

How a bundle of letters brought to life Corkman's remarkable story... and a harrowing account of Great Hunger

He fled famine — but died on a U.S battlefield

FOUR years ago, Ellen Alden stumbled upon an old leather box of letters in her attic in Andover, Massachusetts.

What it contained led her on a remarkable journey during which she delved into her family's history and wrote a book... a journey which culminated in her visiting Cork in September this year.

Inside that box, Ellen Alden found photographs of her great-great-grandfather, a Corkman called Florence Burke, and letters he had written to his wife, Ellen, also originally from Cork, whilst fighting in the American Civil War.

The letters allowed Ellen Alden to build up a picture of the extraordinary lives of her ancestors.

Florence was born in Schull and married Ellen, who lived about a mile away from him, in 1847.

A year later, when he was 19, he and his 17-year-old brother, John, and a cousin fled the famine and emigrated to America together on a ship from Cobh.

Florence lived in the rough Five Points area of New York initially, then joined up with Ellen when she sailed over the following year, in West Springfield, Massachusetts.

The Burkes settled down as tenant farmers and had three children, including Michael, the great-grandfather of Ellen Alden.

In 1861, the Civil War began, but Florence clearly didn't want to be drawn into the fighting. However, on January 4, 1864, at the age of 35, as the bloody conflict neared its end, he did so for unselfish reasons.

He enlisted as a 'substitute' in the Union army in the place of a wealthy man who had been drafted. In return, Florence received a commutation fee of around \$300 and he used it to buy a parcel of land for his family.

He was setting them up for life, but it was a gamble that failed to pay off, as the Corkman tragically died five months later, on June 19, 1864, at one of the Battles of Petersburg in Virginia.

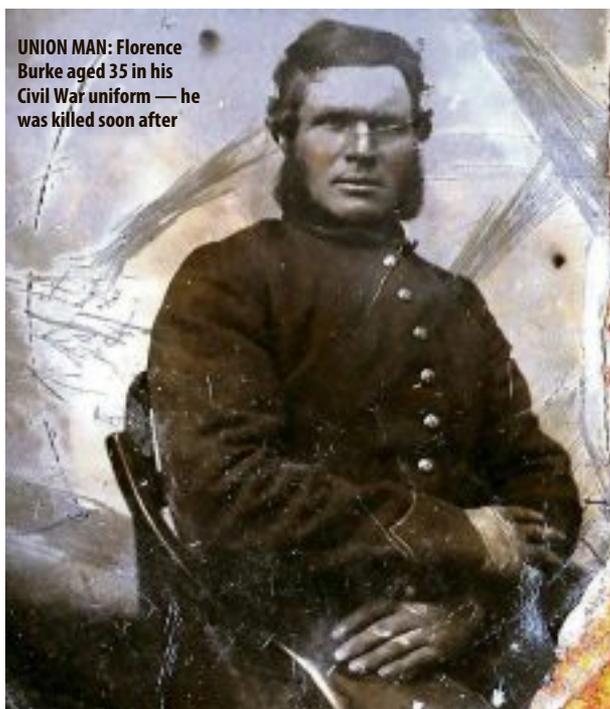
The keepsake box contained a total of 19 letters, three written by Ellen, the rest written by Florence to his wife and their three children on their farm in West Springfield.

In one letter, he mentions meeting Ulysses S. Grant, the most acclaimed Union general in the Civil War, who went on to be twice elected President.

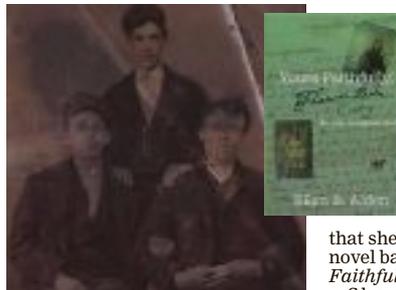
However, the letters also reveal how life was tough for Ellen as a single mother.

Ellen Alden said: "The letters not only follow major battles and an encounter with General Grant himself, but also contain family drama and tragedy.

"Ellen couldn't get an official



UNION MAN: Florence Burke aged 35 in his Civil War uniform — he was killed soon after



NEW LIFE: Florence (centre), aged 19, when he left behind famine Ireland and (inset) Ellen Alden's book

copy of the deed from the town councilman who traded with Florence, a burglar stole their hay and killed their chickens, someone in town accused her of cheating, and, finally, Ellen and Florence's baby girl died while he was fighting."

The poignant last letter in the box related to Ellen's hope that she could retrieve her husband's body.

As the Battles of Petersburg continued into 1865, the authorities in Washington said in a letter to Ellen that Florence's body would be exhumed four months later — if

she stumped up \$100. According to family lore, Florence's body was eventually returned to Ellen, although there is some confusion over whether it was actually his corpse!

Ellen Alden was so riveted by the story of her great-great-grandfather and the photos of him, that she wrote an historical fiction novel based on his life, called *Yours Faithfully: Florence Burke*.

She explained: "Whatever information I could not find about Florence and Ellen's back story, I fictionalised."

She had a presentation of her book in Skibbereen and a book signing in Ballinhassig in September and also spoke at a Culture Night event. You can purchase the novel at www.ellenalden.com

Florence's story also featured in an exhibition on the Irish Famine at St Stephen's Green Shopping Centre in Dublin this year.

Ellen attended the exhibition, which was put together by Gerard McCarthy, from Ballinaspittle, now based in Dublin. A DVD of the exhibition can be purchased at www.theirishpotatofamine.com

Report by Thomas Long



William Balch, an American minister, historian and journalist, visited Ireland in the Famine year of 1850 and penned a journal. We pick up his journey as he approaches Millstreet in Co. Cork

OUR road now lay, after a few miles, through a rough, wild, mountainous country much of the way. We passed along narrow defiles, through boggy meadows, and under lofty mountains, following a small stream to its very source in a large bog, from which we descended into a small valley running between two ranges of jagged, barren mountains, in which is situated the little dirty town of Millstreet.

We passed several ruined castles on our way; among them Carriga-Phouca, somewhat in the style of Blarney, though more dilapidated, having been built by the McCarthy's, in the early style of castle architecture.

In the course of the afternoon it came on to rain in torrents. We were wholly unprotected from the 'pelting of the pitiless storm'. An English naval officer, on the seat before us, was sheltered by a good mackintosh cape, a corner of which I borrowed without his knowledge, to shield my knees. He also had a large blanket under him, which he preferred to keep there, rather than offer it to us. Another gentleman of the same nation, on the right, had an umbrella, which he contrived to hold just so as to pour an additional torrent upon one of our company, never offering to share it with us.

The poor fellows behind, and one forward, were as bad off as ourselves, except Mr Red-coat, who bundled himself up with several cloaks and took it patiently. There was not a passenger inside, and had not been all day. Six might have been shielded from the storm, perhaps, from sickness and untimely death. But to enter was not permitted, inasmuch as we had taken outside seats, and neither the driver nor the guard had any option in the case — we suppose they had not. Humanity is the boast of John Bull. This is an illustration of it.

At Millstreet we stopped a few minutes, and most of the passengers took a lunch. A loaf of bread, the shell of half a cheese and a huge piece of cold baked beef were set upon the table in the dirty bar-room. Each went and cut for himself, filling mouth, hands and pockets as he chose. Those who took meat paid a shilling; for the bread and cheese, a sixpence. The Englishmen had their beer, the Irishmen their whiskey, the Americans cold water.

Our party came out with hands full, but the host of wretches about the coach, who seemed to need it more than we, soon begged it all away from us, and then besought us. "Please, sir, a ha'penny, oond may God reward ye in heaven." A woman lifted up her sick child, in which was barely the breath of life, muttering, "Pray, yer honour, give me a mite for my poor childer, a single penny, oond may God save yer shoul."

Several deformed creatures stationed themselves along the street, and shouted after us in the most pitiful tones. Others ran beside the coach for half a mile, yelling in the most doleful manner for a "ha'penny", promising us eternal life if we would but give them one.

We observed that the Englishmen gave nothing, but looked at them and spoke in the most contemptuous manner. We could not give to all, but our hearts bled for them. We may become more callous by a longer acquaintance with these scenes of destitution and misery; but at present the beauty of the Green Isle is greatly diluted, and our journey, at every advance, made painful by the sight of such an amount of degradation and suffering.

At one place, we saw a company of 20 or 30 men, women and children, hovering about the mouth of an old lime-kiln, to shelter from the cold wind and rain. The driver pointed them out as a sample of what was common in these parts a year ago. As we approached, ascending a hill at a slow pace, about half of them came from the kiln, which stood in a pasture some rods from the road. Such lean specimens of humanity I never before thought the world could present. They were mere skeletons, wrapped up in the coarsest rags. Not one of them had on a decent garment.

The legs and arms of some were entirely naked. Others had tattered rags dangling down to their knees and elbows. And patches of all sorts and colours made up what garments they had about their bodies. They stretched out their lean hands, fastened upon arms of skin and bone, turned their wan, ghastly faces, and sunken, lifeless eyes imploringly up to us, with feeble words of entreaty, which went to our deepest heart. The Englishmen made some cold remarks about their indolence and worthlessness, and gave them nothing.

I never regretted more sincerely my own poverty than in that hour. Such objects of complete destitution and misery; such countenances of dejection and woe, I had not believed could be found on earth. Not a gleam of hope springing from their crushed spirits; the pangs of poverty gnawing at the very fountains of their life. All darkness, deep, settled gloom! Not a ray of light for them from any point of heaven or earth! Starvation, the most horrid of deaths, staring them full in the face, let them turn whither they will. The cold grave offering their only relief, and that, perhaps, to be denied them, till picked up from the way-side, many days after death, by some stranger passing that way, who will feel compassion enough to cover up their mouldering bones with a few shovels-full of earth!

And this a Christian country! A part of the great empire of Great Britain, on whose domain the 'sun never sets', boastful of its enlightenment, its liberty, its humanity, its compassion for the poor slaves of our land, its lively interest in whatever civilizes, refines, and elevates mankind! Yet here in this beautiful island, formed by nature with such superior advantages, more than a score of human beings, shivering under the walls of a lirrriekiln, and actually starving to death!