

*'Yonder a maid and her wight
Come whispering by:
War's annals will cloud into night
Ere their story die.'*

Thomas Hardy's poem, from which this verse is taken, was written during the First World War, and can apply to any time; humankind continued, and continues, to be born throughout all sorts of strife and warfare and deprivation. The story does indeed carry on, in the universal sense. In the individual sense, however, the circumstances of the time and the context into which they are born affect profoundly the lives of individuals.

I am going to start with Ross. He was my great grand-uncle, born in June 1845 to my great-great-grandparents Mick Keohane and Nelly Driscoll, in Glan, near Schull in West Cork.¹

That is all I know about him. In fact, I'm not certain that his name was Ross at all, or even that he was a boy, because the baptismal register is so damaged that all which can be clearly made out of his name is the end; a double s. So, perhaps, in June 1845 Mick and Nelly baptised a baby girl, called Bess. Both names occur elsewhere in the register, though numerically Bess (a diminutive of Elizabeth) is the most popular. The transcriber has opted for Ross. He was the family's eighth child. The name of their sixth child is so unclear as to render impossible even a guess, so he/she is transcribed as simply the surname without gender. They had thirteen children in all, or perhaps some more names were registered and subsequently obliterated, if they came at the top or bottom of those very worn pages.

It seems wise, therefore, to think of Ross/Bess as one of those toddlers whose gender is difficult to guess. I picture him/her with a mop of unbrushable curls, in the corner of a field on a sunny day, playing with the dog as the family harvests the potato crop. But of course that is hopeless romanticism. This is 1847, and this is Schull, where 'famine and pestilence raged with probably greater fury than in any other part of Ireland'.²

*'In Schull people were too poor to afford coffins. At Ballydehob we were told by Mr and Miss Noble that they had seen five dead bodies transported through the town barely covered by straw. Dr McCormick, the dispensary physician at Kilmoe, states he saw a man dragging two dead bodies on the end of a rope to their grave. At Cappagh, south of Ballydehob, he was horrified to find, in the corner of a field, a human skull gnawed by dogs.'*³

Ross, or Bess, could easily have featured in one of these horrific tableaux, or in any one of countless others. There is no record of his/her death, but there is no record of a marriage either, or of emigration. Sometime between 1848 and 1851, the family moved from Schull to Bantry; ten children are baptised in the former parish and three in the latter. Was this move undertaken by the

1 These forms of the names Michael and Ellen are what they use themselves when baptising their children. Keohane is spelt variously as Cahan, Cahane and Cohane, and (O') Driscoll as Driscoll and Driscole.

2 Larry Geary, "Report upon the recent epidemic fever in Ireland: the evidence from Cork" in *Atlas of the Great Irish Famine*, ed. John Crowley, William J. Smyth and Mike Murphy (Cork, 2012), page 210.

3 From an unattributed report in the centenary supplement of the *Southern Star* newspaper (1989) detailing famine scenes witnessed by Reverend Chevinix Trench.

family themselves, perhaps after eviction (the two places had different landlords) or was it arranged for them as some sort of relief effort, in what were chaotic times? How many children moved with them, and how many died in Schull?⁴ Did some children emigrate to escape the famine? If they did, they were young to travel alone, as the first was born in 1833, but it was not unknown for a fourteen-year-old to board one of the infamous coffin ships at the height of the famine in 1847. If they did, their names were not recorded, and no descendants have ever surfaced. All that is known for certain is that Nelly and Mick, a maid and her wight, were baptising children from 1833 to 1861, with two born while death was all around them, in 1846 and 1848. That branch of the family tree is vague and sketchy indeed, and very much of its time and place.

Denis Keohane, born in 1840, the fifth child of Mick and Nelly, was my great-grandfather. As this wight was marrying his maid on November 25 1869, it's unlikely he was aware that the Suez Canal had opened in the previous week, or that, a few months earlier, the first train had crossed the continent of North America. Of more interest to him, surely, was that a railway reached from Cork to Dunmanway, with plans to extend to Bantry.⁵ His bride, Jane Minehane, was probably oblivious to the fact that The American Womens' Suffrage Association had formed that year. Of more interest to her might have been reports that American hotels now had 'indoor plumbing'.

The Skibbereen Eagle newspaper, started in 1857, brought world news into every home, so Denis and Jane were not completely unaware of the wider world, and they were both readers. It is likely that, as their family grew, they followed closely the news of land reforms, especially after the formation of the Land League in 1879. In 1882, a judicial rent review gave Denis Keohane a reduction from twenty-seven pounds and ten shillings annually to twenty-five pounds.⁶

As English rule began to weaken in the wake of Catholic Emancipation in 1869, the English language, however, eclipsed Irish; in the census of 1901, Denis and Jane report themselves as speakers of English and Irish while their children speak only English. Perhaps they whispered to each other in Irish to hide their worry from the children as scarlet fever hit, taking nine-year-old Kate and three-year-old Timmy at the start of June 1885. It was a rare family which saw all its children reach adulthood.

Civil registration had been introduced in 1864, and this generation is much better documented than the preceding one. Five of the surviving six children of Denis and Jane married. Some people, however, remained undocumented; Denis, son of Denis, born in 1878, does not appear in a marriage registry, a death registry, a census or a passenger manifest. Of the Denis Keohanes of appropriate age in these records, and in prison and asylum records and newspaper reports in Ireland and elsewhere, none seems to be 'our' Denis. He (at least it is *a* Denis Keohane) was a witness at the wedding of his brother in 1906, but otherwise he appears in no documentation. One story has him fleeing after an altercation in Bantry during which a Spanish sailor was hit over the head with a bottle of brandy, but there is no written account of such an event. Another tale has him absconding after shooting an informer during The Troubles, but he would have been in his forties then, outside the usual age-profile for such activity. A rusty gun, however, was found on the family land many years later, stuck into a ditch as if to be hidden. A *Michael* Keohane, entering Ellis Island at the age of 30, which would be roughly correct, has 'HELD INQUIRY' written opposite his name; could this be Denis, using his brother's name? But if he could travel under an assumed name (and passports only became necessary some years after 1910) why would he retain his surname? He was my father's uncle, quite a close relative, and yet he seems to have disappeared from the face of the earth.

My father's father, Michael, married his maid in 1900, as one century gave way to another. Trains

4 Over thirty per-cent mortality was recorded for the parish of Schull, and the very young and the very old would have had a higher proportion. Marriage records exist for five of the thirteen children.

5 In areas that were predominantly agricultural, the railways in many cases provided people's first encounter with the industrial revolution.

6 Report from *The Skibbereen Eagle*, 1882

held no fascination for him, as he had been watching the Bantry to Cork one pulling in and out of the station since he was a child. His wife, Judy, would live out her long life without ever seeing indoor plumbing, and their house was a simple two-room stone building, roofed with local slate, which would most likely melt back into the landscape like so many of its predecessors.⁷

As their extremely large family was born, various Land Acts were passed enabling tenants to buy out parts of the old estates and Michael (known as White Mike) bought eighty acres in 1906. Conditions changed little for small farmers, and infant and child mortality were still high. Judy was pregnant as many as twenty-two or twenty-three times, seventeen children were born between 1901 and 1922, and only thirteen survived to adulthood.

In 1911, the valley where they lived had 622 inhabitants. A full quarter were under ten years old, and a fuller quarter between ten and twenty; in total 330 of the 622 were under the age of twenty. Their opportunities were limited, and small farms had already been subdivided, so a great many were destined to emigrate.⁸

The first three daughters went to New York, where they lived close together, and where they had work arranged for them by their maternal uncles before leaving Ireland. They would have had considerably more comfort and security on the steamboats than those uncles, who were among the last to travel under sail. Still, the sinkings of the *Titanic* and the *Lusitania* must have meant that a trans-Atlantic crossing was not without its risks.

One of the sisters, according to her son, had a little rhyme she used to say to herself when working around the house:

*Joe Jack and Paddy
Nelius Pete and Dannie*

It was her way of remembering the names of her younger brothers, all children when she left. Four out of six of those boys spent most of their working lives in England. Paddy died within weeks of arriving, in a building site accident. He was already dead by the time his mother received this letter, one of the most poignant documents I have seen:

11-5-1936

11, Harper Place
Marylebone
London, N.W. 1

Dear Mother,

Just a line to let you know that I am well
hoping ye are all the same I suppose ye are cutting the turf
these times is good weather for doing anything. I was lucky to get
the job I have here for though the work is hard the pay is very good
I am sending you one pound pinned above and would send ye more only I
must get a new suit for the summer. I'll be writing home again and sending ye
more money for I know you need it so have a good heart and all I came to
to help you I will do it for as I know you were a good mother to me

Good Bye now for a while,
From your fond son,
Paddy

Keep on Hoping Mother.

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8 Mick and Nelly, who had arrived in the valley during the famine, had divided their holding between three sons.

The emigration pattern of the time and place meant that more girls went to America and more boys went to England. As time went on, emigration began to fall somewhat, and the three younger girls of the family, born almost twenty years after their sisters, did not consider following them to New York. All three married locally, one after she had trained as a nurse in London.

Nelius joined the English navy, after an enlistment campaign visited Bantry. In some quarters, this would have made him unpopular, but White Mike gave him the same advice leaving home as he gave to Dannie, my father, when he joined the newly-emerging civil service: *'Good luck son, and don't let religion or politics ever trouble you.'*

He had bought his land in 1906, and had seen little change in his circumstances, with a life of hard dawn-to-dusk labour very like his father's and his grandfather's, both of whom were tenant farmers. He had reared most of his children for emigration, and there seemed little reward for any of them in the life of a small farmer, with no-one emerging as a natural or willing successor for the land. He would die without seeing a grandchild, as they were all in New York. In 1941, months before his death, he would read a report in *The Southern Star* about a hundred men lined up outside a Bantry hotel willing to pay an agent to find seasonal work for them in England. Perhaps, also, his grandfather's move from Schull to Bantry had been eased by the intervention of a Protestant rector, Robert Traill, who had helped many starving people in Schull while the Earl of Kenmare, a Catholic, did little for his tenants. Perhaps his grandparents Mick and Nelly had been moved into a house and land from which people even more impoverished than themselves had been evicted; during the Famine and afterwards, it was survival of the fittest, and every man for himself.⁹

As Famine times gave way to the Land Wars, and, later, as the new owners struggled through the Economic War, and as the nineteen fifties and sixties saw the farming population implode and the towns and cities expand, it must be wondered if it was, or ever will be, truly possible to make a living from a small farm. When White Mike's daughter and her husband came home from England and took on the land, she came with the knowledge that her nursing qualification would enable her to earn an income outside the farm, and indeed she worked in Bantry hospital for many years. Most farms in the valley have some form of other income. The farmyard where Mick and Nelly raised their family, or what survived of it, is now an impressive sight on Google Earth, as it has become an advanced driving academy, with over a mile of tracks simulating driving conditions.

Several newcomer families have, however, chosen to live in the area, and carve out modest livings from specialist foods, handcrafts and yoga centres. Some have arrived relatively recently, and some are into the second and even third generations, the descendants of the original hippies who flocked to West Cork in the nineteen sixties and seventies. As the oil crisis looms, and as the implications of global warming and the importance of sustainability are more fully understood, their life-choices seem to make more and more sense.

Only time will tell. Life must be lived forwards and understood backwards, and history truly is the essence of innumerable biographies.¹⁰

9 Recent research on the Irish ancestry of the American actor George Clooney has shown that in the wake of the Famine, as people scrambled to consolidate their holdings, it was primarily the greed of a neighbour rather than a landlord which precipitated the emigration of Clooney's ancestors.

10 First quote is from the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1856) and the second from the Scottish social commentator Thomas Carlyle (1813-1885).