



Irish-American Culture and Acculturation

Wherever they settled in their new American homeland, immigrant groups had to go through the sometimes-difficult process of preserving or rejecting parts of their native cultural tradition. In general, the Irish were singularly fortunate in being able to preserve many of their customary patterns of life and association. In particular, the Irish were spared the linguistic alienation experienced by many other ethnicities as they adapted to their English-speaking workplace and neighborhoods. As it had in their homeland, the Catholic religion remained both a spiritual solace and a bulwark of communal identification. Social clubs and Irish bars rivaled parishes as social centers, especially for the unmarried, and traditional Irish music and dance proved to be among the most enduring aspects of Irish culture among Irish immigrants to San Francisco and the surrounding area.

The appeal of Irish music, not only on the stage and in the dance hall, but in pubs, clubs, church halls, and private homes, was perennial. In the first essay, Gearóid Ó hAllmhuráin traces the history of traditional Irish music in San Francisco from its origins as an authentic expression of an immigrant community during the Gold Rush to its latter day transformation into a “folk” idiom of nearly universal appeal. Dance halls like the Knights of the Red Branch (KRB) were immensely popular in the city and often proved to be quite literally the “ballrooms of romance” for many young couples. For immigrant offspring, the more formalized, reinvented traditional dance promoted by the Gaelic League, complete with stylized costumes, served as a mode of valuing and perpetuating Irish culture. As Lynn Lubamersky points out in the second essay, for some talented young Irishwomen, this proficiency in dance could and did develop into significant professional careers.

In the third essay, Daniel Walsh addresses that humble domestic institution, the boarding house. The boarding house not only sheltered the Irish immigrant, it also provided understanding and appreciation of the immigrant’s traditional culture while helping to transform it. During the early decades of the twentieth century, Maggie’s boarding house served as a place of welcome for an extended family of newcomers from rural Ireland, and it provided the gradual acculturation necessary for the greenhorns to settle into and, in most cases, to prosper in the cosmopolitan urban environment of San Francisco.



Old Age Pipers and New Age Punters

Irish Traditional Music and Musicians
in San Francisco, 1850–2000

GEARÓID Ó HALLMHURÁIN



The cock he crew in the mornin,' he crew both loud and shrill
And I awoke in California, many miles from Spancilhill¹

Michael Considine's "Spancilhill" (c. 1870)

Irish traditional music has had a prismatic history in the San Francisco Bay Area. After journeying from the stone cabins of the West of Ireland into mining camps in the Sierras and immigrant dance halls in the Mission District of San Francisco, this music continues to find a niche in celebrated venues like the Plough and Stars in the City's Richmond District. Since the 1850s, Irish traditional music has given work to enterprising thespians, recreation to homesick immigrants, and enjoyment to vaudevillian patrons throughout the Bay Area. It has also functioned as a conduit for various forms of political and cultural nationalism and facilitated the contribution of Irish musicians to American popular culture. Unlike Irish step dancing, which still enjoys a thriving institutional presence within the Bay Area's Irish-American community, traditional music, whose popularity in this milieu was high during the early 1900s and again in the 1950s, has now outgrown its historic social habitat and has been adopted by and absorbed into the polyphonic mosaic of Californian culture. In its present wave of media-driven popularity, it has reached out to a diversity of musicians, most of whom have little in common with its former ethnic patrons. This study will explore the cultural history of Irish traditional music in San Francisco, from its nebulous origins in the 1850s, to its revered status among the city's Gaelic Leaguers in the early 1900s, and its eventual displacement from its old communal nexus during the 1960s and 1970s, an era which witnessed the emergence of radical countercultures throughout the Bay Area.

Off to California: Irish Music Makers and the Californian Gold Rush

The discovery of gold by James Marshall on the Sutter estate in Coloma Valley on 24 January 1848 was a pivotal event in California history. Marshall's find triggered a series of monumental changes, not only for the nascent state of California, but for the expanding nation to which it would soon be annexed. Within two years, the California Gold Rush had generated a demographic tidal wave which has been described as the "greatest population movement since the crusades."² Mobilizing a multi-cultural caravan of laborers and intellectuals, brigands and mystics, free masons and bohemians, socialists and aristocrats, the myopic bait of Californian gold also attracted hordes of Irish immigrants. Many of these had made the seventeen-thousand-mile sea journey from New York to San Francisco around Cape Horn. Others crossed the country on the Oregon Trail from Missouri, while more chanced their luck through the torrid jungles of Panama.³

Following on the heels of these instant miners who swarmed into the Sacramento Valley and the Sierra foothills came a wave of service workers, tool suppliers, and entertainers—among them Irish musicians, singers, and dancers. These pioneer entertainers, like Donnelly's Ethiopian Serenaders, sensing a profitable market in the gold fields, were probably the first Irish musicians to perform for a paying audience in California.⁴ Their frontier lyrics, sung to jig, reel, and polka meters, were published in pocket songbooks which, according to folklorist Alan Lomax, were circulated by "professional entertainers" who toured the gold camps in the period 1849–1853.⁵ Two of the most colorful Irish performers to tour the mining camps of Grass Valley during this period were the soprano Catherine Hayes and the dancer Eliza Gilbert, otherwise known as Lola Montez. Both women were born in Limerick in 1818. Apart from sharing a common birthplace and birth year, they belonged to two totally distinct strains of Irish musical culture; one blended nationalist airs with high art classical music; the other had moved well and truly beyond the moral perimeters of traditional Irish dancing.

Catherine Hayes was born into abject poverty in Limerick and rose from total obscurity to fame in the great opera houses and concert halls of Europe, America, and Australia. She competed on the European stage with illustrious stars like Henrietta Sontag and Jenny Lind. Despite the fact that she had no formal education, Hayes learned French and Italian and spoke both fluently. Her short life—she died as a result of a stroke in London at the age of forty-two—was filled with success and renown, as well as phenomenal earnings from her concert tours.⁶ She first toured the United States and Canada in 1851. She was persuaded to return the following year on the invitation of entrepreneur P. T. Barnum, who was astutely aware of the staggering fortunes that were being made in California. Barnum agreed to pay her fifty thousand dollars for the tour, and to divide the concert profits with her. Accompanied by her mother on a bustling itinerary of sixty concerts, Hayes arrived in San Francisco in late November 1852. She gave her first concert at the American Theater on 30 November. Because of the huge demand for this event, tickets were auctioned at exorbitant prices. The highest bid

was made by George Green, foreman of the Volunteer Empire Engine Company, who paid \$1,150 for the best seat in the house.⁷ Hayes's concert repertoire, in virtually all of her San Francisco performances, included a staple of operatic arias interspersed with drawing room and nationalist standards like "Kathleen Mavourneen," "The Harp That Once Through Tara's Halls," and "The Last Rose of Summer." While these pieces were far removed from the traditional dance tunes and songs of rural Ireland, they proved enormously popular among the crowds of Irish immigrants who turned out to hear her. Their enthusiasm was so profuse at her opening concert that the *Alta California* berated the audience for its lack of taste for throwing money onto the stage at Hayes's feet.⁸ Having spent four months in San Francisco, during which her lucrative concert earnings reached epic proportions, she took a vacation in the Sierras in the spring of 1853. During this trip, she gave concerts in Virginia City, Grass Valley, and Sacramento. Despite the protestations of Irish miners, who claimed special access to her over other patrons, some of the choice tickets for her Sacramento concert were auctioned for \$1,200 each.⁹

In contrast to the unsullied repertoire of operatic arias and *Moore's Irish Melodies* sung by Catherine Hayes, Eliza Gilbert's performance material was of a radically different genre. Her artistic forte was exotic dancing, although, she was also an accomplished Irish step dancer and ballad singer. Her career was also more spurious than that of her Limerick-born contemporary. Little is known of Gilbert's early life in Ireland. She first came to prominence in Europe as the mistress of Louis I of Bavaria, who bestowed the grandiose title of Countess of Lansfeld on her. She was also a confidante of Victor Hugo, Franz Liszt, Alexandre Dumas, and Georges Sand. When Louis I abdicated during the bloody revolution of 1848, Gilbert fled in haste from Bavaria. Passing herself off as a militant feminist, she arrived in New York in 1851 with Lajos Kossuth, the exiled leader of the Hungarian revolution.¹⁰ In 1852, she arrived in San Francisco where she was greeted with a fanfare of flags, bunting, and crowds of curious onlookers who turned out to see the "king's mistress." Dividing her time between Irish-born journalist Patrick Hull, to whom she was briefly married, and the millionaire Sam Brannan, leader of the California Mormon community, Gilbert became a bohemian sensation in San Francisco. By day, she strutted the streets dressed as a man, smoking a cigar, and carrying a parrot on her shoulder. By night, she performed her famous spider dance in the old San Francisco Hall on Washington Street, for which she netted a hefty sixteen thousand dollars a week.¹¹

After two months of front-page living in San Francisco, Eliza Gilbert left the city for Grass Valley, where she spent the next two years digging for gold. Living in a cottage provided by Sam Brannan, she made occasional trips to the mining camps of her Irish compatriots, where she sang traditional Irish ballads.¹² She also held a weekly *salon littéraire* in her cottage, which was attended by writers and poets who had exchanged their literary aspirations for Californian gold. Among her musical protégés in Grass Valley was Lotta Crabtree, a young girl who had come west with her mother in 1853. While her mother ran a boarding house on the northern Mother Lode, Lotta learned Irish songs and

step dances from Eliza Gilbert, who was better known now by her stage name, Lola Montez. After a career as a child artist dancing Irish jigs on barrel heads and touring mining camps in a theatrical troupe's buckboard, Lotta Crabtree went on to become one of the most celebrated, popular, and best-paid artists in nineteenth-century California.¹³

San Francisco: A New Mecca of Irish-American Entertainment

While the mining camps of the Sierras and the Sacramento Valley attracted a constant influx of itinerant performers, the burgeoning city of San Francisco stood at the apex of an emergent music industry which teemed with opportunities for Irish music makers. Two years after the discovery of gold, the city had been transformed from a straggling trading village with a few hundred people to a bustling seaport of twenty-five thousand. By the end of the 1850s, it would boast a population of fifty-five thousand. This instant explosion in urban life led to the rapid construction of new buildings, as well as to an expansion of service industries and civic institutions. Despite its failure to live up to the moral standards of its evangelical detractors, early San Francisco can hardly be accused of being uncultivated.¹⁴ By 1855, San Francisco boasted of twenty newspapers, in addition to literary and specialty magazines. Formal entertainment had started as early as 1849 with a concert of vocal music in the old schoolhouse in Portsmouth Plaza. Shakespearean theater made its debut in San Francisco in 1850.¹⁵ While most of the early variety theaters in the city were adjuncts of saloons (referred to as "melodeons" by their all-male clientele), three high art theaters and three circus troupes were entertaining enthusiastic crowds by early 1851.

Enticed by a cornucopia of stage opportunities, Irish performers and entrepreneurs were easily lured by this popular entertainment industry. In a town full of "theaters and fandango-houses, pantomimes and minstrels," their range of performance venues stretched from high art theaters and high society balls to concert saloons and dance cellars.¹⁶ Musicians who failed to make it onto the roster at the up-market Plaza could opt for the rowdy ambiance of the Polka Saloon.¹⁷ According to the Frenchman Albert Benard de Russailh who arrived in San Francisco in 1851, "a musician could earn two ounces (\$32) by scraping on a squeaky fiddle for two hours every evening, or by puffing into an asthmatic flute."¹⁸ By the mid-1860s however, cosmopolitan San Francisco had sparked a novel trend in minstrel comedy, especially in the satire of lyricist and playwright Edward Harrigan, who would be immortalized by George M. Cohan during the early 1900s, and later on by the Hollywood dandy, James Cagney.

Edward Harrigan was born on Cork Row in the Corlear's Hook section of New York's Lower East Side in 1844. His father William, whose ancestors had come from Cork to New York via Newfoundland, was second-generation Irish.¹⁹ Despite his early interest in music, Edward Harrigan began his working life as a merchant seaman. After the Civil War, he arrived in San Francisco where he found work as a ship caulker. Sharing the stage at the Bella Union on Kearny Street with celebrated figures

like Grace Darley, Sallie Thayer, Kitty O'Neill, and later on with Lotta Crabtree, his career as a blackface minstrel took off in earnest by 1867. Blackface comedy, with its satirical depictions of Southern plantation life, was reviled in some parts of the country after the Civil War. However, it was still at its zenith in San Francisco. Much of the city's high society consisted of Southern families, many of whom returned home to the south to fight for the Confederacy during the war.²⁰

Harrigan's early stage work in San Francisco consisted of banjo strumming and singing. Soon, however, he expanded his repertoire to include Irish and Dutch dialect comedy, which was to become a staple of the variety stage.²¹ While Harrigan was experimenting with a genre of musical comedy begun by his Irish predecessors like Dan Emmett, Edwin Kelly, and Frank McNish on the East Coast, his brand of satire stretched well beyond the bounds of theatrical convention. The liberal Irish in San Francisco played a significant part in allowing Harrigan to break with tradition. According to music historian William H. A. Williams, Harrigan's brand of satire "allowed him to make fun of the Irish while celebrating them. His satiric distance, as well as his own sense of ethnic confidence, may reflect the experience of the West Coast Irish, who did not suffer from the discrimination and hostility encountered in the East. Without a ghetto mentality, they were able to cultivate a positive Irish identity within the context of San Francisco's developing cultural pluralism."²²

The San Francisco Irish were also among the denizens of the theater business, both as owners and lessees. Tom Maguire was considered the entertainment czar of early San Francisco. After working as a hackney driver and saloon keeper in New York City, he arrived in the Bay Area in 1849, when the Gold Rush was in full swing. His first venture, the Parker House Saloon on Kearny Street, included the famous Jenny Lind Theater as well as a gambling den, which Maguire called "The Snug." Despite being destroyed twice by fire in 1850, the theater became one of the earliest entertainment landmarks in the city and hosted a range of minstrel shows, dramas, and operas until it was sold in 1879 to pay off Maguire's debts. Henceforth, it became the new city hall. Despite his mercurial fortunes and roguish penchant for controversy, Maguire remained a major figure in the entertainment industry in the city for over three decades. His portfolio included establishments like the Metropolitan, the Alhambra, Baldwin's Academy of Music, as well as his own Opera House and Academy of Music.²³

Civil War Escapees, New Compositions, and Military Bands

Although the market favored "innovative" musicians, singers, and dancers who were prepared to go with the flow of the variety stage and vaudeville, more traditional performers also found a forum in early San Francisco. Professional pipers who had followed their Irish audiences into exile after the Great Famine made their way west, usually after revamping their craft on the East Coast. Local newspapers, parish vignettes, as well as the minute books of various Irish societies in San Francisco all contain references to Irish pipers working in the city, from the days of the transient frontier Irish in the 1850s to the consolidation of established Irish communities in the Mission District by the end

of the century.²⁴ Among the most celebrated of this professional coterie was the Limerick piper, Charles Ferguson, who spent some time in San Francisco during the 1850s. The self-styled “Professor Ferguson” began to play the uilleann pipes as a young man and took lessons from Dr. Charles Tuohy, Bishop of Limerick from 1814 to 1828. As well as learning airs and dance tunes, Ferguson also learned to play liturgical music on the pipes, hence, his popularity as a church musician in Brooklyn towards the end of his life. He first came to prominence when he toured the United States with Catherine Hayes in 1851, who he had met in the late 1840s in Dublin.²⁵ As a consequence, Ferguson’s financial and material circumstances improved considerably in America. The massive audiences that turned out to hear Hayes also showered accolades on Ferguson. His fame, however, did little to curb his imagination, or his high opinion of his own piping. Shortly after arriving in the United States, he circulated a rumor that his elaborate set of pipes was presented to him by Queen Victoria, even though it was widely known that the set was made by Michael Egan, whose workshop was on Forty-Second Street in New York City.²⁶

The fear of being drafted during the Civil War was a source of anxiety for many professional pipers, especially in New York. Many used this as an excuse to escape to the West Coast and elsewhere. The Connolly brothers, William and John, both pipers from Milltown, County Galway, are an interesting case. They both worked as professional pipers in Liverpool in the 1850s but quickly tired of their Merseyside audience. Hoping for better tidings in the New World, they set sail for America. Their careers, however, were disrupted by the possibility of being drafted into the Union Army during Civil War. After arriving in America, John found work in New York, but then headed west to San Francisco. His brother William, who had played on the steam packets plying the St. Lawrence, had just bought property in Brooklyn when the war broke out. Fearing he might be drafted, he sold his property quickly and headed back to Liverpool.²⁷ He returned to the U.S. in 1867, and for the next thirty years he rambled across the country, making two trips to San Francisco before eventually settling in Pittsburgh.

Apart from pipers and road show musicians who passed through on the professional circuit (particularly after the completion of the transcontinental railroad), traditional musicians living in San Francisco also found avid audiences, usually among the more plebeian of their fellow countrymen. The distinction between the “modern” and the “traditional” in musical genres, and their respective class values, manifested itself quite early among the Irish community in San Francisco. This was evident in the variety of music played at balls and dinners organized by the myriad of Irish societies. In February 1869, a “Poor Celt” complained to the San Francisco *Morning Call* that the rich Irish had started to distance themselves from their less fortunate countrymen. The latter were obliged to make do with Kelly’s Brooklyn Hotel, while the rich Irish, with their high art predilections, retired to the more affluent Occidental Hotel to hold their annual ball.²⁸ This class separation also became evident in the kinds of music played. An advertisement in the *Catholic Guardian* on 8 February 1873 for

the Twentieth Anniversary Ball of the Sons of the Emerald Isle Benevolent Association at La Grande Armory Hall declared that Alpers' full quadrille band would furnish the music. John Blake, "the celebrated Irish piper," had also been secured for the occasion for those who did not feel inclined to "trip the light fantastic." Staid traditionalists could enjoy themselves by dancing reels and jigs at certain intervals during the evening "to their favorite tunes on the bagpipes," an instrument which was hardly conducive to the "modern" sound of quadrille bands in the 1870s.²⁹

Despite the social and musical fissures which were developing within the San Francisco Irish community in the 1870s, it is clear that traditional musicians were given ample opportunities to practice, perform, and compose. By the 1880s, traditional Irish dance tunes with a variety of California titles were already appearing in printed collections on the East Coast, most likely from the repertoires of anonymous folk composers living in the Bay Area. In 1882, the New England music collector William Bradbury Ryan and his mentor Elias Howe published *William Bradbury Ryan's Mammoth Collection* in Boston. This single volume was one of the most important repositories of nineteenth-century American music.³⁰ It contained music created by singers, dancers, instrumental musicians, and blackface minstrels, much of which would develop into American country music, blues, and ragtime by the early twentieth century. It also contained instructions for contemporary social dances like the lancers, gallops, and walk-arounds, many of which were cognates of traditional set dances taught by dancing masters in nineteenth-century Ireland. Among the California titles listed in Ryan's collection were reels like the "Golden Gate," "California," "Pacific Slope," and "Western Gem." He also published the "California Hornpipe," which bears no resemblance to the reel of the same name.

Other well-known California dance tunes were also collected during this fecund period. In 1868, the Chicago collector and flute player Francis O'Neill came through San Francisco after being shipwrecked in the Pacific. O'Neill was born near Trilibane, Bantry, County Cork in 1848 and had spent several years at sea before arriving in the Bay Area. Rejecting the bohemian lifestyle of the emerging metropolis, he found work as a shepherd in the San Joaquin Valley. In his memoirs, he relates how he learned the reel *Far from Home* and the well-known hornpipe *Off to California* from Irish sheep farmers in this isolated frontier milieu.³¹

As key brokers in an almanac of social entertainment, Irish musicians living in San Francisco were called upon to play at picnics, excursions, concerts, dinners, sporting events, benefits, political, and religious gatherings, as well as parades and festivals held by the Irish community. Fiddlers and flute players comprised the majority of the city's Irish music coterie, although, as in other parts of urban America, banjo and melodeon players were also making inroads into the Irish music scene.³² Cheap single-row melodeons, which were mass produced in Germany and sold on the East Coast, made their way across the country with the wagon trains and mining expeditions in the early 1850s.³³ By the 1880s, parlor pianos were also finding their way into Irish-American homes, particularly in the upper echelons of San Franciscan society.³⁴ Apart from playing at home or at private gatherings,

Irish musicians, who were not playing the professional circuit, had a variety of performance venues within the Irish community. Early Irish parishes like St. Francis of Assisi in North Beach, St. Patrick's on Mission Street, and Old St. Mary's in Chinatown (all inaugurated between 1849 and 1854) built parish halls and schools, many of which were used for concerts, dances, and meeting places for Irish benevolent societies.³⁵ Irish association halls, like the huge Irish-American Hall (capable of holding 1,000 people), the Hibernia Hall, the Knights of the Red Branch Hall

(KRB), as well as Platt's Hall, La Grande Armory Hall, and the Metropolitan Theater, all functioned as forums of Irish music and dance in the late 1800s.

Irish musicians were in high demand during the month of March, when their communities took to the parks, streets, theaters, and ballrooms of the city to celebrate St. Patrick's Day. The first celebration, which took place in 1851, was a low-key affair in comparison to the festivals and parades of later years.³⁶ Hayes Park, the city's pioneer public playground, was the venue for the gathering before street parades became the norm. While the Sons of the Emerald Isle organized the earliest parades, by the early 1860s the United Irish Societies (which included military companies and Fenians) became the primary organizers of the event. By 1866, the St. Patrick's Day parade had become a grandiose assembly of musicians, dancers, benevolent societies, and nationalist associations, as well as a conduit for vote-hunting politicians. While choirs gave singers an opportunity to participate in the parade, musicians performed in fife and drum bands attached to Irish military companies, most of which were based on the waterfront and in the Mission district.³⁷

Like temperance bands and Land League bands in Ireland, these bands played nationalist airs, hymns, and marching tunes. Most were trained by musically literate band masters. Hence, musicians (especially flute players) got an opportunity to learn the rudiments of written music. As Irish participation in the Fourth of July celebrations and Washington's Birthday parades expanded in the 1860s,



FIGURE 3-1



FIGURE 3-2 Irish Pipers' Club, San Francisco, early 1900s. Top Row (left to right): Owen Maguire, Patrick O'Malley, W. P. Dorsey. Middle Row: Joseph Kelly, George Mulraney, James Barry, William Maguire, Patrick Rattigan, Percy Lonergan. Front Row: Patrick Madden, Thomas Maguire, P. E. McCormack, William McMahan, James Smith. *Photo credit: Francis O'Neill, Irish Minstrels and Musicians (Chicago: Regan Printing House, 1913).*

these bands were given other occasions to display their skills. One witness claimed to have heard “Fenian Music” at the Fourth of July parade in 1875.³⁸ Two years later, an English observer noted that the most numerous contingent in the Fourth of July parade was “a band of the Ancient Order of Hibernians carrying a green flag with a harp on it and so large that the unfortunate standard-bearer could hardly stagger.”³⁹ In expressing loyalty to their new homeland, these bands inspired Irish audiences to manifest their own sense of nationalism vicariously through that of their American cohorts.

The Gaelic League: A New Forum for Irish Music Makers

By the 1890s, the population of San Francisco was equally divided between natives and foreign born.⁴⁰ Consequently, the Irish who chose to settle there experienced no traumatic transition. Socially confident and economically successful, they were fortunate to have arrived in an instant metropolis which was devoid of an established puritan elite.⁴¹ Their early arrival gave them an advantage over later immigrant groups, not least in their access to political and ecclesiastical resources. Their self-assurance was also fueled by an intense sense of Irish nationalism which had pervaded the Bay Area's Irish community, both socially and ideologically, since the 1850s.⁴²

Spearheaded by the Fenians, and later on by the Ancient Order of Hibernians and the Land League, Irish nationalism became a statewide phenomenon under the auspices of the Gaelic League during the early 1900s.⁴⁴ One of the principal architects of the League in the Bay Area was Peter Yorke, a Galway priest who had come to prominence as a fiery editor of the *Monitor*, the city's Catholic newspaper, in the 1890s.⁴⁵ Having stifled the xenophobia and anti-Catholicism of the American Protective Association and championed the rights of the city's labor unions by the early 1900s (to the chagrin of the Catholic hierarchy), Yorke devoted the last two decades of his life to promoting Irish

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2. Recitation in Irish Mr. Seamus Brennan
3. Selection of Ancient Irish Airs { Violin, Prof. Batt Seaulon
{ Piano, Miss M. Ronayne
(From the Famous Petrie Collection)
4. Song, "The Foggy Dew," Mr. M. Crowley
5. Dance—Irish Hornpipe { Mr. H. Tohill
(In Gaelic Costume) { Miss V. Roright
- Music—Irish Bagpipes, Mr. M. Healy
Violin, Mr. J. Tamsory
Piano, Mr. J. Egan
Piano, Fred P. W. Darcy
6. Song in Irish Miss Maire McMahon
7. Brief Oration on St. Enda's Schools and
Education in Ireland, Prof. J. J. O'Hegarty
8. Song, "Soldiers of Erin," Mr. M. Kennedy
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3. Waltz
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5. Fox Trot
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Padraic Pearse Branch, Polito Hall, Every Friday.

FIGURE 3-3 Entertainment and Dance Program of the Pearse Branch of the Gaelic League, 1919.⁴³

republicanism.⁴⁶ Between the launching of his Irish newspaper, the *Leader*, in 1902 and his death on Palm Sunday 1925, he advocated a myriad of political and cultural causes. Among these was the Gaelic League, whose aim of reviving the Irish language appealed especially to immigrants from the West of Ireland, for whom the unwritten price of admission to America had been linguistic unanimity. Yorke regarded the League as the true bedrock of Irish nationality. By 1902, the Bay Area had one the highest concentrations of Gaelic League branches in the United States.⁴⁷ Creating a caucus for language enthusiasts, musicians, and dancers, their activities included Irish language and history classes, *céilithe*, *feiseanna*, Irish fairs, and Gaelic Athletic Field Days.

Despite its ubiquitous luster, there was nothing particularly novel in the genre of Irish cultural activities organized by the Gaelic League in San Francisco. As early as 1885, the Philo Celtic Society was hosting Gaelic entertainment evenings on a monthly basis, while the Gaelic Literary Society had been conducting its meetings through Irish since 1887.⁴⁸ Similarly, the city teemed with Irish music and entertainment, of the popular vaudevillian type, as well as the more informal traditional genre. In broadening the scope of these activities, however, the League added an invigorating sense of cultural nationalism to Irish social life in the Bay Area. In so doing, it was astute enough to recruit its main lieutenants from among its precursor organizations, many of which continued to function in tandem with the new organization. One of the most prominent of these was Jeremiah Deasy, a flute player and Gaelic singer, who had come to prominence as an Irish National Convention activist in the city in the late 1870s. For the next thirty years, Deasy featured as a performer, lecturer, and organizer in a legion of Irish political, cultural, and parochial associations. By 1900, he was dean of the Gaelic School which, by February 1901, had three hundred students attending Irish language classes in San Francisco.

The crusade of cultural nationalism which was unleashed by the Gaelic League spawned several new organizations whose mandates were particularly geared towards music and dancing. The most prominent were the Irish Pipers' Club, the Gaelic Choral Society, and the Gaelic Dancing Club. All three enjoyed prominence until the earthquake of 1906 altered the social geography of the Irish community in the city. While the Irish Pipers' Club drew its inspiration from similar trends in cities like Chicago, Philadelphia, Boston, and New York, pipers, it seems, comprised the minority of its membership. A formal photograph of this auspicious group, dressed in their Sunday best, shows one lone uilleann piper, P. E. McCormack, surrounded by eight fiddlers and five flute players. The Gaelic Dancing Club, on the other hand, had several hundred members, mainly adults. As well as acting as a performance and learning environment for Irish language songs, the Gaelic Choral Society ran a calendar of dances, concerts, and banquets during the early 1900s.

As Gaelic League idealists set about reinventing Ireland's past, many of them attempted to create arbitrary cultural distinctions between "age old traditions" and "recent customs." In this myopic and absurd exercise, customs that were considered non-Irish were purged to reinforce the supposed authenticity of "pure" Irish traditions. This purging was particularly widespread within the contentious precincts of Irish dancing. By the early 1900s, the timeworn custom of set dancing was deemed foreign, while Munster step dances and newly developed *céilí* dances were elevated to the status of "pure" traditions.⁴⁹ Unlike their homologues in Dublin and London, who were busy contriving a canon of national dances, most musicians in San Francisco steered clear of hardcore nationalist prescriptions. Although some scribes took exception to dancers commercializing their art, the *Leader*, a cogent barometer of nationalist opinion, reflected the vibrant cosmopolitanism of its hinterland—at least where music and dance were concerned.⁵⁰ From the onset, it reported on an eclectic range of Irish

music, from Robert Allan's Iroquois Band, which played everything from "Happy Days in Dixie" to "Moore's Irish Melodies," to Lynch's Irish Orchestra, whose repertoire included "foreign" foxtrots, waltzes, quadrilles, and polka sets, as well as "pure" céilí dances like the "Walls of Limerick."

Irish Music Making During Prohibition and the Great Depression

With the onset of the Roarin' Twenties, musical tastes in San Francisco changed dramatically. While older establishments, like the KRB hall, continued to cater to recent immigrants and their offspring, young Irish Americans were being enticed by the music of Scott Joplin, Irving Berlin, and George Gershwin. Likewise, Irish-American flappers moved from South of Market to the Fillmore, where they discarded the "Stack of Barley" for the "Texas Tommy," the "Charleston," and the sensual moan of the saxophone.⁵¹ As San Francisco partied its way through Prohibition, jazz and Tin Pan Alley took center stage. Soon Hollywood would replace Tin Pan Alley to become "the most flourishing factory of popular mythology since the Greeks."⁵²

In an increasingly marginalized Irish music circuit in the 1920s and 1930s, professional fiddlers and dancing masters found patrons largely among their own immigrant communities. To keep pace with the social mores of the times, Irish music teachers now taught in grandiose studios, which put them on a par with piano teachers and voice trainers. By now, former quadrille bands had become Irish dance orchestras, while dance schools upgraded themselves to Irish dance academies. The Kerry fiddler, Batt Scanlan, gave classes in an elegant Mission District studio. A former student of the celebrated itinerant fiddler George Whelan, Scanlan was a major figure in the Irish entertainment scene, not least among immigrants from Cork and Kerry who were numerous throughout the Bay Area. Touting himself as the "leading exponent of Irish music in the West," he published *The Violin Made Easy and Attractive* in 1929. An instructional collection, it contained many of the Kerry slides and polkas he learned from Whelan in the 1890s.⁵³

The onset of the Great Depression in the 1930s had a traumatic impact on the social and cultural life of San Francisco. As dust bowl farmers, laborers, and railroad transients swelled the ranks of the city's unemployed, Irish immigration slowed dramatically.⁵⁴ Despite the impending hardship of their host environment, a trickle of musicians continued to arrive in the Bay Area, among them,

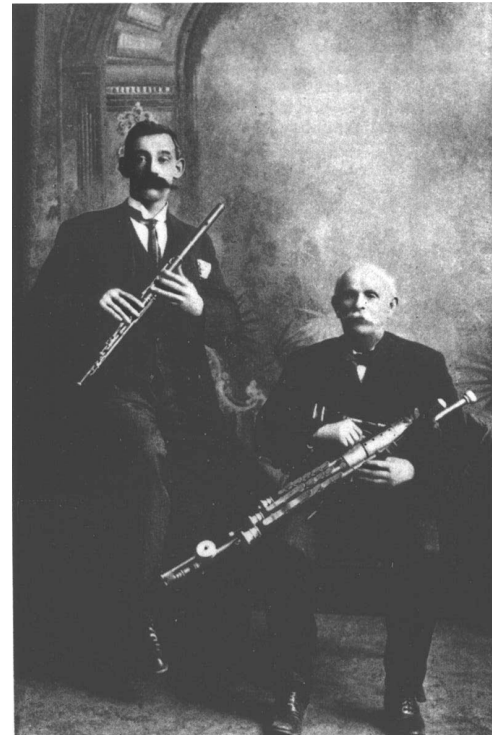


FIGURE 3-4 Irish Musicians George Leech (Cavan) and John Cummings (Galway), San Francisco, circa 1900.

Photo credit: Francis O'Neill, *Irish Minstrels and Musicians* (Chicago: Regan Printing House, 1913).

Cork fiddler, P. J. O'Regan, and Clare concertina player, Mary Gavin.⁵⁵ Unlike their predecessors who arrived a generation earlier, these new immigrants found a new matrix of popular culture which would compete with their traditional talents. By now, Hollywood talkies were dominating movie theaters, and commercial radio had found its way into many Bay Area homes.⁵⁶ For traditional musicians who wanted to maintain their art, the Irish community offered a roster of county picnics during the summer, as well as weekly dances in the Irish-American, the Hibernian, and the KRB halls. The latter was a hub of cultural activities, as well as a meeting place for newly arrived immigrants. During the week, it doubled as a schoolhouse for teachers like Bill Healy, who taught Irish dancing, and Séamus Moriarty, who taught Irish language classes. It also hosted meetings of the various Irish societies, including fife and drum and pipe bands. Music for weekend dances at the KRB during the 1930s and 1940s was provided by groups like the Irish Troubadours, as well as small ensembles of Cork and Kerry musicians. The Bay Area also had an enclave of Donegal musicians, among them fiddlers Joe Tammony (who corresponded with the collector Francis O'Neill), Dudley Byrne, and accordionist Bridie Erskine.⁵⁷

During the Great Depression, adverse poverty forced many Irish families in the Bay Area to entertain themselves at home. A staple of home entertainment on Sunday afternoons, during the winter months, was the "kitchen racket." These gatherings of families and neighbors in private houses were often the only forum that traditional musicians had during the depression years. Clare concertina player Mary Gavin played for kitchen rackets organized by local hurling and Gaelic football teams in San Francisco during the 1930s. Similarly, some families built extensions onto their homes and converted them into small dance halls to which friends and neighbors could come and dance. House dances were often held as benefits to support Irish families experiencing economic hardship. When the depression lifted and the United States became embroiled in World War II, the numbers of Irish traditional musicians arriving in the Bay Area declined further.⁵⁸ This musical deficit would continue until the post-war boom in American industry opened the floodgates of immigration again in the 1950s.

Irish Traditional Music During the Post-War Boom and Hippy Revolution

As America's economy went into overdrive after the war, emigration from Ireland—usually via the East Coast cities or Toronto—intensified, and Irish musicians again made their way to California.⁵⁹ The Kerry fiddler Seán O'Sullivan was among the new arrivals of the 1950s. His prominent cohorts included accordionists John Hickey, Con Dennehy, Tom Mylett, Mick Lucey and Tadhg Reidy, the latter a pupil of the celebrated fiddle master Pádraig O'Keeffe from Sliabh Luachra. Cork musicians Bill and Noirín Cotter also arrived during the same period. By now, Irish dance bands operating in San Francisco were assuming the identity of unionized orchestras, not least those under the batons of John Holland, Mike Scanlan, and Bridie Erskine. This offered them the same legal and economic protection as other professional ensembles within the musicians' union.⁶⁰

In contrast to their contemporaries on the East Coast however, the Irish in San Francisco failed to produce musical celebrities like Sligo fiddle masters Michael Coleman, James Morrison, or Paddy Killoran, whose commercial recordings enjoyed Promethean status among Irish immigrants in New York and Boston in the period 1925–1950. An attempt was made to redress the dearth of Irish music recording in San Francisco when the Knights of the Red Branch Club purchased recording equipment in the mid-1950s. Among the performers who benefited from this scheme was Donegal fiddler Danny O'Donnell. Born in Rosses in northwest Donegal during the first decade of the century, O'Donnell left Ireland in 1948. After living and playing music in New York for eight years, he moved to the Bay Area in 1956. In a city full of Cork and Kerry music makers, O'Donnell helped rejuvenate a small coterie of Donegal fiddlers, which included his countymen, Dudley Byrne from Kilcar and Joe Tammony from Fintown. During his stay on the West Coast, O'Donnell made some private acetate recordings on the machine which was purchased by the KRB. A surviving copy includes a suite of well-known reels, "Music in the Glen," "Farewell to Ireland," and "The Dawn." The first reel is "clearly in its preferred Donegal fiddle setting in the key of A," while the "The Dawn" shows O'Donnell's superb mastery of different fingering positions.⁶¹

By the 1950s, however, the geographic and social cohesion of older Irish communities in San Francisco had begun to disintegrate. The completion of the Golden Gate Bridge and the Bay Bridge in the late 1930s had dramatically reduced the geographic isolation of the city. The mammoth influx of wartime workers shortly afterwards created enormous housing shortages. These pressures increased further after the war when thousands of demobilized veterans returned home and wartime workers opted to remain in the Bay Area.⁶² In the resulting expansion of San Francisco and its hinterland, many Irish families, striving for upward social mobility, left older inner-city communities for the East Bay, the peninsula south of San Francisco, and the Outer Sunset district of San Francisco, thus sundering established centers of Irish settlement which had endured for nearly a century. While first- and second-generation Irish-American families were leaving the Mission District, newly arrived immigrants were still frequenting its Irish dance halls, especially the Éire Óg club at the Irish-American hall on Valencia Street and the KRB hall on Market Street. Set and *céilí* dancers met weekly at the KRB, until it ceded its place as a primary dance venue to the new United Irish Cultural Center on Sloat Boulevard in 1974.⁶³ Traditional dancers who wanted a more homely setting than the dance hall in the 1950s and 1960s could retire to Bryce's basement on Church Street, as well as to Mrs. Piggott's and Abbie Murphy's private homes, all of which contained rooms set aside for dancing. Like their precursor gatherings during the pre-war years, tea, coffee, and Irish soda bread were all part of the hospitality offered at these house dances. Despite their loyalty to traditional dancing during their early years in exile, however, many of these young immigrants were enticed by the burgeoning showband scene which was sweeping through Ireland and its emigrant communities in the United States and Britain by the late 1960s. Many flocked to John Whooley's Avalon Ballroom (later

operated by rock impresario Chet Helms) and Bill Fuller's Carousel Ballroom (afterwards Bill Graham's Fillmore West) to dance the *Hucklebuck* and other rock'n'roll steps to the music of bands like the Royal Showband, who were imported directly from Ireland to entertain Bay Area patrons.⁶⁴

The self-satisfied mood of the Eisenhower years was underpinned by an era of economic growth and prosperity throughout the Bay Area. Ironically, this climate of affluence witnessed the take-off of several artistic, intellectual, and political countercultures in San Francisco. This new movement was pioneered by the Beats, a nonconformist literary group dubbed "Beatniks" by Bay Area columnist Herb Caen after the launch of the Russian Sputnik satellite in 1957.⁶⁵ While the Beat experience was short lived, many of its multidirectional nonconformist influences were rekindled when the hippy phenomenon came to fruition in the city's Haight Ashbury district in the mid-1960s. Throughout the next decade, San Francisco would remain at the forefront of the countercultural movement, with its potent rock music energy, and the radical political movement that voiced the credos of anti-war and civil rights. Irish folk songs and, later on, traditional instrumental music had their own distinctive presence within this cultural milieu. As early as 1960, the Clancy Brothers and Tommy Makem were singing Irish ballads in clubs like the Hungry i, on the edge of Chinatown. Within a decade, many of their fans would cross to the other side of the Irish musical spectrum, to trade rebel songs for reels and jigs, and guitars for more traditional instruments.⁶⁶

It was into this eclectic milieu of economic prosperity, political radicalism, and cultural nonconformity that the celebrated Galway accordionist Joe Cooley arrived in 1965.⁶⁷ A veteran of Ireland's famed Tulla Céilí Band, Cooley was a native of Peterswell, County Galway. By the late 1940s, he was a highly respected and charismatic figure in the world of Irish traditional music. Unable to find work in Ireland, he immigrated to the United States in 1954. After spending time in New York and Boston, he moved to Chicago, where along with his flute-playing brother Séamus, he spent nearly ten years playing in various Irish dance bands before moving to the West Coast. His seven years spent playing and teaching in San Francisco proved seminal and inspirational. Three decades afterwards, his Bay Area pupils Patricia Kennelly, Milíosa Lundy, and John Lavel continue to sustain his unique East Galway style of accordion playing, with its dynamic rhythm, *draíocht*, and "lift" favored by Cooley's set dancing fans. From 1965 until his return home to Peterswell in 1972, Cooley played with accordionist Kevin Keegan from Eyrecourt, County Galway, flute player and fiddler Joe Murtagh from Miltown Malbay, County Clare, and flute player Jerry O'Loughlin from Liscannor, County Clare. This ensemble played at dances, renaissance fairs, and festivals as the Graineóg Céilí Band. As a traditional artist, Cooley attracted a vast cross section of music enthusiasts, many of whom had no connection with Ireland or with Irish America. His relaxed personality had enormous appeal to freedom-seeking hippies (among them, Grateful Dead legend Jerry Garcia) who formed part of California's countercultural mosaic in the late 1960s. Cooley's death left a deep void in San Francisco's Irish music community—a void from which it never quite recovered.⁶⁸

Five years after Joe Cooley's death, his friend Kevin Keegan died in San Francisco, leaving very little recorded evidence of what had been an illustrious career. His friends in Ireland recalled his rare appearances as *fleadhanna* in the 1960s and his remarkable repertoire of waltzes and dance tunes, while his admirers in America regretted his failure to record before his health failed. After Keegan's death, Irish music in the Bay Area passed to a large extent into the ranks of non-Irish performers, most of whom were immersed in the popular folk music revival of the 1960s and 1970s.⁶⁹ Despite their conspicuous enthusiasm and goodwill for the music, these new custodians had little exposure to the traditional storehouses of their former mentors. Neither did they share any discerning sense of cultural identity with established Irish communities in the Bay Area, within which traditional music had been rooted for generations. In the countercultural alchemy of the 1970s, Irish traditional music thrived in a kaleidoscope of alternative musical forms, ideologies, and lifestyles.⁷⁰

While Irish traditional music found new habitats and patrons, older Irish-American communities began to relinquish it throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Lured, perhaps, by the incessant appeal of American popular culture, bourgeois mores, and social respectability, as well as by a desire to distance themselves from hippy-based countercultures, older Irish-American communities clung instead to Irish step dancing, which, unlike instrumental music, enjoyed established institutional structures. With a myriad of artistic activities, *feiseanna* offered full-family entertainment, while dancing schools (whose ranks swelled during the baby-boom) instilled discipline, reinforced school-based learning, and strengthened neighborhood affiliations in Irish-American communities.⁷¹ This cultural polarization between Irish step dancing and instrumental music making was also impacted by changes in Irish emigration. With Ireland experiencing an economic boom in the 1970s, the influx of Irish immigrants (traditional musicians included) who came to San Francisco reached an all-time low. This shortfall was also evident in the number of older Irish pubs which turned to newer forms of entertainment to attract patrons. By the mid-1970s, older session houses, like McCarthy's Pub in the Mission District, which had hosted sessions by Joe Cooley and Joe Murtagh, had ceded their place to folk-oriented pubs like the Starry Plough in Berkeley and its sister premises, the Plough and Stars in San Francisco.⁷² Similarly, local radio also acted as an innovative conduit for non-Irish audiences. Shows like Peter Persoff's *The Cat in the Corner* and Pádraigín Magillicuddy's *Terrible Beauty*, broadcast on KPFA in the 1980s, focused popular attention on Irish traditional music and made it accessible to a younger generation of non-Irish patrons.⁷³

The New Irish and the Polycultural Mosaic of Modern San Francisco

For almost two decades, Irish traditional music has enjoyed a huge consumer audience throughout Northern California. This popularity owes as much to the accelerated commercial development of the music during that period as it does to the discerning and enthusiastic former hippies who shepherded it through the lacuna in Irish emigration between 1970 and 1990. This adoption of Irish

traditional music by non-Irish born performers extended its artistic matrix beyond the cultural topography of its original homeland and well beyond the perimeter of its former ethnic habitat in the Bay Area. While the influx of the new Irish during the 1990s has helped to replenish the quality and quantity of Irish traditional music played in San Francisco, it has also helped to re-anchor the music to an extended sense of time and place in Ireland. Similarly, these new arrivals have redressed the balance of patronage and performance between an aging hippy milieu, a New Age successor nexus, and an emergent coterie of Irish-born musicians now living in the Bay Area.

Since 1990, several arts associations in Northern California have shown an innovative propensity to develop Irish music commercially. The resulting commodification has spawned a series of lucrative Celtic festivals throughout the Bay Area, the most prominent convening annually in Sebastopol, Nevada City, San Francisco, and Campbell. Other organizations have focused on specific instruments. The Irish Pipers' Club was reactivated by Cork piper Denis Brooks in 1975. Directed by Dubliner Conal Ó Raghallaigh since 1995, the club meets frequently for reed-making workshops and piping classes. Sustained by the international standards set by Bay Area pipers Seán Folsom and Peter Healin, as well as an entourage of visiting pipers from Ireland, the Bay Area club co-sponsors the annual West Coast *Tionól na bPíobairí* (Pipers' Convention) with its sister club in Seattle.⁷⁴ While instrumental music was undergoing its own focused renaissance in the 1990s, Irish singers were forming singers' circles. During the 1990s, songwriters Michael and Shay Black, Vincy Keehan, Richard Morrison, Órla McGowan, Kenny Somerville, and Jimmy O'Meara added to the store of vernacular Irish ballads composed and sung in the Bay Area.⁷⁵

While special interest groups have focused on specific instrumental traditions, there were no organized attempts made to institutionalize the transmission of Irish traditional music in the Bay Area. Despite the existence of a chapter of *Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann* in San Francisco for several decades, there are no formal schools of Irish traditional music in the Bay Area. With the exception of musical families like the Dealys, Roches, Quilters, and Kennellys, who have passed their music on to their younger members, there are no educational opportunities for children to learn Irish traditional music. In sharp contrast to these pedagogical shortcomings, Irish step dancing and set dancing have thrived in the region. Some dance academies, like the Kennelly and Healy schools, have an illustrious history in San Francisco. Recent initiatives by the Whelan Academy, the Boyle School, and other troupes have expanded the frontiers of Irish dancing along the peninsula and into Silicon Valley. One of the seminal figures in the revival of set dancing in the United States is dance historian Larry Lynch, who has taught sets in the Bay Area for many years.⁷⁶

Twenty-five years after launching its maiden sessions with Kevin Keegan and Joe Murtagh, the Plough and Stars, owned by Newry man Seán Heaney, continues to act as the nerve center of Irish traditional music in the Bay Area. Critiquing its polycultural ambiance, Galway songwriter, Vincy Keehan observed,

It is a fairly incongruous scene by Irish standards. You might have an Irish priest, surrounded by a multicultural congregation, playing there on a Sunday night. The session could include a Vietnamese fiddler, a Japanese guitarist, a Jewish bodhrán player, a Chinese-American fiddle composer and an African-American bass player. After deciding on reels, the priest will tune his flute and lead the musicians into a few old standards from Clare and Galway. By the time the *Humors of Tulla* gives way to *The Bucks of Oranmore*, the band could be augmented by a former hippy, a clinical psychologist, or a software engineer from Connemara.⁷⁷

Eavesdropping on this multicultural concord is an oil painting of Kevin Keegan. Hanging aloof on a sidewall, this relic faces a photo gallery of illustrious artists who played at the Plough during the past twenty-five years. In this unintended act of detached veneration, the lanky figure of Keegan, drooped over his smoke-stained accordion, continues to preside over the artistic legacy which he and Joe Cooley bestowed on the Bay Area in the 1970s. Judging by the legions of aficionados, from hippies to New Age devotees, that they attracted to Irish traditional music, it is clear that San Francisco is distinguished by an ironic case of *How the "Non" Irish Saved Civilization* from the musical lethargy of its former ethnic trustees.

Notes

1. Robbie McMahon, "Spancilhill," in *The Humours of Clare: Music & Song from Clare FM* (Clare FM: Ennis, 1991). Geographic remoteness at the far end of the western frontier and a yearning for one's homeland are among the earliest motifs to crystallize in Irish traditional songs composed in Northern California. The ballad "Spancilhill" penned by the songsmith Michael Considine in the early 1870s is a classic case in point. Considine was born in Spancilhill in the drumlin country of east Clare in 1850. At the age of twenty, he immigrated to Boston, and shortly thereafter, crossed the continent to San Francisco, where he spent the rest of his life. Considine's western journey to California was typical of his Irish cohorts who moved to the Golden State in the latter half of the nineteenth century. First, they moved from the West of Ireland to the American East Coast, then, having sampled the WASP-pervaded mores of New England, came the final move to a more liberal and cosmopolitan California.
2. A short time after Considine arrived in the San Francisco Bay Area, he penned 'Spancilhill' for his five-year-old nephew John in Ireland. In it, Considine described a dream he had in faraway California. Emulating, in a more colloquial sense, the *aisling* poets of the Gaelic tradition, Considine stepped "on board a vision" and returned home to his native Clare on 23 June, the eve of the famous horse fair in Spancilhill. A comical litany of character sketches and townland recollections, his reverie has proved to be an enduring legacy ever since it entered the indigenous storehouse of traditional songs in the late nineteenth century.
3. Theodore H. Hittell, cited in Michel Le Bris, *La Fièvre de l'Or* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), 15.
4. Douglas Fetherling, *The Gold Crusades: A Social History of Gold Rushes, 1849–1929* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 28–32.
5. Gary F. Kurutz, "Popular Culture on the Golden Shore," in Kevin Starr and Richard J. Orsi (Eds.), *California History* 79, no. 2 (Summer 2000), 295.
6. Cited in Fetherling, *Gold Crusades*, 25. See also Richard A. Dwyer and Richard E. Lingensfelter (Eds.), *Songs of the Gold Rush* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1964).

6. See Basil Walsh, *Catherine Hayes: The Hibernian Prima Donna* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2000).
7. Patrick J. Dowling, *California: The Irish Dream* (San Francisco: Golden Gate Publishers, 1988), 311.
8. *Alta California*, 1 December 1852.
9. Dowling, *California: The Irish Dream*, 317–318.
10. Michel Le Bris, “La Reine de Mineurs: La Porte d’Or,” in Le Bris, *La Fièvre de l’Or*, 135.
11. Robert O’Brien, *This Is San Francisco: A Classic Portrait of the City* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1948), 145.
12. Le Bris, *La Fièvre de l’Or*, 136. See also Kevin Starr, *Americans and the Californian Dream 1850–1915* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), 303.
13. O’Brien, *This Is San Francisco*, 228.
14. Earl Pomeroy, *The Pacific Slope: A History of California, Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Utah, and Nevada* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), 153–154. See also George R. MacMinn, *The Theater of the Golden Era in California* (Caldwell, ID: Caxton Printers, 1941), 21–30; and Edmond M. Gagey, *The San Francisco Stage: A History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1950), 28–31, 52–53.
15. Charles A. Fracchia, *Fire & Gold: The San Francisco Story* (Encinitas, CA: Heritage Media, 1998), 49.
16. Van Wyck Brooks, *In the Times of Melville and Whitman* (New York: Dutton, 1947), cited in Fetherling, *Gold Crusades*, 35.
17. William Perkins, *Three Years in California: William Perkins’ Journal of Life at Sonora 1849–1852* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1964), cited in Malcolm E. Barker, *San Francisco Memoirs 1835–1851: Eyewitness Accounts of the Birth of a City* (San Francisco: Londonborn, 1994), 147–151. Perkins (1827–1893) was a Canadian who prospected for gold in the Southern Mines around Sonora, in Toulumne County.
18. Albert Benard de Russailh, *Last Adventure: San Francisco in 1851* (San Francisco: Westgate Press, 1931), translated from the original by Clarkson Crane, cited in Barker, *San Francisco Memoirs*, 254.
19. William H. A. Williams, “*Twas Only an Irishman’s Dream*”: *The Image of Ireland and the Irish in American Popular Song Lyrics, 1800–1920* (Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 158–172.
20. Barker, *San Francisco Memoirs*, 140.
21. Don Meade “The Life and Times of Muldoon, the Solid Man,” *New York Irish History* 11 (1997), 6–11, 41–48.
22. Williams, *Twas Only an Irishman’s Dream*, 158. See also Timothy Sarbaugh, “Exiles in Confidence: The Irish American Community of San Francisco, 1880–1920,” in Timothy J. Meagher (Ed.), *From Paddy to Studs: Irish American Communities in the Turn of the Century Era, 1880–1920* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1986), 161–179. Harrigan’s lyrics were so popular in San Francisco that East Coast place names were sometimes supplanted by locations more familiar to his Bay Area patrons. The final verse of “Muldoon: The Solid Man,” for example, was stripped of its New York locales to make way for San Quentin, Oakland, and ‘Frisco.
23. B. E. Lloyd, *Lights and Shades in San Francisco* (San Francisco: Bancroft Printers, 1876, reissued by Berkeley Hill Books, 1999), 153–154. One of the more humorous of the Maguire controversies unfolded when he decided to import a Bavarian-style passion play to San Francisco. Horrified by his lack of respect for Christian beliefs and rituals, Maguire incurred the wrath of both the Catholic and Protestant establishments. The city fathers eventually brought the affair to a head by arresting Jesus (played by James O’Neill, father of the playwright Eugene O’Neill) on opening night of the play.

24. Thomas J. Wrinn (Ed.), *Irish Societies in Early San Francisco: A Volunteer Directory* (WRC Historical Indexes, St. Paul, MN, 1997–1999), Wrindex II, CD-ROM. <http://www.wrindex.com>
25. Captain Francis O'Neill, *Irish Minstrels and Musicians: With Numerous Dissertations on Related Subjects* (Chicago: Regan Printing House, 1913), 222–223.
26. O'Neill, *Irish Minstrels and Musicians*, 222.
27. O'Neill, *Irish Minstrels and Musicians*, 226. While Connolly was dodging the draft in Liverpool, he made a trip back home to Ireland. When he reached Milltown, he was reported to have paid a young boy to carry his pipes through the village, just to flaunt his success in the New World. Modesty, obviously, was not his most conspicuous virtue.
28. R. A. Burchell, *The San Francisco Irish 1848–1880* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 113.
29. Cited in Burchell, *San Francisco Irish*, 113. By the 1860s, two types of bands were popular—the brass band, used mainly for outdoor marching, and the quadrille, or dance band. The latter usually consisted of string and wind instruments.
30. Patrick Sky (Ed.), *Ryan's Mammoth Collection: 1050 Reels and Jigs, Hornpipes, Clogs, Walk-Arounds, Essences, Strathspeys, Highland Flings and Contra Dances with Figures and How to Play Them, etc.* (Boston: William Bradbury Ryan and Elias Howe, 1882; reprint, Pacific, MO: Mel Bay, 1995), 14.
31. These two tunes, as well as others from his Bay Area correspondents, were included in O'Neill's *Music of Ireland* which was published in Chicago in 1903 (Captain Francis O'Neill [Ed.]. Chicago: Lyon & Healy, 1903). Ironically, this volume incorporated much of Ryan's original material—somewhat liberally. See Capt. Francis O'Neill, *Irish Folk Music: A Fascinating Hobby, with Some Accounts of Allied Subjects including O'Farrell's Treatise on the Irish or Union Pipes and Toubey's Hints to Amateur Pipers* (Chicago: Regan Printing House, 1910), 14–16.
32. Photographs of the San Francisco Irish Pipers' Club, taken around the late 1890s, show a remarkable paucity of local uilleann pipers, as opposed to a multitude of fiddlers and flute players. See O'Neill, *Irish Minstrels and Musicians*, 222–223.
33. Fetherling, *Gold Crusades*, 19.
34. In the ten years between 1840 and 1850, the number of pianos in the United States doubled. By 1850, there was one piano for every 2,777 Americans. See Fetherling, *Gold Crusades*, 19.
35. Burchell, *San Francisco Irish*, 96–115. Benefit events were particularly dependent upon the services of local musicians. For example, on 27 November 1869, the *Monitor* announced a benefit ball for “Mr. John O'Brien, an old member of the ‘Sons of the Emerald Isle,’ who has been under great affliction for the past three years, by the complete loss of his sight.” On 23 April 1870, the same paper suggested that an Irish Music Festival should be organized on behalf of the family of Martin O'Brennan who had fallen on hard times.
36. Burchell, *San Francisco Irish*, 111.
37. O'Brien, *This Is San Francisco*, 227. The McMahon Grenadier Guards (named for the first president of France and donning uniforms presented by Napoleon III) and the Montgomery Guards were founded as the first Irish military associations in the city in December 1859. See Burchell, *San Francisco Irish*, 97.
38. *Daily Morning Call*, 7 July 1870.
39. Rose Lambart Price, *The Two Americas: An Account of Sport and Travel with Notes on the Men and Manners in North and South America* (London, 1877), 206–207, cited in Burchell, *San Francisco Irish*, 114.

40. According to the Census of 1890, seventy-five percent of San Francisco's residents were foreign-born immigrants or the children of immigrants.
41. James P. Walsh, "The Irish in the New America, 'Way Out West,'" in David Noel Doyle and Owen Dudley Edwards (Eds.), *America and Ireland 1776–1976: The American Identity and the Irish Connection* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1980), 169.
42. With the exception of the military societies who arranged a busy schedule of military and civic balls, the Fenian Brotherhood and Sisterhood organizations in San Francisco organized a calendar of balls, picnics, excursions, and benefit fairs throughout the Bay Area. These were particularly frequent during the late 1860s and 1870s and were used as a means of raising money for Fenian prisoners held in British prisons. See Wrin (Ed.), *Irish Societies in Early San Francisco*.
43. I am indebted to Seán Prendiville of the Irish Film Society, Berkeley, for bringing this document to my attention.
44. Sarbaugh, "Exiles in Confidence," 167.
45. Yorke was appointed editor of the *Monitor* by Archbishop Riordan to counter an outburst of nativism by the American Protective Association. However, the latter's enthusiasm proved too much for his more moderate and reconciliatory superior, and Yorke eventually retired from his editorial post.
46. See James P. Walsh, *Ethnic Militancy: An Irish Catholic Prototype* (San Francisco: R and E Research Associates, 1972), and Joseph Brusher, *Consecrated Thunderbolt: A Life of Father Peter C. Yorke of San Francisco* (Hawthorne, NJ: Joseph F. Wagner, 1973), 71–73. Yorke was also a formidable fundraiser. On the occasion of Dr. Douglas Hyde's visit to San Francisco in 1906, Yorke raised an impressive twenty-two thousand dollars for the Gaelic League in Ireland. He subsequently raised forty thousand dollars for the Irish Relief Fund set up to aid the orphans and families of the prisoners of Easter Week 1916. When Eamon de Valera toured the U.S. in 1919 to establish the Irish External Loan (i.e., Sinn Féin Bonds), Yorke and the Friends of Irish Freedom raised a staggering six hundred thousand dollars for the bond drive. See Joe O'Neill, "Annual Tribute to the 'Lion of San Francisco,' Father Peter Yorke," *San Francisco Gael*, March 1999.
47. Wrin (Ed.), *Irish Societies in Early San Francisco*. The most prominent branches in the Bay Area included the Potrero, O'Curry, Fr. O'Growney, Pádraig Pearse, and Henebry. The McHale branch was located in Sacramento. Despite this profusion of branches, native speakers of Irish did not always rise to prominence within the Bay Area's Gaelic League hierarchy. At the highly contentious National Convention of the Gaelic League held in Philadelphia in October 1902, the Californian delegates were berated for their lack of knowledge of the language. Apparently, only one Californian delegate, a Mr. Murphy, was capable of contributing to the proceedings in the official language of the League. See the *Gael*, New York, November 1902.
48. Wrin (Ed.), *Irish Societies in Early San Francisco*. An Irish language school under the auspices of the Philo Celtic society was opened in the Hibernia Hall on 23 April 1904. The principal was Miss Anne Deasy.
49. Helen Brennan, "Reinventing Tradition: The Boundaries of Irish Dance," *History Ireland* 2, no. 2 (Summer 1994), 22–24. See also Frank Hall, "Your Mr. Joyce Is a Fine Man, But Have You Seen *Riverdance*?" *New Hibernian Review: Iris Éireannach Nua* 1, no. 1 (Fómhar/Autumn 1997), 134–142.
50. In its edition of 3 January 1914, the *Leader* lambasted the "buccaneers sailing under false Irish colors" who were commercially exploiting Irish dancing for their own profitable ends.
51. Tom Stoddard, *Jazz on the Barbary Coast* (Berkeley: Heyday/California Historical Society, 1982), 36–45.

52. Alistair Cooke, *Alistair Cooke's America* (New York: Knopf, 1974), 319.
53. Fintan Vallely (Ed.), *The Companion to Irish Traditional Music* (Cork, Ireland: Cork University Press, 1999), 330. Scanlan owed much of his popularity to the prevalence of Cork and Kerry emigrants in San Francisco. Slides and polkas were staples in his dance repertoire. Hence, his appeal to *Sliabh Luachra* set dancers living in the Bay Area.
54. In 1870, the Irish foreign-born of California constituted one in four of the state's foreign-born, one in ten of the total population. By 1920, they were one in seventeen and one in seventy-one. By 1940, they had fallen to a mere one in twenty-five and one in one hundred and ninety-eight. See Pomeroy, *Pacific Slope*, 285.
55. Interview with Mary Gavin's nieces at St. Paul's Parish Hall, March 1997. For interview with P. J. O'Regan, see Anne O'Brien Hickey, "Nights at the Knights," the *Irish Herald/New Irish Gael*, October 1999.
56. Radio began as a novelty, a promotional oddity used by newspapers and university scientists working in the nascent field of wireless communication. Much of this initial radio activity took place in the Bay Area. As early as 1906, a lecture given by twenty-year-old Francis McCarthy, at the Native Sons' Hall, was relayed via a telephone instrument to a receiving earphone at the back of the hall. By 1909, Dr. Charles Herrold, who ran an engineering school in San Jose, started to experiment with voice broadcasts. Within four years, he had established the world's longest radio signal (relayed 950 miles from the Bay Area with the help of an antenna on Mare Island). The Bay Area's longest established radio network, KPO, was set up in 1922, as was the San Francisco *Examiner's* KUO. KGO and KLX (which claimed to have "the world's largest transmitter") began to operate out of Oakland around the same time. Professional opportunities for Irish traditional musicians within the world of radio were sparse. By the 1930s, the entertainment schedule of commercial stations consisted of sponsored orchestral performances, radio plays, serials, comedy programs, and musical variety shows. See Jerry Flamm, "Good Life in Hard Times": *San Francisco in the '20s & '30s* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1978, reissued 1999), 34–48.
57. Caoimhín MacAoidh, "Policemen, Polkas and Puzzles," *Irish Music* 3, no. 7 (March 1998), 20.
58. Interview with fiddler Bill Dennehy, leader of the Irish Fiddlers' Club, San Francisco, March 1998.
59. Anne O'Brien Hickey, "Mylett's Californian Contribution," *Irish Herald/New Irish Gael*, July 2000.
60. See Anne O'Brien Hickey, *Ballroom of Romance: The KRB Revisited* (San Francisco: California Publishing, 2000), 39–41, 208–211.
61. Caoimhín MacAoidh, *Between the Jigs and the Reels* (Manorhamilton, Ireland: Drumlin Publications, 1994), 138.
62. Rand Richards, *Historic San Francisco: A Concise History and Guide* (San Francisco: Heritage House, 1991), 227.
63. Anne O'Brien Hickey, "Where Hallinan Met Her Knight," *Irish Herald/New Irish Gael*, April 2000. Recalling her first experience at the KRB hall in the mid-1950s, set dancer Theresa Hallinan from Inagh, County Clare, pointed out that "the music was good and the dancing was wild." After the relocation of the United Irish Societies to their new center at 45th Avenue and Sloat Boulevard, lounge bar trios and quartets playing Irish "country and western" music, interspersed with occasional *céilí* selections (similar to that played in pubs and lounge bars all over Ireland during the 1970s), became the ubiquitous formula of entertainment.
64. Cork man John Whooley was a major promoter of Irish culture in the Bay Area. For over thirty years, he ran the monthly *Irish Herald*, which continues (under new ownership) to serve the Irish community

- throughout Northern California. See Séamus Breatnac, “The Difference Remains,” in James P. Walsh (Ed.), *The San Francisco Irish, 1850–1976* (San Francisco: Irish Literary and Historical Society, 1978), 150. Kerry entrepreneur Bill Fuller owned Irish dance halls in New York and San Francisco during the 1960s and 1970s and was responsible for creating touring opportunities for a host of Irish showbands and solo artists. See Rebecca Miller, “Irish Traditional and Popular Music in New York City: Identity and Change, 1930–1975,” in Ronald H. Bayor and Timothy J. Meagher (Eds.), *The New York Irish* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 492–500.
65. Richards, *Historic San Francisco*, 229–230.
 66. Nancy J. Peters, “The Beat Generation and San Francisco’s Culture of Dissent,” in James Brook, Chris Carlsson, and Nancy J. Peters (Eds.), *Reclaiming San Francisco History, Politics, Culture* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1998), 199.
 67. Gearóid Ó hAllmhuráin, “Irish Traditional Music on the West Coast,” in Vallely (Ed.), *Companion to Irish Traditional Music*, 421.
 68. Interview with fiddler and folk composer Joe Murtagh, South San Francisco, September 1995.
 69. Conversation with fiddler Marty Somberg, Detroit, October, 1998 and fiddler Kevin Carr, Palo Alto, June 1998.
 70. Conversations with fiddler Bruce Culbertson and pianist Barbara Carr, Palo Alto, June 1998.
 71. Interview with Irish dance teacher and accordionist Patricia Kennelly, Sacramento, September 1998.
 72. Among the performers who hosted sessions in these new venues in the period 1975–1995 were Marty Somberg (accordion), Peter Persoff (concertina), Max Parsley (banjo), John Sherry (fiddle), Marla Fibish (mandolin), Peter Healin (pipes), Bill Dennehy (fiddle), Scott Renfort (fiddle), Paul Chaffee (fiddle), Jack Gilder (concertina), and Jeremy Kammerrer (accordion). Most of them had no ethnic connection whatever with Ireland.
 73. Interview with set dancer Janice Reynolds and concertina player Jack Gilder, San Francisco, May 2000.
 74. Interview with uilleann piper, Conal Ó Raghallaigh, San Francisco, May 1999. Seán Folsom plays over thirty different sets of pipes from various world music traditions. He performs at festivals and piping events all over North America, Europe, and New Zealand. His recordings include *Holywell* (1985) with the Celtic group “Sheila na Gig,” *Beautiful Vision* (1982) with rock’n’roll celebrity Van Morrison, and the film soundtrack for *Northern Lights*, winner of the Best New Film Prize at the Cannes Film Festival in 1979. Folsom was attracted to the uilleann pipes after hearing Irish pipers Paddy O’Neill and Dan Sullivan perform in San Francisco in the early 1970s. See Gian Luca Ferme, “Intervista con Seán Folsom,” *Utricolus* 5, no. 2 (18, Aprile/Giugno, 1996), 6–21.
 75. Interview with singers, Jimmy O’Meara, Kenny Somerville and Richard Morrison, San Francisco, January 2000.
 76. His research on the history of set dancing in Ireland has placed Larry Lynch at the forefront of the set dance revival which has impacted Irish communities on both sides of the Atlantic since the late 1980s. He has also been on the dance faculty of the Willie Clancy Summer School, Ireland’s premier traditional music academy, for several years.
 77. Interview with Galway singer, songwriter, and guitarist, Vincy Keegan, San Francisco, July 2000.



Women in Irish Dance in San Francisco, 1900–1935

LYNN LUBAMERSKY



Irish step dance is an ancient art form revived in its modern incarnation by the Gaelic League in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Many of the features of Irish dancing as it is done today are characteristics shared by “Gaelic dancing,” as it was called in San Francisco in the period from 1900 to 1935. First, in contrast to the “purity” imposed by the Gaelic League in Ireland and Britain, “Gaelic dance” as practiced in San Francisco drew on the city’s rich minstrel and vaudeville tradition as a form of popular entertainment that crossed cultural boundaries of time and space. Second, many of the largest schools in San Francisco during the early decades of the twentieth century were run by women teachers, each with hundreds of students, mainly girls. Other studies have concluded that male “dance masters” and teachers dominated Irish dancing before 1935, but this was not the case in San Francisco where women played a major role in the development and promotion of Irish dance.¹ Third, Gaelic dancing teachers became notable figures in the entertainment and cultural scene of San Francisco where there were opportunities for dancers to make a living through dance both as teachers and as professional entertainers. Gaelic dancing teachers in San Francisco built careers that shifted in tune with the trends of the time: becoming popular first as part of vaudeville minstrel show acts, next appearing in children’s song-and-dance acts, later in the chorus line, then in motion pictures, and with the invention of television even to become acclaimed television stars. Just as the form of popular entertainment changed over time, so surely did the dance itself, but one constant throughout was that Gaelic dancing teachers viewed the dance as popular entertainment.

One of the figures promoting the Gaelic Revival in San Francisco was the charismatic Father Peter C. Yorke. While Father Yorke’s political role as an activist on behalf of Irish working people has been well documented, his cultural role has been discussed less.² Yorke supported Irish culture as editor of the weekly newspaper, the *Leader*, from 1902 until his death in 1925. He understood the power of journalism and used it to defend the interests of the Irish and Catholic communities of San

Francisco. Yorke was not just an able editor, but also an excellent organizer, founding clubs like the Young Men's and Young Ladies' Institutes of California and the Catholic Literary and Social Society.³

Far from promoting Gaelic dancing, in some instances the Roman Catholic clergy took a stand against dance, condemning it from their pulpits and even attempting to suppress it on the grounds that it was unruly behavior.⁴ Yorke took the opposite view. As an important member of the Gaelic League, he wholeheartedly supported and promoted Gaelic Dance in San Francisco. He advertised the activities of the Gaelic Dancing Club as well as all the Gaelic League events in the pages of the *Leader*, which form the main source of information about Gaelic dancing in San Francisco in the first decades of the twentieth century.

Yorke began the *Leader* as the official paper of an Irish fair held at the Mechanics' Pavilion from 1 May to 12 June 1902, to raise money for St. Peter's Church and to promote modern Gaelic culture. To commemorate the opening of the fair, Yorke wrote, "In the Irish fair I have given the Irish people of birth and descent something that would instruct them of their history, that would inform them of their present, that would enhearten them to do the very best that is in them to make their mark on this glorious commonwealth of California."⁵ One of the main intentions of the fair was to educate San Franciscans about the Gaelic Revival. Yorke wrote that the Irish fair was not a church bazaar, but a Gaelic festival that "aims at presenting to the people of San Francisco a clear perspective of the revival which has brought new hopes and almost forgotten glories of . . . history. . . . All this has been accomplished by the Gaelic League, which encircles the earth and is in the process of working out the destiny of the race."⁶

The fair linked the Gaelic past and present by being a living museum of Irish culture, constructing a miniature Ireland in San Francisco where people could view small-scale replicas of architectural landmarks from the medieval to the modern period from all the counties of Ireland. It was designed to show San Franciscans that "there remains something more in Ireland than thatched roofs and mud walls."⁷

People gathered in the reconstructed Ireland and experienced Gaelic culture through dance, gathering at "a cross roads where the young folk [could] gather and dance the old home dances, so good to see."⁸ The daily Gaelic dancing at the reconstructed crossroads, where tradition has it that rural Irish would gather to meet and to entertain themselves, brought to San Francisco part of Irish life and culture. The fair also included Gaelic dancing exhibitions by pupils of dancing schools. There were three dancing schools listed as appearing at the 1902 fair: Miss Campbell's school with twelve children dancing, Miss Bessie Allen's school with twelve children dancing, and Professor O'Brien's Irish Dancing Academy.⁹ But by far the largest number of Gaelic dancers at the fair were adults, dancing along with the Gaelic Dancing Club. On 9 May 1902, "400 couples attended the fair to appear in a grand march of the Gaelic Dancing Club."¹⁰ Just a week later, the Gaelic Dancing Club, led by its President Joseph P. Kelleher, and his business partner John J. O'Connor, teamed up with "Bessie Allen and Pearl Hickman, along with other professionals [to lead the club] in four-hand and eight-hand reels, jig and hornpipe dancing, as well as dancing the high caul-cap," with nine thousand spec-

tators attending the fair for the performance.¹¹ The Irish fair showed the strength of the Gaelic Revival and the popularity of Gaelic dancing in San Francisco in 1902.

Irish dancing, like many forms of national commemoration, is an invented tradition, a modern cultural invention that is presented by a state or an elite as a cultural ritual or practice that promotes a sense of national solidarity and national identity, to instill pride in the citizen who participates in or views it, and to make the individual feel that he or she is a part of the larger national community.¹² There is no better example to illustrate this invention of tradition than that of the issue of Irish national dress and the development of a Gaelic dancing costume.

The Irish dancing costume evolved out of the desire of Gaelic Revivalists at the turn of the twentieth century to wear a distinctive national dress. Part of English colonial oppression had been to erase the memory of Irish cultural distinctiveness, including the national dress. As far back as 1536, Henry VIII decreed that Irish dress styles should be banned and that “no man or man child should wear no mantle to the streets but cloths or gowns shaped after the English fashion.”¹³ Gaelic revivalists wanted to reclaim the distinctive national dress that had been lost to memory. Scholars from the early nineteenth century on gained some knowledge of Irish costume from archaeology and antiquarian research. They found the *léine*, a sleeveless, ankle-length, and often saffron-colored tunic, which was worn in Ireland by both noblemen and noblewomen from early Celtic times to the sixteenth century.¹⁴ So by the twentieth century there was knowledge of an authentic model that could have been copied had Gaelic Revivalists been interested in adhering to strict tradition and wearing the clothing that their ancestors had worn prior to English conquest. But there is little evidence that their intent was to copy costumes of the past. Instead, they intended to invent tradition and to create a modern Gaelic costume that would draw upon tradition but fit modern needs. It would have been cumbersome and impractical for dancers to try to dance Gaelic dance steps in a costume like the *léine*. A modern Gaelic dancing costume needed to be designed.

In the period from 1890 to 1910, there was nothing that was identifiable as a Gaelic dancing costume. Photographs from the period show that dancers generally wore the contemporary clothing that was fashionable in that period, either their everyday clothing or their “Sunday best.” But after the Gaelic League’s *Oireachtas*, or Irish regional cultural festival held in Dublin in 1911, a more uniform Gaelic dancing costume began to emerge. The Dun Emer Guild and Cuala Industries of Ireland constructed models of the Irish national costume that were purchased by both men and women and worn to the *Oireachtas*. By buying this Gaelic costume, one could be sure that one was wearing what had been deemed to be an authentic national costume, while also supporting the Irish textile industry. Some of the men bought kilts, as that was seen as an appropriate national dress for men.¹⁵

The move toward instituting a standard national costume made its way to San Francisco at the same time that this process was taking place in Ireland. The first time that a “regulation” Irish dancing costume is mentioned is March 1911, at the St. Patrick’s Day parade, when “one hundred pupils

of Miss Frances Dougherty appeared in regulation Irish dresses.”¹⁶ After this, Irish dancers in costume are mentioned regularly, but it seems evident that adults did not embrace the new Gaelic costume to the dismay of the Gaelic Leaguers. The O’Growney branch of the Gaelic League, the largest and most active in San Francisco, held a celebration in 1917, and they announced, “The Irish costume is the chief topic of interest in O’Growney circles at present.” “In future,” they continued, “the usual display of green dresses will look ludicrous at our Irish gatherings in San Francisco,” and strongly urged people to place an order for the “true Irish costume” to wear at Irish gatherings.¹⁷ But even a year later, in 1918 at the fifth annual Gaelic *feis* (festival), adults were still allowed to compete in Gaelic dancing without Gaelic costume, while children could participate only in Gaelic costume.¹⁸ The Gaelic costume seems to have been worn by children and by professionals dancing in exhibition or competition and not by most adults.

Gaelic dance teachers like Frances Dougherty had a dual role as cultural educators and as entertainment promoters. One common thread running through the careers of all the main Gaelic dance teachers in San Francisco from 1900 to 1935 is that they viewed Irish dance as entertainment, and they viewed themselves as entertainers. In all cases, those who taught Irish dance also taught other forms of dance, whether that be tap, so-called “fancy” dancing, or other “specialty” dances. In most cases, they proved themselves to be successful professional entertainers whether in vaudeville, where Gracie Allen and Frances Dougherty gained acclaim through comedy, or being recognized as excellent show producers as with Peggy and Helen O’Neill.¹⁹ In George Burns’s biography of Gracie Allen, he wrote that Gracie did not love Irish dancing as her sisters did, but “she learned [it] because she thought it would help her get into show business. She was determined to get into show business . . . [and] practically every day she would go downtown and stroll from theater to theater,” to the Alcazar, the Rialto, and the Orpheum theaters, dreaming of the day her picture would be posted out front.²⁰ For Gaelic dancers in the first decades of the twentieth century, dance was one way to get into show business because it was popular entertainment.

The peak of Irish dancing’s popularity in the early twentieth century coincided with the height of vaudeville and the growth of a mass culture industry, which began at the turn of the century. By the 1920s, theaters had become organized into national chains, replacing family businesses, mass markets had superseded local markets, and the new mass media—magazines, motion pictures, and radio—targeted a large and diverse audience.²¹ By 1910, two of the largest vaudeville circuits in the country, the Keith circuit and the Orpheum circuit, the most successful on the West Coast, merged to form a nationwide vaudeville circuit dedicated to providing respectable and wholesome entertainment to a mass audience.²² Gaelic dancing fit the bill for the vaudeville circuit, as did other Irish-American song-and-dance and comedy acts.

Gaelic dancing must have been popular, since it was a part of vaudeville acts all over the country, but it was especially popular in San Francisco. Possibly one reason for the popularity of Gaelic danc-

ing in vaudeville acts in San Francisco was the strength of the Irish community. The 1890 Census reveals that in San Francisco three out of every four residents were immigrants or the children of immigrants, and the largest group of eligible voters were Irish Catholics. Some seventy-six percent of San Franciscans identified themselves as Catholics.²³

However, Gaelic dancing was popular not just among Irish-American San Franciscans. In a charity benefit for the San Francisco Maternity and Children's Hospital in 1909, dances of many nations including Ireland were performed, with the cream of San Francisco society attending: Mr. and Mrs. Sutro, Mr. and Mrs. deYoung, Mrs. Phoebe Hearst, and many others. They held a contest to determine which was the most popular dance, and the Gaelic dancing scored high, along with "Marsovian, Spanish, and Scotch" dance.²⁴ At the time of its peak popularity in the early twentieth century, Gaelic dancing was grouped with other exotic dances, including dances of unknown parts of the world, like the misnamed "Marsovian dance."²⁵

By 1914, the popularity of Gaelic dance as mass entertainment had begun to irritate traditionalist members of the Gaelic League in San Francisco, prompting a reaction against what they perceived as the commercialization of the dance. The *Leader's* writers lamented what they saw as exploitation of things Gaelic by "imposters" who wanted to profit from exploiting Irish heritage:

For many months past San Francisco has been exploited by buccaneers sailing under false Irish colors. Legitimate organizations sadly saw their best laid plans miserable failures, while enterprises of the imposters apparently flourished. . . . The day of the commercial Irishman is over. A new spirit, or rather an awakening of the old Irish spirit, is abroad in the land. One of the first manifestations of this truly Irish sentiment will be the grand *Feis Ceoil* (Gaelic music festival) to be given by the Gaelic League. . . . The great affair will be conducted along truly Gaelic lines. There will be no "politics," no "business," or other distracting influences to interfere with the undertaking.²⁶

Even in 1914, it seems apparent that some people were making a business out of the new popularity of Irish culture. Others might have sought political gain out of association with the Irish, and the Gaelic League railed against the "commercial Irishman."

One Gaelic dancer who profited from the popularity of Gaelic dance was John J. O'Connor. O'Connor was paid to endorse a product, a rheumatism cure, in the same way that popular athletes now endorse cereals or sporting goods. O'Connor, a tailor by trade, was once a champion Gaelic Dancer, but by 1914 he had developed rheumatism. In the ad he is quoted as saying, "My career as a dancer threatened to be terminated recently, but thanks to Akoz I can continue to entertain my friends and go on with my business."²⁷ Despite the disapproval of the Gaelic League, it seems likely that O'Connor and others continued to profit from their association with Gaelic dancing and its popularity. Gaelic dancing also offered women, as well as men, the opportunity to make a living.

One post-Famine pattern in Ireland was that of late marriage, with only 5.3 percent of women marrying under the age of 21 by 1911, and there was a striking number of Irish who never married at

all.²⁸ In the decades following the Famine, Irish women immigrants to the United States tended to outnumber Irish men.²⁹ There were many single Irish-American women who relied upon only themselves for financial support. Irish-American families sometimes found themselves “wracked by high levels of male desertion in the last decades of the nineteenth century.”³⁰ Irish men, like the father of the playwright Eugene O’Neill, who could not adjust to immigrant life simply picked up and left their wives and children to fend for themselves, often leaving their families to the charity of the Sisters of Mercy, the Little Sisters’ Infant Shelter, and other organizations. The fact that many Irish-American women needed to support themselves—either women who would delay or forego marriage or those who were abandoned by their husbands—meant that they looked for attractive and financially rewarding ways to make a living. Although many “chose” domestic service, the enterprising women who taught and professionally danced saw Irish dancing as a career, a chance for them to break into show business, and as an opportunity for them to make a good living as performers and teachers.

Probably the most famous Irish dancer in San Francisco history was the great comedienne Gracie Allen of the “Burns and Allen” team, who got her start in show business as a dancer in her father’s Irish minstrel song and dance act. She made her stage debut at the age of three and a half.³¹ The youngest of four daughters, Gracie Allen was born 26 July 1895.³² The family’s dancing school, run out of their home, was well-established by 1902 with classes given by her father and three older sisters, Pearl, Hazel, and Bessie.³³ The Allen sisters were trained to dance by their father, George Allen, so it is probable that their dancing crossed cultural boundaries and was a blend of both Gaelic dancing and tap dancing. As a minstrel man, Allen’s stock-in-trade would have been tap dancing. Allen was one of a long line of Irishmen making his living as a minstrel, since from 1840 to 1890 minstrel shows were the most popular form of American entertainment, featuring song and dance, jokes, and music. “White minstrel men (usually Irish) blackened their faces with burnt cork and created stage performances based on their interpretation of plantation slaves and their music and dance forms,” including tap dance.³⁴

By 1911, the dancing academy was run by the Allen sisters exclusively, and they had over one hundred pupils in ballet, in Gaelic dancing, and in other “different national dances.”³⁵ Gracie Allen’s father had left the family when she was about five years old, and possibly as a result of that abandonment, the sisters grew more serious about their dancing act and eventually took their show on the road.³⁶ On 18 May 1912, the *Leader*’s headline read, “ALLEN SISTERS GO EAST.”

The Allen Sisters . . . have started for New York from where they will tour the Eastern States, giving exhibitions of the Irish jigs, reels, and hornpipes. The Misses Hazel, Grace and Pearl Allen will join their sister Bessie in New York, and in partnership with her they will make a completed tour of the East, visiting the centers where the Irish people are most numerous, and where it is certain that they will get a more than cordial welcome. . . . They are so well known and appreciated all along the Pacific Coast for their graceful exhibitions that it is a foregone conclusion that in the crowded cities of the East they will meet with like appreciation and success.³⁷

Bessie lived in New York in 1912, the first of the Allen sisters to work in vaudeville as a singer and dancer. “When Gracie was six years old she went to see Bessie perform, and Bessie brought her out on stage . . . [to do] an Irish jig and a sailor’s hornpipe. Twenty years later Shirley Temple stole Gracie’s act.”³⁸

The Allens were back in San Francisco teaching dancing classes once again by 1914, but the experience of touring whet their appetite for further touring.³⁹ George Burns recalled, “All of the Allen sisters were talented Irish and Scottish dancers. At the holiday picnics, they used to win all the prizes. Bessie, in fact, was so good that Sid Grauman used to tell people, ‘If you want to learn tap, you have to go to Bessie Allen.’” And Hazel could dance and play the piano at the same time. Gracie never believed she was as good a dancer as her sisters, but she was good enough to hold her own in a specialty number opposite Fred Astaire in (the 1937 film) *Damsel in Distress*.⁴⁰

As soon as Gracie graduated from the Star of the Sea School, she began touring in a singing and dancing act called The Four Colleens, an act that broke up when she was still a teenager.⁴¹ Later, she and her sisters teamed up again and went on tour in an Irish act called “Larry Reilly and Company,” but by 1918, Bessie had returned to San Francisco to get married (to Edward Myers) and Hazel had gone to help Pearl with the dancing school.⁴² Gracie quit the act and teamed up with George Burns in 1922, and she went on to become “the smartest dumbbell in the history of show business,” until her death in 1964.⁴³

The Allen sisters continued their dancing school in the basement of their home at 668 Fourth Avenue in San Francisco, and there Pearl Allen and Hazel Allen Boydston taught weekly Irish step dancing and tap dancing in classes of about ten to twelve Star of the Sea students.⁴⁴

Frances Dougherty was well known in San Francisco as a popular dancer and a Gaelic dancing teacher by 1908.⁴⁵ In 1909, she was considered to be the best Gaelic dancer in the city and “second to none on the Pacific Coast.”⁴⁶ Just like the Allens, Dougherty was considered an expert dancer in general and not just an expert Gaelic dancer. She located her Gaelic and Fancy Dancing Academy in Puckett’s Cotillion Hall on Church Street, where she gave lessons to large numbers of children every Saturday afternoon. On Wednesday afternoons, she instructed the children of the Potrero on Fifteenth Street South.⁴⁷

Frances Dougherty was also popular among the Bay Area Irish because she produced benefit shows, including minstrel shows to benefit a worthy cause, like the St. Teresa’s social club, and would even go outside the city to Suisun to raise funds for St. Alphonsus’ Church.⁴⁸ The Suisun benefit,



FIGURE 3-5 Gracie Allen at the age of twelve posed in her Spanish costume. Photo credit: University of Southern California Cinema-Television Library and Archives of Performing Arts (with the kind permission of Ronald Burns).

produced and stage managed by Frances Dougherty, gives a glimpse into what would go into a program of the “excellent and high-class” entertainment that was popular among the Bay Area Irish in 1909. The star attraction was a child dancer known as “Little Josephine Lenhardt” who “captivated the large audience by her clever dancing specialties and songs.” Another Dougherty pupil and child dancer, “Little Irene Hannan,” danced a specialty dance. Frances Dougherty herself sang, followed by a “coon monologue”⁴⁹ performed by Elmer Gallagher. The program also included an “Indian sketch” and a cakewalk. All the children taking part were Dougherty’s pupils.⁵⁰ Many elements in this program would be found in a typical vaudeville: singing and dancing, the “coon monologue,” and comedy sketches. By comparing this program with the standard vaudeville program of the day, one can see that the tastes or preferences of Irish Americans in the San Francisco Bay Area were the same as those of others in the community, so that these shows might well have attracted a broader following than just an Irish-American one.

By 1911, Dougherty had one hundred pupils dancing in her school, and they turned out in force wearing regulation Gaelic dancing dresses at the St. Patrick’s Day parade. Frances Dougherty cut an impressive figure in the parade as she “rode a splendid charger and directed her pupils with the confidence and ability of an expert drill master.”⁵¹

Frances Dougherty held an annual carnival and social which included a show of her pupils at the Scottish Rite Auditorium at Van Ness and Sutter.⁵² The program at these exhibitions was eclectic since her pupils were skilled not only in Gaelic dances, but also in “Scotch,” Spanish, and specialty dances.⁵³ Frances Dougherty also exhibited her pupils’ talents in “grand vaudeville entertainment” promising her fans “novelties never before witnessed in California.” The *Leader* urged readers in 1912 to support Frances Dougherty’s show in appreciation for her numerous acts of kindness in the past.⁵⁴ By 1915, the message was even more explicit—that “Miss Dougherty has always been a willing contributor to Catholic and Irish entertainments, and it is expected that her many friends will unite in making this affair one of the biggest social and financial affairs of 1915.”⁵⁵

Frances Dougherty’s talent and generosity were rewarded by the Irish-American community. The *Leader* periodically held a “popular” contest similar to ones held in mass-circulation dailies in which readers were urged to vote for the most popular figure in the community, and that person would win a new automobile at the end of the contest. The contest would run for many weeks, and the *Leader* would post weekly results. In 1912, Frances Dougherty was among the top vote-getters in the popularity contest, which showed her stature in the community.⁵⁶

In June 1918, the *Leader*’s headline proclaimed a “Rousing Welcome for Clever Girl” Frances Dougherty, who had been given a contract by the Orpheum vaudeville circuit, and “since her entry into the greatest vaudeville circuit in all the world, Miss Dougherty has made good as a ‘dainty vaudevillian.’”⁵⁷ Frances Dougherty was welcomed back to her hometown, San Francisco, where “she received a wonderful ovation on Sunday. . . . There were flowers galore and cheers till the roof of the

famous theatre all but rattled. Miss Dougherty was compelled to come out and make a speech of appreciation, which she did in her own cute, inimitable way.”⁵⁸

Frances Dougherty packed the Orpheum with her fans among the Knights of Columbus, the Ancient Order of Hibernians, and the AOH Ladies’ Auxiliary, so that hundreds came to wish her well on her professional debut in San Francisco. She was praised not only by the *Leader*, but received a favorable write-up by the *San Francisco Chronicle* theater critic, Walter Anthony, who wrote, “Frances Dougherty provided fifteen minutes of pleasant entertainment with songs and dances. Miss Dougherty is a graceful, pretty dancer, and her forte is refined, wholesome humor, the product of an engaging personality. Her song addressed to President Wilson in behalf of Ireland, attracted much applause, and I do not doubt if it were sung by Miss Dougherty to our chief executive he would heed the petition. The singer, though slightly hoarse with a bad cold, managed easily to indicate rare intelligence in the reading of her song lines. Her offering was warmly received.”⁵⁹ Frances Dougherty showed herself to be a spokeswoman for the Irish nationalist cause, and here she used her time in the public eye to put forth the message of Irish nationalism.

Frances Dougherty’s successes in San Francisco continued for many years, with notices of her appearance at the Hippodrome Theater in 1922 and her triumphant return to the city in 1927.⁶⁰ It is not clear whether she re-established her career as a dance teacher after her return, but in 1934 she married Francis J. McCluskey at the Church of the Holy Names, on Thirty-Eighth Avenue, and the two established a home together in San Francisco.⁶¹

Frances Dougherty, like the Allen sisters, established herself in show business through Gaelic and other forms of dance. She supported herself as a professional and married late. She earned respect and popularity in the Irish-American community by doing charity events for the Catholic Church and promoting the nationalist cause on stage. Her act was deemed wholesome, middle-class fare, so it fit the bill for the new vaudeville chains that wished to attract women and immigrants. Through her talents and generosity, she won a following, and through that support, she was able to develop a successful career in Gaelic dance.

Peggy and Helen O’Neill opened a children’s dancing school and school of elocution in the Mission district in 1915. They taught not only Irish dancing, but also “grace, culture, stage and fancy dancing, Scotch, Russian and toe ballet, holding ballroom dancing classes on Friday evenings at their residence on 290A Guerrero, near Fifteenth Street.”⁶²

Like those already teaching in established schools, they volunteered their time and talents at Irish community events. The O’Neill sisters began to dance with the O’Mahoney brothers, since both families were considered “beautiful and expert dancers” and both ran their dancing schools together with their siblings. The O’Neill sisters danced with the O’Mahoney brothers in a Gaelic dancing exhibition at the Ancient Order of Hibernians’ Picnic in June, and at the St. John’s picnic in July 1915.⁶³ The O’Neill sisters also encouraged their pupils to dance with the O’Mahoney pupils in “Scotch” dances

and four-hand reels.⁶⁴ In just four months, the O'Neill sisters expanded their repertoire of dance classes to include "the fox trot, hesitation, the waltz, and the one step, as well as Irish dancing."⁶⁵ The apparently friendly rivalry between the O'Neill pupils and the O'Mahoney pupils is revealed in an advertisement for the 49th Annual Picnic of the Ancient Order of Hibernians in 1918, which announced "Special Gaelic Dancing Contests" pitting "O'Neill Sisters' Pupils vs. Dan. O'Mahoney's Pupils."⁶⁶

Like the other Gaelic dancing teachers in the city, the O'Neill sisters were anxious to support the cause of Gaelic Revival, and they joined the O'Growney branch of the Gaelic League in September 1915, at the same meeting where Helen O'Neill received her first-place medal for the ladies' jig and hornpipe competition in the Gaelic League *feis*.⁶⁷ The sisters danced at the conclusion of Gaelic League meetings frequently after they joined.⁶⁸

Like Frances Dougherty, the O'Neill sisters, especially Peggy, were very popular. In the *Leader's* "Grand Popular Contest" of 1915, Peg O'Neill won first place with 7,816,000 votes cast for her to win the big 1915 Mitchell car.⁶⁹ Peg was not only popular, she inspired poetry! One of her devoted friends, Dan O'Doan, was so overjoyed at her victory that he wrote a poem, "Best Wishes to Peg O'Neill":

Come all, you well wishers;
 Let not your absence mar
 The christening of the *Leader's* prize
 For Peg has won the car . . .
 And should her great ambition lead
 To journal, boat or stage,
 May the name of Peg O'Neill appear
 On history's brightest page
 For in the hour of victory
 With mind of noble tread
 She clasped the vanquished hand and smiled
 And thanked her every friend.⁷⁰

Peg appreciated such lofty sentiments, but if Dan O'Doan was vying for her affections, he apparently fell short of the mark. Peg O'Neill delayed marriage until twenty-three years later, devoting herself instead to building a career as a professional dancer, actress, and theater producer.⁷¹ On the other hand, marriage did not seem to mean the end of a professional career for Helen O'Neill. She married Joseph Sweeney, district deputy of the Knights of Columbus, in St. Agnes' Church on 8 September 1919, on the night before she got front-page billing in the *San Francisco Chronicle* as the star of a modern dance show at the Civic Auditorium.⁷²

Like the other Irish dancing teachers, the O'Neill sisters put on vaudeville shows to show off their students' talents, and as tastes changed, they changed their repertoire.⁷³ By 1919 their school had grown to seventy pupils ranging in age from three to fourteen years old, and they featured "Phil Sapiro's famous jazz orchestra" to complement their program.⁷⁴

In 1919, both sisters were active in Irish nationalist events held in San Francisco. On Saturday 14 June 1919, the San Francisco United Irish Societies dominated downtown San Francisco as they staged an Irish Republic Rally at Eighth and Market Street beginning at 2:00 P.M. and lasting until 8:00 P.M. to “urge that a universal demand be made on the peace conference to hear Ireland’s claim to political freedom.” There was a program of entertainment and sports (a tug-of-war) to accompany the political speeches, and Peggy O’Neill’s dancing was a featured event.⁷⁵

The O’Neills’ nationalist leanings became even more clear a year later, in 1920, when they were among the organizers of the first San Francisco rally of the Women’s Division of the American Commission on Irish Independence, an organization dedicated to raising Irish Republic bond certificates. The Commission had pledged that San Francisco would raise \$500,000 to meet the California goal of \$1,500,000 to be sent to the Irish Republic, and staged a play as a fund-raiser. That play was W. B. Yeats’s *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, depicting the spirit of Ireland, although it is not clear whether Peggy O’Neill played the role of Ireland herself.⁷⁶

The O’Neill sisters continued to support the nationalist cause during 1921 when they organized an Irish May Day Festival in support of the Sinn Fein movement for Irish independence. They had over one hundred pupils dancing a Maypole dance for the festival at Shell Mound Park that also included the Western Championship Title Gaelic Dancing Competition.⁷⁷ The O’Neills were acknowledged fund-raisers for the nationalist cause later in 1921 when more than thirty thousand people attended a fundraising ball of the American Irish Assembly. Father Yorke, Peggy and Helen O’Neill, and Viola Doyle were the team captains for the effort.⁷⁸

Gaelic dancing remained popular throughout the 1920s and 1930s though the *Leader*, the San Francisco paper that had chronicled Gaelic dancing so well, fell into decline after the death of its editor, Father Yorke, in 1925.⁷⁹ In terms of numbers of students, the O’Neill sisters had more than double the number of students in the 1920s that they had in 1915, with two hundred students dancing in their annual “extravaganza,” and at Irish dance competitions held annually at the Rebel Cork Picnic at Shell Mound Park.⁸⁰ By 1922, they were operating their school out of a drab little studio in National Hall in the Mission District.⁸¹

In the 1930s, “kiddie revues” or shows that featured children in song-and-dance songs were at the height of their popularity. Shirley Temple was the most famous child star in the United States in 1934–1935, and many parents wanted their “little princesses” to have the chance to break into show business through song and dance. Even during the Depression they marched their children into dance lessons in droves. The O’Neill Sisters benefited from this trend, and by 1932, they produced a weekly revue at the Fox West Coast Theaters, as well as one at the Warfield Theater, and another at the El Capitan. They trained all the performers in their shows, planning the routines, choosing the music, and selecting the costumes, in addition to conducting dance lessons in their school of four hundred pupils.⁸² Peggy O’Neill explained,

Kiddie revues were unheard of when we got our first company together. The theaters in San Francisco were quite suspicious of the whole idea. Finally we got a chance to put on a revue in Sacramento. It was a family theater, patronized by a lot of youngsters, and it was figured our act couldn't do much harm there. Of course, my sister and I were scared to death. If it flopped it meant the end of a lot of work and planning, and perhaps meant that we never could get our revues into the moving picture theaters. But it didn't flop, glory be. In fact, it went over so well that the youngsters got a booking over the whole West Coast circuit.⁸³

Although Peggy O'Neill attributed the sisters' success to good luck, she admitted that she loved children and enjoyed "teaching and managing" some two thousand children who "passed through the hands" of the sisters in the course of their career.⁸⁴

By 1935, the O'Neill sisters no longer viewed their school as primarily a Gaelic dancing school since their greatest rival was the Fanchon and Marco Studio, a studio that did not even teach Irish dance. The Fanchon and Marco Studio was started in Los Angeles by a sister and brother who began producing successful children's vaudeville acts and later moved into producing extravagant musical theater productions. In 1931, they had a staff of six thousand. One noted Fanchon and Marco pupil was Cyd Charisse.⁸⁵ Competition between the two dance studios was so stiff in San Francisco that Fanchon and Marco Studio hired a saleswoman to go door-to-door to drum up business, and the *San Francisco Chronicle* published a humor column on the time that a saleswoman knocked at the door of Mrs. Helen Sweeney of 2141 Hayes Street and tried to convince her to enroll her daughter, Peggy Anne, in Fanchon and Marco's classes. Mrs. Helen Sweeney was Helen O'Neill in professional life, and the funny column was good publicity for the O'Neill sisters' dance classes.⁸⁶

In step with the changing times, by the mid-1930s the growing popularity of chorus line shows encouraged the sisters to expand their horizons beyond "kiddie revues" to the chorus line. Peggy O'Neill choreographed and trained the chorus line at the Warfield Theater, where the dancers ranged in age from eighteen to twenty-two. In a feature describing "the daily life of a chorus girl," photos show the fourteen dancers rehearsing for three hours daily under the direction of Peggy O'Neill. Peggy O'Neill was also shown conducting the daily weigh-in to which each woman was subjected, since none was allowed to exceed 120 pounds. All of the girls had training in ballet and tap, and most had been with Peggy O'Neill since childhood.⁸⁷

Helen O'Neill also branched out in her career—into radio. In 1930, she was appointed manager and director of radio station KTAB of Oakland, a station whose program included news, musical concerts, as well as studio programming. Helen O'Neill was chosen for the position since she was already "well known for her radio activities in California." According to her appointment announcement, she was qualified to direct radio programs on the basis of her training in musical comedy and comic opera, as well as concert and educational work done with Sherman, Clay & Co.⁸⁸

In 1938, when "that glamorous Peggy O'Neill" eloped to Reno with Archer M. Bowles, division manager of Fox West Coast Theaters, it made front-page news in the *San Francisco Chronicle*.⁸⁹ Four years

later, when Arch Bowles was promoted to general manager of Fox West Coast Theaters, two of the best-known names in the San Francisco theater world left for Los Angeles.⁹⁰

Peggy O'Neill died in San Francisco in 1947, after a short illness. The *San Francisco Chronicle* obituary credited the O'Neill Sisters' Studio with giving a theatrical start to many pupils who achieved professional success. "Graduates of the O'Neill studio include such luminaries as Screen Star Janet Gaynor and Tommy Harris and Joaquin Garay, now local night club owners. . . . [All] made their first appearances in the O'Neill Kiddies. . . . Lucille Page, who subsequently became the toast of Paris, and Alice Sullivan, who became dance director for the Roxy Ballet in New York" were also given their start by the O'Neill sisters.⁹¹

Peggy and Helen O'Neill began their career in Irish dancing as competitors and teachers. Over the years they developed their talents as singers, comedienues, actresses, and organizers and attained great popularity in the Irish-American community. Through hard work, talent, and "luck," they were able to adapt to changing technologies and changing tastes to succeed in both the theater and in radio and gain recognition in a wider community than just Irish San Francisco. They touched thousands of children's lives and cultivated the talents of children who would go on to careers in show business. By viewing Irish dance through the prism of the O'Neill sisters' careers, it is clear that Irish dance offered the opportunity for capable and talented women to break into show business and to make their mark there.

The Gaelic League's project to create a bilingual Ireland and Irish diaspora was never as successful as its most ardent supporters hoped it would be, but their cultural goal of modernizing and revi-

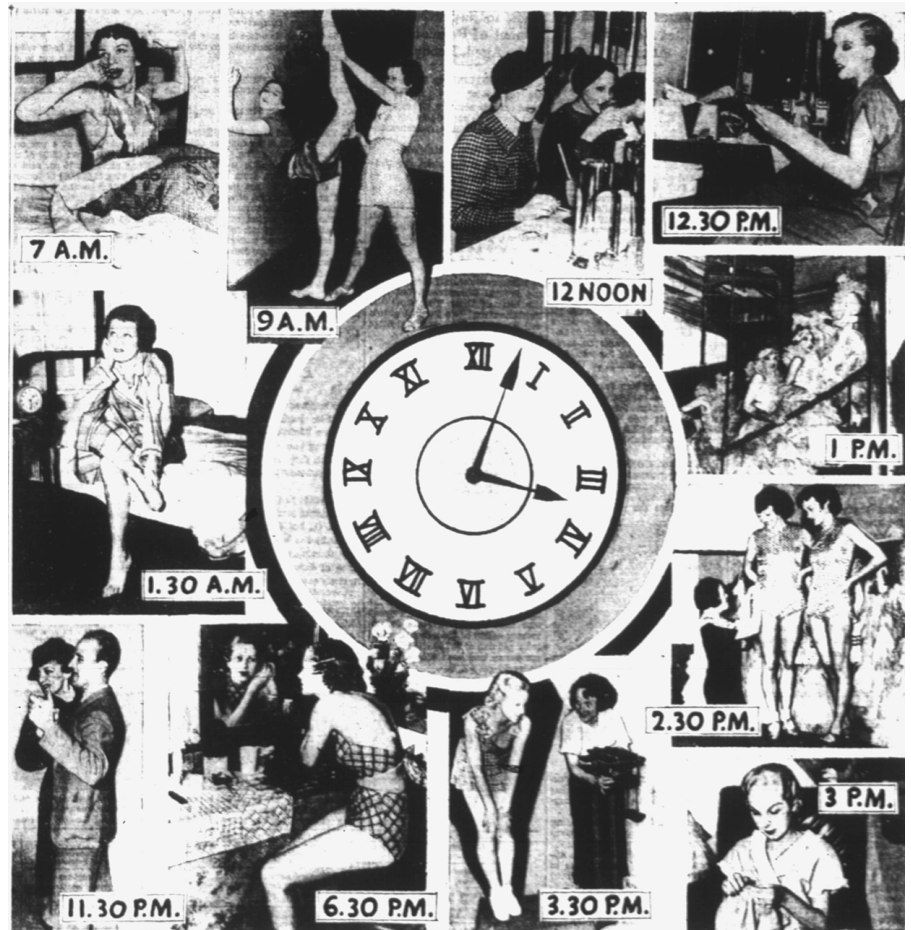


FIGURE 3-6 Before the second show at 4:o'clock: Rae Wirtanen knits while Moray Fore is weighed by Peggy O'Neill. *San Francisco Chronicle*, August 11, 1935. Photo credit: San Francisco Chronicle.

talizing Irish culture met with much success, if one judges by the popularity of Irish dancing. The longevity and endurance of Irish dance is in part the legacy of the work of the Gaelic League which promoted and reinvented Gaelic dancing both around the world and in San Francisco.

The Gaelic League was not the only or even the most important promoter of Irish dance in San Francisco from 1900 to 1935. The Irish-American women of San Francisco who participated in, taught, and promoted Irish dance never rose to challenge the public predominance of men in the Irish-American community, but they created a cultural achievement that would outlast the work of many of the male-dominated organizations. In general, women did not serve as president of the Gaelic League, or president of the Gaelic Dancing Club, as editors of Irish-American newspapers, as pastors of their local parish churches, or even as adjudicators in the dancing competitions held at Irish organization picnics. All these positions were held by men. But through promoting and teaching Irish dance women played a vital cultural role in Irish-American history that has gone unrecognized.

Notes

1. Helen Brennan, *The Story of Irish Dance* (Dingle, County Kerry, Ireland: Mount Eagle Publications, 1999), 45.
2. See James P. Walsh, "Peter Yorke and Progressivism in California, 1908," *Éire-Ireland* 10, no. 2 (1975), 73–81; Joseph H. Brusher, *Consecrated Thunderbolt: A Life of Father Peter C. Yorke of San Francisco* (Hawthorne, NJ: Joseph F. Wagner, 1973); Timothy J. Sarbaugh, "Father Yorke and the San Francisco Waterfront, 1901–1916," *Pacific Historian* 25, no. 3 (1981), 28–35; Richard Gribble, "Peter Yorke and the 1901 Teamsters and Waterfront Strikes in San Francisco," *Southern California Quarterly* 74, no. 2 (1992), 141–160.
3. Philip J. Ethington, *The Public City: The Political Construction of Urban Life in San Francisco, 1850–1900* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 325.
4. Catherine Foley, "Ireland: Traditional Dance," in *International Encyclopedia of Dance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), vol. 3, 516.
5. *All Ireland: Official Paper of the Irish Fair, Mechanics' Pavilion May 1–24, 1902*, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, ff850 A43 Nos. 1–20, 1 May 1902.
6. *All Ireland*, 5 May 1902.
7. *All Ireland*, 2 May 1902.
8. *All Ireland*, 5 May 1902.
9. *All Ireland*, 6 May 1902; 10 May 1902. See also 9 May 1902.
10. *All Ireland*, 9 May 1902.
11. *All Ireland*, 16 May 1902.
12. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1993).
13. Martha Robb, *Irish Dancing Costume* (Dublin: Country House, 1998), 5.
14. Kass McGann, "Woman's Léine," *Reconstructing History*. Accessed 23 April 2000 from <http://www.reconstructinghistory.com>
15. John P. Cullinane, *Irish Dancing Costumes: Their Origins and Evolution* (Cork, Ireland: Dr. John P. Cullinane, 1996), 25.
16. *Leader*, 25 March 1911.
17. *Leader*, 9 December 1916; 6 January 1917.
18. *Leader*, 10 August 1918.

19. *Leader*, 29 June 1918.
20. George Burns, *Gracie, A Love Story* (New York: Putnam, 1988), 26.
21. M. Alison Kibler, *Rank Ladies: Gender and Cultural Hierarchy in American Vaudeville* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 10.
22. Kibler, *Rank Ladies*, 19.
23. Ethington, *Public City*, 325.
24. *San Francisco Chronicle*, 18 February 1909.
25. According to Dr. Gearóid Ó hAllmhuráin, this is probably the Varsoviennne dance, a popular folk dance of the early twentieth century.
26. *Leader*, 3 January 1914.
27. *Leader*, 4 April 1914.
28. Hasia R. Diner, *Erin's Daughters in America: Irish Immigrant Women in the Nineteenth Century* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), 9 and 45.
29. Diner, *Erin's Daughters*, xiv; Joan M. Jensen and Gloria Ricci Lothrop, *California Women: A History* (San Francisco: Boyd & Fraser, 1987), 39.
30. Diner, *Erin's Daughters*, 59.
31. *San Francisco Chronicle*, 29 August 1964.
32. Cynthia Clements and Sandra Weber, *George Burns and Gracie Allen: A Bio-Bibliography* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996), xv.
33. Cheryl Blythe and Susan Sackett, *Say Goodnight Gracie! The Story of Burns and Allen* (New York: Dutton, 1986), 4.
34. Sally R. Somer, "Tap Dance," in *International Encyclopedia of Dance*, vol. 6, 97.
35. *Leader*, 27 May 1911.
36. Burns, *Gracie*, 17.
37. *Leader*, 18 May 1912.
38. Burns, *Gracie*, 28.
39. *Leader*, 21 February 1914.
40. Burns, *Gracie*, 25.
41. Burns, *Gracie*, 29.
42. Burns, *Gracie*, 30.
43. *San Francisco Chronicle*, 29 August 1964.
44. Jane Kesner Morris, "Gracie Allen's Own Story 'Inside Me'" in *Women's Home Companion* 40 (March 1953), 100. Ann Ruane Lubamersky, interview by author of her mother, 5 January 2000.
45. *Leader*, 19 December 1908.
46. *Leader*, 13 March 1909.
47. *Leader*, 21 August 1909, 4 September 1909.
48. *Leader*, 13 February 1909.
49. One can assume that this racist term described an act in which an Irish minstrel man would present his version of stereotypical black speech and behavior.
50. *Leader*, 14 October 1909.
51. *Leader*, 25 March 1911.
52. *Leader*, 13 May 1911.
53. *Leader*, 2 September 1911.
54. *Leader*, 18 May 1912; see also 30 May 1914.
55. *Leader*, 15 May 1915.

56. *Leader*, 5 October 1912.
57. *Leader*, 29 June 1918.
58. *Leader*, 29 June 1918.
59. *Leader*, 29 June 1918.
60. *San Francisco Examiner*, 21 April 1922; *San Francisco Chronicle*, 8, 19 June 1927.
61. *San Francisco Chronicle*, 8 February 1934.
62. *Leader*, 24 April 1915.
63. *Leader*, 19 June 1915; 3 July 1915.
64. *Leader*, 7 August 1915.
65. *Leader*, 7 August 1915.
66. *Leader*, 15 June 1918.
67. *Leader*, 11 September 1915.
68. *Leader*, 30 October 1915.
69. *Leader*, 27 November 1915. According to the rules of the contest, each contestant received 5000 votes upon nomination. During the course of the contest, each weekly issue of the *Leader* contained a “vote coupon” worth 100 votes, which readers were encouraged to mail into the *Leader* office. In addition, each new or renewed subscription brought a coupon of 3000 votes for a one-year subscription, 8000 votes for a two-year subscription, 15,000 votes for a three-year subscription, and 35,000 votes for a five-year subscription. During the two months of the contest, contestants and their supporters were exhorted in the columns of the *Leader* to solicit subscriptions and get the coupons turned in. In 1915, nearly twenty million votes were cast.
70. *Leader*, 4 December 1915.
71. *San Francisco Chronicle*, 3 October 1938.
72. *San Francisco Chronicle*, 9 September 1919.
73. *Leader*, 13 May 1916.
74. *Leader*, 31 May 1919.
75. *San Francisco Chronicle*, June 14, 1919.
76. *San Francisco Chronicle*, 25 February 1920.
77. *San Francisco Chronicle*, 30 April 1921.
78. *San Francisco Chronicle*, 7 November 1921.
79. *Leader*, 11 April 1925, commemorative issue.
80. *Leader*, 16 December 1922, 26 July 1924.
81. *San Francisco Chronicle*, 8 February 1947.
82. *San Francisco Chronicle*, 17 July 1932.
83. *San Francisco Chronicle*, 17 July 1932.
84. *San Francisco Chronicle*, 17 July 1932.
85. Anthony Slide, “Fanchon and Marco,” in *Encyclopedia of Vaudeville* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994), 167–168.
86. *San Francisco Chronicle*, 7 March 1935.
87. *San Francisco Chronicle*, 11 August 1935.
88. *San Francisco Chronicle*, 2 May 1930.
89. *San Francisco Chronicle*, 3 October 1938.
90. *San Francisco Chronicle*, 3 August 1942.
91. *San Francisco Chronicle*, 8 February 1947.




Maggie's Boarding House

Irish-American Assimilation in San Francisco 1910–1930

DANIEL P. WALSH



espite the significant role that the boarding house played in the building of urban America, its importance has been largely overlooked. Two literary works constitute the published guideposts to this undeveloped historiography. The first, Upton Sinclair's classic *The Jungle*, surrounded the boarding house with enduring tragedy. The second, *Mama's Bank Account* by Kathryn Forbes, portrayed the boarding house quite positively, but only to one generation—its own.¹

Sinclair's *Jungle* narrates a riveting story of an extended family of Lithuanian immigrants in turn-of-the-century Chicago who huddled together in dangerously inferior housing. As an extended family, they experienced depravation in all forms: physical, social, economic, cultural, psychological, and moral. Dragged down from hope to despair, most of the family only found relief in death.

Forbes's version of the immigrant boarding house in San Francisco is the absolute reverse image. Her early twentieth-century period piece, *Mama's Bank Account*, published in 1943 under her pseudonym, is a semi-autobiographical account of Norwegian Americans. Mama and the energetic family were so functional that the boarding house blossomed into a happy and rewarding business. Success, however, far outreached the narrative's content. In 1944, Richard Rogers and Oscar Hammerstein brought the San Francisco story to the Music Box Theater on Broadway as *I Remember Mama*. Four years later, RKO Radio released it as a feature film starring Irene Dunne, supported by Cedric Hardwicke, Rudy Vallee, and a very young Barbara Bel Geddes. From 1949 to 1957, the Columbia Broadcasting Company aired "Mama" as a popular television series. Theater undoubtedly impacted reality. Yet, this image of the immigrant boarding house became synonymous with the best of American life.² So did its setting, San Francisco. The starkly contrasting images of the same subject in quite different settings seem, in essence, sound. Sinclair's 1906 story prompted the political reform of his day, the Progressive Movement, and *The Jungle* persists as an apt characterization of the subject, the place, and the time.

The following exploration of the role of the boarding house in urban America is traced through the life of Irish-born Margaret (Maggie) Walsh Beggs. Her story not only depicts one individual's assimilation into the city of San Francisco, it also chronicles the powerful and significant female role within the urban immigrant community as well as the crucial role of the boarding house. Maggie's immigrant experience supports the basics of the Forbes version of the San Francisco boarding house. In place of Mama's sentimental and dramatic account, Maggie's story provides documentation, the traditional measure of historical reliability. In addition, Maggie's historical experience in San Francisco both sustains and questions aspects of major historical works that relate to the subject.

Hasia R. Diner's *Erin's Daughters in America: Irish Immigrant Women in the Nineteenth Century* established the numerical preponderance of women within the Irish immigrant stream as well as benefits associated with domestic service.³ While recognizing the negative factors of such service, Janet A. Nolan's *Ourselves Alone: Women's Emigration from Ireland 1885–1920* shared and broadened Diner's findings. Essentially, Nolan concluded, "Emigration did allow women to regain their social and economic equality as wives and within the family economy."⁴ Maggie's San Francisco story demonstrated this and more.

Maggie Walsh's pre-boarding house experience in domestic service was largely a positive one, providing a contrast to those experiences discussed in *Erin's Daughters* and *Ourselves Alone*. Significantly, Maggie's San Francisco employers were Jewish professionals, and the husband was the household's central figure. All these features (Jewish household, male responsibility, and prevailing harmony) run counter to the national standards examined by David M. Katzman in *Seven Days a Week: Women and Domestic Services in Industrializing America*.⁵ Kerby A. Miller's monumental treatment of the Irish experience in America, *Emigrants and Exiles*, focuses neither on domestic service nor on boarding houses, but his interpretation of the status of women in the late nineteenth-century Ireland does contain an explanation of why women like Margaret Beggs left Ireland.⁶ However, her early and enduring enthusiasm for life in San Francisco appears to exclude her from Miller's category of "exiles." The meeting of the San Francisco environment and those Irish who it successfully beckoned west resulted in something quite different from that which greeted Irish immigrants on the East Coast. California and San Francisco were desirable destinations for Irish immigrants, but they were realistic ones only for those who could afford to travel the added distance, estimated as at least twice the cost of reaching New York or Boston.⁷ As well as being remote, the Pacific metropolis was different from those East Coast magnets. An instant city, San Francisco sprang from the Gold Rush of 1849, not from the Old World's colonization or even from America's more recently fixed urban institutions. In San Francisco, the Irish were free from established political machines like New York's Tammany Hall.⁸ Likewise, they were free from the chronic get-even tactics of tribal chieftains such as Boston's James Michael Curley.⁹

Although many Irish gathered in San Francisco, the cultural diversity of the new city allowed for an accepting and comfortable environment.¹⁰ Those Irish who made it to the Golden State found no one group holding established positions of strength, none capable of assigning inferior roles to

them. Early twentieth-century Irish arrivals were talented and self-assured. Their self-assurance prevailed in San Francisco's liberal and fluid environment. No political hack compelled their votes by trading on their fear of poverty, discrimination, or insecurity.¹¹ From San Francisco's earliest days, the Irish were able to maintain their Irish culture and at the same time, and at their own pace, assimilate with the surrounding, unthreatening community.¹²

The city alone, however, cannot take full credit for Irish success. Many factors prompted this relatively smooth Irish transition into San Francisco life. Among them, and that focused upon here, is the role of the Irish boarding house and the woman who made it work. Specifically, it is the story of a remarkable young woman's contribution to Irish assimilation. It offers insight into an obviously neglected component of women's history, and it prompts a more balanced understanding of Irish-American life. Broadly projected, it suggests that longing after Ireland—exile mentality—may have been an interwoven theme in San Francisco, but one that was decidedly subordinate.

Margaret Walsh Beggs and her San Francisco boarding house served newly arrived greenhorns. The combination of Margaret's outgoing and obliging character and her cramped but welcoming accommodations provided her relatives an easier transition from Ireland to America. The boarding house and Margaret were key ingredients for transition from rural Irish living to the demands of urban America.

Margaret Walsh (1892–1973) was born in the Irish coastal village of Tully, County Galway, Ireland.¹³ The village, a scattering of farm houses, a post office, pub, and store, looked out upon Galway Bay about nineteen miles west of Galway town on Ireland's west coast. The Great Famine generation of Walshes lived just north of Tully, in hill villages called Glenicmurrin and Formweel. These agriculturally inferior lands were a very small part of the vast and grossly encumbered Martin family estate centered in Ballinahinch, Connemara.¹⁴ Bankruptcy terminated Martin family control of lands and transferred management to the Law Life Assurance Company. This London corporation intended to carry out a post-Famine reorganization and rationalization of the holdings through the sale of land and the reduction of weaker, non-rent paying tenants to the status of day laborers—with no rights to the land. The obvious, but unstated results for some of these tenants and their families would be departure or death.¹⁵

The *Griffith's Valuation Survey* for Glenicmurrin and Formweel (1853) listed the Walshes among the surviving tenants who continued leasing their farmlands from the Law Life Assurance Company. Together, three Walsh brothers held a surprisingly large lease of 1,246 acres in Formweel, 116 acres of it being streams and lakes. A relative in adjacent Glenicmurrin held twice as much land and water in association with three other families.¹⁶

According to family tradition, verified by notations on the original manuscript of *Griffith's Valuation Survey*, Margaret's father and his brothers moved down from the hills in the 1880s and secured access to better lands. Margaret's grandfather became the successor of record in 1885 at Tully, County Galway, on the lands leased immediately from the "Rep[resentative]s [of] Valentine F. Blake."

The initial Walsh holdings at Tully consisted of 111 acres and contained home, office, and land plus 90 acres described as herds, home, and land. Additionally, 44 acres of water are listed.¹⁷ It appears as though Margaret's grandfather acquired this lease for the use of his sons, as he died on his old farm up in Glenicmurrin in 1893, age sixty-four, without medical attention and in the presence of his son.¹⁸ The new Tully lands passed to his sons, one of whom was Margaret's father.

On this farmland along the Galway coast, young Margaret Walsh developed into a lively and self-reliant girl, quite capable of asserting herself when necessary. These characteristics would serve her well in San Francisco, but in Ireland her independence and strong motivation at times challenged family and community customs. When Margaret was sixteen, the local priest, recalled later as Father Anthony, tried to arrange a marriage with a man who was twice her age. He was established and financially secure.¹⁹ Greatly upset, Margaret wanted nothing to do with the arranged marriage. Assertively, she told the priest that if she were forced to marry the man, she would jump into Galway Bay. Father Anthony, knowing Margaret's reputation for doing what she wanted, relented saying, "That won't be necessary. I will call off the arrangements." Margaret had her own strong views, which she expressed emphatically, thereby preventing a fate she characterized as "worse than slavery."²⁰

Life in Ireland, although not what Margaret wanted, was tolerable. She had regular meals of cereal, bread, and tea in the morning, potatoes and milk for lunch, and sometimes had fish or meat for supper. Food was not a problem for the Walshes in Ireland. Life, though difficult, was enjoyable and even exciting—at least as Margaret remembered it.²¹ There were no major calamities for Margaret to endure except for her mother's early death.

Margaret rejected her chance to marry for comfort and security at a time when many Irish women in her situation would have accepted her notion of "slavery" as good fortune.²² Despite clear reasons why other women might stay, Margaret left Ireland in late 1909 and sailed to America. Almost seventeen years old, Margaret rejected the life others projected upon her and became a voluntary emigrant.

Margaret's uncle, Martin Walsh, already in San Francisco, paid for her ship and rail passage.²³ Her older sister Mary Walsh and their aunt Kate Concannon had preceded her to San Francisco and met her upon her arrival. Their happy reunion marked the start of an altogether novel life, the life that Margaret chose for herself.²⁴

Margaret obtained employment, as she had anticipated, in domestic service. Domestic employment opportunities were abundant in San Francisco, and with those jobs, most women also received room and board. Margaret worked at her first job for approximately two years but did not enjoy the situation. The family, she felt, was not accommodating. However, at age nineteen she accepted employment from a Jewish family, Charles de Young Elkus and his wife Ruth, who hired Margaret in 1911. She moved into their home to take care of their children: young Ruth, Benjamin, Robert, and Charles Junior. Mr. Elkus practiced law in San Francisco, and he and his wife played a major role in educating and socializing Margaret to a middle-class American lifestyle.²⁵

Working for Jewish professional families was a common practice for many Irish immigrant women. Margaret, her two half-sisters, and one future sister-in-law all began their lives in San Francisco in this manner. In her case, Margaret accompanied Charles and Ruth Elkus and their children throughout San Francisco and Northern California. Besides first-hand observations of how a middle-class American family managed daily living, Margaret experienced theater, opera, and family vacations. Reflectively or not, Margaret received a quality education in American living. Every experience with the Elkus family brought her closer to the Americanization she sought. Time with the husband, wife, and four children helped her understand San Francisco and cope with America. Later, she shared her education with those who became residents in her boarding house. She would pass on to them the understanding, skills, and behaviors that she learned while working as a domestic. Charles and Ruth Elkus appreciated Margaret, and in return for her care of their children, they unconsciously developed the coping skills which would allow her to prevail over future adversity.²⁶

Margaret had already established in Ireland that she was unwilling to marry or date any man who was significantly older than she was. She was quite willing to wait for a man who was closer to her own age and more compatible with her emerging American standards.²⁷ Margaret's patience would soon pay off.

Her outgoing personality and her energetic approach to life caught the attention of a third-generation Irish American, Joseph Beggs. The American fell in love with the Irish woman while she was still living with the Elkus family. Joseph was Margaret's age, had been a draftsman, and then worked as a riveter. His youth and his occupation appealed to Margaret, but best of all was the quality of his pursuit. Joseph loved her madly, and he knew how to show it. Margaret welcomed his attentions. Certainly, marriage to the American-born Beggs would advance Margaret's assimilation into American culture. Acculturation that began with the Elkus family would extend well beyond what she would have been able to attain alone or with a spouse of similar background. And, besides, Joseph was engaging, devoted, and a real good sport.

Their unhurried courtship progressed enjoyably. Joseph continually wrote letters to Margaret when either of them was out of town. Joseph loved writing to Margaret, and she loved the attention. When Margaret was out of town, his closing lines embroidered his basic theme: "Honey, San Francisco is a waste land without you!"²⁸ Joseph was too perfect for Margaret to pass up.



FIGURE 3-7 Margaret Beggs, 1924.

Photo credit: Beggs Family Papers.

Their wedding day was 18 August 1917. Both bride and groom were twenty-four years of age with Margaret being a few months the older.²⁹ She had her young man and, as was the custom, she relinquished her employment with the Elkus family and lived with her husband. Margaret and the Elkus family, however, maintained their friendship. She continued to remain in touch, and Charles Elkus would help Margaret when tragedy struck her unexpectedly.

After three years of marriage, Margaret and Joseph had one son, Cornelius Thomas “Bud” Beggs, named after his American grandfather. During the 1920s, life was advancing happily. Joseph was driving a truck for the Overland Freight Company, and he belonged to the Teamsters Union. The young family seemed to be enjoying their acculturated experience, and they were eager to share their knowledge of American customs with successively arriving and mostly Gaelic-speaking relatives.

Maggie’s boarding house at 268 9th Avenue in San Francisco’s Richmond District flourished from the start, and in the family lore it simply became “268,” no matter what the reference or context. Maggie’s provided a place where incoming immigrants—Maggie’s Irish relatives and their Galway friends—could feel comfortable and at the same time integrate into the larger social and cultural surroundings under the guidance of Margaret and Joseph Beggs. By the time her half-brother Patrick arrived, Margaret had been in the United States for fifteen years. She had become relaxed and comfortable in America and was accustomed to city life. Joseph, a San Franciscan, was a fountain of information concerning city life.

Household membership fluctuated with men staying longer than women. Margaret, Joseph, and Bud constituted the nucleus. Patrick’s stay was the norm, from his arrival (1925) until his marriage at the neighborhood parish church, Star of the Sea (1930).³⁰ His older brother Thomas arrived earlier, married earlier, and left earlier. Tim Concannon and Jimmy Concannon, Margaret’s cousins on her mother’s side, moved into “268” as well. Michael Walsh, the last of the Walsh brothers, arrived in 1928, the year of Thomas’s marriage and departure.³¹

The long-term boarders were all men, all from Galway, and mostly Gaelic speakers. Their jobs, unlike those of the women, did not provide housing. Anne and Katherine Walsh, like Margaret before them, quickly found employment as live-in domestics in local households—Katherine in Margaret’s old place with the Elkus family. Working in the neighborhood, the half-sisters socialized at Maggie’s and spent their free nights and vacations with her. That was the pattern until they themselves married and established homes of their own.³²

Throughout the period, the boarding house’s kitchen functioned as a meeting place for neighbors and other relatives not residing at “268.” The 1920s marked the busiest period in the history of Maggie’s boarding house. Also, and momentarily, it was traumatic, particularly for Margaret.

Her eldest brother Peter Walsh had emigrated soon after Margaret, and he played a significant, collateral role in the boarding house’s success. By 1925, he had established himself with the Southern Pacific Railroad Company in the North Bay town of Martinez. A strong, physical man, capable of

sustained hard work, Peter got on well with non-Irish workers and exercised good judgment when dealing with them. His step up to permanent employment with the Southern Pacific seemed natural and allowed him access to economy tickets to bring his and Margaret's half-brothers and half-sisters across the broad and otherwise expensive continent. With Peter's entry-management position came another valuable fringe benefit—a company home located adjacent to the Martinez train station.³³ His good fortune raised the prospects of success for Margaret and her boarders.

From the perspective of San Francisco, Peter's house represented the country. From the perspective of newly arrived greenhorns, it was a place of transition. Usually tired from transatlantic and then transcontinental travel, the immigrant relations spent a few days at Peter's home to adjust before heading for the bright lights of San Francisco.³⁴

The Walshes immigrated in succession, usually by age. Margaret, though two years younger than Peter, did precede him. He was the oldest son of their father's first marriage. Being the oldest, he could have had the farm. Peter, however, chose not to stay in Ireland and labor on the farm. Once settled in California, Peter, like Margaret, was interested in helping the relatives who voluntarily followed in their footsteps.³⁵ He did so initially with low-cost railroad tickets across America.

Maggie's boarding house with its low rent, hospitable surroundings, and access to cheap public transportation allowed the greenhorns quickly and easily to become solvent and to bring out more family members. Of the total twelve Walshes who survived infancy, nine immigrated to San Francisco. One, Margaret's older sister Mary, married and returned to Ireland. Three remained on the family farm in Tully, County Galway.³⁶

These women and men who chose San Francisco were not driven out of Ireland and into exile. They immigrated because they felt that their financial and personal prospects were limited at home and more promising in California. Patrick, one of Margaret's half-brothers employed as a country postman, may have had the best prospects had he remained in Ireland, but he left anyway.³⁷ Another voluntary emigrant, Patrick grew up on the California dream. He learned about it in school, from an uncle and aunt who had been there and returned, and through an occupational fringe benefit. Not only did he deliver the emigrant's letters at home, he read them for the elderly and even translated the American news into Gaelic for those who knew no English. Everything was positive for Patrick, even the reality of Peter's economy coach ticket: "I had to sit up the whole way. Seven days and seven nights. Never laid down."³⁸ He was young and strong.

The three brothers—Peter, Thomas, and Patrick—all followed Margaret to San Francisco even though Ireland had treated them decently. Even if Ireland promised some social and economic mobility, extinguishing their desire to come to America would have been unlikely. In his own recollections, Patrick told his children, "I always wanted to come to America."³⁹

To all her brothers, sisters, and cousins, Margaret offered the organization and the affection that the greenhorns needed. The boarding house provided an environment for planning social and

economic strategies and for testing opportunities that allowed the immigrants better chances for success and mobility. Like Margaret's brother Peter, her father-in-law and close neighbor Cornelius Thomas "Neil" Beggs enhanced the arrangement. The senior Beggs worked as a special policeman with the Southern Pacific Railroad and introduced the men to company jobs. He arranged Patrick's first regular employment.⁴⁰

Patrick's job was in the Southern Pacific's baggage department. He transferred trunks and cases from the arriving and departing trains at the station in San Francisco's downtown, south of Market Street. The job requirement, knowing Neil Beggs, was the easy part. The hours were the deterrent, all but negating the advantages of full-time employment. Patrick clocked in at seven at night and worked until three in the morning, seven days a week. He was the swingman covering for those who received a night off. After a few weeks, and having never previously experienced night work, Patrick admitted to being "a little shook up." His time at the station grew lonely and he felt isolated. Nonetheless, he never questioned his decision to come to San Francisco. He believed that the baggage job was not forever. He would find another job, a better job, in the future.⁴¹ He was able to persevere, in part, because Margaret sustained him.

She and her son Bud would come to the station some nights and visit Patrick. Bud remembered one Christmas when he and his mother walked from the streetcar down to the station and brought Patrick some of the Christmas dinner. Their visits, though sometimes short, provided a comfortable atmosphere for Patrick. Margaret and Bud made his job more tolerable, and by doing so guided Patrick along the route to a more secure and satisfying adjustment.⁴² Margaret, whether knowing it or not, sustained an environment which was conducive to assimilation. She took it upon herself to make the immigrants' transition from the rural past to urban present as gentle as possible. Within so large an impersonal city, Margaret's many acts of kindness reduced loneliness and combated depression.

Part of the acculturation that Margaret facilitated involved discarding Gaelic as a principal language. Margaret grew up speaking both Gaelic and English. However, her fifteen years in America and her marriage to Beggs decreased her use of the Irish language. In fact, her primary language became English. Her brothers Patrick and Michael both recorded that their primary language upon arrival in San Francisco was Gaelic.⁴³ They had spoken it at home in Tully for twenty-two years. Peter in Martinez and Thomas were even more Gaelicized than their two younger brothers. They both were older when they left Ireland and had absorbed more of the Irish culture. All had learned English at school, but they did not use it at home. Their father's second wife, Mary Folan Walsh, spoke Gaelic only.⁴⁴ When the boarders arrived at Maggie's, circumstances required them to speak English on a regular basis. Joseph Beggs had never been to Ireland and did not understand Gaelic, and Margaret was out of practice at best. With Joseph and Margaret conversing in English, courtesy required the boarders to try their best. So, Margaret's Galway relations converted to speaking English not only in public, they

spoke English among themselves at home. Margaret and the boarding house advanced acculturation in this historically unnoticed manner too.

Maggie's offered the boarders a welcoming point and a guidance system into American life. Individual boarders lived there for widely different periods of time. Once the interim period passed, all became citizens, and most married and moved on to independent living. Citizenship and marriage became the symbolic steps forward, a commitment to a larger, more inviting American life. Marriage, for those who chose it, concluded the support group phase of their San Francisco acculturation.

Thomas, the senior boarder, established the exit pattern via marriage. His brother Patrick followed two years later. Their sisters Anne and Katherine (non-boarders but socialized by Margaret at the boarding house) followed as well. The youngest brother to settle at "268," Michael Walsh, presented a distinct alternative. Arriving later (1928), he may have expected a great deal more from America, and he may not have shared the identical work ethic as his older brothers and sisters.⁴⁵ Like Michael, Maggie's cousin Jimmy Concannon chose an alternate path. The two drew upon the boarding house's support system. They enjoyed its socialization and security, and gradually they settled into their roles as classic Irish bachelors. Never marrying, they never moved. They became citizens, but they did not choose what others considered the more critical step into independent lives.

Not marrying as the only explanation of why Michael and Jimmy never left Maggie's is too simple. Life in the boarding house undoubtedly became more comfortable with time, particularly as Margaret remained non-judgmental. Michael liked hanging around with the boys in the neighborhood bars where he sometimes alternated between being a customer and the bartender.

The one calamity that struck Margaret also impacted the boarders. Joseph Beggs died in 1927, at age thirty-five from an improperly diagnosed burst appendix. While working as a teamster, Joseph began suffering from stomach pain. As his condition worsened the company doctor stuck to his initial ptomaine poisoning diagnosis. After the pain became agony, the doctor relented and rushed Joseph to the hospital, but it was too late to save his life. Although the appendectomy operation had been perfected thirty-eight years before Joseph's loss, the symptoms were not clearly enough understood, at least by Beggs's company doctor.⁴⁶ Witnessing this death taught Margaret what to notice and what to do—acquire early and competent surgical intervention. Consequently, when in 1928 Margaret's brother Patrick suffered an appendicitis attack, she arranged for a successful surgery that saved his life.

Joseph had been the fulfillment of Margaret's Irish aspirations, the reward for her long journey in America, and the essence of her satisfying new life in San Francisco. His death caused heartache, but not bewilderment. Margaret reacted to her personal disaster by making prompt and important decisions. First, she moved young Bud into her own room, thus creating bed space for one more boarder. Next, Margaret sought the professional advice of Charles Elkus.



FIGURE 3-8 Sunday at the Ocean Beach, 1925: (front) Bud Beggs, Anne Walsh, and Margaret Beggs; (back) Thomas Walsh and Patrick Walsh.

Photo credit: Beggs Family Papers.

She received a four-thousand-dollar death settlement of an insurance policy stemming from her late husband's employment. San Francisco was a strong union town and either the Teamsters or the Overland Freight Company had paid the premiums. Elkus advised investment for long-term income and warned against the consumption of the principal. Margaret agreed, and Elkus invested her funds in 1927 stocks, two years before the crash and the onset of the Great Depression. Like the rest of America, Elkus did not foresee the crash

and undoubtedly lost many of his own investments with those of his now vulnerable former nanny. When Margaret's stock values plummeted, Elkus persisted in his friendship and support. He managed Margaret's remaining assets, trading and reviving them through the 1930s. When Margaret died in 1973, her Depression era stock had reached thirty thousand dollars, plus the dividends paid to her over the intervening decades.⁴⁷

Margaret's friendship with the Elkus family continued. Elkus felt obligated to help Margaret in her time of need, an obligation he pleasantly assumed. Luckily, he was financially as well as socially astute. For her part, Margaret gained more from this warm and abiding inter-ethnic relationship than knowledge of where the salad fork belonged and how to dress children.⁴⁸ The benefits to the Elkus family, undoubtedly substantial too, may only be inferred.

Simultaneously, Margaret truly put her own house in order by overhauling boarding house practices. Emulating Ruth Elkus, Margaret devised a money-management system for paying bills. She developed a meal plan that offered nutritional balance to the household, and she rarely leaned on the boarders for physical help beyond the obvious, for which they normally volunteered. She transferred the best of what she had observed into permanent practices within the boarding house.

She used a system of billing that was easy and efficient. In the 1920s and 1930s, cash was the medium of exchange. At the neighborhood level, it was interest free, and after 1929, it was greatly deflated. She did not have much of it, but what she had purchased a great deal. Instituting an envelope

system, she wrote the name of each bill on the front. The cash went inside. She budgeted everything on a monthly basis, debits and credits. The boarders each paid forty dollars a month, and in return, she bought the food, cooked the meals, and did the weekly washing. Under her steady management, each boarder always knew where he stood. So did Margaret. Underlying all the warmth and spontaneity, stability prevailed. Clement Street merchants appreciated her business approach because too many of their other customers ran up tabs while unemployed. One shopkeeper seemed particularly attentive to Margaret—Mr. Landecker the neighborhood jeweler. She was unsure if her modest and very occasional purchase prompted his interest or had he other intentions?⁴⁹ In either case, she chose not to find out. Because of Margaret's love for Joseph and her loyalty to his memory, she grew old but he did not. Her American husband remained, forever, the young man of her Irish dreams.

Her reorganized management also improved the well being of her relation-boarders. When not at work, they relaxed within a predictable, always pleasant setting. They could stay home and play cards while talking about the day, go out to the local pub, or take in a neighborhood movie where the talkies were replacing the silent films. Weekend options included dances at the Knights of the Red Branch Hall on Mission Street where Irish community organizers hosted continuous fundraisers for perpetually worthy causes. A simple walk in Golden Gate Park or a streetcar excursion to the Ocean Beach also beckoned. Dressed in their Sunday best, the boarders invariably posed at the beach for photographs complete with make-believe cars propped before a canvas backdrop of the Cliff House.

For most of Maggie's "tenants," courtship and marriage were eventually a natural corollary and fulfillment of the boarding house years. Patrick Walsh, for example, met his future wife Nellie Murphy, a non-Irish speaker from County Cork, in the park. Patrick, his sister Anne, and Bud were out for a walk when Nellie noticed him and wondered if the others were his wife and child. Attentive to the matter, Nellie discovered that the tall Galway man was single. Her own duties as nanny for another Jewish professional family (Swaren) brought her to the park often enough, so she took it upon herself to meet Patrick. Not long after, their relationship blossomed, and they married in 1930.⁵⁰ To credit Maggie's boarding house for successful marriages would be an overstatement, but it was a proximate cause nonetheless. Maggie's care allowed Patrick to be comfortable, and it encouraged punctuality. It allowed him to be in a relaxed and friendly frame of mind and to arrive well dressed and well groomed. Margaret recreated the Elkus environment as best she could.

Peter Walsh, Margaret's Martinez brother, also played a second major role in the acculturation mix—beyond providing transcontinental railroad tickets. In time, Peter and his wife Kate had five children. Both parents were very understanding of each other and of the responsibilities each felt toward the extended families. Kate accepted houseguests as a regular part of married life. From the start, they had a resource that no other relative enjoyed—their company-provided home. And at it, they offered liberal hospitality. As a result, Martinez served as a Walsh escape from the novel and stressful pressures of big city life.

Although the Walshes left Ireland voluntarily, adjustments to the city environment did cause stress, more for some than others. Margaret put it this way: when the boarders were “on the blink,” meaning overdosed on alcohol, they would go to Martinez and dry out.⁵¹ Alcohol abuse, despite the existing American prohibition laws, persisted as a larger problem, one with its boarding house dimension. Peter seemed to have no difficulty. He was steady, reliable, and hearty. Some would say he was rough. His approach to life was positive, and he did not dwell on problems, his or yours. He welcomed everyone who needed a weekend in the country. Those who could talk to him in Gaelic received a warmer welcome. His own language enthusiasm extended to instructing non-Gaelic speaking Irish priests assigned to the Martinez parish. He introduced them to basic conversation as well as to Catholic prayers in Gaelic. Peter’s open-handed hospitality offered quite a mix: abstinence or indulgence, leisure or light exercise, and the essence of Irish culture—the native language. A country retreat, Martinez augmented “268” as the humanizing element in American assimilation. Peter’s house was there for all the boarders needing time out from the struggle. It offered perspective amid their greatest adventure—cultural change.⁵²

San Francisco’s cultural environment also contributed to boarding house success. In San Francisco, assimilation was relatively easy and Maggie’s boarders came to know why. In this city, unlike in so many eastern industrial centers, Catholicism was the religion of historical precedent.⁵³ Catholic Church membership was heavily Irish, and they alone constituted the bulk of all churchgoers in the city. The larger society, statistically, simply was irreligious.⁵⁴ As a result, religious controversy, when it occasionally arose, emanated mostly from those who did not understand the materialistic cosmopolitanism of their own city. For the San Francisco Irish, this relative absence of religious animosity was a distinct local advantage.

Religious toleration, nonetheless, was not uniformly present along the Pacific Coast. Intolerance was close enough for the boarders to appreciate the San Francisco advantage. When Neil Beggs, Margaret’s father-in-law, encountered intolerance as close as Ashland, Oregon, he wrote back to the boarding house and described what he had seen. Oregon elected a Klansman as governor and in 1922 required all children ages eight to eighteen to attend public schools. The political initiative was, of course, aimed at Catholics and their schools. In his letter to his son Joseph and to Margaret, the senior Beggs recorded: “This place here is the worst place I ever been in, it’s principally [*sic*] protestant thare [*sic*] are 22 Churches here all different believes [*sic*], and a great many Klu Klux Clans [*sic*].”⁵⁵ Beggs’s lesson was obvious. The Irish were better off living in San Francisco and encountering greater tolerance, less animosity.⁵⁶

Margaret’s Richmond District was hardly a neighborhood of immigrants. Yet, it was still diverse for its day. Jewish professional families resided and employed the Irish women there. Germans named Dellwig owned the boarding house building. Margaret’s son Bud recalled them as a wonderful family and compassionate landlords. During the Depression, the Dellwigs lowered the rent so Margaret and the boarders remained while adjoining flats became vacant.⁵⁷

The existing diversity mixed class and ethnicity. Bud played with a boy of his own age, Edward Stanley, and a neighborhood girl named Virginia Leal. Stanley's father was a vice president with the Bank of America and earned a good income. The family was English and not Catholic. Later they moved to upscale Saint Francis Wood. At the time, though, the family lived in a substantial two-story home near the boarding house. Leal's father was Portuguese, from the Azores, and he owned property on the block where Swedes and Italians were among the renters. A few Hungarians, Norwegians, French, and Central Americans extended the ethnic base which included only one Asian—Bertha Fujimori, a servant in the household of a German importer. Around the corner on Clement Street, one Greek family (Americanizing too) operated the “Splendid Grill.”⁵⁸

This economic and cultural mix enabled the boarders to observe what for them was considerable diversity, to aspire and then to assimilate into ongoing American life. The Irish immigrants were not segregated socially, culturally, or economically. They blended and advanced with the other immigrant groups and with the “Americans” too—the longer established San Franciscans also of European origins. Their Irish identity was and remained central, but they found that the transition from being Irish to Irish American hardly constituted a burden in the San Francisco they chose to join and learned to understand.

Maggie's boarding house facilitated a comfortable assimilation into the life of the city. The immigrants received tailored and friendly instruction in new ways in a new world, while at the same time being liberated from the basic problems of day-to-day living. The boarders' ability not to dwell on the past (Ireland) and their fascination with the future (San Francisco) facilitated this assimilation. Margaret's command of English, her example, her roles as cook, domestic, and financial manager; Peter's country haven; and Neil Beggs's labor connections all combined to advance the assimilation process. These enhanced opportunities extending from the boarding house offered paths toward what became economic, social, and cultural assimilation as well as the basis of the startling educational trajectory across the next generation.⁵⁹ The boarding house softened the transition from a rural community to an urban one, from Galway to San Francisco. And Margaret presided over it all with such spirit and good will that two boarders, Jimmy and Michael, simply refused to leave—not that Margaret ever asked them.⁶⁰

Notes

1. Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle* (New York: Jungle Publishing, 1906). Kathryn Forbes, *Mama's Bank Account* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1943). Even further afield is Widow Melville's *Boarding House* (St. Paul, MN: Pioneer Press Print, 1881), the 1881 novel by Dillon O'Brien, who facilitated Irish immigration to Minnesota for Archbishop John Ireland. O'Brien ignored the Irish immigrant theme altogether, personalized mainstream American experiences, and associated success with the Far West.
2. “Novelist Kathryn McLean Dies,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 17 May 1966. She had published as Kathryn Forbes.

3. Hasia R. Diner, *Erin's Daughters in America: Irish Immigrant Women in the Nineteenth Century* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983).
4. Janet A. Nolan, *Ourselves Alone: Women's Emigration from Ireland 1885–1920* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1989), 83.
5. David M. Katzman, *Seven Days a Week: Women and Domestic Service in Industrializing America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).
6. Kerby A. Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).
7. Séamus Breatnac, "Irish Need Not Apply," *San Francisco* 27 (March 1985), 35.
8. Alfred Connable and Edward Silberfarb, *Tigers of Tammany: Nine Men Who Ran New York* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1967), 138–147.
9. Thomas O'Connor, *The Boston Irish: A Political History* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1995), 180. Kevin Starr, "Jerry Brown: The Governor as Zen Jesuit," in James P. Walsh (Ed.), *The San Francisco Irish 1850–1976* (San Francisco: Irish Literary and Historical Society, 1978), 128.
10. In 1900, San Francisco's population was 342,782. The Irish constituted 94,782. United States Bureau of the Census, Twelfth Census of the United States (1900), 10 vols. (Washington, DC, 1901–1902), 1, 738–739, 868, 876–877, 884–885, 892–893, 900–901, 904–905.
11. Séamus Breatnac, "Should Irish Eyes Be Smiling?," *San Francisco* 12 (August 1970), 27–28; and Breatnac, "Irish Need Not Apply," 37.
12. R. A. Burchell, *The San Francisco Irish 1848–1880* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 37–38.
13. Civil Record, Spiddle Birth Register 11, p. 93, entry 465. Galway Family History Society West Ltd., Galway, Ireland, reference GH2827 616, Computer Search, 9 April 1997.
14. *General Valuation of Rateable Property in Ireland, 1848–1864 (Griffith's Valuation)*, Valuation of Tenements, Parish of Kilcummin, County Galway, Land Valuation Office, Dublin, 123. Pdraig G. Lane, "The Management of Estates by Financial Corporations in Ireland After the Famine," *Studia Hibernica*, 14 (1974), 70–84. (Note: Griffith's Valuation references Walsh at Glenicmurrin and Formweel. Lane references encumbered Martin estate.)
15. Lane, "Management of Estates by Financial Corporations," 72–75.
16. *General Valuation of Rateable Property in Ireland*, Valuation of Tenements, Parish of Kilcummin, County Galway, 123.
17. Valuation List No. 15, County Galway, Parish of Killannin, Union of Galway, Electoral Division of Kilcummin, A19. Galway (3675) G339. Wt82.D41.600.8–48.F.P.-624, 13, 31, Land Valuation Office, Dublin.
18. Register of Deaths, District of Spiddle, Union of Galway, County of Galway, Book No. 6, 1889 forward, 9, Office of the Western Health Board, Galway. The spelling of the town of Spiddle or Spiddal varies in translation; both are used throughout documentation.
19. Margaret Beggs, interview by James P. Walsh, September 1970, Los Gatos, CA, in possession of author.
20. Margaret Beggs, interview, September 1970.
21. C. T. Beggs, interview by the author, 31 March 1998, San Jose, CA, in possession of author. Margaret Beggs, interview, September 1970.
22. Diner, *Erin's Daughters*, 10–12. Diner maintains that women left Ireland because marriage opportunities were not available. Margaret found the terms of marriage that were available to be unacceptable as well.

23. Mary Walsh, "The History of the Walshes" (Unpublished manuscript, 6 pages, 1996), in possession of the author. Martin was 16 years younger than Margaret's father (his brother) and received no Tully land. However, he received more education.
24. Walsh, "The History of the Walshes."
25. C. T. Beggs, interview, 31 March 1998.
26. C. T. Beggs, interview, 31 March 1998.
27. Upon her arrival, Margaret was enthusiastically pursued by an older Irish immigrant, Jimmy Walsh (no relation). With equal enthusiasm she told him that she was not interested. From Margaret Beggs, interview September 1970.
28. Joseph Beggs to Margaret Walsh, two letters, n.d. [1916–1917], Margaret Beggs Papers, in possession of C. T. Beggs, San Jose, CA.
29. Marriage License, Joseph Beggs and Margaret Walsh, Margaret Beggs Papers.
30. Marriage License, Patrick Walsh and Nellie Murphy, in possession of author.
31. Affidavit of Support, Thomas Walsh for Michael Walsh, San Francisco, 30 April 1928, in possession of author.
32. Patrick Walsh, interview by James P. Walsh, September 1970, Los Gatos, CA, in possession of author. Temporary exceptions included the months Thomas lived in barrack accommodations while laying gas pipelines beyond San Francisco. Statement of John Walsh (Thomas Walsh's son), interview by James P. Walsh, 7 May 1998, San Francisco.
33. Margaret Beggs, interview, September 1970.
34. Patrick Walsh, interview, September 1970.
35. Patrick Walsh, interview, September 1970.
36. Patrick Walsh, interview, September 1970. Family genealogical chart by Thomas Walsh (Martinez), in possession of author. Those who remained in Ireland were James (1900–1983), Bridget (1909–1930), and Martin (1910–1970).
37. Photograph of Patrick Walsh still wearing pre-treaty English-issue postman's uniform (c.1924), in possession of author.
38. Patrick Walsh, interview, September 1970.
39. Patrick Walsh, interview, September 1970.
40. Patrick Walsh and Michael Walsh, interviews by James P. Walsh, September 1970.
41. Patrick Walsh, interview, September 1970.
42. C. T. Beggs, interview, 31 March 1998.
43. Patrick Walsh and Michael Walsh, interviews, September 1970.
44. This is so despite her being listed on the *Census of Ireland, 1901*, as bilingual. Family visits to Ireland in the 1950s assured that she spoke Irish solely. *Census of Ireland, 1901, Galway, W.R.: Spiddal, Inverin; Form A, B, 2; Return of Members of the Family, 31st of March 1901*.
45. Patrick Walsh, Margaret Beggs, and Michael Walsh interviews, September 1970. Michael admitted as much. Margaret said that he was real smart. Patrick characterized him as a "wise guy" or someone with all the answers.
46. Loyal Davis, *J. B. Murphy: Stormy Petrel of Surgery* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1938), 128–142.

47. C. T. Beggs, interview, 31 March 1998.
48. C. T. Beggs, interview, 31 March 1998.
49. C. T. Beggs, interview, 31 March 1998.
50. Marriage License, Patrick Walsh and Nellie Murphy, Recorded, Marriage Certificates Book 294, 489, filed 10 March 1930, Recorder's Office, San Francisco. In possession of author.
51. Margaret Beggs, interview, September 1970.
52. C. T. Beggs, interview, 31 March 1998.
53. John B. McGloin, *San Francisco: The Story of a City* (San Rafael, CA: Presidio Press, 1978), 12–21. Walton Bean and James J. Rawls, *California: An Interpretive History*, 5th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1988), 18–32.
54. *Religious Bodies, 1906*, U.S. Department of Commerce and Labor, Bureau of the Census, pt 1, Summary and General Tables (Washington, DC: 1910), 299–300.
55. Cornelius Thomas “Neil” Beggs to [son] Joseph and [daughter-in-law] Margaret Beggs, 4 October 1922, in possession of C. T. Beggs.
56. Beggs was correct. Even Reverend Peter C. Yorke, the aging but still-vigilant slayer of San Francisco's nineteenth-century American Protective Association, looked to the national scene to locate significant KKK activity. See his *Leader*, 19 July through 4 October 1924. Nativist transplants who did not understand the local limits to religious intolerance could learn from the *San Francisco Chronicle* of 6 October 1924, which reported that the Holy Name Society of the archdiocese paraded eighty thousand men and strong boys up Market Street amid another one hundred thousand approving spectators—including Catholics gathered from Northern California. In the Civic Center, at the entrance to the Public Library, Archbishop Edward J. Hanna offered the Blessed Sacrament for public benediction. The stated reasons for the largest organized public event west of the Mississippi were transparent: to welcome Hanna home from a trip to Ireland and to curb the profane use of God's name. The unstated, understood reason was to demonstrate the futility of Klan-induced anti-Catholicism in San Francisco during America's decade of intolerance. The Star of the Sea Parish met its quota of 1,500 marchers and added a parade float depicting the Blessed Virgin. Maggie's boarders undoubtedly marched or watched.
57. C. T. Beggs, interview, 31 March 1998. Joseph Beggs to Margaret Beggs, 4 March 1925, in possession of C. T. Beggs. In the letter, Joe explained how he negotiated rent down to \$47.50 per month well before the Depression.
58. C. T. Beggs and Virginia Leal Murphy, remarks at 16th Walsh-Beggs-Collins-Folan family reunion, San Francisco United Irish Cultural Center, August 23, 1998. United States Bureau of the Census, Fourteenth Census of the United States (1920), Microfilm of Manuscript Original, San Francisco County and City (Enumerated Districts 283–301, 398–399, 302–318) Roll No. 141, Ninth Avenue, ED No. 283.
59. Walsh boarding house siblings had seven children. All male, they earned the following degrees: six bachelors, two masters, one medical doctor, and one Ph.D. The senior first cousin, not in receipt of a university degree, qualified by California State licensing examination as a civil engineer following university course work.
60. By outliving Margaret, both men approached role reversal, from Bud's nurturers to Bud's dependents. Symbolically, before Margaret's death, Peter assured her that he would provide in his will for her funeral expenses. Instead, Margaret collected in advance. She did not prearrange at Holy Cross Cemetery, however. True to herself, she cruised to Hawaii aboard the S.S. *Leilani*. “Margaret Walsh Beggs: A Journey Through Ireland and America,” a paper by Daniel P. Walsh to the 16th Walsh-Beggs-Collins-Folan family reunion, United Irish Cultural Center, San Francisco, 23 August 1998, in possession of author.

An Irishman Goes to San Francisco

MICHAEL CORRIGAN

It is 1955 in San Francisco, the western capital of America. At 20th and Mission Streets, two Irishmen meet outside a tavern.

“And how’d your little Irish horse do?”

“All the way out Market,” the second Irishman says.

“Up Eddy, down Turk?” the first Irishman asks.

“Sure—by a nose, I suppose.”

I once asked Father the significance of this common greeting. Why were people riding all the way out Market, up Eddy, down Turk? What was down Turk?

He replied: “It was an old streetcar line that ran all the way out Market Street, turned up Eddy Street and then went down Turk Street. The conductor would call out: ‘All the way out Market, up Eddy, down Turk. All the way out Market.’ He had a nasal drone like a tinker with his horse and wagon. The line’s now discontinued.”

“But why do people still say that to each other? What does it mean?”

“I don’t know,” Father said. “It can mean anything. You hit the jackpot, lose a wife, or win the daily double, you say, ‘All the way out Market, up Eddy, down Turk.’ I guess it means you’ve gone the distance.”

Growing up in the Mission District, I became aware of a street language that differed from the standard English we spoke at Mission Dolores Grammar School. It was also different from the musical Irish-accented speech of my grandparents. Grandfather called films “filems” and used “after” to suggest past tense, like the stage Irishman who says, “I’m after going to the store.” For a mild oath, he might say, “For the love of Mike” or “the love of six bits” (75 cents). He never used the slang of my father and his cronies. That was not the first time father and son spoke different languages. It was true of countries, as well. As George Bernard Shaw allegedly said, “England and America are separated by a common language.” The Mission District Irish

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had developed their own language, ironically, from the slums of London. Perhaps the Irish and English underclasses were connected by a common slang. Some Irish expressions have become part of our language. In the Middle Ages, the English-controlled land around Dublin was called “the Pale.” Anyone who went “beyond the pale” was a true warrior. My grandparents, Thomas and Agnes, lost their original language.

We need some history.

On 24 April 1907, Thomas Corrigan left Queenstown, Ireland for America. Though an Irish laborer, he carried a British passport and landed at Ellis Island on 3 May. From New York, he traveled to San Francisco, meeting a cousin named Pat McGreal living in the Mission District. Thomas Corrigan never left San Francisco and never saw Ireland again. He started a new life paving the streets of a post-earthquake San Francisco and raising five children with Agnes Kennedy.

The slightly warmer Mission District attracted many immigrant families: Irish, Italian, Latino, and Middle Eastern. Newsboys sold papers. Families ran small shops. The El Capitan Theatre showed serials every Saturday. Strippers and bad comedians entertained at a burlesque house on 16th Street. My grandparents didn’t speak Gaelic or “Irish”—the native tongue the English had occasionally forbidden and frequently disdained. Taking the language of the oppressor, Ireland produced Yeats, Shaw, Beckett, Joyce, and others. If Shakespeare’s Caliban learned the language only to curse, the Irish learned to sing.

Like so many of his countrymen, Thomas was a laborer. They were not college educated, though the collected works of Shakespeare sat on the shelf. Our clan worshipped labor unions, the One Holy Irish Catholic Apostolic Church, and the Democratic Party. (It was a more innocent time. Democrats were not allowed to marry Republicans.) Though my grandparents had little formal education, Grandfather could recite his early grade school lessons. One was about a boy named Jack and his cart. Agnes knew the Celtic myths, though her Irish pagan warriors sounded remarkably Catholic. At Christmas, the house filled with relatives, and each one had a song, a poem, or a story.

Grandfather told stories in his familiar Irish brogue. Strange then that first- and second-generation Irish spoke not with Roscommon or Sligo accents, but used a slang similar to Cockney rhyming slang which rhymed idiomatic expressions with the dictionary words. For example, Cockneys called trouble “Barney Rubble.” (In the mission, “trouble” was simply “a beef.”) Why Cockney? The English had oppressed Ireland. With the exception of Shakespeare’s collected works, anything English was bad.

“Eat your corn beef and cabbage,” Grandfather would say at the table, “or the Black and Tans will be after getting you.”

“Who are the Black and Tans?” I asked, imaging dual-colored monsters.

“Half police and half army—and English,” Grandfather added.

The very word—English—stopped all conversation. Perhaps the Irish didn't consider the slum dwelling Cockneys as English. Of course, many of the expressions were unique to the Mission District. Here are a few examples:

A cop was a bull, Harness Bull, or "Johnny Law." A boss was the "main event." A fool was a "salmon" easily hooked. An "off shore Benjamin" was something off kilter. I'm not sure who Benjamin was or how things would change if he were on shore, nor am I sure if the term suggests a noun, adjective, or adverb form. A "trencherman" was a heavy eater. An Irishman lived in a "gaff" or "joint," not a house. He drove a "heap," not a car. "Indiana" was not a state but a state of being; anyone who was "Indiana" was also "in like Flynn" or extremely successful. (It is uncertain how Irish Hoosiers living in Indiana used the term.) The following dialogue might serve as an illustration:

We was at the track to lay down a few bets, see. I study the racing form while Flarety gets a heat on. All the way out Market—Flarety's horse comes in and mine is still runnin.' Christ's sake, my wallet had the last rites, and he's Indiana.

Like modern rappers, theatrical body language was essential, and standard grammar was optional. Rhyming slang is colorful. "Aye diddle-diddle" meant in the middle. In the morning, an Irishman would "turn to" (go to work). This phrase doesn't rhyme, but he would "turn to" after pulling "Oscar hocks" over "plates of meat"—that is, socks over his feet. He would slip on "ones and twos" or shoes and don his "pair of strides," a variation of the Cockney "round the houses" for trousers. Then he needed a shave or "ocean wave." This was followed by a breakfast of "dummy and cackles" or toast with eggs to fill his "jam and jelly" or belly. Let's not forget to wash the "chip and chase" or face. (Usually this phrase was shortened to "chip.") A woman might powder her "I suppose." On his day off, he'd wear "pork and beans" or jeans at the race-track. "Apples and pears" were stairs. "Bonny fair" was hair. Covering that was a "lean and fat." "Brothers and sisters" were whiskers. There were some vulgar expressions, of course. A whore was called a "boat and oar." Using the bathroom would be described as either "taking a hit and miss" or a "Jimmy Britt." (I must apologize for the unfortunate fact that the word for defecation rhymes with the slang term for English person.) "Happy Easter" rhymed with Kiester, which meant ass or buttocks. One landed on one's "Happy Easter." To take an "Arthur Duffy" meant one was taking a hike, another expression for leaving. I don't know who Arthur Duffy was or why his name meant vacating the premises. Perhaps he took the streetcar all the way out Market, up Eddy, down Turk. Taking Shank's mare is a common phrase for walking since Shank, whoever he was, didn't own a mare.

An Irishman didn't take a left or right turn but a "left or right chalk." Protestants were "Left Handers." This felt strange to me since I am left handed. If someone overheard your conversation, they were doing an "Erie canal." For a headache, one didn't take a pill but a "Jack and Jill."

FIGURE 3-9 Might these unidentified mission parents have reared their children bilingually, “Mission-Speak” amid Standard English? *Photo credit: San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library, Photographer: Herman Deurloo.*



An Irishman lit his “Margarit” with a “Jack Scratch.” He called his friends on the “Alexander Bell.” (I should add here that my relatives preferred to shout out the window rather than use the telephone.) An Irish American or “Harp” carried money in his “skyrocket” or pocket.

You might notice I often use the pronoun, “He.” For some reason, this slang was used more by men than women. This brings me to some unfortunate terms. A man referred to his wife as “storm and strife.” A black person was called a “blue” which I guess is better than the infamous “N” word. I should mention that the blue-collar Mission District Harps I grew up with—plumbers, laborers, hod carriers, cement workers, printers—were not so much racists as Irish Nationalists. Anyone unfortunate enough to be born a non-Irish Catholic might consider jumping off the Golden Gate Bridge. The Irish Catholics were devout; they killed Protestants—Irish and British. A common myth declared we were the true chosen people; thirteen secret millionaires owned the country, but the Irish ran it.

The Mission District Irish also invented an infix, not heard in any other language except Arabic. This is a syllable added in the middle of a one-syllable word. The syllable was roughly pronounced “ee-iz” or “ee-ah”; an example would be the word “blonde” spoken as “bliazond.” A sample of dialogue might go thus:

I walk in a beer joint and I seen Flarety with a bliazond. What a salmon. Aye diddle diddle—he’s dancing with the boat and oar and I got the storm and strife.

I’m told by linguists that the only other infix in English is the profane Anglo Saxon word for fornication. The word “fantastic” often uses this word in gerund form between the syllables “fan” and “tastic.” I won’t demonstrate this quaint phrase.

A people's language defines them. There was a poetry in the Mission District slang. The San Francisco Irish had a remarkable number of words or phrases for being or getting drunk. Here are a few: stewed, had a snootful, had a jar, had a jug, had a belt, had a grog, had a drop taken, got loaded, got lit, and the aforementioned got a heat on. There was no such thing as a "bad drunk." A number of original premises were born on licensed premises.

Let's translate a famous story into Mission District slang.

Back in the days when the trolley cost a nickel, Little Red Riding Hood went to visit her grandmother. She left behind her waspy friend, Goldilocks, the Bliazond who preferred riding around in daddy's heap. Red Riding Hood took Shank's mare through the woods. After awhile, she made a right and then a left chalk and there it was, Granny's Gaff. Little Red Riding Hood didn't suspect an off shore Benjamin, but inside, a wolf-trencherman that he was, had just eaten Granny. He pulled the old woman's dress over his pair of strides when he saw the girl through the window; holy smoke, he thought, with a second meal for the day, he'd be Indiana. Little Red Riding Hood entered the joint and saw her grandmother in the bed. She stared at Granny's chip.

"My, what thick brothers and sisters you have."

"All the better to tickle you with," said the disguised wolf.

"My, my, and what a long 'I suppose' you have."

"All the better to sniff out today's wonderful lunch," answered the wolf.

"Sure but wearing that lean and fat, I can't see your long gray bonny fair."

"Then come closer," said the wolf. "Take a load off those lovely plates of meat." After a pause, the wolf said, "Those pork and beans fit you so well. Join me in a jar. Then have a loaf of dummy to fill that jam and jelly."

Little Red Riding Hood suspected Benjamin was off shore. Where did Granny get those strides? The Alexander was disconnected. Harp that she was, Granny never offered her a drop. She heard hunters shooting outside. Did they have an Eerie Canal?

"What big pearlies you have, Granny."

The wolf had lost patience. "All the better to eat you with, my dear!"

The wolf sat up but Red Riding Hood knocked the wolf on his Happy Easter. She took an Arthur Duffy outta Granny's gaff and headed for the woods, calling to the hunters. The main event appeared, pulling a pistol from his sky rocket as the wolf stood in the door. With a bliazast, it was curtains for the wolf.

And like the wolf of that story, the old Mission District Irish slang has disappeared. The old Irish have vanished. If Grandfather was a Shanty Irishman, his house was hardly a shanty. With the passage of time, fewer relatives arrived at Christmas. Grandfather died in that home, as did my father, Thomas Jr., years later. That now remarkably small house resonated with a



poetry of its own. While visiting two elderly aunts in Ireland this past summer, I heard some of the familiar Roscommon cadences. Perhaps there are a few stories left. So the next time you meet someone after a triumph or set back, you can say, “All the way out Market, up Eddy, down Turk.”