

September at the Museum!



FDNY at Ground Zero 9/11

The Fireman on the Stairs: Communal Loyalties and the Making of Irish America.

On September 11, 2001, three hundred and forty-three firefighters died in the World Trade Center Towers attacks. An entire nation watched them, an entire world perhaps, and marveled at their heroism. In an America and indeed, dare we say it, a New York where only the rich, the famous, the notable, the notorious - in short the "successful" - had long seemed worthy of our attention, if not respect, "the grunts" as Peggy Noonan called them, "became the kings and queens of the city."

... What became clear in interview after interview, talk after talk, story after story,

was that they went up those stairs from a sense of commitment, of duty. It was not so much an abstract obligation, but a sense of commitment rooted in the concrete community of the Fire Department - of their fellows, their brothers, their sisters, uncles, cousins and friends. They went up sometimes, quite literally, to rescue friends, even family members, but even when they went up to save strangers, their sense of duty was rooted in a community and its traditions and the need for the respect of their peers.

To many observers, these communal loyalties, these fierce bonds, are as striking and intriguing as the heroism they produced. To many Americans, for whom the restless, wandering individualism of modern America is so much the norm that it seems commonplace, this communalism must have seemed foreign, almost exotic, if touching. To us as Irish Americans it may have been more familiar, but it still seemed strange - not because we did not know it or recognize it, but because we had not seen it for so long.

Men and women of many nationalities went up those stairs, and it would be unjust, indeed, cheap, mean and self-serving not to recognize that fact. And yet, and yet (you will see that phrase written here a lot), a substantial proportion of the firefighters were Irish Americans. One hundred and forty-five of the three hundred and forty-three firefighters who died that day had been members of the Fire Department's Irish American fraternal group, the Emerald Society.

It was not just the names, the neighborhoods, or even the songs that marked them as Irish American, it was also these tight bonds of communal loyalty that bound this community of working-class men and women, regular guys all, together. If those Irish-American values of communalism and "regular guy egalitarianism" seem like an anachronism today, they have not always been so. For a long time, nothing seemed to set Irish Americans apart more, nothing seemed more tellingly or indelibly Irish-American, than this kind of rough-and-ready communalism. Moreover, the conflict between such communal loyalties and the values and circumstances of the American environment - values of individualism and circumstances of economic abundance and racial and ethnic diversity - has been the central dynamic of the history of the Irish in America.

Such loyalties, many historians argued for example, seemed to retard Irish Americans' upward mobility. Until recently Irish Americans have been the poster boys for economic failure in America. From historians like Stephan Thernstrom to contemporary observers like Thomas Sowell and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, the "relevant question" has been, as Moynihan stated, "not how the Irish have succeeded, but why they have not succeeded more." And the answer, as often as not, has been Irish Americans' failure to act as individuals, to stand on their own, take responsibility for their lives, self-confidently assume risks and make the improvements that would make them successful. Irish Americans failed to be individuals and move up, so this argument goes, not so much because of a lack of skills but because of a lack of will: individual mobility would break their ties to their community, Irish Americans allegedly feared, their bonds to their fellows, and this Irish Americans were reluctant to do.

More Irish-born men and women lived in New York City in 1890 than on the entire continent of Australia; and far more lived in Boston than in all of the mountain states in United States in the same year. The northeastern United States - New England and the Middle Atlantic states - was the core, the heart of the Irish diaspora, but here Irish Americans made slow economic progress, significantly slower than other ethnic groups here like the Germans, Scandinavians, the British and the Jews. How do we account for these complications?

Frankly, I don't know, but I think they have something to do with immigrant networks. Networks are those groups, clusters of friends and relatives, who made migration possible in the nineteenth century for people from countries like Ireland, Italy and Hungary. They still do for poor people from Mexico, El Salvador or Guatemala today. Most poorer immigrants, as Charles Tilly points out, migrate not as individuals but as parts of these networks, as "chains" of men and women following friends or relatives in long trails from home in the old country to home in the new. This helps the poor and the ignorant - not stupid, just people without education - to brave the fearful, unknown risks of going three thousand miles to a new country.

Networks provide more than information. Friends who had already come to America often bought tickets for their relatives and friends at home. Irish Americans sent \$260 million back to Ireland between 1848 and 1900: 40 percent, or \$104 million, in prepaid tickets. In Worcester, where I come from, a steamship ticket agent named Richard O'Flynn sold sixty tickets on the White Star Line in December of 1884 and sent them to Ireland. Forty-three of the tickets were bought by people in Worcester for people with the same last name in Ireland: Sara Gleason for Maurice Gleason; Bridget McNamara for Andrew McNamara; John O'Connor for Jeremiah O'Connor.

Networks not only help immigrants travel to a new country they sustain newcomers when they get there. Networks help new immigrants find jobs and places to live. While most Irish immigrant women worked as domestic servants and lived in the homes of their employers, most immigrant men boarded out, not in big boardinghouses, but as groups of two or three with Irish immigrant families who had come to America before them. And when they went to get a job, Irish immigrants depended on friends to help them. In Worcester in 1901, there were twenty-one Irish-born policemen, but no less than five were from Killarney. Coincidence? I think not. Around the same time, a Worcester newspaper reported a woman from Ireland picked up by the police. She was crazed with fear, sobbing and crying. She had lost the addresses of her friends and relatives in Worcester and felt lost.

Networks, friends, community could be essential here in America, an economy of abundance, as in Ireland, an economy of scarcity, because in nineteenth and twentieth century America, there may have been more opportunities for economic success than in Ireland, but there were also many risks, especially for poor people with few skills. The American industrial economy ran a roller coaster of boom and bust in the nineteenth century; job-related deaths or injuries were commonplace; and there was little backup or safety net - except for the poorhouse, and no one wanted to go there. Immigrants still needed help, they needed each other. This, then, was not just communalism as a new or old idea, but communalism embodied in the flesh and blood of friends and family.

Irish immigrants who came here they sustained; they nourished; they kept people alive. Tyler Anbinder, in his book about Five Points, reports that even there, in the foulest, most degraded Irish slum in America, immigrants from the most impoverished parts of Ireland, like Kenmare in southern Kerry, were opening bank accounts and saving money in the 1850s and 1860s. In the end Anbinder attributes this ability not so much to individual initiative as to "having so many of their kinsmen and former neighbors with them in New York. Virtually overnight, they created a large, intricate network that could be used to help find jobs, housing, even spouses."

Networks did not have to be inherited from Ireland, however. Irish immigrants and their descendants, like all immigrant and ethnic Americans, created new webs of friends and loyalties here in the United States. Irish immigrants might follow chains into city neighborhoods, but once settled, they and their children found new friends among their neighbors. Eventually, many Irish-American neighborhoods evolved into tight communities centered on churches, groceries, saloons, ethnic clubs, and gangs that constantly reinforced and strengthened communal ties. In cities from Boston to Chicago neighborhoods sometimes took on the names of their Catholic parishes, such as St. Gregory's or St. Peter's in Dorchester.

Irish Americans, like other American ethnics, built occupational networks too. Burrowing into specific trades or industries they created "niches" for their own people. New York City's Fire Department, with its hive of Irish-American friends and relatives, is a classic example of this kind of niche, but there have been others. In New York, Irish Americans also established substantial niches among the longshoremen and transit workers at one time or another and dominated the city's Police Department for decades. Irish-American occupational niches were common elsewhere as well. In David Emmons's Butte, Montana, Irish immigrants monopolized jobs in the city's copper mines, for example. Networks, then, were not merely bridges across the Atlantic, not merely means for the immigrants to get to the United States and weather their initial adaptations. They were essential parts of ethnic life for generations after the immigrants had passed away.

Networks, then, were and still are beneficial and sustaining for immigrants and their descendants. But they have another side. The more people depend on them, the

thicker the links and bonds among such friends and relatives can become, and thus the harder it can be to even see outside the network, much less break out of them and grab new opportunities - to think, perhaps, not of being a fireman or a police man, but, God forbid, a lawyer. That may have been part of the problem with upward mobility in the Northeast. Here, slower-growing economies and elites hostile and entrenched in their own networks made upward progress more difficult and helped push Irish Americans back into reliance on the help of their own people. (Networks can also serve to exclude people however, as we have learned in our own past.)

(In the end,) can a people, can a nation, can a world, really, survive without some sense of our obligations, our loyalties to one another? Without firemen and women willing to go up those stairs? Can we, or any society, take care of our old, succor the poor, or nourish our children without some sense of community?

From: *The Fireman on the Stairs: Communal Loyalties in the Making of Irish America*, Timothy J. Meagher. Radharc, Vol. 4, Special Commemorative Issue: Ten Years of Glucksman Ireland House (2003), pp. 3-58

Máire Ní Chathasaigh and Chris Newman
Celtic Hall, 430 New Karner Road
Tuesday, September 3rd, 7pm
\$15 for members, \$20 non-members

The virtuoso partnership of "the greatest Celtic harper of our age" (LIVE IRELAND) and a premier flatpicking guitarist and has by now brought its unique musical vision to twenty-two countries on five continents. Together they have created one of the most distinctive voices in modern acoustic music. Their six duo and five solo CDs, instructional books and collaborations with many other luminaries of the Celtic, folk, swing jazz and bluegrass worlds express both the depth of their commitment to tradition and an eternally playful, curious and adventurous spirit.

Over the years Chris and Máire have toured with Altan, Sharon Shannon, Cherish the Ladies, Patrick Street, the Rankins, Mary Black, Maura O'Connell, Dónal Lunny, Aly Bain, Boys of the Lough and many other leading bands and artists. Recording collaborations include a guest appearance on Irish rock legend Rory Gallagher's posthumous *Wheels within Wheels* (BMG), work with (among others) Dan ar Braz, Sharon Shannon, Dónal Lunny, Liam O'Flynn, Aly Bain, Danny Thompson, Cathy Fink, Boys of the Lough, and a quartet CD, *Heartstring Sessions*, with Arty McGlynn and Nollaig Casey.

Tickets available at the door but call the museum on 518 427 1916 to reserve your seats.



Rambling House: Traditional Irish Music
Irish American Heritage Museum
Thursday September 5th, 7pm



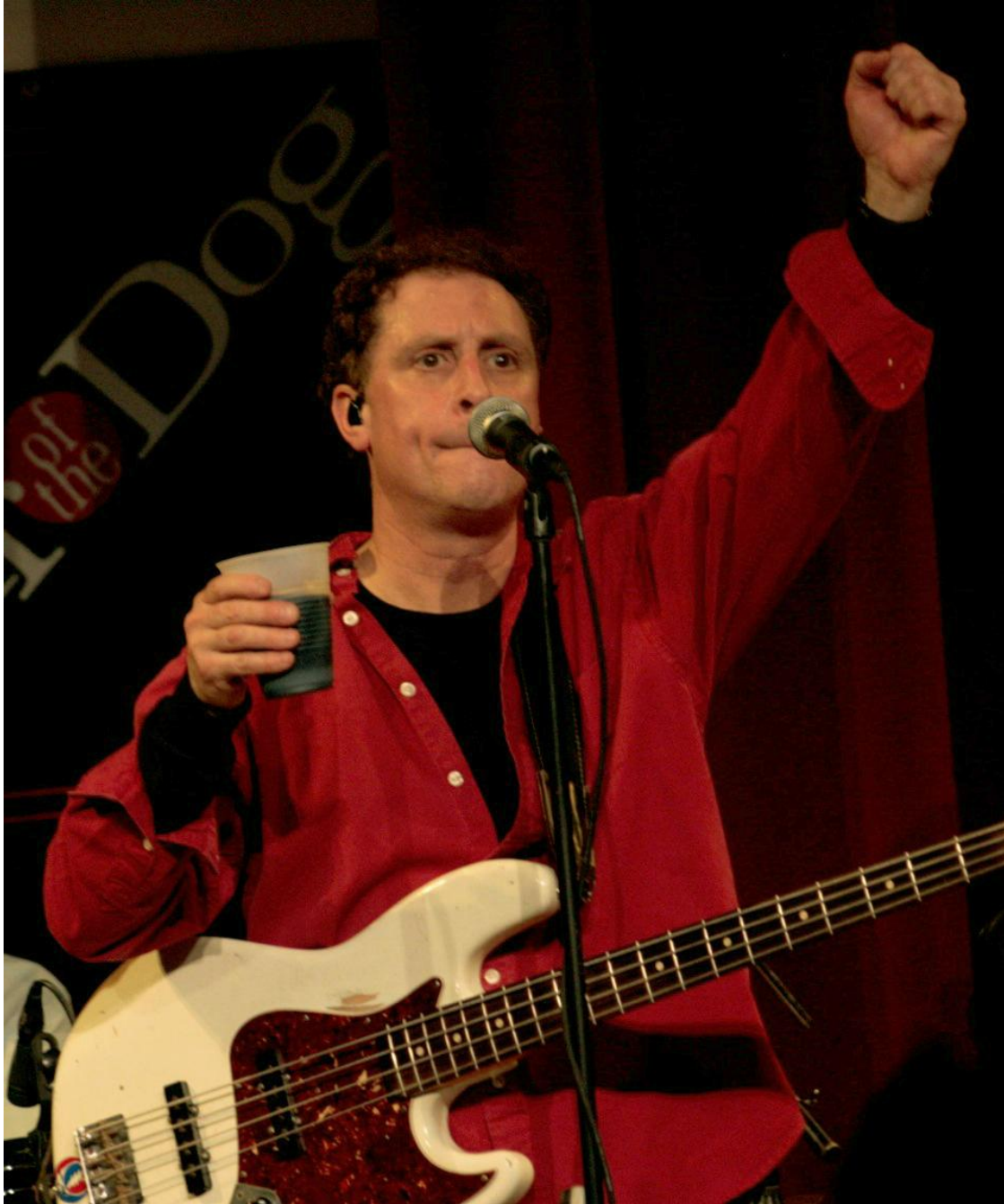
We are delighted to be back after the summer hiatus! As usual, all are welcome to participate in this free evening of traditional Irish music and song brought to you by Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann (the Irish Musicians' Association). Bring your party piece or instrument! Audience participation welcome and encouraged by our friendly group. Hear traditional Irish music, and old songs, stories and poems in a traditional format that still happens in many Irish homes (and bars) today.

The motto of Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann is "ceol agus gaoil" (music and kinship), and while headquartered in Ireland, there are branches of Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann all over the world. Light refreshments will be provided.

Members Picnic
West Pavilion, The Crossings Park at Colonie
Saturday August 8th 1pm.

This is our first members picnic and we are very excited to showcase Irish hospitality, games, and music in a family-friendly park. Rick Bedrosian will play both Irish and American songs, the Albany Rebels (our local GAA team) will demonstrate Gaelic football and teach the kids some moves! We will have food and drink but all are welcome to bring a dish to share too. The

Crossings is a beautiful park, and our space is near the Children's Maze and playground as well as the duck pond and the Ramble for those of you who want to explore. For ease of entrance, please bring your membership card. Bring lawn chairs or a rug and catch up with friends at this informal event. Call the museum for more information.

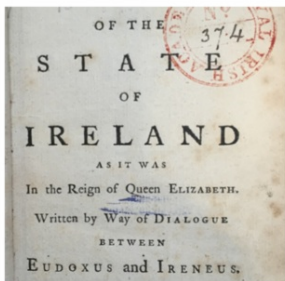


**Memories of 9/11 at Home and Abroad.
Tuesday September 10th, 7pm**



At least eighteen Irish citizens (seven born on the island of Ireland) died on 9/11, as did scores of other people of Irish descent - from many of the financial workers in the upper floors of the Twin Towers to a significant number of the brave FDNY and NYPD members who tried to rescue them. This discussion will focus on the Irish and Irish American experience on that day. From Fr. Mychal Judge, officially designated Victim 0001, to the men and women who perished in the attacks, from the firefighters and police who worked at Ground Zero, to the construction workers who worked on the rebuilding of the World Trade Center, this lecture will discuss the impact of 9/11 on Irish America. In the years since the attacks, memorials both big and small have been built throughout the United States and across the globe. The most immediate ones were impromptu - garlands draped on a parked car it became clear no one would claim, notes and photographs taped to fences and walls around New York City, candles placed outside of Ladder Company fire houses. Five memorials have been built in Ireland and we will discuss the communities in Ireland that have commemorated the event..

Historical Biases of Spenser's *A View of the Present State of Ireland* Dr. Tom Bulger Wednesday 18th September 7pm



Edmund Spenser spent most of his adult life as an English planter in Ireland, where uprisings against

English rule were a regular occurrence. *A View of the Present State of Ireland*, which is written as a dialogue between two Englishmen, examines the reasons why previous attempts to subdue the Irish had failed and proposes strategies by which English rule could be imposed once and for all. In the first half of the work, Irenius, an expert on Irish affairs, describes to Eudoxus the evil customs of the Irish, condemning their nomadic herding practices, their religion, their social and familial organization, their bards, their hair and dress, and so on. In the second half, he outlines a program for the military pacification of Ireland. The brutality of Spenser's proposals, and his insistence on martial rather than common law as the solution to the Irish problem, may explain why the book was not printed until 1633. Dr. Bulger's discussion will focus on how Spenser's view of Ireland reflected the Elizabethan England's received views of religion, warfare, political, moral, linguistic, and cultural issues in Ireland in the 16th century.

Author Discussion - *The House Children* by Heidi Daniele Wednesday, September 25th, 7pm.



The House Children is based on the true stories of five women who grew up in the same institution - Saint Joseph's Industrial School in Ballinasloe, Galway. The women wanted to remain anonymous, so author Heidi Daniele wrote the story as a novel. In addition to the interviews, she obtained documents including birth certificates, court orders of detention, education and health records, photographs, newspaper articles, and she met with the Sisters of Mercy, visited Ballinasloe, and assisted the women in filing for restitution through the Redress Board. In this presentation, she will take us through the documents she discovered and tell the story of these real lives, forever changed by conservative Ireland.

Her book tells the story of Mary Margaret Joyce, born in 1937 in the Tuam Home for unwed mothers. At age five she is sentenced to an industrial school with one hundred other unwanted girls, where she is given the name Peg and assigned the number 27. Peg quickly learns the rigid routine of prayer, work, and silence under the watchful eye of Sister Constance. Her only respite is an annual summer holiday with the Hanleys, a kindly host family from Galway that has taken an interest in Peg. Based on actual events, *The House Children* is a compelling story

of familial love, shameful secrets, and life inside Ireland's infamous industrial schools. We have copies of the book for sale.

**Antietam Remembered: Survivors Tell of America's Bloodiest Day
with State Museum Military Historian Robert Mulligan.
Thursday, September 26th, 7pm**



Fought on September 17th, 1862, before the technology of television cameras and recordings allowed an event to be captured for posterity, it was up to those who fought there, seated years later at their kitchen table or library desk, to describe the event in their own words.

In this presentation, Robert has joined images of the battle, contemporary and afterwards, with selected quotations from those men, and from one woman. The audience will assume the identity of one of those persons, and read from a slip of paper handed out at the beginning, what their surviving veteran wrote. Audiences always come away with a very changed perception of the battle, and Civil War battle in general. Reflective listeners sometimes wonder why they thought history in high school was so dull!

**Film Society: *Older Than Ireland*
Monday, September 30th, 7pm. \$5**

This landmark documentary tells a unique living history of Ireland - one seen through the eyes of 30 Irish centenarians. The film explores each centenarian's journey, from their birth at the dawn of Irish independence to their life in modern day Ireland. Director Alex Fegan (who also looked at another aspect of Emerald Isle life in his 2013 tale *The Irish Pub*) has cleverly crafted a kind of chronological narrative out of their musings, covering everything from their first memories (a lot of which seem to involve new shoes) to life in triple figures.

What fascinates is their frankness. Many recall how "brutal" and "savage" their educators were, others recall the tumultuous events of the 1916 uprising and the "frightening" "Black-and-Tans" period. Partners' flaws are laid bare, as are concerns about declining moral standards and today's youngsters "doing nothing on their little machines." Each of the interviewees has witnessed a century of immense social, political and technological change, and provide a unique perspective on the meaning of life.



OLDER than Ireland



Tales, wit and wisdom from the centenarians of Ireland.

Irish American Heritage Museum | 518-427-1916 | info@irish-us.org | www.irish-us.org