

# *The Early Life of Isabelle Gessford*

*(by Robert Simmons)*

My name is Isabelle. Isabelle Mary Josephine Guy Simmons Gessford, but no one calls me that. My friends and acquaintances call me Belle. To some East Coast relatives, I'm "Is." It's Mom or Mother to my four children, and Grandma Belle to their children and their children's children. No one ever called me Mary...well, unless I was bad, as in, "Isabelle Mary Guy! You stop that right now!" And I remember only one or two nuns ever calling me Josephine, my confirmation name. I think of myself as Isabelle.

I entered this world kicking and screaming, as they say, on July 6, 1913.

I found myself in a hot, humid bedroom in an apartment at 72 West 106th Street on the Upper Westside of New York City, in what they call Manhattan Valley due to a slight depression there. My first memory of that small walkup is standing in a dark hallway, listening. It was night, probably after my bedtime, but I was up, listening to my mother and father talking in the kitchen. They spoke in subdued voices, filled with much introspection and emotion. They filled me with apprehension, although I didn't know why. But, only three at the time, I could still tell something was wrong.

Father was saying goodbye. He was leaving us for an Italian adulteress. I didn't know he could leave. It threw me off balance, but with time it made me stronger - I had to rely on myself because others might leave.

If I listed the lessons life taught me at an early age, self-reliance would be at the top, as it must have been for many of the Irish in the New World. We had to fend for ourselves; and I guess in his way Father was, too. Of course, another trait I think his departure instilled in me is loyalty - a stubborn refusal to let anyone down. So, though it sounds strange to say it even now, Father's desertion was good for me, just as it was good for him--he had a full, prosperous life. The one who suffered was Mother.

Both my parents were Irish immigrants - Margaret Campbell, born March 6, 1889, in Termonfeckin, County Louth; and William Wellington Hosford Guy, born July 8, 1888, at Crannogue, County Tyrone, in what we call today Northern Ireland. (He and I almost shared the same birthday, but I guess I couldn't wait.) They met in New York City while William resided on Columbus Avenue, and Margaret on West 104th Street, in what must have been an Irish Community.

Despite their expectations and the assurances of those who went before them, neither of my parents felt welcomed in the New World, other than by what family who preceded them. Even other "micks" could be jealous and distrustful, afraid of losing opportunities to the Johnnies-come-lately. To native-born New Yorkers, the WASPs of that era, my parents were outcasts, lowest of the low, and everything about them--speech, mannerisms, clothes, religion, lack of



Margaret Campbell and daughter Isabelle in New York, 1925.  
*(Photo courtesy of Bob Simmons)*



Mary Campbell (nee Reynolds), Yellow Gap, Termonfeckin, 1916. Mother of Margaret Campbell.  
*(Photo courtesy of Bob Simmons)*



Cottage at Yellow Gap where Margaret Campbell was born.  
(Photo courtesy of Bob Simmons)

education, lack of status--only increased the barrier to their acceptance.

At any rate, they married in what was probably a subdued ceremony in October of 1911, at the Ascension Catholic Church on W. 107th Street, by a Father Matthew J. Duggan--an all Irish wedding. Mother's oldest sister, May Campbell, signed the marriage certificate as one witness, and a Peter Hagan as the other. I have no idea who he was, but considering the absence of his name in my memory, I think it's safe to say that he was one of Father's friends.

My parents began their life together in an apartment on West 92nd Street, and about four months later, on February 11, 1912, the reason for their low-key wedding became clear: my brother, William Thomas "Buster" Guy, was born. (Thomas was my father's father's name.)

Perhaps the seeds of Father's abandonment took root in that inauspicious beginning. Did he feel an obligation, rather than affection toward my mother? I don't know. Either way, he left us sometime in 1916 and moved to Connecticut, where he could live with his "hot and dark Italian mistress" (that's how my family portrayed her to me), and not pay alimony or child support due to that state's laws. The abandonment was complete: physical, emotional, and financial.

I've often wondered what brought about my parents split. Mother could be a hard woman, solemn

and, as I remember her, also timid when confronted. But, I don't know whether those traits were innate or a result of losing her husband. It's possible the fiery Italian attracted Father because she was so much the opposite of his wife, a very drab woman. I can't remember what Mother and Father were like together, whether they fought or ignored one another, or whether they had some genuine feelings for each other. My only memory while they were still together is the conversation. Yet, I'm sure witnessing Mother's hardships, after he left, had a lot to do with my inability to forgive Father until years later.

In 1907, like her sister, May, and brother, Patrick, Mother received money and sponsorship from them and other relatives already in the States, so that she could depart Ireland for the American Dream. Unfortunately, being only eighteen, frightened and homesick, she discovered that her vision of the "dream" wasn't her reality. As I said, her life here proved hard. Not only was she poorly accepted, but New York was also fast, loud, dirty, alien, huge, and frightening. It was nothing like her tiny, placid Irish hamlet of Termonfeckin. The rustic village sat in a wooded dip half a mile from the Irish Sea, and had a small tower house castle, plus a tenth-century high cross in one of its graveyards. In the tenth century "Old" York was barely happening.

In "New" York, she discovered that work--when and if you found it--was demanding and demeaning. She had to labour long, backbreaking hours with little

compensation. She told me, when I was older, that her station in New York felt lower than it had in Ireland, and she so missed the greenery and fresh air. Gone were the verdant fields that surrounded Termonfeckin, its clean sea breeze, the soft silence, as well as her family and friends. She was very lonely.

It's hard for me to imagine what it must have been like for Mother, although in a way I did the same thing, just in reverse: large city to small town. But, I had the love of my life to share that adventure with. Mother came to the New World afraid and alone.

Mother told me that she almost didn't stay in New York. That many a night she cried herself to sleep, wishing she was back in Ireland, but she did stay, and after much struggling, finally landed what everyone thought would be a plumb position: live-in house servant for Enrico Caruso, the world famous Italian tenor! The job didn't turn out to be a "plumb," however, or so she let on.

Caruso died in 1921 at a house in East Hampton, and that is probably where Mother worked. By all accounts he was an amiable, even sweet man, considerate and generous, but she implied something else. Though she never talked about her experiences with Caruso, it was obvious she held him in low esteem. Her sisters tried to drag from her the details of life with the celebrity, but she would only admit that she wasn't happy working for him due to the way he treated her. That was it, but for years after leaving his employ, whenever one of his records played, or his name came up in conversation, she would make a derogatory sound and say, in her heavy brogue:

"Caruso, humph, he wasn't anything."

She never added to that tantalizing statement. If pressed, she would simply wave her hands and say:

"Enough said."

(That's how the phrase entered my lexicon: enough said.)

I've harboured the idea that her dislike of the man was partly due to his ethnicity--same as the house wrecker's! Nonetheless, I've often wondered what she might have written, had she kept a diary. I've regretted not wringing it from her before she left.

At any rate, immediately following Father's departure, Mother felt that she had only two choices: go back to Ireland or stay and find a new husband. Despite her nostalgia and twinges of homesickness, the stark realities of life in Ireland, plus a scarcity of eligible bachelors in Termonfeckin, decided things for her. I imagine that her Irish obstinacy also didn't help: she wouldn't want to admit defeat. So, she stayed. The next problem was, she didn't have the means to live, support her children, and hunt for a hubby all simultaneously.

Her solution was to place Buster and me in the care of family back in Termonfeckin. That was her plan, so to Ireland we went.

When the three of us road the pony cart down the muddy country lane, it amazed me. For a three-year old who had never left the City, everything was so green and open. Fields went off in every direction as far as my little eyes could see. Sheep wandered over

them and over the road. I couldn't believe there was a town at the end of that small, rutted path; and there wasn't, at least nothing I was familiar with.

Termonfeckin was a smattering of small cottages, and a few larger buildings crouched at a crossroad in the middle of all the empty greenness, with two church steeples set at opposing ends representing the schism in the country.

I remember thinking, "This is it?" Being only three, I wanted to go back to the ship we'd come on, so I could get more ice cream! It so impressed me that the ice cream is the only memory I still have of the voyage across the Atlantic. Lots and lots of ice cream.

"You scream. I scream. We all scream for ice cream."

I learned later, back in the States, that the sea was just a mile down the road from Termonfeckin, but we never went to see it--I wonder now whether the Irish Campbells did not have the love of the sea that gripped me so strongly during my life.

When we arrived in Termonfeckin, however, the Campbell clan had dwindled. There was only my mother's "ma," Mary, and the two kids who hadn't yet made the great escape to America: Essie and Laurence. There was another sibling who came to the States, didn't like it, so joined the British Navy, but he didn't live with the family any more. Mother's father, Patrick Senior, had died in 1915, a year before our arrival. Purportedly, he lost the family farm in stereotypical Irish fashion. So, when we arrived, Grandma Mary resided in half a small, thatched duplex with the remnants of her children.

Termonfeckin, County Louth, sits on the eastern seaboard of Ireland about thirty miles North of Dublin and, according to a signpost, eight miles East of Drogheda. There are only brief scenes, and flashes of it left in my memory. The only lasting impression I have is the cloying stench of constantly boiling potatoes. It permeated my grandmother's house. The smell was in the wooden beams and floorboards, the linens and curtains, my bed clothes, even my hair! I quickly grew to loathe the reek. It nauseated me. When I learned that Mother meant to return to New York City without Buster and me, my determination not to stay was in large part due to that horrible odour.

Once I realized what was happening, I made it known most vociferously, and with the obstinacy and immediacy only a child can display, that I wasn't staying behind. After the tantrums, I'm not sure whether Mother relented or the family refused to keep me. Either way, poor Buster, not as strong-headed nor leather-lunged as I, stayed in Termonfeckin. (I remember being excited at the prospect of more ice cream on the boat, although the rest of the trip back is a blank.)

Before we left, however, someone took a picture of Buster and me sitting on an old, carved wooden bench. I don't remember it. I don't remember posing like that with his arm so protectively around me, but the picture speaks volumes about the emotions we were feeling at the time. Mother mentioned she had



the photo taken so she'd have a picture of her two children, until they were together again. No one knew when that would be.

It was a tearful, wrenching departure. Buster didn't want to stay either, but he hadn't been capable of convincing Mother not to leave him. I think he was too gentle a soul to make a fuss, or else, due to her tenuous financial situation, Mother had to choose and picked me. Whichever reason, Buster stood crying on the stoop, Grandmother holding his hand, as Uncle Laurence drove Mother and me off in the creaking pony cart to the train station in Drogheda. It would be five years before I would see Buster again.

### The Campbell Clan

Buster never talked much about his stay in Ireland, except to say that he didn't want to leave when the time came - imagine how long five years must have seemed to him. I'm sure Ireland felt like home by then; New York dreamlike.

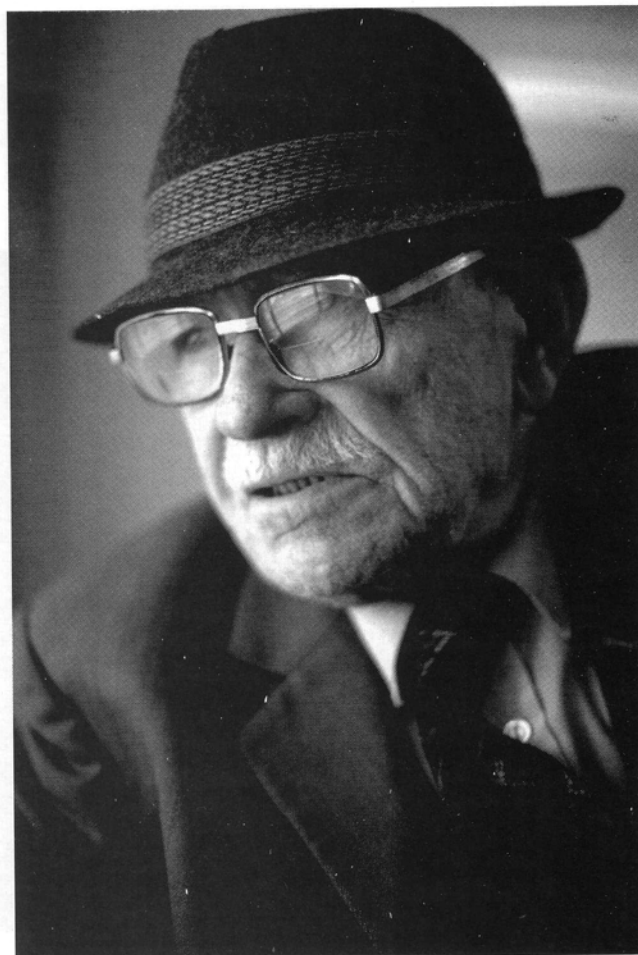
Over there, Buster was free to run and do as he pleased, most of the time. The green fields probably seemed to go on forever - there were no fences. The beach lay close by, and there were hundreds of yards of hard, wet sand when the Irish Sea ebbed. It was a young boy's paradise. No wonder he didn't want to leave.

Although I'm not familiar with Buster's time in Termonfeckin, nor with our other Irish relatives, my eldest son and his wife uncovered some of that information when they visited. For, during their time there, they met a retired Irish Army captain, Michael Cumiskey, who remembered Buster in Ireland and the Campbell clan.

Captain Cumiskey, dressed in suit and tie with a sporty hat, impressed my son and his wife. They spent a long morning visiting with him in his parlour, sipping straight Irish whiskey and taking notes. Afterwards, the Captain drove them around Termonfeckin, pointing out houses the Campbells used to live in, the farmland they owned, and the family gravestone at Port Cemetery.

The Captain, himself, lived in a large old manor house in a village area called Yellow Gap - I don't know why. It was as impressive, though weathered, as the Captain himself - my son described him as a "dapper, bantam rooster of a man," resembling the late actor, Barry Fitzgerald. The Captain was born around the turn of the century, closest in age to my Uncle William, yet still "as lucid and quick as the day is long." Not only did he tell many stories about the older Campbells, he also remembered Grandma Mary's loud yelling when it was time for the younger Buster to come home.

"You could hear her caterwauling all over the town," the Captain explained. "So loud everyone did everything they could to get Buster back home, so she'd shut her yap. But, we didn't call him Buster. I can't quite remember what we called him. I think it was Wee Willie, 'cause he reminded us so much of his Uncle Willie."



Michael Cumiskey, Termonfeckin, 1986.  
(Photo courtesy of Bob Simmons)

According to Captain Cumiskey, Buster was a square peg in a round Irish hole when he first came to Termonfeckin, but was "just one of the boys" when Uncle Laurence, my mother's youngest brother, escorted "Wee Willie" back to the States. (Laurence had received money and sponsorship from Uncle Patrick, who, at the time, was living on the ever popular Columbus Avenue.)

"We rode the lad to the train station in the pony cart," Captain Cumiskey said of Buster, "and there were a few tears shed that day, I can tell you. He was a little scrapper, and we all loved him."

Captain Cumiskey also knew or remembered all the Campbells; plus that the name, Campbell, meant "one with a crooked mouth." He said that at several town hall parties he danced with Aunt Essie, my mother's youngest sister, and on one occasion went so far as to kiss her. After two stiff whiskeys, he even remembered dancing with Mother when she came back to Ireland to drop off Buster and me. But, I also found out from other relatives that the Captain wasn't shy when it came to spinning yarns. So, what's real and what isn't is always in question. Nonetheless, Captain Cumiskey mostly had stories about his friend, Uncle Willie.

Supposedly, of my mother's four brothers - Patrick, Richard, William, and Laurence - Willie was the most head strong. Captain Cumiskey - known to have "had a fling from time to time meself" - once worked beside

Willie in the fields, and tipped back many a pint with him after a day on the job. They were drinking buddies up until Cumiskey joined the Irish Army.

The Captain said that at one time Willie fell for a Mary Anne - the Captain couldn't remember her maiden name - but she was promised to a much older Protestant: Mr. Gorman. So, Willie sailed for New York, but didn't take to the States, so he returned to Britain to join the British Navy. Then, some years later, after having a son with Mary Anne, named Jamesy (who died at age thirty-nine from rheumatoid arthritis and kidney failure, but whose daughters still live in Ireland to this day), Mr Gorman died. He worked on ships and, while climbing the mast of a docked boat, slipped on some black ice and fell to his death. He left behind Widow Gorman.

Captain Cumiskey wasn't clear on the dates, but at some point Willie moved back to Termonfeckin, took up with the Widow Gorman, married her, and finally consummated his unrequited love. Willie and Mary Anne stayed together until their deaths (both in Ireland), and had two children, Mary (who married a Stephen Garvey) and Patrick. Also, before leaving Ireland, Aunt Essie married Jimmy McEvoy and had three children: John, Mary or "Sister," and Jimmy Jr.

In the States, Bridget, known to me as Aunt May (the first to arrive in 1902) married a man named Tom, but I can't remember his last name. They had three daughters: Mary who married Raymond Guillaume, Frances who married Charles Kurz, and Katherine who married Walter Rennick. Patrick married Katherine (known to me as Kitty) and had two daughters: May and Dorothy. Richard married another Mary Anne, and had three children: another Patrick, Christopher, and Betty. Laurence married Jenny, and they had one daughter: Jane. Captain Cumiskey also claimed he remembered how Grandfather Patrick lost the family farm.

There are many Patricks in my Campbell Clan. The first anyone knows of was born around 1760, according to dates on the family's gravestone. His age coincides with a diaspora of Scottish people, swarms of farmers who left like "bees rising from the fields." It was a period in Scotland's history when Catholics were leaving due to Protestant ascendancy. The Protestant lords and landowners, who preferred to rent their properties to the wealthier Lowland and English sheep farmers, began to charge exorbitant rents to the Catholic Highlanders. Evictions became prevalent; resulting in many families being dispossessed and dispersed. They left for Ireland, the States, Canada, and even Australia; a mass depopulation of the Highlands. And I think one of those dispossessed souls was probably my great-great-grandfather, either by himself or with his family: Patrick Campbell.

By whatever means Patriarch Pat came to Termonfeckin, it appears he set about to find himself a wife and start a family. Her name was Anne, six years his junior, but I've learned nothing else about her,

except what the family marker has to say. They lived in Newtown, an old Catholic colony near Termonfeckin, and together they reared three children: Mary, born in 1797; William, my great-grandfather, born in 1806; and Richard, born in 1811.

It was William who originally commissioned the family gravestone: a large, lichen-encrusted, weather-worn, nearly unreadable granite marker in the cemetery near Mayne.<sup>1</sup> Subsequently, the monolith also came to include William's own date of death, as well as my grandfather's, the last Campbell mentioned.

Here is a facsimile of the information codified on the stone:

**Wm Campbell of Newtown, Termonfeckin  
in memory of his mother Anne who died**

**20th December 1813**

**Aged 44 years**

**of his father Patrick who died**

**12th December 1843**

**83 years**

**Sister Mary**

**8 May 1848 Age 51 yrs**

**Brother Richard 20th May 1882**

**Age 71 yrs**

**Wife Bridget 8th August 1886**

**Age 79 yrs**

**Age 20 yrs**

**William 8th November 1890 84 yrs**

**& son Pat 13 March 1915 Age 72 yrs**

William married Bridget Maguire, born in 1807, and together they had my Grandfather Patrick in 1843. He married my Grandmother Mary, the daughter of Laurence Reynolds and Marge Flynn, sometime before 1880 - the Reynolds had a Termonfeckin farm, too, which to this day locals call the Reynolds' farm. Of course, then Patrick and Mary set about to create my Campbell clan. Essie was the youngest and May Bridget was the oldest. Between came William, Patrick Jr, Richard, Laurence, and my mother, Margaret, squeezed in there somewhere.

It was my Uncle Patrick who sailed to Ireland in 1915 to arrange and pay for my Grandfather Pat's funeral; the last Campbell listed on the stone. Almost everyone else emigrated, but only after Grandfather lost the farm.

During the tour he took my son on, Captain Cumiskey pointed out the land that used to belong to the Campbell Clan, fecund acres still under cultivation. All the buildings were gone, but he said it was the best farm in the region when it fell into Grandfather Pat's hands.

The farm was the family's pride and joy, the legacy of three generations of hardworking Campbells. Grandpa Patty probably assumed control of the

<sup>1</sup> The graveyard referred to is at Port.

property sometime before his father's death, then inherited it for sure in 1890, when the patriarch passed-on. But in that grand old tradition of Irish alcoholics, it appears Patty drank away the profits, until the government confiscated the land for failure to pay taxes. And, supposedly, the disgruntled landlord bought the farm at auction just so Campbells would never have a second chance to get their hands on it. And, as you might suspect, it was about that time that the Campbell kids started leaving for America.

When Buster stayed with Grandma Mary, she lived in a small, stucco house, the second after the farm--they measured time that way: "houses after the farm." The first house after the farm was a small, rickety, thatched cottage close by Captain Cumiskey's - it no longer exists and barely existed while the Campbell's lived in it. No wonder they left for the promise of the New World.

I can't imagine the vexation, and embarrassment Grandma Mary must have suffered upon losing her wonderful farmhouse to move into a pauper's hut. At least the second house after the farm--the one reeking of boiling potatoes--was a clean, sturdy little duplex. But, after the loss, or so the Captain claimed, Grandma Mary began to enjoy the spirits quite a bit herself. As for the Campbell kids and how they did in America, Captain Cumiskey claimed "Patty got stinkin' rich over there," although he couldn't remember how. His money not only paid for his father's burial, it along with Aunt May's also allowed other Campbell's to emigrate. Cumiskey wasn't positive, but he thought it was Laurence, or Larry, who wound up owning a Bronx pub, called the Bainbridge Cafe (which I believe is still there), and after the construction of a subway station nearby, became fairly wealthy himself.

When Patrick traveled back to Termonfeckin in 1915 for Grandfather Pat's funeral, Captain Cumiskey had a chance to become acquainted with the older man. Cumiskey admired Patrick very much, and made a point of telling my son all the things Patrick did upon his return. First, he purchased a new dress for his mother and Essie, plus a suit for Lar. Next, he paid

to have the family plot tidied up and the last line carved into the gravestone. Then he bought an expensive coffin, and paid for the service and burial. And the wake!

"By then, everyone was impressed with him," said Cumiskey.

During this time, Patrick and Cumiskey, met quite a bit. They shared stories and caught up on Termonfeckin and Stateside news. They also rode together in a horse-drawn trap when the funeral procession traveled from the Catholic church in Termonfeckin to the family plot at Port Cemetery, several miles outside town. Then, they went to the wake together. Being only fifteen at the time, however, the wiser heads didn't allow young Cumiskey, much to his dismay, to "join in" as much as he would have liked.

"But, I'll tell you," he said, "it was one of the grandest wakes the town ever knew. Many a soul suffered for it the next day, I can tell you."

But, it was Aunt May who, in 1902 when she was 17, was the first to leave for America. She provided, for whoever made the trip, a place to stay and any other help she could offer while they settled in the New World. For instance, she witnessed my mother's wedding. Through her, and then Patrick, the Campbell kids made their great escapes - just as I made mine with Mother.

#### **Notes:**

Margaret Guy (nee Campbell) is buried in the Immaculate Conception Cemetery, Montclair, New Jersey. She died in Upper Montclair, New Jersey in December 1967, aged seventy-eight.

The extract from Isabelle Gessford's story was taken from Robert Simmons' website [www.grandmabelle.com](http://www.grandmabelle.com)

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