

Michael J. Brown:

Grand Marshal of the 1915 NYC St. Patrick's Day Parade

My mother was never one for telling long family stories. Like so many children of Irish immigrants to New York City in the early 20th century, she looked forward to possibilities and prospects as they unfolded day-to-day in the bustling neighborhoods of the Irish Bronx. Hard times back in Ireland comprised an unspoken family legacy. They were a part of who you believed yourself to be, an inheritance carried in blood as pride and strength, but rarely fully articulated or even verbally acknowledged. Nevertheless, every year at St. Patrick's Day she spoke of her father, Michael J. Brown, and his role as grand marshal of the NYC St. Patrick's Day Parade. It would be many years before I would learn that Michael was the parade's grand marshal as long ago as 1915. Dorothy was but a girl of four when her father sauntered up Fifth Avenue on a tall black stallion, leading the parade wearing his top hat and sash. My mother was the youngest child in her family, and we (I'm a triplet) are the youngest children in our family. I regret that I never met my grandfather Michael as the span of years between us was too great.

After hearing even relatively unembellished snippets of Michael's parade story I became prone to daydreaming about him at school. Sitting upright at my desk and imagining myself to be wearing my own top hat and sash I commanded a pretend-steed up Fifth Avenue. Piercing the cheering crowds, hearing the clapping of hooves on pavement and the buoyant sounds of indomitable brass bands, I would crash back into reality only when a hand belonging to one of the Irish Christian Brothers cuffed the back of my head and a voice admonished "Pay Attention!" I was paying attention, not to Latin conjugations of the moment but rather to the chords and echoes of family history I encountered in my mother's scant stories about her Irish family. Cultivating an imaginative empathy for the past is the historian's stock-in-trade. In this brief essay I'll tell a tale of Michael J. Brown, proud son of Co. Roscommon, based on what I've gleaned from family lore but derived mostly from information I've uncovered in the historical record. In this his centennial year as grand marshal of the St. Patrick's Day Parade, I offer this piece as a tribute to my grandfather's life and memory.

Michael Joseph Brown was born on March 23, 1877 to James and Bridget Bruin (nee Giblin) in the parish of Fairymount, Co. Roscommon. Baptismal and parish records indicate that Bruin was the original family name in Ireland. Following the Anglo Norman Conquest of the late 12th century, Bruin became a relatively common name in Roscommon and Galway. By the mid-19th century there were more Bruin households in Roscommon than in any other Irish county. Michael was the second youngest of five children in the family. He, along with his sister and mother, emigrated from Roscommon in 1890. After a brief stay in New York City they traveled to Chicago where young Michael served an apprenticeship with a contractor to be a bricklayer. Some of Michael's family members from Ireland retained the name Bruin after arriving in

Chicago but he and his mother changed, or perhaps more accurately slightly altered, the family surname to Brown. Upon completing his apprenticeship Michael returned to New York and boarded briefly with relatives while plying his skills as a bricklayer.

Ambitious and entrepreneurial, Michael soon learned that more money was to be made buying and selling property in the Bronx than could be earned as a worker in the building trades. As he developed his real estate ventures in the early years of the 20th century he also jumped headlong into the liquor and spirits business. Michael combined his two business interests and became the owner and proprietor of several saloons in the Irish precincts of New York. In the 1910s, the Wine and Spirits Dealer's Association of New York City appointed Michael president, a position he held for several years. By 1920, when the federal government imposed Prohibition as the law of the land, Michael owned some six saloons in the Bronx. During this period he also became enamored of baseball. Viewing the game as an entryway into full participation in American life, especially for immigrant boys, Michael sponsored a semi-pro baseball team comprised of Irish lads in the Bronx.

After returning to New York City from Chicago in 1900, Michael met Ellen Page from Co. Galway. A few years older than Michael, she arrived in the city four years after his initial entry into the country. Ellen, the daughter of Mick and Bridget Page (nee Fahy) from the market town of Portumna, married Michael in 1901. They established their home in various locations in the Bronx and together had six children, five of whom survived into adulthood. James, Helen, Walter, Edward, and Dorothy were born between the years 1904 and 1911. James became a physician in private practice and was decorated for his service as a Navy surgeon during WWII. Helen was a mother, taught school in the Bronx, and owned a travel agency that specialized in travel to Ireland. Walter played professional baseball for the Montreal Royals in the International League and served as chief intelligence officer in the Air Service Command in North Africa and Italy, for which he received two Bronze Stars in the War. Edward owned a successful New York City insurance agency and was the wittiest relative I remember being around. And Dorothy raised six children in two different groups. The first wave arrived as separate babies in the 1930s while the second set came bundled together as triplets on July 4th, 1952. Fireworks indeed!

At the dawn of a new century, Michael threw himself into family life, into activities that would test his business acumen, and into service on behalf of the Irish community. Regarding the latter, Michael was for many years active in the Ancient Order of Hibernians, especially Division No. 6, the Fordham branch of the AOH in the Bronx. Division 6 headquarters was located just a few short blocks away from where the Brown family lived in the early 1910s. In my mind's eye I can see Michael leaving home on warm summer evenings and ambling up Tremont Avenue toward the company of compatriots gathering to plan activities in support of the New York Irish

community. He frequently served as an AOH delegate at city and state conventions and often shouldered the solemn task of representing the organization at funerals of fallen members. The Irish press in New York, most notably the *Irish American Weekly*, regularly acknowledged or “good-manned” Michael for his diligent work as chairperson of arrangements for AOH-related celebrations and entertainments, events that could draw thousands from the city’s Irish neighborhoods.

In addition to his work with the arrangements committee, Michael held positions of responsibility on various finance committees for the Manhattan and Bronx chapters of the AOH. It appears that my grandfather was flying high in the first two decades of the 20th century. Real estate, the liquor business, his growing family, and a flurry of activities related to the cause of Ireland in America, pushed him forward on a number of fronts. In the early winter of 1915, AOH officials from the Bronx and New York Counties gathered in mid-town Manhattan for their annual convention. They selected Michael J. Brown as Grand Marshal of the great parade. He in turn appointed John McHugh and George W. O’Brien as his 1st and 2nd aides respectively. Roderick J. Kennedy chaired the arrangements committee, Thomas P. O’Gara acted as secretary, and James Doris served as treasurer. Following tradition, in the week prior to St. Patrick’s Day, Michael, in his role as grand marshal, along with parade officials Roderick Kennedy and James Doris, paid a visit to the residence of John Murphy Cardinal Farley, Archbishop of the Diocese of New York. They called on the prelate to invite him to observe the parade with other dignitaries and honored guests, and to ask his permission to erect a reviewing stand in front of St. Patrick’s Cathedral at 50th Street and 5th Avenue. Cardinal Farley agreed.

Michael and his parade committee had plenty to worry about in the days leading up to the parade in March. Besides needing to overcome all the usual logistical and organizational hurdles, the parade committee faced a unique set of challenges. They were required to uphold the American government’s official position on neutrality in the “Great War,” which then was raging in Europe. The United States had yet to enter the conflict. Parade officials in 1915 had to thread the needle of nonalignment. Long before parade day itself, the arrangements committee felt compelled to scrutinize the musical programs of marching bands for songs and tunes that could potentially inflame the passions of partisans along the parade route.

They banned one song in particular. “It’s a Long, Long, Way to Tipperary” was the parade’s forbidden fruit of 1915. The committee had two reasons for prohibiting the song. One was overt and obligatory; the other somewhat more obscure but it was highly charged politically. On the one hand, they could easily argue that “Tipperary” was so thoroughly allied with British soldiers that it would imply a violation of neutrality. And on the other hand, the song indeed had become so thoroughly associated with British soldiers that it enraged many Irish

nationalists. The nationalists objected to the way the tune was being used by Britain's military machine to recruit Irish boys into the British army. Roderick Kennedy explained to a *New York Times* reporter that "many letters had been received by the committee asking that 'Tipperary' be dropped from the musical program for the day." And so it was, or nearly so.

St. Patrick's Day 1915 began with a Pontifical High Mass celebrated by Cardinal Farley at St. Patrick's Cathedral. Some 3,000 souls crammed into the church for the service, including members of the Sixty-Ninth Regiment, "the Fighting Sixty-Ninth," an Irish American military unit renowned for its heroism and valor during the Civil War and in subsequent conflicts. The Fighting Sixty-Ninth long has enjoyed a place of honor in the parade as the first marching unit in line. Following mass at the Cathedral, Michael checked on the horse he would lead up 5th Avenue later in the day. Sitting on his mount, he posed for a press photograph while wearing his grand marshal's regalia of riding boots, overcoat, decorative gloves, top hat, and sash. I wonder if in that moment Michael felt a surge of pride. Perhaps he paused to reflect upon his long journey from the fields of Roscommon to Chicago as a bricklayer's apprentice, and then to New York City where he was being honored as an esteemed member of his Irish American community. More than likely he had little time, and even less inclination, for such reverie. The parade was to begin promptly that afternoon at 2:30. The only problem was the Fighting Sixty-Ninth was nowhere to be found.

Just before 2:30, Police Inspector Myers of the Traffic Squad closed 5th Avenue. By that time, marching units and bands had massed at 43rd street. NYPD officers struggled to constrain impatient spectators who were jumping the curb for a better view of the parade. Organizers, becoming increasingly exasperated, asked Inspector Myers to climb into his automobile and search for the Sixty-Ninth. Myers sputtered around the city for an hour before finding the Regiment lingering over lunch at a tavern. Members of the Sixty-Ninth, no doubt, were entirely unaware of the fact that, in their absence, the parade had stalled at the starting line. While Myers looked for the Sixty-Ninth, an automobile carrying six suffragists from the Women's Political Union inched its way through the congested side streets adjacent to the parade. Taking advantage of the crowds waiting for the march to begin, the suffragists, led by WPU organizer Kathleen Taylor, presented impassioned arguments for why women should have the right to vote. By all accounts the suffrage advocates were well received by parade spectators. Then, an hour or so after the parade's planned starting time, the Sixty-Ninth's Regimental Band thundered to life and set into motion tens of thousands of marchers who moved spritely through the teeming and cheering streets of New York.

Cardinal Farley, New York City mayor John Mitchel, two Supreme Court justices, parade officials, and other assorted bigwigs and honored guests squeezed into the reviewing stand in front of St. Patrick's Cathedral at 50th Street and 5th Avenue. Michael, on horseback, pranced

past them ceremoniously in the early phase of the march. He was accompanied by mounted police and by his aides John McHugh and George O'Brien on foot. The Grand Marshal and his retinue were well on their way to 127th Street, the parade's end point, when one of the last bands to perform stopped in front of the reviewing stand to offer their musical selection. The bandmaster of a group known as the Eccentric Firemen readied his musicians. Apparently the Eccentrics were never informed about the ban on "It's a Long, Long Way to Tipperary" because they immediately and unapologetically launched into the song's opening bars. The crowd cheered as strains of the familiar tune soared above 5th Avenue.

Roderick Kennedy, sitting in the reviewing stand with the Cardinal, flew into the street waving his arms and signaling the band to stop. Thomas O'Gara was first to reach the bandmaster's ear. Within seconds the song came to a jerky and abrupt end. The Cardinal and Mayor laughed at the innocent misstep and the parade continued apace. A *New York Times* reporter apparently overheard Cardinal Farley asking Kennedy why the song was barred from the parade. Kennedy replied that "the committee did not care to link Leicester Square and Picadilly [two London landmarks mentioned in the song] with St. Patrick's Day." Notwithstanding the challenges associated with enforcing the neutrality mandate, a tardy start, and violation of the ban on "Tipperary," the press reported record attendance and delighted crowds. St. Patrick's Day 1915, concluded with the customary evening festivities and grand ball at Harlem River Park up in the Bronx.

My mother had a gentle way of deflecting the heartaches associated with life's inevitable hardships and losses. She used to say, "Into every life a little rain must fall." Michael's rain started falling in 1920 with the implementation of Prohibition. The Eighteenth Amendment to the Constitution outlawed the sale and consumption of alcohol and brought an abrupt end to Michael's liquor businesses and saloon operations. A hardboiled New York sports reporter interviewing Michael's son Walter, the baseball player, for a story about Walter's pitching career, wrote in 1926 that "Prohibition hit him [Michael] on the chin like a line drive." During the 1920s, Michael occasionally returned to Ireland with his family, sometimes for extended stays. More rain fell in 1932, when Michael's wife Ellen died. Congress repealed Prohibition the following year and Michael returned to the liquor and spirits trade, but this time as a salesman rather than as a business owner. Michael died in the mid-1940s in New York City. I will remember, imagine really, Michael sitting astride his St. Patrick's Day steed. On that bright blue Wednesday morning of March 17th, 1915, Michael was in the prime of his life, and at thirty-eight years of age he was at the peak of his powers. Our eyes meet; he removes his top hat and says quickly "God bless you boy." I return his blessing, and watch in gratitude as he takes his place at the head of the parade.

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The Brown family ca. 1925. Seated from left to right: Ellen, Helen, Dorothy, Micheal
Standing from left to right: James, Edward, Walter