playing. Her friends took turns singing Irish ballad “ditties” and doing humorous recitations. Two songs were especially written in honor of Miss Quinn, one of which was entitled, “When You’re Gone, my Dear Irish Lassie, My Heart Will Yearn for You.”<sup>60</sup> John O’Neil, who had arrived in Brooklyn in 1904, made his journey home to Donegal in 1924 that was preceded by a party in Sheepshead Bay. His friends presented him with “a silver covered album, with the pictures of the various members of his family, which he will take to his mother.”<sup>61</sup>

Welcoming parties were thrown for arriving visitors from Ireland as well. Elizabeth Mooney from Aranmore, on a trip to visit her cousin in 1912 in the Williamsburg section, was given a house party there simply because her arrival coincided exactly with the twelfth anniversary of her cousin’s immigration.<sup>62</sup> Another house party was given to arriving immigrant Margaret Meehan in 1921 at the Bedford-Stuyvesant home of a cousin and a number of Meehan relations.<sup>63</sup> These gatherings contrasted sharply with the one for William Quigley, whose Brooklyn immigrant children had awaited his arrival at the dockside. Quigley, although on board, was nowhere to be found and the supposition was made that he had drowned or had gotten on shore unobserved. The call went out to family and friends within a hundred miles of the city, and this was aided by newspaper articles about the missing Donegal man. After five days, the family finally received word that their father had been sent to the

almshouse after he had wandered about the city unable to tell anyone the address of any of his children. The family was soon reunited.<sup>64</sup>

Homesickness for the home county extended itself occasionally to the offspring of immigrants. Assistant District Attorney Joe Gallagher traveled to Killybegs in 1924 to visit the birthplace of his mother where he got to play the role of a privileged tourist of the century before grouse hunting on the neighboring hills. “Mr. Gallagher’s fame had preceded him, and friends for many miles around came in to welcome him.”<sup>65</sup> Children’s Court Judge George O’Keefe was given a shipboard party by relatives and friends before he proceeded on a voyage to Moville and then a motor trip through Donegal “happy at the prospect of visiting the places in Ireland where his parents were born.”<sup>66</sup>

It was only in the twentieth century that the westbound finality of travel across the Atlantic began to change, thanks to the ease of frequency and lower cost of ocean travel. Perhaps then, there was a closeness between the old land and the new that is not even present in this age of instant worldwide internet communication. John S. Crosby, speaking at the annual dinner of the St. Patrick Society of Brooklyn in 1906, jokingly referred to the interchangeability of Brooklyn and Donegal for many families:

*He caused a laugh by thanking his forbears for arranging that he should be born in this country and saved the trouble of immigration. Even if he had been born in County Donegal, he said, he would have been in the United States by this time.*<sup>67</sup>

In addition to its social and emotional significance, being from Donegal was important in other respects. In 1874, Brooklyn was once again the scene of a highly contested municipal election in the area between Brooklyn Heights and Red Hook, the old 6th and 12th Wards. Place of birth in Ireland was still sometimes a factor when it came to politics. County of origin was a factor in a candidate’s suitability in areas where there were concentrations of immigrants from one or just a few counties. Red Hook was the stronghold of the Cork immigrants and their

bloc vote could spell victory or defeat at the polls, but their influence was often lessened when all the other counties could combine against them. According to a report in the *Brooklyn Review* during November, 1874:

*The nominations on the Democratic side, for those wards, are not made by the General Committee, they are made in Ireland and the name of the candidate is sent over by mail. Phil Clare is a "long-tail," and Coffey is a "Far-down," The "long-tails" were notified that they must stand by Clare. It seems that Phil's ancestors originally came from a place called the Rocks of Van Duren [sic], in the north of Ireland. When the Far-downs heard who Phil was they refused to endorse Coffey. Coffey told his constituents that they did endorse him, and thus secured the Far-down vote. Election day Billy McGivney, a friend of Clare's, received a letter from Donegal saying that the people of that section (the North) had resolved after 12 hours of deliberation, to allow the candidates to stand on their own merits.<sup>68</sup>*

At first glance this story seems rather far-fetched, but Phil Clare was in addition to his political power the head of the Ancient Order of Hibernians, a secret fraternal society whose passwords were sent from Ireland. Donegal was a powerful center of Hibernian activity at the time and a major factor in the ruling body known as the Board of Erin. Perhaps if Clare had actually been from Donegal, rather than apparently from Longford (long-tail = Longford), he may have been more successful. This side of the city was not particularly strong in its Donegal contingent in any case.

Less than a year later, a Mary McElevey, gave testimony in a Brooklyn courtroom that confirmed that all was not perfectly harmonious between the Irish county groups:

*Mary McElevey testified that she resides at No. 44 Main Street (Irishtown, ed.), and the wife of Matthew McElevey: went to Miss Baird's house at the invitation of her mother, with my child in my*

*arms: while there, and during a conversation, I made some remark about the Donegal folks when Mrs. McCluskey threatened to hit me with a boot: can't say whether she did or not: and thereupon Mrs. Baird came up and struck me a blow on the nose with her fist: she left the room and went down the stairs and met me in the entry, where she again hit me on the nose: I then left.<sup>69</sup>*

As newcomers who spoke differently than native-born Americans, it was understandable that many foreign-born were reluctant to fully express themselves in public. In 1890, John J. Roche of the Central Labor Union addressed an organizing meeting for the cartmen, an occupation where many Donegal immigrants were to be found. Roche stated that every member had the right to be heard and, indeed, there was an obligation on the part of members to speak up:

*Let me say get up and express himself when he is at his meeting as best he can. Do not be afraid, if you are German, that you will be laughed at, or if you are a 'Far Down' or a 'Connaughtman,' or even a 'Donegal man,' (laughter and applause) and I see some of the 'Donegals' here to-night. The man who laughs or jeers at another that he knows is trying to convey his ideas in his own way to the meeting which he is connected with is no fit member for organized labor. By expressing your opinion in your own crude way you will become educated and you will educate others.<sup>70</sup>*

Sectional bitterness certainly dissipated by the turn of the twentieth century. Edward T. O'Loughlin, a columnist in the *Times Union*, in answering a correspondent of Italian origin who complained that a majority of Italians in public office in Brooklyn seemed to come originally from just one section of Brooklyn, referred to the Irish, who by this juncture in time seemed to handle their old country origins humorously:

*It seems they have sectional feelings over there, just as we have at times in the*

*United States. Just like men from different parts of Ireland. Just as a fellow from Leitrim thinks he's better than another from Donegal. (When just between you and me, none of them can touch old Mayo).*<sup>71</sup>

Few Irish counties were even recognized by most Americans, but Donegal was perhaps more so because of the fame of its tourism and the literary contributions of MacManus and others. Donegal tweed was long a by-word in clothing and all types of woolen products were advertised regularly by the clothing and department stores. Donegal was a familiar word, even if it was not pronounced correctly. Curiously, a want ad appearing in the *Brooklyn Eagle* in 1901 puts the "No Irish Need Apply" lament somewhat into the dust:

*Wanted – TO DO COOKING, WASHING AND IRONING, a young girl; must be experienced and well recommended: salary \$20; one from County Donegal, Ireland, preferred. Apply at 213 Sterling place*<sup>72</sup>

Donegal partisanship could sometimes be something an individual wanted to shed. One of the distinctive, although relatively rare, surnames of Donegal was Whoriskey. For Edward Sarsfield Whoriskey, whose grandfather emigrated from Donegal, the name had become a problem. He appeared in Brooklyn county court in 1918 to petition a name change it to Waters, a loose English translation of the Gaelic name. Edward Whoriskey found that Americans didn't think his name was Irish at all. He claimed it had cost him several employment positions and his sister found it difficult to get certain lodgings the previous summer because of her name. The Brooklyn court granted the request routinely ending a thousand years or more of Donegal heritage.<sup>73</sup>

**DONEGAL AND THE IRISH IMMIGRANT STORY**  
In the history of Irish immigration to America, there were hundreds of places where colonies from one or more of the various Irish counties were established. When these settle-

ments were at their height, when hundreds or thousands of Irish exiles clustered together to form tight communities, they resembled a part of the old country moved almost intact to the new. But inevitably, in the course of just a few decades the colonies disappeared, the immigrant generation passed away and their descendants, for the most part, with little inkling of what was lost, began to forget even the place in Ireland where their ancestors came from. The story of the Donegal people in Brooklyn was a small, but significant, part of the Irish immigrant story.

## Endnotes

- 1 February 18, 1919, *Times Union*
- 2 (February 25, 1910, *Brooklyn Citizen*) and (April 23, 1913 and December 28, 1916, *Times Union*)
- 3 (October 26, 1920, *Times Union*)
- 4 Jan 20, 1915, *Times Union*
- 5 February 18, 1919, *Times Union*
- 6 November 13, 1916, *Tablet*
- 7 September 16, 1877, *Brooklyn Eagle*
- 8 February 25, 1921, *Times Union*
- 9 May 4, 1915, *Times Union*
- 10 January 22, 1916, *Times Union*
- 11 January 22, 1916, *Times Union*
- 12 April 2, 1913, *Standard Union*
- 13 December 6, 1924, *The Chat*
- 14 October 15, 1927, *Donegal Democrat*
- 15 June 22, 1896, *Brooklyn Eagle*
- 16 April 21, 1914, *Times Union*
- 17 May 4, 1922, *Brooklyn Eagle*
- 18 November 18, 1912, *Times Union*
- 19 September 27, 1917, *Standard Union*
- 20 February 26, 1930, *Times Union*
- 21 July 2, 1906, *Times Union*
- 22 November 18, 1928, *Times Union*

- 23 July 13, 1936, *Times Union*
- 24 February 22, 1898, *Times Union*
- 25 (September 13, 1911 and February 22, 1898, *Times Union*)
- 26 October 2, 1874; January 28, 1876 and August 3, 1883, *Brooklyn Eagle*
- 27 July 27, 1884, *Brooklyn Eagle*
- 28 September 27, 1880, *New York Sun*
- 29 June 8, 1886, *Times Union*
- 30 March 24, 1933, *Times Union* and May 2, 1933, *Brooklyn Eagle*
- 31 Irish Census of 1901
- 32 October 6, 1871, *New York Tribune*
- 33 June 24, 1914 *Standard Union*
- 34 May 28, 1887, *Brooklyn Eagle*
- 35 May 27, 1887, *Times Union*
- 36 Feb. 12, 1912, *Times Union*, July 16, 1902, *Times Union*, March 6, 1916, *Brooklyn Eagle*
- 37 September 6, 1903, *Brooklyn Eagle*
- 38 September 29, 1920, *Brooklyn Eagle*, March 21, 1903, *Brooklyn Times Union*, April 27, 1912, *Brooklyn Eagle*, April 11, 1920, *Standard Union*, September 29, 1920, *Brooklyn Eagle*
- 39 January 2, 1913, *Times Union* and January 7, 1884, *Brooklyn Eagle*
- 40 This is based on approximately 30 obituaries of Donegal natives that appeared in the Brooklyn daily newspapers, mainly in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries.
- 41 August 19, 1915, *Times Union*
- 42 June 26, 1897, *Brooklyn Eagle*
- 43 November 30, 1920, *Times Union*
- 44 January 21, 1901, *Times Union*
- 45 January 4, 1907, *Times Union*
- 46 April 8, 1906 and June 13, 1943, *Brooklyn Eagle*
- 47 March 25, 1899, *Brooklyn Life*
- 48 May 6, 1899, *Brooklyn Life*
- 49 October 21, 1912, *Times Union*
- 50 November 1, 1924, *The Chat*
- 51 *Ibid.*
- 52 *Ibid.*
- 53 November 30, 1925, *Standard Union*
- 54 February 4, 1928, *Brooklyn Eagle*
- 55 March 14, 1925, *The Chat*
- 56 April 20, 1929, *The Chat* There is still a Methodist Church and congregation in Ardara and services are held weekly.
- 57 June 11, 1864, *Brooklyn Eagle*
- 58 September 30, 1870, *Brooklyn Eagle*
- 59 September 8, 1902, *Times Union*
- 60 June 2, 1907, *Standard Union*
- 61 July 3, 1924, *Brooklyn Eagle*
- 62 April 10, 1912, *Brooklyn Citizen*
- 63 May 24, 1921, *Standard Union*
- 64 March 21, 1892, *Brooklyn Eagle*
- 65 August 2, 1924, *The Chat*
- 66 July 18, 1928, *Times Union*
- 67 March 17, 1906, *Standard Union*
- 68 November 15, 1874, *Brooklyn Review*. Coffey was actually a Cork native. The use of the term "far down" to describe him was incorrect. Coffey is perpetuated in the Red Hook Street named after him.
- 69 May 13, 1875, *Brooklyn Eagle*
- 70 April 19, 1890, *Brooklyn Citizen*
- 71 January 17, 1935, *Times Union*
- 72 September 13, 1901, *Brooklyn Eagle*
- 73 November 21, 1918, *Times Union*