

‘Yours Faithfully, Florence Burke’

By Kiera Murray, special to the BIR, July 5, 2016

By KIERA MURRAY, BIR Correspondent

The June sun was beginning to set over the Andover Bookstore courtyard casting a golden light on the evening. The fire pit crackled, and the tune “Cockles and Mussels” floated through the warm air as Andover resident and first-time author Ellen Alden sat at a table surrounded by glossy stacks of her debut novel, signing copies for a fast-growing line of family, friends, and fans.

Three years ago, Alden was looking for old photos in her attic when she came across an antique leather box. Inside, she found nineteen handwritten letters, aged and splattered in mud but entirely legible. They were written to a woman named Ellen. In impeccable script, the letters told a first-person account of a soldier’s time fighting for the Union in the Civil War.

From Virginia, he was writing to his wife in Massachusetts, and the couple appeared to have two young sons and a daughter, just like Alden. Each letter was signed, “Yours Faithfully, Florence Burke.”

Alden called her parents to find out who this family was. They told her that Florence was her paternal great-great grandfather, and the first family member to emigrate from Ireland to begin a new life in America.

Alden was enthralled by the discovery from all its sides – the history, the ancestry, and the deeply personal and emotional account of a war so often condensed into a chapter of a history book. Knowing she could not let this story sit in a box, forgotten, she spent the next three years researching her family, traveling to the sites where they walked, and then writing a historical fiction novel, using the letters as the backbone of the story. Honoring the letters, she titled the book “Yours Faithfully, Florence Burke.”

Florence Burke fled Ireland during the famine when he was 19 and settled in West Springfield, Massachusetts. There, he married his sweetheart, Ellen, who had arrived in America with her family just before he did. The couple had three children. Working as a tenant farmer just as he had done in Ireland, Burke struggled to lift his family out of poverty. When a wealthy man offered him a plot of land in exchange for Burke taking his son’s place in the draft, he accepted out of desperation, knowing he could be sacrificing his life for his family.

It is estimated that more than 175,000 Irish immigrants fought in the Civil War, the majority for the Union. A small percentage fought out of sympathy with the Confederacy, comparing its drive for secession to their own recent escape from an oppressive rule. Few, it was said, were concerned about the emancipation of slaves, for the slaves’ freedom meant more competition for already scarce jobs.

The Irish were also being harshly disrespected in their new country, and some wanted to prove their loyalty while improving their standing. They gained a reputation as strong fighters, and it is part of Civil War lore that Lee told Grant the Union side won because it had more Irish.

Alden, however, didn't find a trace of political or patriotic incentive in Burke's letters. He wrote, "I often think how foolish and cruel this war truly is, boys and men killing each other so the states may be united. I find myself praying for both sides, praying for their families, praying death comes without suffering."

Added Alden: "All he said was, 'My motivation is my family.' When he was there, he wanted so badly to leave and come home. I think he needed the money, I think he needed the land. It's not about the union of the states or anything like that; it's really about a father's love and what he was willing to do for his wife and children."

In fact, most Irish who fought for the Union in the Civil War did so out of necessity. Either they could not afford the \$300 needed to avoid the draft, or they were bought off as substitutes, as Burke was. In her research, Alden learned that many joined out of desperation - enlisting guaranteed them a set of clothes, boots and a hat, and food to eat they otherwise could not afford. Ellen Burke would have received state aid, as well, which was vital for families.

In addition to the years of research, writing the novel took Alden to Ireland and Virginia, and involved her maintaining a delicate balance of historical accuracy, imagination, and ancestral intuition.

The embodiment of Irish cheer, Alden is a natural storyteller with an effervescent personality. She employs a lively voice on her author's blog and in conversation, finding humor and magic in everyday situations and encounters.

The tone of her book, however, is a somber reflection of the devastating circumstances of the characters' times. It was a challenge for her to change her voice to properly and respectfully portray the circumstances. "I really had to go to a different place," she explained, "and then when I was done writing, snap out of it so I wouldn't be this big downer."

Physically, that other place was the third floor of the Andover Public Library, where she wrote the majority of the book without distraction. However, most of her inspiration for characters and story lines struck unexpectedly and sometimes inconveniently, like while she battled her thick red hair (likely inherited from the Burkes), blow-drying it into submission, or in mid-conversation.

An event featuring local talent, crafts and businesses in addition to her novel, Alden's book launch attracted more than triple the expected attendance. People strolled through the courtyard, enjoying the live music, and taking photos with the two Civil War-era actors hired to bring the book's characters to life.

Among the attendees was the Irish Cultural Centre's Dave Barrett, who has stocked two copies of the book in the centre's library in Canton. He has already been flooded with requests. "The book is going to appeal to a few different types," he said, "to people interested in history, people interested in genealogy, and Civil War buffs. Not to mention the Irish connection here in Boston, the hub of Irish America. So, I think with all of those things taken into consideration, you can see why she's got a great crowd here. This book is gonna go far."

Though it was nearing eight o'clock and the festivities were almost over, Alden was still

signing and readers were still entering the courtyard, books in hand. Some were in perfect, crisp condition, waiting to be cracked open while others were dog-eared with frayed edges, already devoured. Either way, they were lucky to have copies in tow. Word was going around that they were sold out.

“Yours Faithfully, Florence Burke” is available as a paperback and eBook on Amazon, Barnes & Noble, iTunes and dozens of other resellers. You can read more and follow Ellen and at EllenAlden.com.