

NO PLACE TO GO

By JAMES COLLINS

In 1923 my mother left Ireland and landed in Boston at the ripe old age of sixteen. Ireland at the time and for decades later was the poorest country in Western Europe. Nothing was wasted and everything was reused where possible. Ireland had after 800 years thrown the English out of the South of Ireland and the country had just survived a bitter civil war. Jobs were nonexistent and emigration rose, by necessity, to a flood of young people going to America. The family members who preceded my mother got her a job in New York where her elder sister was a nurse. Immediately she signed up for night school and tried to assimilate into her new home. The Irish immigrants are a clannish lot and historically look out for one another and keep in close contact. That's how the job opportunities arise; the Irish network is amazing.

In West Cork, the county my mother was born in, the predominant religion is Roman Catholic. More than 90% of the population is Catholic and the rest is Protestant. Only one individual was a professed Atheist and both factions watched him with a jaundiced eye as nobody trusted one so deviant in a Christian community. It's not as if they didn't like him, quite the contrary, he was very personable but he was considered different. Everybody from Cork knew William Cunningham, the tout, who left Ireland with the multitude of emigrants and ended up as a gambler in Brooklyn. He was chasing the money- his one true god. They all knew no good would come of him. Then he died!

With the Irish death is the great leveler. No matter how nasty, no matter how drunk, no matter how violent, or lazy, once an Irishman dies he is canonized by all who knew him. So it was to be with Bill. His wake was held in Flatbush and hundreds of Irish from all over New York came to see the Atheist from Cork. There would be no prayers and no kneelers at the bier. This would be such an unusual wake that everyone wanted to be there to be able to talk about it for years to come.

When my mother, still a teenager, walked up to the coffin with her sister and several neighbors from 'home', she was startled. Bill was laid out in a three piece pin striped suit, shirt and handkerchief, highly polished new shoes, a cravat and a bowler hat. In Ireland he would have been wrapped in a winding sheet and all the clothes would have been passed down to those who needed them.

"What have they done with Bill? Why is he dressed in all these fine clothes? Poor people on the street could use the suit the shoes and the hat. This is truly wasteful."

"Calm down Nell, this is America. This is how they do things here." her sister replied. "The waste of the clothes isn't the problem. The really sad bit is that Bill is all dressed up with no place to go!"

THE END