

Valley Stream Historical Society

From Galway to Green Acres

The Mary McDowell Story

includes postscript

HISTORY HIDDEN IN PLAIN SIGHT *series*

November 2022





1950s
Mary Kennedy McDowell (1911—2001)
McDowell family photo

In July 2018, the following was posted on the ***Valley Stream News*** Facebook page:

This is an odd request. I live in Galway, Ireland and in my grandparent's house we found a box of letters. We know who wrote them all, except for one: a beautiful letter from 14 Damson Lane, Valley Stream, New York, written by a woman named Mary. She says in the letter she has a brother Joe and that they once lived in Barna County, Galway. We would love to share the letter with the woman's family, as Mary spoke very kindly to my grandmother.

I messaged the poster, Colm Seoighe*, who turned out to be a 13-year-old young man. Colm explained he was posting the query on behalf of his mother, Cáit Fagan. We exchanged email addresses and soon I was conversing with Cáit.

The letter, written in 1978, was addressed to Kathleen Faherty Fagan — Cáit's grandmother. It contained personal information regarding both heartache and happiness. Mary opens her letter acknowledging the loss of Kathleen's grandfather, William "Liam" Gill. Liam and Kathleen's father, Peter Faherty, both drowned in October 1922 while fishing off the coast of Barna, Galway.



2019
Colm and his donkeys

* Colm, an Irish stage and film actor best known for his role in the *Song of Granite*, was nominated for an award at the Galway Film Festival. He is also an accomplished singer, guitar/banjo player, competitive *sean-nós* dancer, and donkey lover — he has two! His older sister Róisín is in the arts, as well: a songwriter, *sean-nós* singer and dancer. At present, the siblings are filming a television series.

1978 excerpt from the letter Mary Kennedy McDowell wrote to her childhood friend Kathleen Faherty Fagan in Galway, Ireland.

14 Damson Lane
Valley Stream
New York, 11581
U. S. A.

Dear Kathleen,

It was good to hear from you. Your letter came the day my brother was here on a visit. Yes, you are right, his name is Joe. He & I had a grand time remembering our childhood days in Barna.

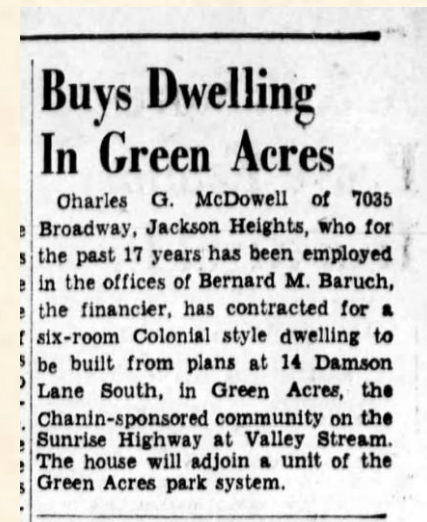
He was very fond of Daddie Gill & did remember that he had been drowned while we were still there. He recalled going to Daddie Gill's cottage & waiting & waiting for him to come back.

When I was with you, you did tell me

It was good to hear from you. Your letter came the day my brother was here on a visit. Yes, you are right, his name is Joe. He and I had a grand time remembering our childhood days in Barna.

He was very fond of Daddie Gill & did remember that he had been drowned while we were still there. He recalled going to Daddie Gill's cottage and waiting & waiting for him to come back.

After looking up 14 Damson Lane on the [Nassau County Land Records Viewer](#) website, the ownership of the house was quickly revealed. The house once belonged to Charles and Mary McDowell.



October 15, 1939
Brooklyn Daily Eagle

1939
14 Damson Lane — Green Acres (aka Mill Brook)
McDowell family photo

As requested in the Facebook post, Mary's letter was shared with her two children, Alice and Owen. They were pleased to see their mother's handwriting again and learn more about her European roots.

The McDowell offspring were generous. They provided photos, timelines, and other useful details. They helped fill in the blanks and by doing so, Mary Kennedy McDowell's life dramatically comes alive.

Mary Kennedy McDowell

In 1911, Mary Kennedy McDowell (O'Kinneide/O'Kennedy) was born in London. Her earliest memory was of huddling in a bomb shelter with her family during WWI. From age four to eight, Mary experienced the devastating bombing of London with her English-born mother Alice (née Sandy), her Irish-born father Bernard (aka Brian), and her baby brother, Joe.

Irish Self-Determination League

In 1919, after WWI ended, the Irish War of Independence (Anglo-Irish War) began. The war was between the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and the British forces stationed in Ireland. That same year, the Irish Self-Determination League was formed. The League sought to educate the Irish living in England on what was happening in Ireland. They set up and supported Irish language, history, and literature classes; raised money to send to Dublin; and held gatherings to spread their message. They published pamphlets and a monthly journal, *Irish Exile*, of which Bernard was the editor (he was also secretary of the organization). The League was closely aligned to Sinn Féin, the political wing of the IRA. Sinn Féin is dedicated to reunification of Ireland and an end to British jurisdiction in Northern Ireland. Art O'Brien, President of Sinn Féin, was Mary's godfather.



Ballykinlar Internment Camp

In May 1921, Bernard was arrested and sent to the Ballykinlar Internment Camp in County Down, Northern Ireland. The camp was on the beautiful east coast, but the camp itself was brutal. Men were chained and forced to walk miles. Their beds were made of planks and wet straw. Prisoners were shot if they strayed too near the prison fence or in other ways stepped out of line. Bernard wrote poems during his imprisonment at Ballykinlar.

The Exile's Return

*Long have you called me, dear Country and homeland,
Long have I craved to see your fair face,
Oft have I dreamt during nights in the foe land
Of mountain and valley, your charm and your grace.
Led by your light ever clear and endearing
Thought after thought bound me closer to thee,
Scorning all danger, disowning all fearing
Ireland, your captive forever I'll be.*

—Brian O’Kennedy, July 7, 1921

Bernard spent three weeks in solitary confinement because he wouldn't "rat on a friend." His cell had no bed, no furniture. He subsisted on bread and water.



Barna, Connemara, and Hickey's boarding house

Alice and the children fled to Ireland either before Bernard's arrest, or shortly thereafter. The family believed they would be safe in Barna, a picturesque, small west coast village in Freeport Townland, County Galway, Ireland. They moved to Hickey's boarding house on Barna Road.

Barna, located in Connemara, is a region with a strong association to Irish culture, literature, and folklore. It is the largest Irish-speaking *Gaeltacht* in the country. *Gaeltacht* are districts in Ireland where Gaelic is the predominant vernacular. It was during that time Mary struck up a friendship with Kathleen Faherty, the grandmother mentioned in the Facebook post. Kathleen and Mary lived across the road from one another.

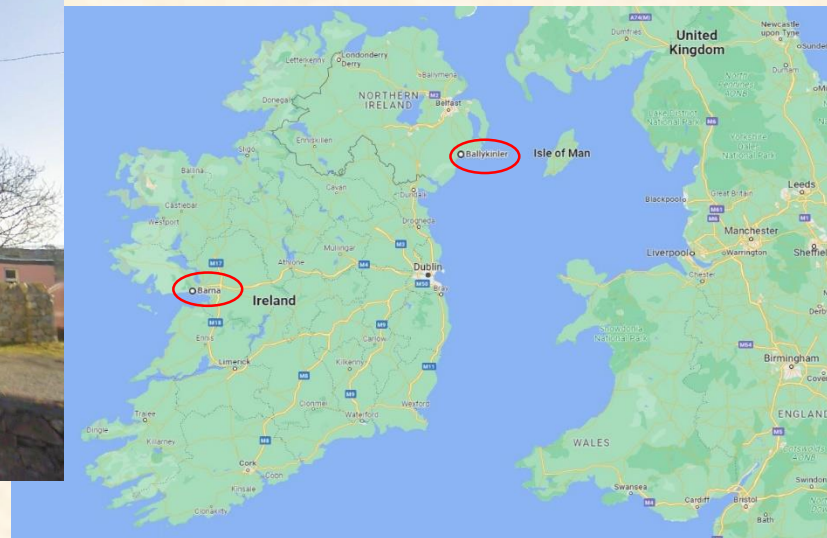
A lifelong bond was soon forged between the two 11-year-olds.



2009

Hickey's boarding house

[R336 Regional Road, Barna, County Galway, Ireland](#)



Black and Tans

Barna was beautiful, but not the refuge the Kennedy's were expecting. Instead, they encountered terror and brutality. The Black and Tans were temporary officers or constables, recruited into the Royal Irish Constabulary to exercise control over the IRA during the Irish War of Independence. British and Irish ex-servicemen formed the militia, some had criminal records. They were called the Black and Tans because they wore a combination of police and army uniforms. The men were poorly disciplined and not sufficiently trained.

For fun, the "officers" would roam the streets in jeeps and shoot through windows of homes. One day, Mary was chased through a field to her house by one of them; she arrived home just in the nick of time. Alice hid IRA members in the rafters of the boarding house and refused to allow the Black and Tans to enter. Because she had a British accent, they thought she was an officer's wife and withdrew their demands. Mary recalled looking up and seeing men's feet in the rafters while her mother stood her ground.

In November 1920, Patrick Joyce, the principal of the Barna National School, was caught relaying the activities of the IRA to the Crown forces (among other factions). His incriminatory letters were intercepted by the IRA who kidnapped and murdered him. After Joyce's abduction and execution, the Black and Tans retaliated by terrorizing the villagers; beating and shooting at them indiscriminately. The Anglo-Irish War was a guerilla war in every sense; filled with sabotage, raids, hit-and-runs, and use of non-traditional military tactics.



Father Michael Griffin

Local lore states that Father Michael Griffin, a popular young Roman Catholic priest, visited Patrick Joyce before his execution (although this was never proven). Griffin, contrary to Joyce, discreetly supported the Sinn Féin and the republican movement, but was outwardly reserved regarding his political views. In retaliation for Joyce's murder by the IRA, the Black and Tans (or another local pro-Crown militia), abducted and executed Father Griffin. A week later, his body was discovered in a bog four miles from Galway. Patrick Joyce's body was eventually found in a shallow grave in a remote bog west of Galway, but not until 1998. The Black and Tans' behavior was so shocking that they swayed the somewhat neutral Irish population to the rebel cause. Controversy still exists regarding the details of the abductions and executions, but this is the gist of what happened.

Ballykinlar closed December 1921, the same time as the cease-fire negotiations. When Bernard was released, the family moved to Dublin, a city where he once worked. In 1923, 12-year-old Mary was sent to a convent school in Brussels run by her paternal aunt, a nun. She traveled alone. She picked up the French language quickly, as all her school subjects were taught in French. The religion taught in the school emphasized the mystical and experiential side of Christianity and not the doctrinal, sin-oriented view prevalent in much of Irish and American Christianity. It was this European-style of Christianity that Mary passed down to her children, much to their relief.

Hickey's boarding house still stands. It has since been converted into a single-family dwelling. Seamus Hickey, a descendant, lives there with his extended family. And Kathleen Faherty Fagan's son still lives in the house across the road.





1950s

Standing: Joe Kennedy, Charles McDowell
Seated: Bernard Kennedy, Alice Sandy Kennedy,
Mary Kennedy McDowell
McDowell family photo

Immigration

The insurrection against the British was bad, but the infighting after gaining independence was even worse. Often, a group fights the common enemy and then a civil war ensues over how to govern, who should be in power, and so on.

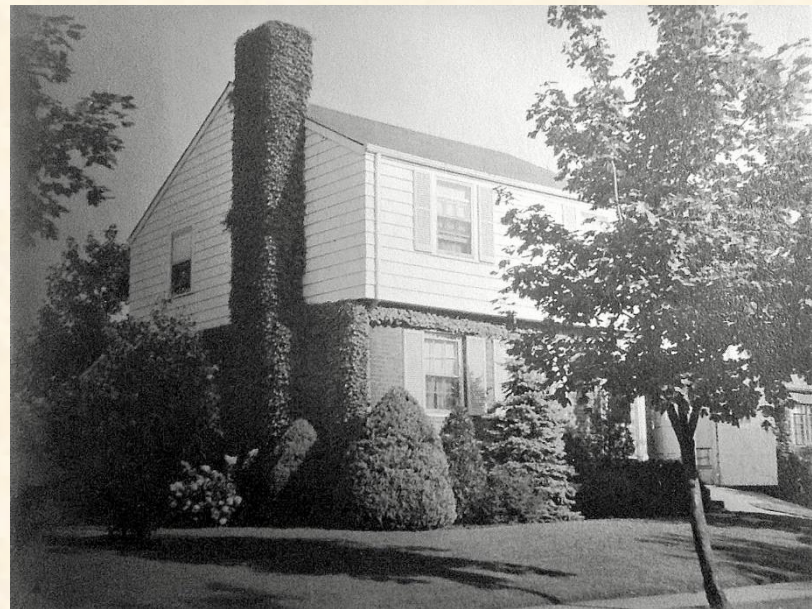
Bernard asked his brother, Tom, who was already living in the US, to sponsor his family. Tom wrote a letter of recommendation, and the family, without Mary, immigrated in March 1927. Mary remained in Brussels to complete her secondary education. After graduating in 1928, she traveled to the Bronx to join her family — just in time for the Great Depression! Fortunately, she landed a job as an assistant editor at the Wilson Publishing Company in the Bronx. She threw herself into American life. Born a good swimmer, she joined the Carroll Club, an organization of young Catholic businesswomen. She also learned photography. In 1938, Mary returned to England to secure the papers necessary to apply for US citizenship. On the ship home, she met her husband-to-be, Charles McDowell. They married the following year and purchased a home in Green Acres at 14 Damson Lane.

Charles, a Maryland native, worked for the financier Bernard Baruch (Baruch College is named for him). The McDowells had two children, Alice, named after Mary's mother, and Owen. Both attended Clear Stream Avenue, the local elementary school situated north of Green Acres and Sunrise Highway, a heavily traveled east/west Long Island arterial highway. In 1953, when Forest Road School opened, the McDowell youngsters transferred there. Finally, a school in their neighborhood, within walking distance! Alice and Owen graduated Valley Stream South High School in 1960 and 1962. The family were parishioners at Holy Name of Mary. Introverted by nature, Mary kept mostly to herself, socializing primarily with her Damson Lane neighbors. The McDowells Green Acres home had a darkroom, and that is where Alice and Owen learned the art of film developing. One can't help but wonder how Mary processed the perceived normalcy and peacefulness of living in post-WWII Long Island suburbia.



1943

Mary Kennedy McDowell and Alice McDowell
McDowell family photo



1958

14 Damson Lane
McDowell family photo

Charles died in 1953 when Alice and Owen were eleven and nine. Alice remembers only seeing her mom cry once in her lifetime — after watching her dance in a school play. “Even though there were no outward displays of emotion, I was well aware of my mother’s sadness, fear, and even anger,” Alice writes in a journal entry to her grandchildren. Not long after Charles’ passing, Mary took a secretarial position at Forest Road School to help support the now single-parent household. It was a job she kept for 22 years. Although she retired in 1976, many Forest Road alumni continued to visit her years after their graduation.



1965
Forest Road Elementary School yearbook
(Valley Stream District 30)





mid-1960s
Forest Road Faculty
Sharon Singer photo

Standing: Jean Ritzenthaler, Marilyn Clarke, Edna Salerno, Alfred Stevens, David Cooper, Richard Kaufman, Nancy Stalb, NK, Roberta Littauer Kalsmith
Middle: Blossom Melnick Licht, Virginia Bendin Cabral, Gladys Parker, Rose Agree, Judith Post, NK, Joan Duck, Ruth Perrich, Elaine Landi
Bottom: Ada Barbone?, Frances Butler Gibson, Gladys Singer, Mary Kennedy McDowell, Maurice E. St. Mary (Principal), Barbara Nancken, Edith Reinken, Vivian Cafiso, Constance Bronner Cummings

In 1995, after living in Valley Stream for 56 years, Mary moved to Ithaca to be near her daughter, Alice.

In 2001, she passed away in her sleep.

Kiss of God

There is a Jewish expression that references those that pass away in their sleep. “A kiss of God,” derived from Deuteronomy 34:5 and the Midrash (commentary), explains its meaning in a contemporary context: a kiss of god refers to an elderly person’s easy death, a death without suffering, where god takes the soul of the dying with his kiss.

Mary’s funeral Mass was held at Holy Name of Mary Roman Catholic Church in Valley Stream. From Mary’s obituary in the *Ithaca Journal*:

Such tumultuous life experiences could have created an embittered person, but for her, they helped forge great qualities. She beautifully combined the head and heart. Her keen intelligence, evident in her love of books and discussion of ideas, was apparent to all who spent a few hours in her presence. This was balanced by a deeply kind, considerate, and listening heart.

Mary is still remembered fondly by many of her “Old Section” neighbors and Forest Road students. The Old Section moniker references one of two developments within the Green Acres community. The Old Section was built in the late 1930s, the New Section in the early 1950s. WWII disrupted the construction of the planned community, hence its two distinctively different sections.





Alice McDowell

Light on the Hill

In 1991, Alice and her husband Lawrence Muscat co-founded [Light on the Hill](#), a non-profit, spiritual retreat located on 236 acres of woods, streams, gorges, walking paths, and panoramic views in Van Etten, New York, about 20 miles south of Ithaca.

Alice holds a Ph.D. in theology from Fordham University, taught religious studies at Ithaca College for 18 years, and is the author of two books. Larry, an ordained minister, is a student of the Mysteries, both ancient and modern. Both Alice and Larry serve as Light on the Hill board members. Alice is also the retreat's Spiritual Director.

At some point in my life, I realized that my psychological and spiritual work included clearing my mother's unprocessed, unconscious material, as well as my own. Many people called my mother a saint as they saw her compassionate and gentle side. Her glory was that she could be so loving despite the traumas she endured.

—Alice McDowell



Postscript



The drownings at Barna Pier

Let's have another look at the 1978 letter that Mary Kennedy McDowell wrote to her childhood friend, Kathleen Faherty Fagan in Barna:

He [Mary's brother Joe] was very fond of Daddie Gill & did remember that he had been drowned while we were still there.

He recalled going to Daddie Gill's cottage and waiting & waiting for him to come back.

Mary was referring to the tragic event that took the lives of Kathleen's father, Peter Faherty; and her maternal grandfather, Liam Gill. Mary, her brother Joe, and their mother Alice were living in Barna when tragedy struck.

How it happened

On October 12, 1922, Peter Faherty, Liam Gill, and another fisherman, Michael Coyne, went herring fishing on a canvas currach off the Barna Pier. On their second trip out to sea, the trio caught a hefty load of herring. The boat sank, however, on their return to shore. The three men spent over 45 minutes in the water holding onto the boat. Faherty and Gill could swim, but Coyne could not, so Faherty slipped an oar under him and brought him to shore.

When Faherty and Coyne reached the shore, they heard Gill shouting that the boat had overturned. Faherty went back to help him, but both men drowned after getting tangled in the herring nets.



100th anniversary commemorating the Barna fishing tragedy



2022

Monument for fallen fishermen
Peter Faherty and Liam Gill.
Fagan family photo

This past October marked the 100th anniversary of the Barna fishing tragedy. Members of Cáit Fagan’s family commissioned a stone memorial to formally commemorate the event. The stone was salvaged from the Barna Pier where the drownings took place.

On October 12th, a ceremony was held and the monument unveiled.

Dara Bradley of the *Connacht Tribune*, a century-old Galway daily, covered the event. “Descendants of drowned fishermen remembered 100 years on” was published on October 18th. Click [here](#) to read the article.



ca. 1924

Kathleen Faherty Fagan (center) with three of her five sisters.
Fagan family photo

Amy Kassak Bentley

Valley Stream Historical Society board trustee, researcher, writer, and webmaster.

Acknowledgments

*Many thanks to the McDowell and Fagan-Seoighe families,
Amy Arutt, Geri Bloch, Rabbi Margaret Frisch Klein, Mara Levy Kahn,
Paul Lew, Kerri McEvoy Monsen, Daniel Pempel, and Sharon Singer.*

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Well, Kathleen, this letter has gone on
long enough. All of us send our
love to you -

God bless,
Mary