

More Than Words:
A Biography of Daniel Francis Burns

by

Matthew R. Burns

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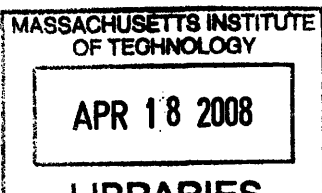
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Signature of Author _____
Department of Writing and Humanistic Studies
May 4, 2005

Certified by _____
William Corbett
Director of Student Writing Activities

Accepted by _____
James Paradis
Head, Program in Writing and Humanistic Studies



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ABSTRACT

Daniel Francis Burns was born in Ireland in 1888 and immigrated to the United States in 1912. He married Mary O'Neill in 1923 and had a family of seven children. He worked as a police officer in the Boston Police Department for thirty-one years. This is the story of his life, from his birth in Ireland to his death in Brighton, Massachusetts.

This is also the story of how one man affected the lives of those who came after him. The reverberations of his life continue to be felt, even by those who were born after his death.

**Thesis Supervisor: William Corbett
Title: Director of Student Writing Activities**

Acknowledgments

This project would not have been possible without the tremendous support given it by Bartholomew Burns, Louise Burns, and Nora Howley. Their memories form the core of this biography. For sharing their past, including the unflattering and the emotional parts, I thank them.

I wish to thank Kenneth Manning for holding this project to a higher standard than even I believed was possible. Thanks also to William Corbett, for his enthusiasm and guidance.

I thank my father, mother, and sister for the love and joy they have brought to my life.

Finally, I thank God for the gift of life. *Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam.*

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For Bart and Nora

Foreword

Call me Quentin.

After writing this biography, I have come to identify with Faulkner's protagonist in *Absalom, Absalom!* The young Compson spends the entire novel attempting to piece together a coherent narrative to explain the life of Thomas Sutpen, a mythic figure who lived a century earlier. Quentin, having no memory of Sutpen himself, must rely on second- or third-hand accounts to fill in the details. In the end, Quentin creates a story that has as much origin in his imagination as it does in the memories of others.

Every biographer must face the ultimate question in the course of writing: Is biography fiction or non-fiction? The answer, of course, is both. No biographer is ever playing with a full deck—that is, a complete, factual account of a life. Such a thing is impossible, for each life is filled with thoughts that never enter the physical record. Much of life is untranscribable, not to be found even in memory.

Imagination must enter biography if it is to have any hope of coming alive. Without it, biography would simply be a collection of facts and disparate memories, a series of data points on a grid. The task of a biographer is to interpolate, to draw the line that best fits the data.

For this reason, biography is a blend of external fact and internal imagination, an amalgam that exposes as much about the biographer as the subject. The biographer can strain to remain invisible, but it is delusional to believe in invisibility.

* * *

When I began this project, I knew nothing of my great-grandfather, Daniel Francis Burns. I knew nothing because I made no inquiry; knowledge must be pursued to be gained. Now that I have inquired, I have discovered that the shadow of this broad-shouldered taciturn patriarch still hangs over our family, not menacing, but certainly present. Present most of all to his son, Bartholomew Burns, my grandfather.

In the initial stages of research, my father interviewed Bart, his father. The two were sitting at the dinner table late one October night, after the dishes had been washed and put away. An hour into the interview, my father, who was recording the conversation on tape, asked a question that shattered all of my previously held notions of my grandfather.

He asked Bart why he had given up his career as an engineer in Arizona's copper mines to return to Boston in order to live with Daniel, after Bart's mother, Mary, had died. With a number of his sisters in the area, Bart still chose to return home, to live with his lonely father. Why?

When I listened to the tape for the first time, my grandfather's answer made every one of my hairs stand on end.

Yes, they were in the area, but that's different. The sound of an indrawn breath, a stabilizing breath. The breath before the sigh, before the storm, the last effort of a man to remain staunchly invulnerable.

See, I could ask a very dumb question. The voice quavering, teetering on the edge of some abyss, an abyss that he would call weakness, an abyss that I would call honesty.

I'd say, do you know God? The voice rising like a bird from its open cage, madly flapping with the confusion of first freedom.

And you'd say...

An unintelligible word follows, garbled by the tears of a man who distains tears. I hear his sobbing on the tape, and I think, this is a miracle. Statues have been known to weep, and now I have witnessed it myself.

The tears dissolve the façade, and the man emerges, the honest man.

He was God to me.

* * *

The hands of the dead clutch our own. Or perhaps we clutch theirs and never entirely let go. This is the story of hands, Irish hands, calloused hands, worshipful hands. This is a story of silence, of work, of grief and resolve. This is the story of statues shattered, only to reveal the flesh beneath the marble.

What did I know, what did I know/ of love's austere and lonely offices?

—Robert Hayden, "Those Winter Sundays"

Speak softly and carry a big stick.

—Theodore Roosevelt

The Burns surname is not originally Irish. It originated in Scotland and arrived in Ireland in the fourteenth century, carried by Scottish mercenaries. They were hired by the Irish for the sake of liberation, to help fight in the battles against the Norman land barons. When the English were finally driven back to Dublin decades later, the fighting was done, the fires put out, the towns rebuilt. After so many years of war, the mercenaries settled into rural areas across Ireland, and within a few generations, they were more Irish than Scottish. The names remained behind.

The Burnses eventually settled in Sneem, a little town on the southwestern coast of Ireland. Situated on the Ring of Kerry, mountains surround the town. The Burnses constructed a dwelling on the upper slopes of one of these mountains, Mount Coomcallee. Called the “Treasure House,” it was little more than a one-room shelter built of stones, built in the seventeenth century. Today, a hike up the broad flank of Coomcallee reveals the ruins of the Treasure House—a scattering of small boulders, more cairn than foundation.

Little is known about the Treasure House, except that its inhabitants were shepherders, a tradition that continued long after the house was ruined. In the late part of the eighteenth century, the Burnses constructed a new home, at the base of Mount Coomcallee. It was into this house that Daniel Francis Burns was born. The third child of Bartholomew and Helen Burns, Daniel was born on January 18, 1888, a Wednesday. His parents were middle-class citizens of Sneem and in addition to their flock of sheep, they owned a butcher shop in the heart of Sneem.

The house was a small, two-story affair, though at that time, two stories meant extravagance. There were no rooms, only two open floors, one on top of the other, with a



The homestead formerly owned by the Burns family, on the outskirts of Sneem.

stone stable attached to the side of the house. The stable was built to care for the several thousands of sheep they owned, usually scattered across the mountain. In the spring months, it served as a place for shearing.

Life centered on the bottom floor, with its fireplace. Throughout the year, peat burned there, its semi-sweet smell filling the air. One of Daniel's brothers regularly cut it from the bog behind the house. Peat has burned in Irish fireplaces for centuries, as it is much more plentiful than wood.

The family, which grew to include nine children, slept upstairs on the floor. No one slept on a bed; they simply bundled up in blankets and rugs, braving the Irish winter, thankfully none too bitter. With so many people cramped on the floor, there were very few opportunities to sleep late into the morning. Daniel's father awoke early for the butchery, and his mother rose just as early to begin cooking for the many hungry mouths. The older children left the house to take care of the sheep or to cut peat on the slopes of Mount Coomcallee.



A portion of Mount Coomcallee. Excessive sheep grazing has left the upper slopes completely barren.

The younger children all went to school until graduating at fourteen years old. The school was attached to St. Michael's Church, a dark, stone parish in the center of Sneem. Its tower bell rang out each morning before school or mass. During his childhood, Daniel went to school during the weekdays, walking three miles into town each morning with his siblings. The school was more than adequate, instructing its students in reading and writing, as well as mathematics. The children walked to St. Michael's barefoot in order to save money on leather; only upon arriving did they slip on their required shoes.



St. Michael's Church, Sneem.

Each Sunday, the family walked into town for mass at St. Michael's, the heavy bell droning out its summons. The family's routine of religious devotion made an impact on young Daniel; throughout his adult life, he attended daily mass.



Two men walk towards a coffee shop in the heart of Sneem.

When the children weren't in school, they were expected to work. The younger ones worked indoors with their mother, tending the fire, sweeping out the stable, or helping with dinner. In the summers, Daniel helped his older brothers tend the sheep; later, when

they left Sneem for England or America, Daniel herded the sheep alone, often fishing in the deep lake near the peak of Mount Coomcallee. During his early adolescence, Daniel occasionally took the family's sheep into town to be sold, using the branch of an Ash tree to spur the flock on. It was a trip made either to Sneem, or to Kenmare, a larger town to the north, about twenty miles away. The trip to Kenmare took Daniel two or three days, depending on how many sheep were to be sold.

Daniel's early life was one of routine, filled with school and church and work at home. The routine was shattered in 1896, when his mother Helen died in childbirth. Daniel was only eight. Helen's death triggered a dynamic change in the family's structure. Within the year, Daniel's older brother John left Sneem for the United States, departing from Cork City by steamboat, bound for New York. No doubt he was seeking \ greater opportunities in America afforded; jobs were not easy to come by in Sneem. What role Helen's death played in John's sudden departure remains unclear. Perhaps he was thinking of his seven younger siblings, realizing that the family was too large to support all its members for very much longer.

John was not the only one to leave Sneem. Soon after his departure, Patrick, the oldest child in the family, left for the United States in secret. Before he disappeared, he went into downtown Sneem to sell some of his family's sheep. Since they had so many sheep, this was not an unusual occurrence. In fact, Patrick had been a seller many times before. This time, however, he kept the money the sheep fetched on the market. Instead of returning home, he went to the nearby port and caught a steamer to Boston. He took Julia Burns along with him. She was a local girl from Sneem, and Patrick's love interest. Although her surname was identical to his, she was not a direct relative. They married a

few weeks after arriving in Boston. What reaction this episode provoked in the Burns household is uncertain. Most likely, it was a mixture of shock and relief. Bartholomew was not against his children leaving for greater opportunity; emigration was a fact of life in Ireland.

Patrick and John eventually settled into their American lives. John became a butcher in a Boston meatpacking plant, and Patrick became a custodian in a Cambridge high school. They began to write back to their family, telling them of the opportunities a life in the United States offered.

By this time, at around the turn of the century, Daniel was finishing up his schooling. There was no secondary school nearby, and even if there had been, it's unlikely that Bartholomew would have paid for it. Once Daniel graduated, he continued to help his family by tending the sheep and cutting peat. In many ways, he became the man of the house in the years following graduation, as his father was spending much of his time in the butcher shop. Daniel likely took it upon himself to take care of the family.

But opportunities for work were few in Sneem, and as Daniel grew deeper into his teenage years, he decided to find real employment. He left Sneem several years after graduating, in the first decade of the twentieth century. The young man traveled to England to find work as a common laborer. He worked alongside other Irishmen, finding what small comfort he could in their brogue as they dug trenches, shoveled gravel, and laid stone day after day. During the years he spent in England, Daniel saved his money and decided to immigrate to the United States. He left on a steamer bound for New York. It was 1912, and he was twenty-four years old.

Daniel's brother John sponsored him when he arrived. By sponsoring his brother, John accepted legal responsibility for supporting Daniel financially. In this way, Daniel was able to become a legal resident in the United States. After traveling from New York to Boston, Daniel lived in John's Back Bay apartment for the first few months. Later, he lived in Somerville as a boarder with several other Irishmen from around the city.

Daniel immediately found work as a common laborer, buying a shovel and working in various construction projects around Boston, including an addition to South Station. After the years he had spent in England doing such work, Daniel had become a strong man, about 5'8" tall and weighing 200 pounds. Such brawniness was not unheard of among the Irish. In fact, one of Daniel's cousins was Steve "Crusher" Casey, who was the undefeated heavyweight-wrestling champion of the world from 1938 to 1947. In addition to his wrestling prowess, Casey was also a world-renowned sculler. In 1940, he raced against Richard Codman, the World sculling champion at that time. The race took place on the Charles River, and the banks of the river were lined with Irish from across the region, shouting and clamoring along the shores, waving their hats in the air. Casey emerged victorious and was awarded the Governor's Cup by the Massachusetts governor at that time, Leverett Saltonstall.

After several years of construction work in the city, Daniel found a job with the Boston Elevated Railway Company in 1915. The company, a precursor to public transportation, operated trolley cars throughout the city. With the Elevated, Daniel earned over \$100 per week by working twenty to thirty hours of weekly overtime. He worked as a conductor on such trolleys. During the trips, Daniel was paired with another conductor, and one of them collected the fares while the other did the conducting.



Memorial for Steve "Crusher" Casey in Sneem.

When they had completed one trip, they switched roles. Compared to the years he shoveled gravel for pennies a day, work with the Elevated was easy for Daniel, and he was happy to work the excessive overtime.

His conducting work was interrupted when the United States entered World War I in 1917. Daniel enlisted in the Army that spring. By doing so, he obtained his United States citizenship, which extended to all who served in the United States military during World War I. This would certainly have been a motivation for his enlistment. However, in light of his later work as a police officer, Daniel probably also felt a sense of duty that impelled him to enlist.

Daniel was assigned to a field artillery unit in France. Daniel and his fellow doughboys spent much of their time operating howitzer guns. Little is known about Daniel's activities or thoughts during this time, as any letters he might have sent no longer exist. More likely, however, he wrote little, if anything, being a taciturn man throughout his life.

Daniel returned to the United States in 1919 a full citizen and resumed his work with the Boston Elevated. But things were not as they were before. The returning veterans had swelled the ranks of the labor market. Inflation skyrocketed while wages fell. Organized labor began to flex its collective muscle, leading to a number of worker strikes across the country, from New York City to Seattle. Boston was by no means immune to worker unrest, and in September of 1919, over 1,100 of the 1,500 Boston police officers went on strike. The force had attempted to form a union, which prompted Police Commissioner Edwin Curtis to suspend the leaders of the union movement. The suspension triggered the strike.

The reasons for the strike were numerous. New officers were paid two dollars per day, a sum that had not increased since 1857. Officers received one day off every other week, leading to 80-hour workweeks. Worse, the officers were required to sleep in station houses during the workweeks, and oftentimes these stations were in appalling conditions, full of lice and rodents. In addition, many of the officers were Irish-Catholic, particularly the thousands of patrolmen, while the police administration was generally composed of Protestant men.

The days following the strike were chaotic; looting and public gambling became commonplace. Finally, the state guard was called in to keep the peace. Calvin Coolidge, then-Governor of Massachusetts, refused to allow the striking officers back into the Boston Police Department. He had met with other Boston union leaders and was assured that there would be no general labor strike, an assurance that allowed him to make such a firm stand. The striking officers were never to return to service.

Because of the plentiful supply of labor, finding new police officers proved not to be a problem. Most of the new force was composed of returning servicemen. They were given higher wages and improved working conditions, the very things the strikers were seeking in the first place.

It was at this point in time, in early 1920, that Patrick began to advise his brother Daniel to join the new police force. His advice fell on deaf ears at first, as Daniel was making over \$100 per week with the Boston Elevated. Since the police force only paid \$35 per week, Daniel did not see any logic in Patrick's advice.

But Patrick continued to insist. His motivations for doing so remain unclear. While his disappearing act in Ireland certainly proved him to be mischievous, he was no

criminal. Perhaps he thought it wise to have a family member in the police department. Whatever the reason, Patrick continued to advise Daniel to join the Boston police force.

In January of 1922, Daniel did. His own reasons for acquiescing to Patrick's request are unknown. Perhaps he was simply sick of his brother's nagging. More likely, he felt a sense of duty associated with his decision. Interestingly, Daniel's age may have been an issue for him when he joined the police force; his police records indicate that he was born in 1888, making him thirty-four years old when he joined the force. However, the 1930 Census shows him to be born in 1894. Most likely, this census data is inaccurate; the 1920 Census shows him to be born in 1889, and pictures taken later in Daniel's life hint that he is a few years older than a man born in 1894. The reason for the inconsistency remains unclear.

In any case, joining the police force was a serious change for Daniel. For one thing, there was the salary drop-off. In addition, officers were required to work seven days in a row before they took the eighth day off. Patrolmen were also required to sleep in the station house for several nights during their seven days of work, in case of emergency. Daniel spent more than several nights in the station house, however, as he worked the night shift for the entirety of his career. The slightly increased pay drew him to the night schedule initially; later, he continued the same schedule because he was used to it. Some nights, he worked the 5 P.M. to 12 A.M. shift; other nights, Daniel worked from midnight to 8 A.M.

The year 1922 was also significant for another reason: he met Mary O'Neill, the woman who became his wife. It was Daniel's sister-in-law, Julia, who introduced him to Mary. Mary worked with Julia, Patrick's wife, as a domestic servant in a Beacon Hill

home. Many Irish immigrant women did so, as they were able to earn more than textile workers and did not need to pay for their own food or shelter. Mary was five years younger than Daniel and had emigrated from Galway in 1910, when she was only seventeen years old. Mary's aunt had sponsored her, and she lived with her aunt's family in South Boston until she found work as a domestic servant.

At times it seemed as though Daniel and Mary shared little except their Irish heritage. While he was the silent type, she was brash and unafraid of letting the world—particularly Daniel—know what she was thinking. Yet Daniel never stopped beaming when he was in her presence. He never smiled so much as when he was with her. The more she chided him, the more he loved her for it. The two of them became acquainted over a period of about a year, and when they had a day off together, they went dancing at night with the other Irish from the city.

They married on January 31, 1923. He was thirty-four years old, and she was twenty-eight. Using his saved money, Daniel bought a two-family home on 101-103 Etna Street in Brighton. Today it stands exactly the same as it did eighty years ago, the only difference being a new coat of paint. It is a rectangular two-story house, with the second floor identical to the first. It is more functional than elegant, a quality that betrayed the personality of its new Irish owners in 1923. Daniel and Mary immediately moved into 103, the second floor. The first floor, 101 Etna Street, was rented out to various people over the coming decades. The street itself was filled with Irish families. Next door to Daniel and Mary lived William Coughlin, a carpenter, and his family. Captain McKinnon of the Boston Police and his family lived across the street. Further down Etna Street lived the Wilburs, the owners of a Brighton car lot filled with new Cadillacs.

Daniel was oftentimes seen outside the house on his days off work, either painting the house or cleaning the gutters. In the summer months, he mowed the lawn that ran around the side of the house into the backyard. Mary was usually tearing through the house, washing floors, scrubbing clothing, cleaning dishes, and occasionally painting the ceilings. Her activity grew even more intense during the Depression, when their home was filled with a rotating cast of down-on-their-luck friends and family, in addition to their young children. At night, when she began to slow down, Mary could often be found sitting in the living room armchair, reading a book. All too often, however, she fell asleep soon after sitting down to read, too exhausted to keep her eyes open.

On Sundays, however, the married couple took a rest. The two of them believed in respecting the Sabbath, and so they did not do any work on Sundays, aside from Mary's cooking and Daniel's subsequent dishwashing. Of course, if Daniel was working that day, there was no escaping the patrol. On Sunday mornings, Daniel and Mary walked to St. Columbkille for mass. It was a Catholic church, only a quarter of a mile away from their home. Daniel was no doubt slightly drowsy after working the entire night on patrol.

Daniel and Mary went to mass every morning, in fact. It was a routine that lasted throughout their lives. The familiar seven-minute walk became something they both looked forward to each morning, as it was one of the only quiet, peaceful times they could share together. Their religious devotion did not end with mass. Mary said the rosary every night at 7 o'clock. Some of the time, Daniel was absent, working the 5 P.M. to 12 A.M. shift. But when he worked the midnight to 8 A.M. shift, he spent his evening with Mary in the living room, the rosary beads running through their fingers as they knelt

on the floor. This evening rosary was to become a tradition for the entire family later on, when the children were old enough to pray with their parents.

At the time of Daniel and Mary's marriage, Brighton was more of a rural area than an urban one, filled with stockyards, slaughterhouses, and meatpacking plants. The meatpacking plants employed hundreds of workers because there was little refrigeration technology available. As such, the time between slaughter and transportation had to be minimized, and this was accomplished only by the use of many hands. The cattle to be slaughtered were brought in from the countryside on train and unloaded at stations adjacent to the slaughterhouses. On occasion, some cattle escaped and ran through the streets with their handlers chasing them down. Every Wednesday and Saturday there were horse auctions in Brighton center. The horses were used for transportation; in the 1920's, even fire engines were horse-drawn.

By the time he married Mary, Daniel had been working with the Boston Police Department for little over a year. He was a patrolman, the lowest rank, and assigned to Division 15, centered in Charlestown. Like all patrolmen, he worked seven days in a row before resting on the eighth day. This arrangement prompted some of Daniel's fellow officers to joke that they worked harder than God. When he was on duty, Daniel's primary assignment was to patrol Charlestown by foot. Since he worked the night shift, he frequently patrolled streets that were deserted and unlit. The patrols, which lasted for several hours, were brutal in the winter months. Over the coming years, Mary sewed old newspapers into Daniel's jacket to keep him warm as he made his rounds about greater Boston.

Along the set route for the patrol, there were a number of police signal boxes—effectively telephones—connected to division headquarters. Each patrolman called the station when he reached a signal box, and in this way the position of each patrolman was tracked. More than that, the boxes allowed patrolmen to call for assistance or alert the station to an emergency.

Although these emergencies could take the form of a bank robbery or a fire, such excitement was rare. More often, a patrol was quiet, solitary work—“Ninety-nine percent boredom and one percent adrenaline.”¹ The diary of Patrolman Francis E. Bailey, maintained by the Archives, sheds some light upon this. Bailey worked as a patrolman for the Boston Police Department in the early 1940’s, and his experiences were similar to those of other patrolmen from that era and before. In one typical entry, he recounts finding a runaway boy: “Relieved Wallace & Finneran. Went to Div. 16. Picked up Robinson, 13 yrs. 92 Winthrop St. He ran away from home. We returned him to his mother. Relieved by Cusick & MacDonald.” Bailey’s other entries describe, among other things, warning a paperboy who was breaking mailboxes and chasing a cat out of a woman’s home.

However, the dangerous one percent was always lurking around the corner. Bailey’s journal includes the occasional adrenaline-pumping episode. One such instance occurred when he was the first officer to arrive on the scene of an attempted suicide. A woman had slit her wrists and then thought better of it by calling for an ambulance. Bailey was the first one there and had to calm the hysterical woman and bind her wrists. On another occasion, a woman attacked her husband with a razorblade and lacerated his

¹ From a conversation with Donna Wells, the records manager for the Boston Police Archives.

legs, prompting the neighbors to call the police. Once again, Bailey was first to the scene, caring for the man's wounds until the ambulance arrived. Add to these episodes the sporadic fires across the city, the occasional bank robbery, and the growth of organized crime during Prohibition. Taken all together, a patrolman was guaranteed to be in the thick of things, even if such notable episodes occurred infrequently.

One such episode occurred early in Daniel's career. A number of banks had been robbed in the vicinity of the RKO Theater in downtown Boston. The robber was a middle-aged man who disappeared within seconds of each robbery. As his notoriety grew with each subsequent robbery, the Boston Police took action, posting several dozen plainclothes officers in the area. Daniel was among them, dressed as a construction worker, complete with overalls and lunch pail. Within a week, the robber was caught; after one of his robberies, an officer observed him scramble underneath an automobile parked alongside the curb near the bank and arrested him. The mystery of his quick escape was solved.

On December 2, 1923, less than a year after they were married, Daniel and Mary's first child was born. They named her Mary. The new mother stayed home with her baby, and Daniel continued to spend seven days a week patrolling Charlestown. It was not an easy arrangement, as Daniel was gone each night. Less than a year later, on January 25, 1925, their second child was born. Daniel named the boy Bartholomew, after his own father back in Ireland. The long name did not stick; eventually everyone began to call the boy Bart.

In 1926, Daniel was awarded a medal for his pistol marksmanship. It was the first sign of his ambition—an ambition that culminated in his promotion to the rank of

lieutenant in 1943. Of the more than 1,500 Boston police officers, 222 were selected to shoot for record, based on recommendations made by higher-ranking officers. The shooting took place at the Commonwealth Armory in early March. Of the participating officers, 129 were awarded the title of “Pistol Marksman,” along with a medal awarded by the department. Daniel was among them.

In June of that year, Daniel transferred divisions, moving from Division 15 in Charlestown to Division 2, headquartered in eastern Boston. The divisional headquarters was located at 229 Milk Street, minutes away from Faneuil Hall and the Long Wharf. As such, Daniel was patrolling much of Boston, from Beacon Street down to Fort Point Channel.

Like her husband’s career, Mary’s life showed no signs of slowing down. On August 6, 1926, their third child, Nora, was born. Now with three children, all under the age of two, Mary had her hands full. Like an expert juggler, she kept everything from crashing to the floor. But things became more stressful when 103 Etna Street began to fill with visitors.

Mary and Daniel began to sponsor immigrants from Ireland in the late 1920’s, including Mary’s sister, Bridie O’Neill. In fact, Brighton could have been mistaken for a city in Ireland, as over three-quarters of its population was made up of first or second generation Irish. Daniel and Mary regularly had one or two recent immigrants staying with them, usually cousins or other relatives. They sponsored these family members, just as they themselves had been sponsored a decade earlier. Normally, the lodgers stayed upstairs with the Burns family for a few weeks or perhaps a month, until they had their

feet on the ground. They left as soon as they could; most of them were proud people, like Daniel and Mary, and did not want to press the bounds of courtesy.

Daniel continued to work seven days a week as the house filled with children and visitors. On the eighth day, he was usually doing work around the house. Most of this work took place outside, for Mary ruled indoors. Daniel painted the house annually and cleaned out the gutters several times a year. As a result, Daniel was frequently standing at the top of a ladder leaning against the house. Since Mary was always busy indoors, Daniel invented a way to move the ladder by himself. When he had finished cleaning out a section of the gutters or painting a section of the siding, Daniel remained at the top of the ladder and hopped sideways with it rather than climbing down to move it. A dangerous maneuver, it nearly cost him serious injury one morning much later in his life, when the ladder began to slip. Fortunately, his daughter-in-law, Louise, Bart's future wife, was there to save him by steadying the ladder after he called for help.

But Daniel was not immune to injury. On November 16, 1926, a Tuesday, Daniel's legs were horribly burned while patrolling Atlantic Avenue in Boston. It is unclear what sort of accident caused his injury. But the implications were clear enough: he spent the months of November and December bedridden, and carried the physical scars with him for the rest of his life.

However, Daniel was by no means crippled by his injury. In the late 1920's, he took up the sport of handball, a game quite similar to racquetball except that the ball is hit with the hand. The courts used in handball are identical to those used in racquetball, and the rules are nearly identical—a player wins a point when the opponent cannot keep the ball in play. For new players, handball can be quite a challenge, for in addition to the

problems of coordination, the constant slapping of the ball leaves one's hands bruised and sore for days afterwards. Inevitably, a player's hands become accustomed to the punishment, leaving them rigid and tough.

Daniel played handball throughout the year. In the summer months, he played at the L Street bathhouse in South Boston. The rest of the year, he could be found in the Hemingway Gym in Harvard Square, playing with friends from the police force whenever they had a day off together. Some nights, Daniel invited a few of his friends to his home for a game of 45s; they sat around the kitchen table, holding their cards and chatting in their thick brogues. Daniel spoke less than the others.

Daniel and Mary found themselves with another baby on the way in 1928. On March 31, their fourth child was born. They named the baby girl Helen after Daniel's mother. In spite of the family's increasing size, the house on Etna Street was by no means overly crowded. The few family and friends that Daniel and Mary sponsored were usually out in Brighton or Boston during the day, working at whatever jobs they could find, usually construction or housekeeping work.

The year following Helen's birth, the stock market crashed and the Great Depression took hold across the country. Thankfully, Daniel's job as a patrolman was secure. As a result, his family did not suffer extreme hardship during the Depression. If anything, his family became the rock in the midst of a raging river of poverty. It was a rock that more than a few family and friends were to cling to in the early 1930's.

The first of these was Katherine O'Neill, the aunt of Mary Burns. She had sponsored Mary when the young woman emigrated from Ireland in 1910. Aunt Kate, as everyone called her, was evicted from her apartment in South Boston soon after the

Depression began for not paying her rent. Her husband had died a few years earlier, and her only son was in constant trouble with the police; he spent much of his time in jail.

As soon as she discovered that Aunt Kate had been evicted, Mary invited her to live with them at Etna Street. She moved in with the Burns family in 1930 and quietly lived with them for the next several years. Mary bought a folding cot for her aunt and let her sleep in the living room each night. Food was tight at this time, as it was for every family, and Mary made use of her aunt's meal tickets, equivalent to the food stamps of today. Every few weeks, Mary sent her young son Bart to use the tickets at the public school in Brighton Center. Bart rolled a pushcart up to the school and redeemed the tickets for whatever was offered that week—flour, sugar, beans, potatoes—and brought the food back to Etna Street. In this way, Mary combined Daniel's income with Aunt Kate's meal tickets, allowing the family to ward off hunger throughout the Depression.



Daniel Francis Burns, his wife Mary, and children (from left to right, Helen, Bartholomew, Mary, and Nora, seated), circa 1930. (Courtesy Nora Howley)

Daniel and Mary knew many friends and family members other than Aunt Kate who were struggling through the Depression. They made sure to invite these people over for lunch and dinner frequently; they knew that many of them were going hungry. As a result, it was not uncommon for visitors to stop by 103 Etna Street in the afternoons and evenings. The children were aware of this. One frequent visitor was Patrick Houlihan, one of Mary's friends. Patrick was one of the many who had lost his job in the early 1930's. He often stopped by for lunch. When Mary walked into Brighton Center to get the family's groceries, she made sure to tell her children to feed Patrick: "If Patrick comes, make sure you make tea and bread for him!" Even though the Burns family was being stretched by the Depression, Daniel and Mary never hesitated to help their struggling family and friends.

Mary also didn't hesitate to assign her children chores every Saturday. On weekdays, the children were exempt from chores, as Daniel and Mary were very concerned about their children's schoolwork. Education was the most important thing, a fact that Mary and Daniel emphasized repeatedly over the years. On Saturday mornings, however, no one was exempt from housework. Each child was assigned a particular chore, from polishing the brassware to scrubbing the floors. The children worked throughout Saturday morning, until the house was as spotless as Daniel's police uniform.

For young Bart, these chores were not without reward. The family had purchased a radio in 1930, and on Saturday afternoons and evenings, Bart sat beside it, enthralled by the college football games around the country. When his chores were finished just before noon, he scrambled to the radio so as not to miss a minute of the Harvard game. Next came the Notre Dame game in the later afternoon. Bart continued to listen as evening

came and USC played. When Daniel had a Saturday off from work, he listened to the games with Bart, the two of them glued for hours to the radio.

Daniel and Bart also enjoyed Gaelic football games together in the 1930's. Gaelic football is a game that originated in Ireland in the 16th century; effectively a mixture of soccer and rugby, the game is violent enough that a bloodied player is not an uncommon sight. During the summer months, thousands of Irishmen from around the city gathered at Smith Playground in Allston to watch the weekend games. The men, dressed in three-piece suits and straw hats, crowded the sidelines, cheering for the teams and sweating under the sun's glare. Some of the rowdier men ended up brawling. Standing in the midst of the crowd, Daniel lifted his son onto his broad shoulders so that the boy could see the bright jerseys charging up and down the field.

By this time, the Burns family had grown to include five children. Born on April 30, 1930, Dorothy assumed her position as the perennial baby of the family. Mary, now seven years old, was enrolled at St. Columbkille parochial school, the same church that Daniel and Mary visited each morning for mass. Bart was to join his sister in another year or two, though he sometimes skipped school to walk around Brighton and watch a local blacksmith make horseshoes by the Charles River.

The Boston Police Department transferred Daniel again in 1930. It was not unusual for patrolmen to be transferred every few years; it was thought that such transfers kept the patrolmen on their toes. It was a way to keep them alert by changing their surroundings. Daniel was assigned to Division 17, headquartered in West Roxbury. But like so many other patrolmen in the early 1930's, Daniel's duties were not limited to patrol work; he also protected the bank trucks driving through Boston.

The Great Depression's grip on the economy was tighter than ever, squeezing many banks dry. Investors withdrew their money to settle debts, and with so much unemployment, new investors were hard to find. As a result, many banks found themselves with a low money supply, leading the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston to begin delivering money to its member banks across the city. The bank delivery trucks needed to be well guarded, so the Federal Reserve turned to the Boston Police Department for help.

Each time a delivery truck wound its way through the Boston streets, a patrolman was sitting in the passenger seat, his pistol at the ready. Occasionally, Daniel was assigned this guard duty. And while nearly all of the deliveries went flawlessly, inevitably there was the occasional accident.

One such accident occurred in 1930 or 1931, on a day when Daniel was the patrolman assigned the bank truck detail. The truck was driving through Central Square on its way to one of the member banks when the truck was hit by a trolley car. Daniel was thrown through the windshield as a result of the impact, suffering a broken nose and lacerations across his face. The back doors of the truck broke open on impact, and bags of money were flung into the street.

A crowd gathered at the scene of the accident, and several people tried to make off with some of the money. Despite his injuries, Daniel picked himself up and leveled his pistol at the crowd, allowing the driver of the truck to recover all the money and place it back into the demolished truck. Daniel used a nearby patrolman's box to signal for help, and then waited beside the truck until his fellow officers arrived.

A few days before the accident, Bart and Mary had asked their father to bring home a pair of ball-and-paddle toys for them. Daniel had promised to do so the next time he returned home from work. A few hours after the accident, he appeared at the front door of his home holding the two toys. His face was still bloodied. After handing the toys off to his shocked children, he wiped his face with a cloth and walked off to Saint Elizabeth's hospital.

Such an episode demonstrates Daniel's sense of duty, both in his police work and his family life. He never hesitated to fulfill even the most trivial of commitments, like the promise he made to Bart and Mary.

Another incident shines further light upon his dutiful nature. When he was seen painting the house or cleaning the gutters, Daniel was actually standing on a ladder belonging to someone else. He had borrowed the large ladder from a friend in North Cambridge. When the ladder broke in the early 1930's, Daniel carried it to Kendall Square to get it repaired. He and his son Bart carried it from Etna Street, over the Charles River, and westward into Kendall Square, a distance of over three miles. Father and son spoke little along the way, separated by the thirty-foot ladder.

Once the ladder was repaired an hour later, the two of them carried it into North Cambridge, back to its original owner. Daniel apologized to his friend, then walked back to Etna Street with Bart in tow. In all, the episode is another indication of how strongly Daniel believed in the idea of duty.

Ironically, the Boston Police Department was not nearly as respectable in the 1930's as Daniel was. Each year, a promotional examination was offered to the more than two thousand patrolmen who made up the backbone of the Department. According to the

Department, those who scored highest on the examination were promoted to the rank of sergeant. The number of promotions varied each year depending on the number of retiring sergeants. In 1931, for example, nineteen men were promoted, thanks to the retirement of nineteen sergeants.² These nineteen promoted men had not achieved the highest scores on the examination, however.

In fact, a pay-off system determined which patrolmen were promoted to the rank of sergeant. Daniel was not aware of this when he took the promotional examination in 1931. Though he had one of the top ten scores among the two thousand patrolmen, Daniel was passed over for promotion. He was no doubt troubled by what had happened. Even so, he raised no fuss and readied himself to take the examination again in 1932. Each day before work, Daniel studied the test materials, memorizing regulations, emergency procedures, and divisional statistics.

Daniel was passed over again in 1932. Once again, he had one of the highest scores. Twenty-four patrolmen were promoted that year.³ Year after year, the outcome was the same. No doubt Daniel knew those being promoted and was aware that they were not of his caliber. Distressed by this fact, he began to investigate the basis of the promotions.

Inquiring around the Department, Daniel learned that a pay-off system was in place. He eventually asked a relative of his—a cousin who worked as a judge in one of the state courthouses—to help him uncover the workings of the system. Late one night in 1935, the cousin stopped by the Burns home on Etna Street. By this time, everyone was asleep, except for Daniel. The two of them met in the living room and spoke in hushed

² Leonard V. Harrison, *Police Administration in Boston* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1934), p. 57.

³ Leonard V. Harrison, *Police Administration in Boston* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1934), p. 57.

tones. Unbeknownst to either of them, Bart was not asleep; the ten-year-old had snuck out of his room and was an eavesdropper on the conversation.

Daniel's cousin had used one of his contacts to discover the workings behind the pay-off system. In order to be promoted to the rank of sergeant, a patrolman needed to pay a \$1,000 bribe to a certain police administrator. At the time, such a sum was exorbitant; Daniel was making only two or three thousand dollars a year in salary. Once the cousin had finished explaining the details of the scandal, Bart heard his father say that he would never pay it.

By this time in 1935, whispers of the promotion scandal had reached the ears of the press. Within the next year, two of Boston's largest newspapers, *The Boston Post* and *The Boston Globe*, had published exposés on the scandal, using Daniel as an example of an officer aggrieved by the system. Since he had achieved top scores on the examination for five years running, Daniel was the perfect example. The newspapers also told the stories of other patrolmen who had been passed over year after year.

The scandal had been exposed to the public. With a new sense of accountability, the Boston Police Department offered the first promotional examination since the newspaper stories. The examination occurred in 1937, and by this time Daniel was an expert; he could have taken the examination with his eyes closed. Once again he scored in the very top percentiles of all the patrolmen. This time, he was promoted. On August 27, 1937, Daniel assumed the rank of sergeant. He had beaten the corrupt system without compromising himself with bribery.

By the time Daniel was finally promoted that year, Mary had borne two more children. Daniel, the couple's second son, was born on September 25, 1932. He was to be



Sergeant Daniel Francis Burns, 1937. (Courtesy Nora Howley)

called “Danny” throughout his childhood. Veronica, their fifth daughter, was born on October 30, 1934. Their seventh child, Veronica, was also their last.

Now that some of the children had grown a little bit older, a family routine began to emerge. Each morning, Daniel and Mary walked to mass, as was their custom. On weekdays, the older children walked to school in their white starched shirts, the girls in their ironed skirts, the boys in their pleated pants. In 1937, the eldest child, Mary, was thirteen years old and enrolled at the Boston Latin girls school. Bart, at twelve, was two years away from entering Boston Latin. Nora, Helen, and Dorothy continued to go to the St. Columbkille elementary school. Danny and Veronica stayed at home with their mother, as they were too young to go to school.

Those weekdays were filled with Mary’s frenzied cleaning. After morning mass, Daniel usually went back to bed, waking up in the afternoon to study for the promotional examinations. As such, Mary was on her own as she cleaned the house. In the morning, after she had made breakfast for the children, she cleaned up the dishes, made the beds, and swept the floors. At noontime, the children returned from school and ate lunch at home before heading back for their afternoon classes. As a result, Mary prepared sandwiches before her children arrived, and then cleaned up the kitchen afterwards. Sitting down for lunch with her children was the first time she had taken a break since breakfast. Her children talked about their schoolwork, but if anyone complained about school, she was quick to remind them of how valuable their education was. No doubt she reminded them of her early days as a domestic servant, and of Daniel’s construction work.

When Mary had cleaned up after lunch, she used the two large stone sinks in the kitchen to wash the family's clothes. She spent the most time cleaning Daniel's police uniforms and the children's school clothes. The rest of the family's clothing was not as high a priority. She prided herself on how pristine her family looked when they went to work and school. In one sink, Mary scrubbed the clothes on a washboard with soap; in the other sink, she washed them off before laying them across a laundry rack.

Even after Daniel's promotion, he continued to work the night shift; after fifteen years of such a schedule, his body was accustomed to it. Since he frequently began work at 5 P.M., the family ate dinner at 4 o'clock. As such, Mary began to prepare dinner early in the afternoon, soon after finishing the laundry. But Mary had no problem with this arrangement; she and Daniel had agreed that the family needed to eat dinner together as a rule. Without that family dinner, it was nearly impossible for Daniel and Mary to have a chance of sitting down together with their children. In their eyes, a sense of family was as important as their children's education.

Grace was said before every dinner. As the family ate, Daniel and Mary asked the children about their day at school. It was the first time each day that the family sat down together. After dinner was finished, Daniel quickly washed the dishes before heading out the door for work, if he was scheduled to begin at 5 o'clock. If he was working the later midnight shift, he could relax after he finished with the dishes. After dinner, Mary always sat down in the living room for an hour. It was the one quiet moment in her day. While the children worked on their homework, Mary either relaxed in her chair or read from a novel. She was a voracious reader, when she managed to keep her eyes open. When she

went into town on Thursday afternoons, she stopped by the library before she went to the butcher's shop and the clothing store.

At seven o'clock each evening, the family gathered in the living room to pray the rosary together. The family had been praying the rosary from the very beginning of their life on Etna Street, whether or not Daniel was home for it. For the next twenty minutes they prayed out loud together, kneeling on the floor. No doubt some of the children were bored. But because it was such a strong family tradition, none of the children dared complain, certainly not in front of their mother. It is no small wonder that one of the children joined a religious order; in 1941, when she had graduated from high school, the eldest daughter Mary joined the Sisters of the Notre Dame.

When the rosary was finished, Mary continued reading. If he were working the midnight shift, Daniel helped his children with their homework; he was excellent at math. In order to encourage his children to learn their multiplication tables, he bribed them with pieces of candy and fruit.

The evening was the only quiet time the family had together; for Mary, it was the only quiet time she had at all. When the children finished with their homework, the younger ones played around before bedtime. Usually, Mary had fallen asleep by this time, sitting in her chair with a book lying open in her lap. Daniel constantly reminded his children to keep their voices down, so as not to wake their mother. He also insisted that they clean up after themselves. As his wife slept, Daniel tidied up the house, so Mary wouldn't have more work to do the next day. Though he spent so much time away from home, he knew how hard his wife worked. Her sleeping form in the armchair was evidence enough.

The family went to bed at 8:30 P.M. each night. When Daniel worked the midnight shift, he tucked his younger children into their beds, then roused his sleeping wife and led her into their bedroom. A few hours later, at 11 o'clock, he set out for work. The cycle began again the next day.

The weekends were the only break in this routine. Mary and her children made the house spotless every Saturday morning, after she and Daniel had gone to mass. When the house was clean, the children left to spend time with their friends. As this went on, Daniel was doing his own share of the work—mowing the lawn or painting the house in the summertime, and raking leaves and cleaning gutters in the fall. When he was finished, Daniel often played handball with his friends in the police department. As Bart grew older, he eventually joined his father at the L Street Bathhouse for these games.

Saturday afternoons were one of Mary's favorite times; along with two other women from the neighborhood, she rode the trolley to Suffolk Downs in East Boston. She loved horse racing. Though she bet the occasional dollar or two, Mary was more interested in watching the races than in betting on them. The excitement and the noise were probably what drew her to the racetrack. It was the experience of something grander than her usual life, an escape from Brighton.

On Sunday mornings, the entire family went to mass together. Respecting the Sabbath, Daniel and Mary refrained from any sort of work, aside from cooking and washing dishes. The children weren't so lucky; they spent much of the day doing their homework. In the early 1930's, Daniel and Mary listened to Father Coughlin's radio show on Sunday afternoons. The family ate dinner together each night, even on the weekends.

Family dinners were more than just a time for the family to sit down together. They were also the time for Daniel and Mary to check up on their children's schooling. The parents' emphasis on their children's education was most intense when report cards were issued. Over dinner, Mary and Daniel looked over each child's report card. What bothered them the most was when a child's effort was marked "Unsatisfactory." For Daniel and Mary, the individual subject grades were not as important as the level of effort being put forth. When the word "Unsatisfactory" appeared on one of the report cards, Mary's disciplinarian figure emerged and chided the one who had earned it.

As the years passed, Bart became a distinguished athlete at Boston Latin, playing baseball, basketball, and football, and taking the trolley home late after practice. However, he didn't take his schoolwork as seriously as his athletics. In his sophomore year at Latin, he failed a mathematics course. Late that spring, Daniel spoke with the headmaster of Boston Latin, who explained that Bart could not return the next year. After the meeting with Headmaster Powers, Daniel walked out of the school with Bart beside him. "You're coming back here next year," he said. Bart was confused and asked his father how that could be. Daniel explained that Powers had agreed to let Bart retake the final exam in August. During that summer, Bart spent every day indoors studying, under the vigilant eye of his mother. Forbidden to leave the house, he thought of all the football and baseball games he could be playing. By the time August arrived, Bart had nearly memorized his textbook. During the ten-question exam, he left after answering the first six questions. He knew that he only needed to answer six questions correctly to pass. He did, and he was able to return to Latin that fall. The frustration he felt that summer led Bart to take his academics much more seriously from then on.

For their part, Nora and her sisters excelled in their schooling. In the spring of 1941, Mary graduated from the Boston Latin girls school. Her parents forcefully encouraged her to enroll in college. Unlike many Irish families, Daniel and Mary believed that their daughters should continue their education after high school. Mary immediately wanted to join the religious life after graduating, but she relented when her father pleaded with her to go to college. She enrolled at Emmanuel College in Boston, but her college experience was short-lived. When her freshman year was finished, in the summer of 1942, Mary joined the Sisters of the Notre Dame. She had begged her parents to allow her to do so; she was unhappy at college and believed her vocation lay in the religious life. Daniel and Mary relented; no doubt they were saddened by what had happened. Daniel was particularly adamant in his belief that his daughters should achieve a college education.

In 1943, Bart was the next to move on, graduating from Boston Latin in the spring. He joined the Air Corps Cadet Program directly after graduation, in May, and was sent to Tennessee for basic training. He went on to fly as a navigator on a number of the Allied bombing runs over Berlin late in the war.

The morning Bart left for Tennessee, he was sent off by Daniel and Mary. Daniel, a veteran of the Great War thirty years earlier, had no words of wisdom to offer his son. Instead, he wept as he hugged Bart. Bart, who had never before seen his father cry, wondered what he had done wrong. The shock of witnessing his father's tears remained with Bart long after. What thoughts passed through Daniel's mind as he held his son—memories of Bart, memories of France—remain unknown. For her part, Mary cried as well. The two Irish parents, seldom emotional, were overwhelmed.

A few months later, Bart returned to Boston for three days before his unit sailed to England for combat. On the last night, he visited his family in Brighton. Sitting around the table after dinner, Daniel asked Bart how he was planning to return to Plymouth the next morning for departure. Bart, whose unit was stationed in Plymouth, was confused. He had told Daniel nothing about Plymouth, and upon asking him, discovered that his father knew the exact time of departure, as well as the name of the ship that was sailing to England. Bart began to believe that Daniel was a spy and wondered if he ought to turn him into the military authorities. In the end, he didn't, and thankfully so. The next morning, in Plymouth, Bart discovered that Daniel was the lead officer on detail that day, organizing several dozen police officers across the port. As the ship sailed off to England several hours later, Bart felt ashamed for believing that his father might be a spy.

A month or two beforehand, Daniel was promoted to the rank of lieutenant. The years of studying in the afternoons and evenings had paid dividends. He took the promotional examination that year for the first time, as soon as he was qualified to do so. Unlike his first promotional experience, Daniel had no trouble being promoted for his high score. On June 24, 1943, he became a lieutenant, the highest rank he was to achieve as an officer of the Boston Police Department. He was undoubtedly proud of his accomplishment, but as was his style, he refused to acknowledge any of his feelings about the promotion.

Life was speeding up for the Burns children. Nora graduated from St. Columbkille high school in the spring of 1944 at the age of sixteen. She enrolled at Emmanuel College in Boston that fall but continued to live at home. In fact, all of Daniel's daughters lived at home until they were married; in Irish circles, the moving out

of a daughter before marriage was treated with suspicion. Mary was the only exception to this rule; she moved to a convent in 1942, when she was eighteen years old.

In 1945, Bart returned from war unscathed, and used the GI Bill to enroll at Boston College. He spent the next two and a half years there, majoring in physics,



Lieutenant Daniel Francis Burns, circa 1950. (Courtesy Nora Howley)

before transferring to the Colorado School of Mines to finish his degree. Bart remained in the western United States, working as an engineer in copper mines across Arizona.

All the while, Daniel continued to work nights with the police force, spending these years working in the eastern Boston divisions. After so many years of patrol work, he now worked out of division headquarters, monitoring the patrolmen and organizing the divisional force. Mary continued to work around the house each day. Even with the sobriety of middle age, Mary's spirit never quieted down. And Daniel never stopped smiling when he was around her.

In the spring of 1946, Helen graduated from St. Columbkille high school. Though Daniel and Mary offered to send her to college, she decided to start working directly after graduating. Once again, Daniel was disappointed. Helen joined the American Telephone and Telegraph Corporation in its Boston offices directly after graduation. Two years later, in 1948, Dorothy graduated from high school. She chose to study nursing in St. Elizabeth's Hospital, a ten-minute walk from their home on Etna Street.

Though Bart and Mary were no longer living at home by this time, the house was not at all empty. Nora, Helen, and Dorothy continued to live there, though they left for college or work each morning. Danny and Veronica continued to go to St. Columbkille school; they were finishing up their high school years. In the spring of 1950, Danny graduated. Half a year later, he enlisted in the military after the United States became engaged in the Korean War; though he trained as a paratrooper, he was never deployed. He returned to Boston in 1953 and enrolled at Boston State College. In 1952, Veronica graduated, choosing to enroll at the Franklin Institute in Boston that fall. No doubt Daniel and Mary were sad to see their youngest child graduate from high school.

The children were no longer the little kids who had trotted off to St. Columbkille each morning. Both Bart and Nora had gotten married in 1950, and Dorothy was soon to follow in the summer of 1952. Bart had married Louise Costello, a woman he had met in 1946 at Hampton Beach in New Hampshire. A year later, Bart went off to the Colorado School of Mines to finish his degree. He returned home in 1950, and the couple wed. Bart returned to Colorado with Louise, where he began to work as an engineer. Nora married Francis Howley, a fireman in the Newton Fire Department, in 1950. She immediately moved in with him, leaving the house on Etna Street a little bit emptier.



*101-103 Etna Street, Brighton, circa 1950. Standing outside are Dorothy (left) and Nora.
(Courtesy Nora Howley)*

Several years later, in August of 1953, Daniel's world came to a crashing halt when his beloved Mary died suddenly of a stroke. She was 59 years old. Most likely, the stroke was brought on by high blood pressure; thirty years of her daily intensity was too much for her body to handle.

Daniel had retired from the police force in July of that year; at 64, the thirty years of late nights and long hours had exhausted him. Just one month later, Mary suffered the stroke, dying a few days later. There was no warning. For a man whose joy in life was his wife and children, it was a heavy blow.

Mary's wake was held in the living room of the home, her body lying in state a few feet away from the armchair where she had sat every night for thirty years. From 7 o'clock in the morning until 11 o'clock that night, the mourners shuffled in and out. Dozens of Daniel's fellow police officers came to pay their respects, a few urging him to return to the force. He refused. Throughout the day, he spoke with friends and family, doing his best to hide his devastation. But he could not keep it completely bottled up. The most vocal grief he could manage was shared with Nora: "When the mother dies, the heart goes out of the home." After the funeral at St. Columbkille the next day, Mary was buried in Holyhood Cemetery in Brookline, several miles from Etna Street.

Bart returned home for the funeral; Louise and their two daughters, Virginia and Marsha, stayed in Arizona, as Marsha was only one month old. Bart was aware of his father's wordless grief; growing up in an Irish household, no one was ever vocal about his or her emotions. Though he was working in Arizona at that time, he decided to move back to Brighton in order to support his father in that lonely house. By this time, only Veronica was living with Daniel. Bart told his father about his idea, and Daniel agreed.

Most likely, as was characteristic, the grieving man expressed little emotion at the news. But Daniel must have been relieved, for he immediately began to ask the tenants downstairs to move out. Despite his insistence, they did not move out until the lease expired midway through 1954.

Bart returned to Arizona after the funeral and spoke with Louise about his idea. She agreed, and in January of 1954, she returned to Massachusetts with her two children, moving into 103 Etna Street with Daniel and Veronica, as the downstairs had not yet been vacated. Bart remained behind in Arizona for the next two months as he finished up a mining project. By March, he was living in Brighton; he had given up his mining career to return home. He began to work as an engineer for various construction projects around Boston. As the years progressed, Bart began working on construction projects outside of Boston, often traveling for weeks at a time. Before Bart returned from Arizona, however, Louise was left to spend her days with Daniel. She had a difficult time adjusting to the living situation. Her father-in-law refused to let her touch anything that had been Mary's. In fact, he had not moved anything that Mary had touched in the days before she died.

Virginia, now three years old, adored her grandfather. She followed him throughout the house each day. After several months, even the gentle, patient man had had enough. At breakfast one morning, Daniel had some sharp words for Virginia. Sitting at the table was Daniel, Veronica, and Louise. It was too much for Louise; she burst into tears. Both Daniel and Veronica immediately left the house; neither of them knew how to handle such a display of emotion.

Veronica moved out in 1954 after marrying a local man, Joseph Smith. That summer, Louise and Bart moved into 101 Etna Street, after the tenants had finally moved

out. Louise was relieved to have her own space. But Daniel continued to be a strong presence in the house, frequently coming downstairs to visit Louise and her children. It was around this time that Virginia gave her grandfather the nickname that stuck with him for the rest of his life.

Louise frequently read to her two children, and one of their favorite stories involved a character named Grampa Bunny Bear. One day, upon seeing her grandfather, Virginia called out “Bunny!” When the story was shared with other family members over the coming months, everyone got a kick out of it, and the nickname stuck. Bunny Burns, as he came to be called on occasion, didn’t mind at all. He was old enough to appreciate the slight crack on his dignity.

Daniel’s life had been changed in a dramatic way since his retirement and the death of his wife. He found some relief in a daily routine. Every day, he woke up at 6 o’clock in the morning. After getting dressed and eating breakfast, he turned on the radio and listen to one of the local priests say the rosary. Daniel prayed alongside the radio with his own rosary beads. After he finished the rosary, he walked to St. Columbkille for morning mass. No doubt the walk was one filled with reminiscing.

When mass was finished, Daniel walked to Brighton center and shopped for a few groceries. Each day, he bought a can of tomato soup to make for lunch, as well as a small piece of cube steak he cooked for dinner. Once in a while, he walked over to the bookie office and bet several dollars on one of the horse races that week.

In the afternoons, after eating his tomato soup, Daniel did a little bit of reading, or else went outside to work on the house. As usual, he painted the siding and cleaned the gutters each year. Despite his age, he continued to hop on his ladder in order to move it.

In 1962, when Louise was pregnant with her fifth child, she ran outside after hearing Daniel holler for help. She found him on top of the ladder, looking down at her in alarm. The ladder was sliding off the side of the house. She immediately ran over and steadied it before he could fall.

At night, Daniel cooked his cube steak. He was no chef, and by the time he finished cooking, the steak looked like a piece of leather. After dinner, he turned on the radio and listened to “The Catholic Hour” before going to bed at 9 o’clock.

Daniel continued to be a part of his grandchildren’s lives. In addition to Virginia and Marsha, Bart and Louise’s children included Daniel (nicknamed Danny), born in 1955, Michael, born in 1958, and Marion, born in 1962. The children were slightly intimidated by his silent nature. In the early 1960’s, Danny and Michael often visited their grandfather for candy. They climbed up the back staircase and knocked sheepishly on their grandfather’s door. When he opened it, he let them in without a word and then walked into his bedroom with the children following. All was done in silence; the only sounds were the ticking clock and the squeaking floorboards. Daniel retrieved two Canadian mints from his dresser and gave them to his grandchildren. They immediately turned around and ran out of the apartment, frightened and exhilarated.

But Daniel was not always a cold personality. When his grandson Danny was hurt one evening, after falling off his top bunk bed, Daniel took the boy into his arms and sang an Irish lullaby to him, rocking back and forth in a chair. Sometimes he threw a football around with his grandsons outside. One afternoon, young Danny threw the football over his grandfather’s head. When the old man suddenly laughed as he retrieved it, Danny turned away, embarrassed and shocked to see his grandfather’s laughter.

Around this time, in the late 1950's, Daniel broke up the routine of his life with a trip to Ireland. It was his first trip back to since immigrating to the United States nearly fifty years earlier. Upon arriving in 1958, Daniel immediately traveled to Sneem and stayed with his nephew Patrick at his house, only several hundred feet from the center of town. Daniel remained there for a week; each morning he walked several miles to visit the homestead where he grew up. His brother Michael was living there at the time with his son Pattie. The two brothers shared stories each morning over coffee and tea; they had lived entire lifetimes without conversing with each other. In the afternoons, Daniel wandered around Mount Coomcallee, over the fields he knew as a shepherd so many years before. He was too old to climb to the peak, where he used to fish.

Daniel also visited some of his family in Sneem, but many of his siblings had passed away years earlier. He visited the graveyard several miles away from Sneem; it was filled with headstones bearing the names of Burns and O'Sullivan. Daniel lingered over the cracked stone inscribed with his mother and father's name.

The week was over quickly, but Daniel returned two years later. His brother Michael had died, leaving young Pattie in charge of the homestead. Upon arriving, Daniel immediately bought a new headstone for his parents' grave. Though he spoke with Pattie and visited family in Sneem, he had come to Ireland to replace the cracked headstone. His return was further evidence of the responsibility and duty that had defined his life. Soon after it was replaced, he left Ireland, never to return.

By the time Bart and Louise bought a summer cottage in Manomet in 1964, Daniel's health had begun to fail. At the housewarming party, Daniel walked around outside, dressed in a three-piece suit and a straw hat, reminiscent of the days of Gaelic

football at Smith Playground. He walked around the yard alone, and later that day spoke to the neighbors, telling them that he had seen a man slip into their house through the back window. Such hallucinations became more common as time wore on. Although it wasn't known at that time, Daniel was beginning to suffer from what was probably Alzheimer's Disease.

His daughter Dorothy, who had become a nurse many years earlier, decided that she could take care of her father better than Bart could. So, in June of 1965, Bart, Louise, and their five children moved out of 101 Etna Street, buying a house in Norwood and moving there. Dorothy moved into the vacated first floor with her family and began to take care of her father, keeping an eye on him as best she could. Daniel's condition continued to decline.

In 1967, the last full year of his life, Daniel suffered from frequent hallucinations and delusions. He was terrified of being alone. Though Dorothy was there to take care of her father, Bart moved into the upstairs apartment for a time and slept outside his father's bedroom each night. Daniel had a cowbell next to his bed, to signal for his son. Bart came into his father's bedroom whenever the bell was rung and sat with his father until the old man went back to sleep. Oftentimes, the bell rang ten or more times each night.

Eventually, Bart and Dorothy could no longer adequately care for their father. Daniel's children decided to put him into one of the smaller hospitals in Brighton. On a mild November morning in 1967, Bart called for an ambulance to take his father away. Daniel walked out the front door of 103 Etna Street and turned back for one last look at the house before getting into the car. "Well, that's it," Bart heard his father mutter. "I'm never coming back here."

The children visited their father in the hospital; Dorothy even managed to get a job there, in order to keep a closer watch over him. But Daniel's health declined very rapidly that winter. His children visited him frequently in these last few weeks; they knew he was still terrified of being alone. But worse than that, they knew he was letting himself go. When he had lived at home, little reminders of Mary surrounded him on every side—the faded photographs, her armchair, and her clothes. Though he was no doubt made lonelier by these reminders, they were something he cherished. Lying in the sterile hospital bed, he had nothing to distract him from death.

Daniel died on January 13, 1968, just five days short of his eightieth birthday. Though the children were grieved at the death of their father, they were also filled with a sense of relief. They knew how much their father had suffered at the hands of mental illness and the loneliness that preceded it. They consoled each other at the wake and supported each other through the funeral at St. Columbkille. The church pews were filled with extended family and friends, all dressed in black. The service was solemn, and it went forward without a eulogy. After mass, several police cruisers led the motorcade into Newton. The ten-minute drive ended when the dozens of cars entered Holyhood Cemetery. Daniel was laid to rest beside Mary.

Like the man himself, Daniel's will was simple and direct. All his assets were to be divided among the children. In reality, the only asset was the house on Etna Street. The children sold it off, for it was too dense with memory for any of them to live there.



101-103 Etna Street, Brighton, today.

Afterword

“There is properly no history, only biography.” —Emerson

I.

For the last six months, I have been writing a biography of my great-grandfather, Daniel Francis Burns. It’s a project that has taken me into mildewed attics, police archives, and most recently to Ireland, where he was born in 1888. I spent a week on the Emerald Isle this spring, traveling with my father and grandfather. We were three generations searching for a fourth.

II.

Daniel grew up on the outskirts of a town called Sneem, in southwestern Ireland. It’s a tiny town—no more than 300 people—but on the day we arrive, the town square is brimming with thousands of people from the surrounding area. Tattered tarps serve as makeshift tents against the drizzle, as tinkers hawk stolen shoes and knick-knacks with their thick brogue.

It’s St. Patrick’s Day, and the parade is coming. As my grandfather and father chat next to me, I glance around. To my left, a teenager with a small camcorder is pointing it at a thick-faced man beside her. “And how is daddy going to celebrate



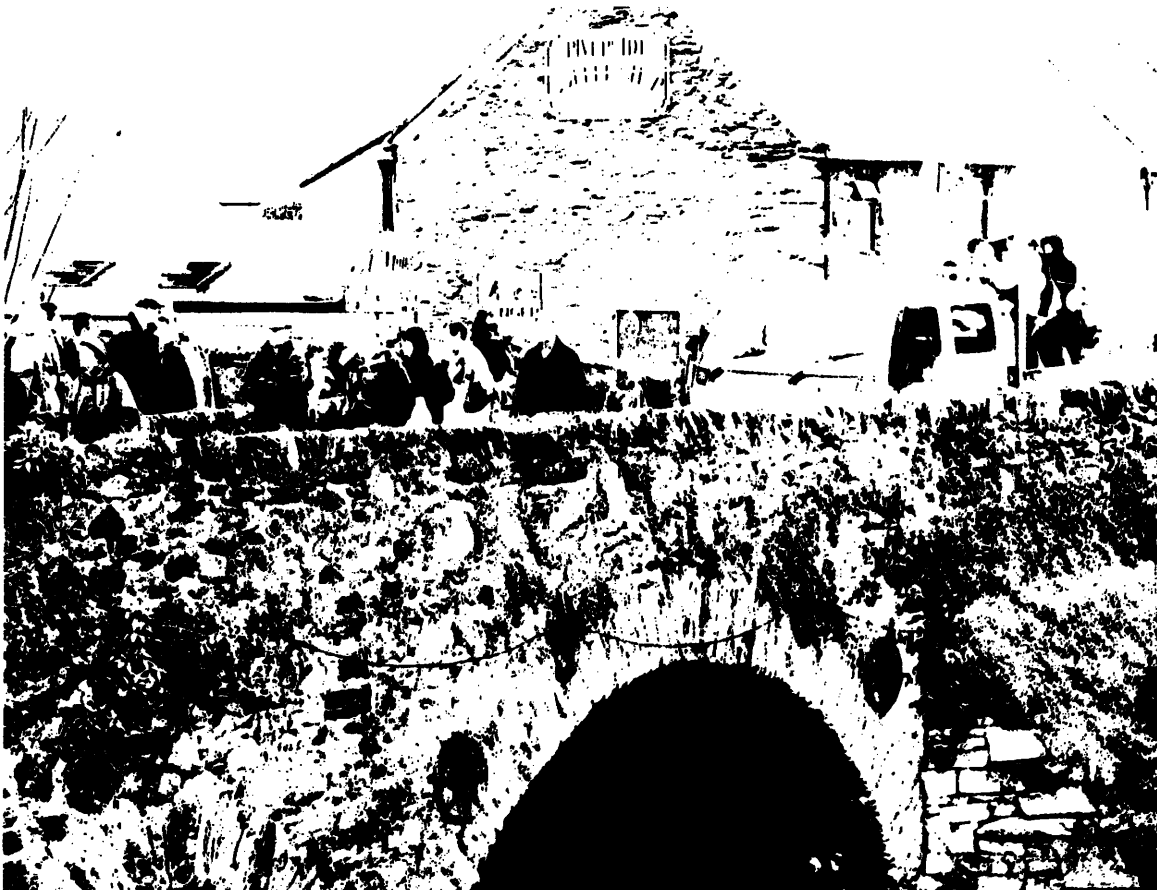
A crowd gathers in the town square as Sneem readies for the St. Patrick's Day parade on March 17, 2005.

today?" she asks, in a singsong voice. The mustached man chuckles deeply and pulls a bottle of whisky from his jacket, and begins to slug from it.

Suddenly, the crowd begins clapping and little children are raised onto fatherly shoulders. I look down the narrow road and see a red Kia creeping along, with a three-foot papier-mâché giraffe sticking out of the passenger window. Following behind is a white pickup truck, its hubcaps caked with mud. In the flatbed, two young boys are

shoving a third into a clothes dryer. The latter is dressed in military fatigues. Political message or inebriation? In Ireland, it's difficult to tell.

Five elderly women walk behind the pickup truck, dressed in Gaelic football jerseys. One particularly plump woman tosses a rugby ball up into the air again and again. She is grinning broadly. The spectators follow the women down the street, streaming into pubs and coffee shops, or else purchasing secondhand clothing from the tinkers.



*The St. Patrick's Day parade crosses Sneem River
on its way into town, March 17, 2005.*

I now understand why someone would want to leave this place.

Before we leave, we discover that there is a butcher named Pat Burns in town. Thinking he might be a relative, we find his shop. It's closed. We decide to return the next day and ask him if the old Burns homestead is still standing.

As the three of us walk back towards the car, I turn to my father. "I'm not going to lie to you," I say. "There are some ugly people here. I think the gene pool may be a little shallow."

"Don't be too insulting to your own genes," my father says.

My grandfather chuckles, shaking his head.

III.

We are sitting in Murphy's Pub, a purple building downtown, if Sneem can be said to have a downtown. Pat Burns is sitting with us three around a black wooden table. He's young—mid-thirties—with sharp-looking teeth and eyes that are clearly bored, wandering around the pub. He's speaking so rapidly that I've stopped paying attention, except to the blood caked under his fingernails. Every other word out of his mouth is "f'kin," and he hurls it out of his mouth the way a machine gun sprays bullets.

At one point, Pat asks my grandfather a question, to which he replied, "My friend, I didn't catch a word of anything you just said." Then they both sip their pints.

We learn that the homestead still stands, ten minutes up the road, at the base of Mount Coomcallee. Apparently a software engineer named Sean owns it now. We bid

adieu to Pat, shaking his bloody hand, and drive towards the ring of mountains to the West.

A few minutes later, the three of us are walking up a dirt road, my grandfather favoring his right knee and grimacing a little bit. Ahead stands a white, two-story stucco house with rotting window frames, attached to a stone and clay stable. The front side of the house is filled with the haphazard finger-painting of a child, the colors garishly bright.

A thin, bearded man opens the front door as we approach. His hair is thinning, just like the grass in his front yard. Introducing himself as Sean, he asks us why we've



Sean Amergin stands in front of his home, previously owned by the Burnses for hundreds of years.

come by, with no suspicion in his voice. Everything about him—his old galoshes and sweater, his slow speech—tells me that he’s relaxed. Perhaps too relaxed, based on how much junk is piled in the yard.

We ask him about the Burns family, and he tells us that he bought the house and its 500 acres from a man named Patty Batt Mike Burns. My father asks him what the Batt signifies, and Sean replies that Batt means “son of.” With so many Burnses and O’Sullivans in Sneem, the father’s name is added to the son’s name to differentiate. It all sounds very Biblical.

The first time Sean visited the house when it was for sale, he found an ancient-looking man sitting in a wooden chair, watching a small television screen, mostly filled with static. A tattered sheepdog lay next to him. “Patty lived alone. The house was falling down around him,” Sean says. It seems like the downfall of a family—a century earlier, fifteen people were sleeping on the upper floor at night, and the children were emigrating out of Ireland because there was no opportunity for work. I imagine Patty as a character in a Beckett play, a solitary bachelor. I picture him as Wash Jones from *Absalom, Absalom!*, the last caretaker, resigned to decay.

Sean bought the house a year or two before Patty died and rebuilt it from the ground up. “I wanted to be faithful to the original home,” Sean explains, as he leads us inside. “So I rebuilt it using only the tools people used fifty or a hundred years ago.” The inside of his house is even more cluttered than the yard was—some circuit-boards on the wooden kitchen table, along with old food wrappers and a bag of bread spilling out beside a crusty-looking jar of jam. It’s dark inside, and wooden beams support the ceiling only two feet above my head.

My grandfather looks around and seems more distant than usual. But his eyes are bright. The past is made vivid to him. From everything I know about my grandfather, he adored his father. Worshipped him, even. When Daniel was dying in the '60s, my grandfather quit his job and returned to the empty house. Daniel was delusional; he would shout or weep the night away, terrified of the dreams and hallucinations that haunted him. My grandfather comforted him; what he thought about his father's transformation from demigod to weeping child, I will never know. Some memories are too entwined with our hearts to share with any hope of imparting their power.



*Three generations of Burnses stand in Sean's home, where Daniel grew up.
(From left, Bartholomew, Daniel, Matthew.)*

Sean takes a picture for us there, inside his home, our home. He and his family are creating memories now; ours are behind us—memories that we do not even know. The gulf is too wide between the past and the present.

But my grandfather is smiling, and that is enough.

IV.

Carl Sandburg once wrote that the past is a bucket of ashes. He was wrong. No bucket of ashes can enslave a man, make him believe in ghosts, and emasculate him. I know for a fact that my grandfather believes himself to be less of a man than his father. I suspect that my father believes himself to be less of a man than his father. As for me, yes, I believe that I am less of a man than my father.

What is it about a man that makes him worshipful? What is it that creates these pedestals in us, on which we raise our fathers, our lovers, our mothers, our children? And what is it about a man that makes him proud? What is it that creates the ultimate pedestal upon which we place ourselves, a pedestal simultaneously crumbling and solidifying?

We know no balance. One day we believe ourselves to be abject failures, living the most futile of lives. The next, we scale our ivory towers and look down upon the world. When will we have enough wisdom to plant our two feet upon the ground and look straight ahead?

V.

In Dublin, a few days after meeting Sean, the three of us are visiting the Book of Kells at Trinity College. The ancient book, a marvel of calligraphy and illustration, was created in the ninth century by a handful of Celtic monks. At one point in its history, the book was stolen from its monastery; it was recovered a month or two later, and history breathed a sigh of relief.

On this day, the book is entombed in a glass case, and a crowd hunches over it. Most of them are the same age as my grandfather and bear the mark of the tourist—backpack, sunglasses hanging from the neck, blindingly white sneakers with Velcro straps. Many of them are nudging each other (politely!) out of the way to get a look at the book. My father and I wait our turn, avoid the elderly elbows, and finally get our glimpse of history. Two seconds later, we're pushed out of the way.

My grandfather stands apart, glancing over a timeline hanging from the far wall. He's seen the book once before and is wise enough to know two things: that it's just a book, and that no two-second glance is enough to take it in. Only after seeing it myself do I discover this, once again proving that wisdom always follows experience.

Seeing all the elderly there, desperate for one glimpse at the Book of Kells, I begin to realize that the young look ahead and the old back. I have only just begun to glance over my shoulder, at the past I once believed was antiquated, useless to me. Even today, I dream of future love, travel to rainforests, an attempt at the Great American Novel. While I spend my years anticipating, my grandfather spends his in memory, in the stories he weaves about bombing runs over Berlin, construction projects in Columbia,

fistfights with Italian boys when he was a teenager. I wonder where my father stands, caught in limbo between the past and future.

Perhaps that is what they mean when they call it a “mid-life crisis.” The final inversion, when a man wakes up, looks in the mirror, and recognizes that he has more past than future.

VI.

We sought a great-grandfather. We sought a grandfather. We sought a father. In the end, we did not find him in Ireland. His ghost was not sitting in a pub in Sneem, chatting and drinking the evening away. It was not drifting over the bog behind the homestead, cutting peat from the earth. It was not wandering the summit of Mount Coomcallee, fishing in the lake, surrounded by sheep.

What remains of Daniel resides in us, his family. His fortitude fills my grandfather, who even at eighty years old, continues to work as a construction manager on large projects across the United States. His faith dwells in my father, whose vocation as a deacon has led him into the homes of the sick, the doubting, the dying.

Fifty years ago, Daniel fled the house when his daughter-in-law burst into tears. That same fear runs through our family, an inability to cope with emotion. Fifty years later, my grandfather fled my father’s house after choking out the honest words: “He was God to me.” Before he left, he wiped his eyes and muttered, “I hate emotional weakness.” The Irish blood remains strong.

But though many honest things remain unsaid, our family culture is one of intimacy. We are covered by the fingerprints of Daniel and Mary, those two immigrants who forged a family around a dinner table, around a rosary.

VII.

Recently, my father and I visited Daniel's grave at Holyhood Cemetery in Brookline. He is buried beside his wife and her sister, the three names inscribed upon a very ordinary-looking headstone. It bears no epitaph.



*Daniel and Mary's headstone, Holyhood Cemetery, Brookline.
Mary's sister Bridie is buried with them.*

As the two of us stood there, surrounded by the dead, I looked down at the grass covering my great-grandfather. *How did you leave Sneem behind? Did your ears ring on the fields of France as the howitzers fired? What did you think about on those winter nights, patrolling the streets of Charlestown? How did you become God to your son?*

My thoughts were interrupted by my father's voice. Laying his hand upon the stone, he said, "Thank you, Daniel, for coming to America." I thought of the steamer across the Atlantic in 1912, the early construction work in Boston, his hands cracked, shoulders aching. I remember the Great War, the Police Strike, thirty years in the Boston Police Department, St. Columbkille, Bart leaving for war, Mary's death, the quiet evenings with the rosary, the trips back to Ireland, the hallucinations.

He forged a life for us. Our memory is our gratitude. The remembering is the only sign of reverence we can muster.

