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# Letters from the frontline

Ellen Alden's Irish great great grandfather fought in the American civil war to safeguard his family, says **Ellie O'Byrne**

**A**DUSTY old, leather-bound box abandoned in an attic was the beginning of a journey of discovery for Bostonian Ellen Alden and it led her all the way to County Cork.

Ellen would discover a family history wreathed in sorrow and hardship, an emigrant's tale, the story of her great great grandfather. The letters he wrote to his wife, Ellen, would inspire her to trace her roots to Cork, befriend a local historian, and write her first novel, but it all started with her daughter, Jillian's third-grade project.

"She needed pictures of me, as a baby," Ellen says. Rummaging through her attic, Ellen stumbled upon something she'd never seen before: an old box of photos and letters.

"There were these tin-type photos and 19 letters, when I opened the first one, it said 'my dearest Ellen', and that immediately caught my attention, because, of course, that's my name."

Asking her parents about the contents of the box, they told her that they were mementos of her great great grandfather, Florence Burke. Florence had left Ireland at 19, at the height of the Irish famine, and settled in West Springfield, MA, with his wife, Ellen.

But America was inhospitable for Irish immigrants and the family's struggles were far from over. Desperate to gain a foothold for his young family and escape life as a tenant farmer, Florence, aged 35, made the desperate choice to become a substitute draftee in the civil war, the conscription act allowing wealthy men to pay another soldier to fight in their stead. Florence would receive money, but, more importantly, he would be given the deeds to a plot of land for his family.

The letters Ellen found were wartime correspondence between Florence and his wife. "The gamble did pay off, because he got his family land, which meant citizenship and higher education for his children," Ellen says. "So my book is really about that struggle for the first generation. I had never really thought about it before. It was like, 'oh, I'm Irish and I have red hair', but I'd never really thought about what they went through."

With letters to shed light on the great-great-grandfather's life in the US, four years ago Ellen embarked on her own journey, to Cork, to research Florence and Ellen Burke's Irish years; she was going to write a book about her family story.

But life doesn't always read like a newspaper. (The Culchie Amnesty is where dead-ends. Instead, meeting local historian, John O'Sullivan, in Ballinacorney, close to Cork city, Ellen decided to fictionalise Florence's town



Ellen Alden (left) has written the story of her great great grandfather, Florence Burke, below, who emigrated to the US during the Famine.

## Desperate to gain a foothold for his family, Florence became a substitute draftee in the US civil war

of origin, and, on her return to the US, she set her great great grandfather's early years in Ballinacorney. Later, she discovered that he had actually come from the townlands between Skibbereen and Schull, one of the worst famine-afflicted areas in the country.

"Florence was 19 when he left and he was born in 1829, so he'd been through years of the famine," Ellen says.

"Later, when I found out how Skibbereen had been wiped-out, I wondered how he survived at all."

She was shocked to discover the extent of the impact of the famine on Ireland. "I always thought there was this spoiled crop, but I didn't know that there was food available that was being exported; I also didn't know just how many died and how many emigrated."

In John O'Sullivan, Ellen had found a friend and research help-mate, communicating by old-fashioned mail, she sent him drafts of her book to check for historical inaccuracies.

The finished book, *Yours Faithfully: Florence Burke*, is self-published and has drawn significant interest from Irish communities in the US, as well as in Ireland.

Ellen thinks that the story is an age-old one, and relevant today, with immigration constantly debated: "Look at all the different groups, like the Irish who came to America; they made the country what it is today. I think that's mostly the sentiment of the States. We're proud of it, and it's what made our country strong, and what it is," Ellen says.

The harshness of immigrant life is reflected in the tragedy that befell the Burkes when they lost their youngest child to typhoid. "She died at six months, while Florence was away at war," Ellen says. "Where they lived, in Massachusetts, was called the snow belt, and she died in January. Jeremiah was their oldest, and then Michael, and they had only referred to the baby as 'baby girl.' I heard that it was common not to name their babies, in case they didn't survive. But, later, I found out her name had been Mary Ellen."

Now, Ellen is set to return to Ireland again. Her great great-grand-

father's story forms part of an exhibition. The Irish Potato Famine, running currently in Stephen's Green Shopping Centre, and she'll also visit Skibbereen to talk there as part of Culture Night. Of course, she hopes to uncover more family history, and possibly even a living relative or two.

"I'm really happy that people are so interested," she says. "It's going to be pretty emotional. I want to honour my great great grandparents, who, basically, had no honour in their own lives, and for whom things were so tough."

The Irish Potato Famine exhibition is on the top floor of Stephen's Green Shopping Centre and runs each day until September 30. Ellen B Alden appears as part of Culture Night on Friday, September 22, at 11.30am in Skibbereen Library, and at 8pm in The Sportsman's Rest pub, Ballinacorney. www.culturenightcorkcounty.ie

## Opening Lines Colm O'Regan



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**I**N the run-up to any All-Ireland final, there are feet and yards of newspaper written about the usual suspects: The teams, the players, the managers, their families and the fans.

But what about that forgotten constituency: The neutrals? It's all very well being a fan. You've got skin in the game. But think of us, the poor neutral. We get taken along for the ride, we share the emotion. We read the same previews you do. We watch the match and shout for you. And if you let us down, we're nothing to show for it. No cathartic long car journey home, shouting at the Marty Squad or a rake of points in a salty pub somewhere in the north inner city that's operating a Culchie Amnesty. (The Culchie Amnesty is where people who only go to Dublin to look at the Pope and Switzer's window are allowed for one afternoon to order a Smithwick for themselves and a

**I don't know whether the neutral can take another Mayo defeat. But maybe they are a metaphor for the exquisite longing that pervades life itself.**

mineral-N-Tayto for a small child, in a pub that is normally hard enough to be featured in a Ross Kemp series.) In deciding who they want to win, the neutral will often make a hierarchy of who deserves to win. The most deserving winner is the county which has taken up the most of our emotional energy thus far.

Last weekend was a good one for the neutral because officially now we no longer need to worry about Joe Canning and Galway. That's been scratched off the neutral's to-do list. I know many of us are walking lighter this week because of it. Waterford can win it next year, preferably with all of the team who lost on Sunday and John Mullane to come on for five minutes at the end. Kilkenny don't need to win it ever again really. Nearly every Kilkenny citizen has an All-Ireland medal, even toddlers (going well in toilet-training, then lads). Tipperary are

fine for a while. Clare are ok. With the droughts they've had, they'd survive on seaweed for decades. It has to be Limerick after Waterford. They haven't won in colour. Then Offaly need it because they have to fly next to Tipp. Laois won it once but that was in the days when you generally scored more goals than points because the sliotar was a stone and your hurley was a branch of a tree so I'm not going to worry about that. London won it in 1901, beating Cork by four points, a result repeated 20 years later with the Treaty. This coming Sunday is simple. It must be Mayo. I don't know whether the neutral can take another Mayo defeat. But maybe they are a metaphor for the exquisite longing that pervades life itself. Do we ever achieve what we truly want? If they win, what do we do then? They are the shimmering romance in a sitcom — Niles Crane and Daphne Moon,

Maddie and David in *Moonlighting*. Once they get it together will the series lose its spark? Still though I hope they beat the Dubs. The neutral admires Dublin. They are the best but they are Carseal Lannister. Just when we think they might be the slightest bit ruffled, they bring in resources we don't even know about. And they've got more money than anyone else put together. Mayo are Jon Snow, heroic and inexplicably make bad decisions at crucial moments. If Dublin lose, they'll be fine. The disappointment will be diluted by all there is to do in Dublin — theatres, public transport, Starbucks every 40 yards, and the possibility of seeing someone from Fair City on the street. If Mayo win we can all get on with the rest of our lives. That obviously means it's Cork for the double next year so. The neutrals won't like it but who cares what they think?



**5 MINUTES WITH NELL HUDSON**  
Best known for her starring roles in period dramas *Victoria* and *Outlander*, actress Nell Hudson has become accustomed to being trussed up in corsets — but she has high hopes her next role won't be quite so restrictive. She tells Yasmin Hashish of a busy schedule, living a double life as her characters and her hopes to tread the boards in the theatre.

**■ IT'S GREAT TO SEE YOU BACK AS MRS SKERRETT IN VICTORIA. IS IT TRUE YOU WATCH THE SERIES WITH THE REST OF THE CAST?**  
Every Sunday night, when it's on, we take it in turns to host. We go over to each other's houses, chill with everyone, watch the series together and take the piss out of each other's acting. So yeah, it's really nice.

**■ ARE YOU SOMEONE WHO DOESN'T MIND WATCHING YOURSELF BACK ON SCREEN?**  
It's a learning curve. I used to find it unbearable; you know your eye kicks in and you think, 'Oh my God, my face looks weird'. But as I grow as an actor, I find it really necessary to watch myself back so I can learn and get a sense of what I am conveying and if I'm doing a good job. It's very nice in moments when I watch and I forget that I'm watching me.

**■ SERIES TWO LOOKS SET TO BE FULL OF DRAMA. TELL US ABOUT THE CHALLENGE AND THRILL OF PLAYING A CHARACTER LIKE MRS SKERRETT?**  
Skerrett leads with her head over her heart and that can be difficult. Not only does she lead a double life, but she also stops herself from following her heart in order to be professional and independent. There is an inner conflict that she's constantly struggling with and [that] has been challenging as an actress. You want to portray that she has this inner conflict, but you don't let that be too obvious so as to not give it away to everyone at the palace. Skerrett is a joy to play.

**■ YOU'RE ALSO ABOUT TO REPRISER THE ROLE OF LAOHAIRE IN THE AGENZIE IN THE NEXT SERIES OF CRIMINAL MINDS. TIME TRAVEL DRAMA, OUTLANDER.**  
Yes, season three is coming out so that is really exciting. [There's] lots of chatting online about the start of that happening, and I had a really great time shooting.

**■ WHAT CAN YOU TELL US ABOUT THIS CHAPTER?**  
Well obviously the book already exists, so people already know what is going to happen. But without wanting to ruin it for anyone who hasn't read the book, we've leaped forward in time and my character now has a 16-year-old daughter — which was so weird to play because the girl playing my daughter was two years younger than me! That ate me up. It was funny looking in the mirror and going, 'Oh my God, is this what I'm going to look like?' It's very unflattering.

**■ WITH SUCH A BUSY SCHEDULE, IS IT DIFFICULT TO BALANCE YOUR WORK AND PERSONAL LIFE?**  
I definitely go slightly off the radar when I'm filming, because getting stuck into the world of a TV series and my character is quite emotionally consuming. I do try to make an effort to see people and catch up with people when I'm in town but, you know, you're living a double life.

**■ IF YOU WEREN'T AN ACTRESS, IS THERE SOMETHING ELSE YOU'D LOVE TO DO?**  
I don't know. I really love writing and I really love music, so it would definitely be something within the art background. I am probably unfit to do anything else.

**■ WHAT'S NEXT FOR YOU - IS THERE A ROLE YOU'D LOVE TO PLAY?**  
It would be very nice to play a character who doesn't wear a corset, so people already know what the attire; I am auditioning at the moment, so I'm very excited because I have got time to think of what my next project will be.

**■ Victoria airs on TV on Sunday nights, and series three of Outlander will launch exclusively on Amazon Prime on Monday, September 11, with new episodes available weekly.**