

New York Stories



Nona Plessner Lyons

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About the Author

Nona Plessner Lyons writes **NEW YORK STORIES**, many sourced from her mother's diary and stories she told about her parents, Kate Griffin of County Kerry, Ireland and Maurice Hennessy of Limerick who immigrated to New York in the early 1880s. The stories told by her mother, Norah Hennessy Plessner provide a glimpse of life in the vibrant city for recent immigrants.



Nona writing at the Blasket Island Heritage Center, Dingle, County Kerry while on a return visit to Ireland for the launch of her sixth book: ***Learning Over Time: How Professionals Learn, Know And Use Knowledge***, September 2017 at **University College Cork**, where she has been a visiting research scholar since 2001. Glimpses of the people, their history and passions provide a snapshot of her ancestors in the 1880s. She previously self-published **KNOWING IRELAND** based on her experiences of living in Ireland for nearly a decade.

1. Beginnings: Finding Ballynoneen Recovering the Lives of Ancestors: Thomas and Mary Nolan Griffin — our Great Grandparents

**Ballynoneen, Co. Kerry in the west of
Ireland, 27 April 2001**

If you came in spring to Ballynoneen from the south along the main road, passing through a part of the stark Derrynasaggart Mountains, coming with the first flowering of green in Killarney, winding a way in and out of the grey market square of Listowel, then heading northeast as the land flattens towards Ballylongford, you would come to the crossroads at Lisselton. Katie Nolan's bright yellow pub is on the right and, just beyond, is Behan's "Meat and Produce" Market. If you stop to ask directions at Behan's, you will probably meet Mr. Behan, the butcher, his father, and his young, black-haired son, Jack who is just learning to walk and say, "Hello."

To get to Ballynoneen they will direct you, "Go out behind the store and take a sharp left; then, follow the road straight ahead up and over the mountain. Ballynoneen is on the other side." We had missed the road two weeks earlier. But today we could see it hidden behind what appeared to be a driveway. We were on our way looking for my great grandmother's little hamlet called Ballynoneen--the place I had discovered only the day before where she had lived for forty years. As we took our leave from the Behan's, armed with sandwiches, sodas and good directions, we said good-bye as little Jack waved to us. Bob said, "See you again." Old Mr. Behan called out in that gracious Irish way, "You'd always be welcome here."

Immediately, the road behind Behan's turns making a very sharp right along the edge of a set of houses. Then it straightens and heads due north in a line as far as the eye can see, rising in the distance as it follows the mountain, Knockanore, to its tip--a high place you cannot see beyond. On either side of the road the land starts to rise up. Now in spring, yellow gorse appears everywhere among the soft green fields. Bog can be seen running through the yellow. Among it is good grazing land. There are

only a few houses and farms scattered along the side of the road. Some are very new and quite fine, clearly not farm-houses.

As you reach the top of the Mountain, the land flattens and the eye catches the very small white and pink daises that cover the field. Suddenly, before you the River Shannon gleams like a thin white line out to the Atlantic, as large clouds frame the landscape in a light rain. The land slopes down and there clustered on the left is the little hallow of houses and farms, small fields and trees with the river beyond. It is Ballynoneen. We stop just to follow the sweep of the river and gaze at the hamlet. It is lovely.

We had come to Ballynoneen today, searching for Mary Nolan Griffin and her husband, Thomas--our great, grandparents. I had begun to be taken with the life of our great grandmother, Mary Nolan, when I suddenly realized that she could have been left alone in Ireland, after most of her children--including our grandmother Catherine Griffin Hennessy--had emigrated to America. Mary Nolan had had six children. One had died in childhood and Bridget, Mike, and Pat had all gone to America. Our grandmother, Kate, had joined her brothers and sister in New York when Bridget asked her to come and sent her the fare. Cornelius, Con, had left later for America but I did not know when, only that it was after 1888/9 when Kate had arrived. So I was curious about Mary Nolan and what had happened to her. I wondered how she had fared and what she would be doing. Where was she? Had she died? When? Where? How had she lived?

I had been searching the microfiche in the library at University College Cork (UCC) which has two very important sources of data: Griffith's Evaluation of the 1840's and 50's, the massive land survey of all of Ireland carried out so that taxes might be collected by the British; and, the 1901 Irish Census. But my searches for Griffins and Nolans through the small little hamlets of North Kerry --including Ballyconry, where our grandmother was born, had not turned-up a Mary Nolan. It had turned up Griffins and Nolans but none seemed right, no other information seemed connected to them. Reading the microfiche of the Census, however, you could easily surmise some very sad stories, especially of women living alone or with a daughter or son. Just the simple listing of "mother-in-law" at the end of a long number of a family's children made you wonder: How had they really fared? And I worried about our

grandmother. So I decided to check the death records in Dublin.

My searches in Dublin a month earlier at the Registry of Deeds had yielded nothing about Mary Nolan. Then I thought to shift the search to Thomas Griffin –Nolan’s husband, our great grandfather. I knew from our mother that he had died in his 40’s of what was called “dropsy.” That was an unusually young age for what I was finding in the records. I did locate a Thomas Griffin in his 40s and asked the Registry Office for the full citation on the certificate, but they were so busy with other searchers that the results had to be sent to me in Cork in the mail.

When it arrived, the death certificate read:

Fifth February 1879.

Ballynoneen: Thomas Griffin, Male, Married, Age: 44 yrs.

Occupation: Labourer

Cause of Death: Disease of the stomach, 2 days, no medical attendance

**Signature of Informant: Mary X Griffin (her mark) present at death,
Ballynoneen.**

Seventh April 1879. Signed: James Moran Deputy Registrar.

I had never heard of Ballynoneen. I had known from our Mother that her grandfather had died in his 40s, had been a fisherman--had been in business with another man, had their own boat--fishing on the River Shannon catching salmon. He had died of dropsy which I since have found out has something to do with fluids in the stomach--as the death certificate indicated.

Armed with this information, I headed back to the University to check the 1901 census. I thought that our great grandmother was probably dead by that time, but I would see if there were any other names of folks who could have been related. But when the microfiche rolled before my eyes for Ballynoneen, I was stunned to find as the very first person listed in the community: Mary Griffin. I hurriedly moved the microfiche to the next page for the details and there listed was:

Mary Griffin. Head of family: Roman Catholic: Cannot read or write. 70 years (1901)

Profession, Occupation: General Servant Domestic: RETIRED. Widow,

**County Kerry,
Speaks Irish & English.**

Listed below was:

Cornelius Griffin: Son: Roman Catholic: 29: Agricultural labourer, Not married, County Kerry, Speaks Irish & English.

Interestingly, it was officially signed by Mary Nolan, her mark, as Head of the Family, not Mary Griffin.

So Mary Nolan was alive in 1901—age 70, living with Con. Con hadn't yet left for America. The census records indicate they lived in a several room cottage, with two windows in the front of the house. And they had a chicken house on the property. Mom always said that they had a small garden and raised chickens and pigs and had a goat. They sold butter and cheese at local fairs.

And so here we were on a lovely morning in spring on the road in Ballynnoneen looking to find the place of our ancestors. It is a beautiful place and a delight to be in. It really is only a stone's throw from the Shannon. You can easily see how Thomas fished the Shannon. At first, I wondered why the death certificate never said that he was a fisherman. I think now that I have discovered why. Let me tell that story.

Fishing in Ballynnoneen

When we were in Dingle on our way to Ballyferriter, a place at the end of that peninsula that we love and have stayed in several times, we stopped in the Dingle Library. There the librarian had shown me the collection of local history books. Among them, I had found a local journal, *The Shannonside*. There were two editions, one in 1993 and one in 1996. The stories were all written by locals of the Shannon River communities.

One story was about fishing on the Shannon. It mostly told of the fishing-partners; the pairs of men who regularly went together to fish. The author talked too of how sometimes the fishing was excellent and how in some years the salmon seemed to

be very scarce. He thought it had to do with some natural cycles. What I realized is that our great grandfather probably did fish the Shannon catching and selling salmon as all these men had. That was what was referred to as his ‘business,’ by our mother. It was a business, a way of making a livelihood. And in that part of Ireland, men always fished with a partner even if a boat’s crew was made up of three men. I was also impressed to read that they used the same small canoe-like structure called a curragh--that had been used in Dingle and on the Blasket Islands. These boats could be made of a very light frame of wood encased in a canvas that had been water sealed with a tar-like substance. You can still see these today in the museum at Dingle Harbour and in the Blasket Island Heritage Center on Dingle. Of course today, fishing in Ireland is being carried on with modern boats and technology. And it is a good thing. It is amazing how treacherous the waters off the Atlantic were this past winter. Several boats ended up on the shores or rocks; several dramatic rescues were made and there was loss of life.

I imagine that fishing along the Shannon must have been wonderful for these men, a rich resource at their front door in somewhat protected waters. I see from the *Shannonside* story that these fishermen in those parts fished off of Beal Point, within a stone’s throw of Ballynnoneen. Beal means “mouth” of the river in Irish. Mom always said her grandfather fished in the mouth of the Shannon. It is amazing how all these little clues add up. I myself in checking the records always looked at how close the places of potential relatives of Mary Nolan or Thomas were to the Shannon. Our grandmother probably gave the translation of the Irish word to her children as she told the stories of her parents. I remember that Mom said she spoke very highly of both her mother and her father, Thomas and Mary Nolan Griffin.

Everyday Life

One other story I found in the *Shannonside Journal* depicted life in a nearby community called Doon. I believe that our Grandmother might have gone with her mother to church in Doon or Kilconry. (I believe Kilconry church may be one the author refers to as Doon.) What I found interesting was the author’s description of going to Mass to the now abandoned church in Doon. He says the people “from over the hill, way over the hill,” made their way walking through the fields going to Mass on a Sunday. Other people would come on bicycles, donkeys and carts, or pony and

trap.” I could see that the people from the Ballynoneen “hill,” Mt. Knockanore, could easily have made this trip. I have been to see the abandoned church. It is a beautiful place, with a simplicity still evident in the fairly small church. It is at a crossroads and if you take the left road from the church you would follow the Atlantic towards the Shannon. The last time we visited there and stayed in Ballybunion while we were searching for Ballynoneen, we left in a light spring morning rain as a wonderful pair of double rainbows arched the ocean and the fields towards Ballynoneen, following us all along the way like some blessing.

The Famine in Ballylongford

The last story I report on here is from the *Shannonside Journal* that relates the stories of what the famine was like for the people in the 1840s in the area of Ballylongford, the largest community the closest to Ballynoneen.

I do not remember any story from our Mother about the famine. I do remember that our grandmother said that she had never seen the poverty she found in New York in Ireland. Of course, our grandfather replied, “But you never would find the education available here in New York in Ireland.”

You wonder, was that why he came to America? As a family, I guess you could say we certainly took advantage of the education. Do you think they--Catherine Griffin and Maurice Hennessy with her parents, Mary Nolan and Thomas Griffin--find that satisfying and rest in peace with that knowledge of us?

2. Leavings

My mother always remembered the way her mother told the story. It began with the passage on the ship, the City of Chicago, in the terrible winter that followed the great blizzard of 1888. Kate Griffin, my grandmother of County Kerry, Ireland on the eve of her 20th birthday was going to New York. The trip would be a turbulent one in the sharp March of that winter. Kate, who was traveling with several girls from her village, became their nurse when the great swells of the Atlantic seas proved their match. "Taking such good care of us" the girls had written home to tell her mother. Kate was leaving for New York, city of promise for so many of Ireland's immigrants.

But Kate Griffin was going not because she wanted to, or like so many, because she needed to, but simply because her sister had asked her, had pleaded with her and her mother, so alone was she, so homesick in New York even with two brothers there. Then, when Bridget sent a ticket, Kate said, "Yes" she would come. And she did. But she carried with her the saddest memory. As the boat train pulled away from the small brick station in the country town of Listowel, Kate saw her widowed mother crumple, fainting in a dead weight as she watched her youngest and dearest child take her leave. Kate, who never returned to Ireland, carried that memory with her always, as did my mother.

In it was there a life lesson: Leaving home, abandoning someone you love for someone you love equally well? What do you do when there are two things you care deeply about? It was a question Kate would revisit again in her life and it is the theme of a story that always captured my imagination and, I believe, my mother's.

But I get ahead of their story. Bridget Griffin, Kate's sister, eagerly awaiting her arrival, met her sister in New York when her boat docked. So thankful to Kate, she would help her get settled, find a job in Manhattan. Typically for so many young Irish women of that day, Kate would take a job as a maid. She lived-in, working for the fairly well-to-do New York family of a doctor whose house stood on the corner of Madison Avenue and 87th Street. She was paid what seems a paltry sum even for the time: 14 dollars a month, an extra one dollar for ironing. But she said she had room and

board and the family was benign if not good to her. On her day off she could treat her friends to lunch at the house. But in spite of her good fortune, Kate said she cried each night for a year for her mother. Five years later, at one of her sister Bridget's celebrated Sunday dinners for the burgeoning Irish community of Manhattan's Rector Street, Kate met Maurice Hennessy, a young man from Limerick, Ireland. In 1893 they were married and soon there was a growing family in a walk up flat on Christopher Street in Greenwich Village.

If Kate's husband had a great passion in life, it was for Ireland. Caught up in the political upheaval of the times, of Parnell's efforts to win the Irish state independence from England, Maurice Hennessy followed intensely the events in his homeland. He was an avid, daily reader of three New York newspapers: *The Sun*, *Irish World*, and *The Globe*. When he would ask his daughter to fetch the daily papers, his wife would chide him, saying, "Isn't it the same news in all the papers, Maurice?" He replied, "But it's the editorials, Kate, the editorials!"

3. Dark Rosaleen

I never really knew my grandmother Kate well. I was a child when she died. But my mother told me that she—and I quote—“had black, black hair, blue eyes and milk-white skin.” She was born in the west of Ireland and lived the short years of her childhood there on a farm near the sea. I imagine to my young grandfather, steeped as he was in Irish lore and politics, when as adults they met in New York, this slim, dark-haired woman may have seemed to him a living vision of the Ireland of song and story, the Dark Rosaleen, the secret, passionate symbol of Irish freedom and independence.

She had come from that part of western Ireland itself of such stark beauty: the incredible landscape of sea and mountains set against the incessant movement of clouds and weather that rolled in off the Atlantic. There her father fished the River Shannon near Beal Point, selling the salmon he caught. The family were caretakers of a small farm in Ballynoneen near the market town of Listowel. The farm leased to her father was owned by an English woman who raised and raced horses there in Ireland. Kate’s family took care of the property in exchange for a cottage and garden of their own. My grandmother always said they lived well, her mother raising chickens and pigs and having eggs and butter to sell—enough to share with others when in need. But tragedy struck the family when Thomas Griffin, Kate’s father, was stricken with an attack of palsy—more likely a heart attack—and died suddenly at age 40. Kate was 7 at the time. She remembered her mother, Mary Nolan, continued on the farm, now designated the care-taker. Kate stood by her mother, doing her part, tending the fire and the garden.

Although it was still a time of want and suffering in Ireland—not the fierce scourge of the famine years, but still of near poverty for many, Kate Griffin lived a good life with her family, working the soil, planting the garden, gathering eggs in the early morning, taking butter and eggs to market. Her mother, a gracious woman, the mother of six, was generous to her neighbors. She once chided a neighbor, Tom Carney who was caught one moonlit night stealing eggs from her larder:

“Ah, Carney,” she said, “why do you come in the night scaring my children? Why didn’t you just ask me for the eggs, God forgive you. You know very well I would have given them to you?”

Later when Kate’s brothers, Mike and Pat, and then Bridget left for America, Kate and her brother Con were the sole mainstays of her mother. Was it this life that made Kate a capable young woman? Later in New York when she tended a doctor’s family, the four sons who worked on Wall Street and the daughter, a teacher, she boasted that she was capable of single-handedly running a large household. She did that for some five years before she left to marry and raise a family of her own.

Kate was always thought of as capable and resourceful, by the girls she nursed on the voyage to America, by her neighbors who saw the sometimes heroic ways she raised her children, and by her own children. She was a strong Irish woman.

But how happy was she in the great city of New York? She always claimed that she saw there more want and suffering she had never seen in Ireland. But her Ireland couldn’t be found in the New York of the 1890’s. Henry James called New York “that teeming, long shrill city.” Kate knew, too, that she didn’t see the possibilities that young Maurice Hennessy said he found there.

4. Sunday Dinner

Bridget's place. A flat on Rector Street on the west side of Manhattan, a stone's throw from Battery Park and the very tip of Manhattan. That Sunday morning—what a sense of anticipation for them!

Kate Griffin with her sister Bridget, now hurrying from Mass went down the great granite steps of St. Peter's Church. They fairly flew along the streets, strangely Sunday-morning still, so different from the whirl of every day. Bridget loved that quiet. The slant light, falling among the tall buildings gave way to a full sunlight as they reached the open space of Trinity Place.

Bridget's head was full of lists – things needing to be done. The big ham must go into the oven as soon as they get home. Then the turnips and some good potatoes. Relish. She had made some yesterday along with two loaves of bread. They could set the long table, the good fresh linen. There would be ten of them in all for dinner. Herself and Tommy, her dear husband of just one year. Kate of course. Their brothers, Mike and Pat. And Pat's betrothed, Minny Hennessey who had asked to bring a friend. The two new men who had just joined Pat on the docks, working as longshoremen had been invited a well. And Minny's brother, Maurice Hennessy from Limerick. He might drop by if his game wasn't too late and he could get away from Gaelic Park. Everyone was looking forward to meeting him. Apparently he loved sports.

Bridget felt proud and pleased that she and Tom could scrape together the money to make such a grand dinner, to be the place where their Irish friends knew they were welcome, a place of comfort to those coming into the strange new world of America. It was Sunday dinner. It was getting to be a regular way.

Bridget and Kate reached Rector Street and turned west. Ahead they could just catch a glimpse of the great ship terminals of West Street. You couldn't see the river beyond, the magnificent Hudson. It was blocked by the wall of terminals that reached all along the river from Battery Park to 59th St. Beyond the terminals were the ships, and the places where her family, their friends all worked. The longshoremen, they

were—the “dock-wallopers”. It was a job sturdy Irish country men would fill, coming off one ship and on to another. And in the 1890s they were coming in waves it seemed—all to the docks of New York.

The streets beyond were filled with commerce of those ships—the crates and carts and smells of fruit and fish from everywhere—cocoa from the West Indies, fish from Cape Cod or Cape Verde, fruits and vegetables, iron works and still from Pennsylvania for the new skyscrapers. Just north of Rector Street stood the vast, block-long Washington Market. Bridget shopped there all the time. What wonders to be found. She shopped there for the dinner she would make today.

So glad the men had this day, could be away from the docks, from the long, long hours of back-breaking work—after the heat of the summer and before the cold harsh winters. Away from those long, long hours of work and the cold and damp and disease of the river. Neither Bridget nor Kate knew it then, but the docks would take their toll. Their brothers, Pat and Mike, would be victims of pneumonia before they reached thirty-five.

But now, today Bridget and Kate hurry up the steps and into the house, slipping off their coats, tying on their aprons to prepare Sunday dinner eager to meet and welcome their guests and the newcomers just out of Ireland. The black-haired Kate would soon welcome the athletic Maurice to every Sunday dinner at Bridget’s place.

5. Home Rule

The unexpected thud of something hitting the door followed the strains of song getting ever louder. She had heard him singing, knew his voice. Suddenly, the door flew open. With a loud whoosh of air, a pair of shoes came hurtling into the narrow hallway, catapulting across the room, landing at the kitchen doorway. The loud, sorrowful voice entered the small apartment on Christopher Street.

It was early evening of a grey October day. Kate knew before asking. It was the anniversary. It was hopeless, for it happened each October 7th for all the long years of her marriage. It was the anniversary. Parnell's death. Maurice, now seated on a chair in the kitchen, had been celebrating the death of Charles Stewart Parnell. Each October he mourned the loss of the great leader for Irish freedom, the uncrowned king of Ireland, his own personal hero. She had heard the moan many times, "Oh, my dead Parnell, my dead Parnell."

Words struck with such a deep sadness that never diminished with time. "Oh, why had the Irish turned against him? Betrayed the man and the brilliant achievements he had already made for Ireland? Why?"

"What had persuaded them to their betrayal? Didn't they see what the man was after, nearly had in the palm of his hand? Irish freedom! What fools!"

Now, Kate knew the ritual had begun, retelling the story. It would go on through the night. The terrible story of Parnell's rise to power in the British parliament. His brilliant moves for Irish land reform, cleverly using a boycott against the acts of greedy landlords, then changing the very land laws themselves. And finally the move toward Home Rule, a parliament for Ireland! Maurice's voice rose with a firmness:

"It was the obstructions. The incessant disturbances. That did it. The constant, little disturbances, upsetting the business of the British parliament. First for important bills, then later for every detail of its business. Parnell had found a way, invented obstructions and used the boycott and nearly had the English at bay, its parliament

paralyzed. Some said “its honor and dignity dragged through the dirt.” But his own party didn’t really understand. At first, they protested to their leaders. He was a rabble rouser, a troublemaker. His party leader in the parliament lamented the “vulgar brawl,” as he called it. “What fools!”

Maurice’s voice continued. “But Parnell knew what he was doing. Bring all of Parliament’s business to a halt. Show them straight, power. Force the case, not beg for it! Parnell had done it by mastering all the parliamentary technicalities even though his own called him unscrupulous. The people understood. Everywhere he went, they came. They knew and loved him. They knew, eventually Gladstone had to listen, had to consider Ireland.”

And it didn’t hurt that Irish-Americans were on his side. They greeted Parnell like a king when he came to America in 1880. He was even invited to Washington, spoke to the Congress. Of course it didn’t hurt that his mother was an American, daughter of an admiral who had fought the British in 1812. And Parnell read Americans right, knew he could count on them for more than just applause. Didn’t he boast at one of the Land League meetings of the American who offered him “\$5.00 for bread and \$20.00 for lead!” Parnell was hinting at how far he was willing to go. He was not the one who would “fix the boundary to the march of a nation,” not of his Ireland.

Maurice paused in the long litany. “Ah, what would happen if there had been no married Katharine O’Shea?” Ah, wonder, a thousand times. And the folly that had followed when Michael O’Shea sued for divorce, and named Parnell as an adulterer. Then Parnell turned around and married her. “It was the clergy, the traitorous clergy, denouncing Parnell from the pulpits, denouncing his marriage. He a Protestant marrying a divorced Catholic. The clergy hounded the man, eager to crush him. Betraying him for themselves, for their own power. The hypocrites. They betrayed Ireland, split the party, broke the power. Then Protestant clergy in England clamored against him as well. The Irish Parliamentary Party realized it could not win Home Rule with Parnell as its leader. Split in a bitter debate, the party seceded from Parnell’s leadership. Home rule was defeated for the time being.”

“That was why Parnell had gone to Galway to begin a new strategy to get the people back to where they were. To try again for Home Rule. And everyone knew it was

within reach. Even Gladstone knew.”

But on the way home to England, to Kitty, the tragedy: Parnell caught a chill which worsened to a deep fever. He never really rallied in spite of the doctors. October 7, 1891, he died suddenly and to such astonishment. Only five months before he had married Kitty, now he lay dead in her arms. “Oh, my dead Parnell,” Maurice moaned into the silence.

Home rule. Kate thought it hadn't yet come for Ireland to the great sorrow of her husband. But would it, she wondered, ever come for her? Would she ever be free of the old stories, the drunken brawls, the embarrassments, have her own home rule? Who would give her home rule?

6. Transforming Cathleen Ni Houlihan

Maurice Hennessy sat in the theatre transfixed by the language and the ideas. The curtain had just fallen and the theatre was hushed in deep silence. In his mind's eye he could still see the stage and the figure of the old hag of a woman magically transformed into a beautiful Cathleen Ni Houlihan, beaoning the young man forward, secretly urging him to join her, work for Ireland's relief and freedom. Just then the applause broke. "My God", thought Maurice, "it is just like Dublin, sudden passion released! What did it mean? What could he do?"

When Maurice Hennessy thought about it, he knew he was coming of age in a new age for Ireland. He had come to New York to find a way to live, to make his own way, yet with a silent hope of making some contribution to his native land. Born within the lifetime of Charles Stewart Parnell, Maurice like so many young men of his generation in America burned with a love for a free Ireland, linked themselves to the brilliant cunning of the new hero and sought a life of action. Going out of Ireland to America for everything Ireland could not give, Maurice Hennessy yearned to share his destiny with Ireland's as he began earning a living on the waterfront of New York. With easy access to a lifetime of hard labor, he followed with passionate intensity the life and work that were Parnell's. When at Parnell's funeral, as his body was being lowered into its grave, it was said a meteor crossed the heavens and a star fell. Maurice read the signs for Ireland and himself—recommitting himself to Ireland.

In Ireland, with Parnell's death some say the young turned away in disgust from politics, gave their energies to a new cause, to uncovering what the English had sought to destroy, the cultural life of an older Ireland; but now reclaiming its language, its ancient legends and transforming them into words and stories—dramas—of Irish life.

The words of Synge, O'Casey, Yeats, *The Riders to the Sea*, or *Playboy of the Western World*—all gave new visions of life to Ireland and were stirring the passions of people. In the service of history and culture but of politics as well. These works merged past and present in powerful new symbols. In Yeats' play, *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, Ireland

herself appears in the guise of an old hag who in the end is transformed into a vibrant and compelling woman secretly urging the young to follow her, to work for Ireland's freedom. No wonder Irishmen flocked to the plays when the Abbey Theatre brought them to New York.

Maurice Hennessy, keeping track, read the newspapers, knew about the new life emerging and its political significance. But his day to day life in New York took a different cast. Teeming with Irish immigrants—the greatest wave in all of New York's history, life for longshoremen on New York's waterfront teemed as well with Irish intrigue and a different use of a creative imagination, all in the service of political action for Ireland.

There were the societies, secret and not so secret, the papers, the meetings, the speculations and the plots. The wild reaches of the imagination directed to other ends. The New York papers chronicled the events and revealed the energy of fantastical imaginings, such as: plots to start a war with Canada to divert attention of the British long enough to win a war in Ireland. Or the notion of building a submarine that would be able to launch attacks on London from New York. A submarine was built but it never left New York harbor. And attacks were launched on Canada, some in an impressive number, but all came to naught stopped by the intervention of the US government.

Now today they would celebrate the gains Irishmen in New York could claim and rejoice with them in their achievements and support hope for their future.

7. The Comforter

“It was eerie. Coming like that suddenly, out of the blackness of the bog. I could see it as clearly as I see yourself standing here before me, Mother. It was a light. Coming out of the bog, it was, as if I should be following. And I did. I followed it. What else could I do?”

“Ah, Cornelius, Cornelius Griffin!

And, I wondering and worrying all night where could he be?

My only son left to me. Gone to the fair, just to sell the cheese and some pigs. Make some money. Maybe get another goat. And not home at 9 o'clock. The church bells peeling across the still night and I not knowing where you were and why you weren't home. Your sister Kate and I sitting here waiting and worrying.”

“I tell you, Mother, I was lost. I had just cut into the bog, a short cut, I thought, with enough light of day left to see me across and home. But all of a sudden nothing seemed familiar! It was so strange.”

“I turned around. I looked each way. But I couldn't find a marker. I was terrified, I don't mind telling you.

And then it was all blackness. Night came on. I must have wandered, I don't know how long. Suddenly, there it was, the light, moving slowly across the darkness. I followed and came out and home here.”

“Ah, it was our prayers, Cornelius, God love you. It was the prayers of your sister and Mother that saved you, gave you the light home.”

Kate Griffin remembered well that night so long ago. So terrified they were, she and her Mother. Cornelius, usually so dependable, then so late. And we there just waiting.

Now, here she was waiting again for Cornelius, this time at a pier in New York City. Waiting, for Cornelius was coming to America. To New York, coming like she had herself had come just a few years ago. He would be bringing the fine goose-down comforter her mother had made for her. She would so treasure it in the new home she would soon make with Maurice. And the great painting, Our Lady of Perpetual Help just like the one that was in Lady Chapel in the church at home. She had so loved that great painting. Her Mother's pride, to be her's. Now given by her Mother. Cornelius would be bringing them, the painting and the comforter for her new home.

But where was he? Most of the passengers had already come through the ship's terminal. The tall, hot waiting room was nearly empty, as it was getting on to 6pm. She remembered as a child -- how just a few years ago -- she had looked forward to her brother's coming and goings. He was the man of the house then.

Just then she saw the man, one of the steam ship company's guards, coming through the door carrying the big roll of a package.

"Kate Griffin. Is a Kate Griffin here," he called.

Kate waved an acknowledgment and he came forward.

"Your brother, Cornelius, asked me to deliver this to you. He said to tell you he was going straight to the train. Had to hurry. He was going on with some people he met on the ship, straight to St. Louis. He said to tell you he was very sorry not to be able to see you, but he needed to go, to take advantage of a job."

"Con, Con," Kate thought. Not coming, not to be seen, no news of home off his lips. Ah! Con, still following some light only you can see. Oh, Con! Not thinking about us waiting.

Kate turned to leave the building. She would tell Maurice what had happened. At least, she had the comforter.

8. Haunted by Ghosts in the Microfiche

Tralee. March 2001

The slightly blurred microfiche of the 1901 census slowly rolled before my eyes revealing townland names in the Barony of Raghticonnor, that ancient division of northern county Kerry that still organized the lives of people there in 1901. I was looking at data from the town lands of Ballyconry and what is officially named “Listowel Rural”, the cluster of towns, seemingly infinitesimal but amazingly named and known, if not always appearing on maps. We had come to the Tralee Library to search the microfiche because the librarian in Dingle had told us that Tralee had a fine Historical Documents collection. We were looking for my family, especially for records of the life of my grandmother, Catherine Griffin, who had come to America out of County Kerry in 1889. Two years ago at the National Library in Dublin, I had located her birth record: the 15th of May 1868. Now, I was searching for her mother, Mary Nolan Griffin, my great grandmother. I had suddenly realized that all of Mary Nolan’s five children had left her for America. I wondered: was she alive in 1901 when the first census was taken in Ireland? Could I find her presence somewhere in the names and lines and boxes of that report? Just some clue as to her whereabouts?

The week before I had been at University College Cork’s Special Collections searching that earlier census, Griffith’s Evaluation of 1851. That census had been taken of all landholders and land user tenants, so that taxes might be collected from them. In looking at Griffith’s, I had focused on Ballyconry where I knew from the Dublin records that our grandmother had been born. In Griffith’s Evaluation of 1851, I had in fact located in the vicinity of Ballyconry many Griffins, Nolans and even a Maurice Hennessy--the name of the man grandmother had married in 1893 in New York, even though we know he came from Limerick. In Tralee, searching the 1901 Census, I find again the same family names that appear in the 1851 Evaluation, but dramatically reduced in number.

I wonder where they all have gone. Had they all left Ireland for America? And

although I conclude that I need additional dates before own my search can go forward, I cannot get my great grandmother out of my mind. Where was she in 1901? Mary Nolan Griffin, this great grandmother, would have been some 76 years old in 1901, if she were alive. I know that she was married in 1855. I had found the records from the Church in Ballybunion where she had been married; it noted the marriage of Mary Nolan to one Thomas Griffin. In 1875, her husband, Thomas, had died tragically at age 40 from what is called the dropsy. He had been in business with another man, fishing the River Shannon for salmon. Stories in our family suggest that Mary Griffin had then become the caretaker of the cottage they lived in on property owned by an Englishwoman who raised and raced horses in Ireland. I also know that Mary Nolan Griffin had six children, but had lost one daughter in childhood, unexpectedly in an accident: It was said that on hearing the news her hair had turned grey.

The last daughter remaining at home, my grandmother, Catherine, left Kerry in 1888-89. The last son, Cornelius, left for New York sometime later. But when exactly is not clear. His sister, my grandmother, had gone to meet his boat in New York, only to discover an envelope and a hand-written message: "Have decided to go straight through to St. Louis. So won't stop now, but will write later." He never did. So, if Mary Nolan were alive in Ireland in 1901, she would have been without any of her children. But, if so, where was she living? And with whom? An aunt or uncle? The Carmody's, her friends? Or Mary Mulvihill who had witnessed the birth of her daughter Catherine, signifying the event on the baptismal record with "her mark," still visible today? As I sat in Tralee and watched the microfiche roll by and searched for a trace of Mary Nolan Griffin, I wondered.

Nothing did turn up in that search. But as I pursued the microfiche, I found that I had to pause at certain information. It was as if I were discovering ghosts in the microfiche. Lives hinted at, etched in census details, revealed under the headings of: ages, relationships of people to one another, education, "rank, profession or occupation", the number of rooms in a house, or, the language spoken. I found, for example, in rural Kerry a listing for a Johanna Griffin--no relative--but "mother in law" to a Thomas and Ellen Tidings--not a name we knew. In 1901 she was 69, could not read but could speak Irish and English. More chilling was the entry for one woman and her daughter, she 60, the daughter 29, unmarried, living all alone. The daughter a domestic, somewhere. The census boxes revealed that they were living

in a one room cottage. There was no electricity in Ireland until the 1950S. In those poor communities, what would life have been like? For them or for another, Nora Downey, listed simply as “Beggar.” And, then, I laughed when I read the entry for Mary Stack, “head of family” who in 1901 was living with two older sons, and their seven children. Under the heading of “Marriage” this head of family had been listed by the census taker as “Married.” But a different, stronger hand--was it perhaps Mary Stack’s herself? --had crossed out married and written in “WIDOW” and under the heading of occupation was written, “FARMERESS.” Mary Stack, the “farmeress” was 54 and could read and write and speak in--large print--in IRISH! –

Perhaps the saddest ghost I encountered in the microfiche was in a line in *The Kerry Evening Post* of Saturday, January 4, 1868. There among the ads for transporting flax by railroad to Belfast, and Halloway’s Pills for disorders of the stomach, the news from London of alarms of the operations of the Fenian “enemy” in England and Ireland, and some late New Year’s greetings was the following notice:

“Bridget Hayes, the woman who tried to drown herself in the River Feale, is charged with a fine of five pounds or a sentence to spend three months in jail.”

I thought of Tony Morrison’s book *Beloved* and wondered if Bridget had been trying to save the life of a child from the one she had lived. So the ghosts appear in the microfiche of ads and census data and old newspapers. Small details of lives noted -the number of people who entered the Tralee Workhouse, the number discharged, the total number of inmates at 609, as against 624 last year, the increased cost that year of the Christmas fare supplied to paupers, Christmas 1867--the large moments untold, unrecorded, only guessed at. Who, I wondered, might today be searching for Bridget Hayes?

Today, I went back to the Library and began again my search for the Griffins and Nolans, this time enlarging my scope to the countryside around Ballyconry, into all the small - tiny communities there in North Kerry. As I scrolled again the microfiche, I was stunned to find in the listing of the family members of one, Timothy Griffin,

not someone recognized as in our family, the name, "Nona Griffin" age 8, listed as "a scholar," as are all the children of school age. I think a friendly ghost has come out to greet me!

9. Going to School: A New York Story

I was lucky to be born in New York City and to go to high school there. The school, Cathedral High School, was located on 50th Street and Lexington Avenue in Manhattan. I lived in the Bronx. So every day for four years I would take a bus to the subway and travel south from the Bronx to Manhattan and to school. Cathedral High School was the New York City all girls' school, a first rate school, and as a class we were considered to be first-rate as well, designated the "scholarship" class of the school.

As a class we were especially fortunate in our senior year to have as our home room teacher, Sister Anna Mercedes, SAM as we called her. She was a smart, sophisticated woman with a great interest in the world and in world events. And since our school was on 50th and Lexington, next door to the Waldorf Astoria, a celebrated meeting place of visitors to the city, we constantly had our noses pressed to the windows, eyeing what or whoever was to be seen. You never could predict what might be going on in the city so it was always important to be paying attention. We were only a few blocks from St. Patrick's Cathedral, which was designated as our school's church.

Our class had spent the first two years of our four years of high school in an annex in the Bronx. For our 3rd and 4th years to our delight we came to Manhattan. There we had as faculty the heads of departments to teach our courses. Our home room teacher also taught our English class. I remember math being a most challenging class

Our classes and learning were a top priority. But I also had a job. I worked at one of New York City's branch libraries. It was in the Bronx. So each day by 3pm I was on my way to a branch of the New York Public Library in the Bronx. There it was my primary job to put away books. I also worked with staff as they might need my help. It was a wonderful job for someone interested in books. We were constantly in discussions about books, their authors, what they were writing about. Every best seller was in our library. And I had access to them.

As a New York City Catholic high school, we celebrated graduation from St. Patrick's

Cathedral. Then all of our thoughts were on college: what we were planning to study, what it would be like. Shortly after graduation I had a full-time job with the New York Telephone Company and would attend college in the evenings. I went to St. John's University in Brooklyn on scholarship, getting home by 11pm and graduating in five years. Shortly afterwards with a teaching license in hand I entered into teaching at a Junior High School in the Bronx.

Then a remarkable event occurred. It changed my life. It happened because a group of educators from MIT and Harvard became intensely interested in the state of New York's and America's schools. Believing that America was seriously losing ground to other nations, notably to Russia and its schools, they planned to develop a program especially in math and the social sciences that would improve American education. At that time I was teaching English and Social Studies in a New York City public junior high school, and was recognized as a "good" teacher. I knew the Superintendent of Schools, Joseph Loretan because he was the head of the New York City schools and I had him in a course I was taking in New York at the time at Hunter College.

When the Harvard-MIT group began their project to develop a new curriculum they decided that they would have to include New York City schools to make their case convincing. They went to Dr. Loretan to request some NYC teachers to work with their project. When they specified social studies, Dr. Loretan suggested my name and one other teacher. And so off we went to Cambridge, Massachusetts to a first meeting with the project. I didn't know it then but I entered into a relationship that would last over some 30 years, working with world class scholars creating new curriculum programs.

That experience also made possible my interest in pursuing my own further education. Eventually I would complete a doctorate in education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. I began teaching there first as a student/teaching fellow 1978-82 and then a lecturer, 1982-90. That experience led to other avenues in my education. I became the Director of Teacher Education at Brown University, 1990-93 and the University of Southern Maine, 1993-97; and associate professor of education, Dartmouth College 1997-2001.

Since 2001, I have been a visiting research scholar at University College Cork,

Ireland where I have had the privilege of working with faculty in the land where my grandparents, Kate Griffin and Maurice Hennessy came from. Maurice was right when he told my grandmother: “But you never would find the education available here in New York in Ireland.”

THE END

