PATRICK KENNEDY: THE FORGOTTEN FOUNDING FATHER

By Edward Klein

In the faint pewter light of an Irish dawn, a young man riding bareback on an old gray draft horse emerged from a fog bank on the outskirts of New Ross, a river port south of Dublin. A cold, hard rain pelted the sides of his horse, and the fog roiled up above the treetops, concealing the road ahead. A stranger might have hesitated to proceed any farther for fear of getting lost, but the young man knew the countryside like the back of his hand. He was a local lad, and the sum total of his life's experiences, along with the memory and bones of his ancestors, were encompassed within a fifteen-mile radius of the town.

Because he was Roman Catholic, no baptism certificate existed to fix the precise date of his birth (at the time in Ireland, only Protestants were considered deserving of that privilege), but according to family tradition, he was born in Duganstown, County Wexford, in 1823, which made him twenty-six years old.

His name was Patrick Kennedy, and on this foggy February morning in the year 1849, he was about to leave his family and the tangled web of personal relationships in Ireland that had sustained him and given his life meaning. He was going to leave Ireland and the Great Famine that had claimed more than one million lives, and take his chances in America.

Once in Boston, Patrick would marry, have children, then die of consumption—all within the space of nine years. In that brief period of time, however, this little-known man became the founding father of the greatest political dynasty in American history. Through his blood-line, he gave America its first Catholic President (John F. Kennedy), three United

States Senators (JFK, Robert and Edward Kennedy), a U.S. Attorney General (Robert), two members of the House of Representatives (Joseph II and Patrick Kennedy), two additional presidential contenders (Robert and Edward), and the dream of a golden age called Camelot.

In Boston, Patrick moved into the cold-water flat of an old friend, where the two men shared a table, a couple of chairs, a bed, and a black cast-iron stove that supplied heat in the winter and fire for cooking. On Saturday nights, his friend poured hot water from a large kettle into a galvanized-iron tub for his once-a-week bath. When he stepped out of the tub, Patrick stepped in, and bathed in the same water.

The only indoor toilet for the tenement's thirty families was located in the dirt-floor basement. "No one was responsible for the care of these communal instruments," observed the sociologist Oscar Handlin, "and as a result they were normally out of repair. Abominably foul and feculent, perpetually gushing over into the surrounding yards, they were mighty carriers of disease."

"Of all the immigrant nationalities in Boston, the Irish fared the least well, beginning at a lower rung and rising more slowly on the economic and social ladder than any other group," the historian Doris Kearns Goodwin wrote.

The Irish were despised by Boston Brahmins for their rural customs, poverty, and Roman Catholicism. They were thought fit only for manual labor.

"Even the Negro," wrote Richard J. Whalen, "…faced less discrimination than the Irishman."
"The Negroes," added the Rev. John F. Brennan, "held jobs closed to the Irish, such as cooking and barbering."

Many want ads in the Boston papers read, "None need apply but Americans." When Irish men and women showed up for jobs, they encountered notices that read, "No Irish Need Apply," which

eventually became shortened to “NINA.” The only jobs available were the most menial and the cheapest. Live-in Irish maids, called “potwhallopers,” “biddies,” and “kitchen canaries,” were paid $2.00 a week. Unskilled Irish laborers made about the same wage, and were called “clodhoppers,” “Micks,” and “Paddies.”

Constant humiliation only deepened Patrick Kennedy’s view of the world as a dangerous place that had to be kept at arm’s length.

“If anything,” wrote Terry Golway in *The Irish in America*, “America could be worse than Ireland, for here Catholics were a distinct minority in a nation that increasingly took the view that democracy and Protestantism were inseparable.”

Even skilled workers like Patrick did not avoid the virulent anti-Catholic nativism that was fomented by the infamous Know-Nothing Party. In 1854, five years after Patrick’s arrival, the Know-Nothing Party captured the governor’s office and virtually every seat in the Massachusetts General Court. The party harassed Catholic schools, disbanded Irish militia companies, and tried to pass legislation mandating a 21-year wait before a naturalized citizen could vote. All this struck Patrick like a replay of the notorious British Penal Laws in Ireland.

But Patrick Kennedy never regretted leaving his blighted homeland. Within weeks of his arrival in Boston, he married Bridget Murphy. And over the next several years, they had five children—a son, who died in infancy; three daughters; and second son, who lived and was named after his father. “Nurtured from birth with the doctrine that they have a lien on greatness, the Irish were unable to come to terms with their own powerlessness,” noted the historian Thomas J. O’Hanlon.

In America, this outlook created two distinct strains in the

Irish character. One type was the compliant, loyal, God-fearing Irishman, an easy-go-lucky people-pleaser who got along by playing by the rules; who went to mass on Sunday, was deeply moved by the depiction of Christ bleeding under His bloody crown of thorns; who readily confessed his sins; who accepted suffering in silence; and who often ended up as a priest, or a day laborer, a train conductor, a garbage collector, a policeman, a fireman, or some other kind of civil servant who counted the days to retirement on a secure government pension.

The other type was the defiant, unruly, rebellious Irishman, a dark, brooding, frequently manic-depressive character, who nurtured a sense of resentment against all established authority; who did not show up at church very often, if at all; who could not deal with the humiliations of the past, and who rarely if ever talked about the Great Famine because he did not want it reported that he had not been able to feed his family; whose primary loyalty was to his wife and children, not to his country; and who often became a journalist, a scholar, a pub keeper, a politician, a gangster, a lawyer, a businessman, or a secret sympathizer of outlawed Irish rebels like the Fenians.

Patrick Kennedy was the rebellious sort. Though he eked out a meager existence as a barrel maker, and had a wife and four children to support, he contributed his pennies to the cause of Irish independence, and was an ardent supporter of the Irish Republican Brotherhood, or Fenians, who used modern methods of terrorism in their fight against the British. “The British,” said Patrick, “understand one thing—force. The only way to get them out of Ireland is to bomb them out.”

Patrick was a popular figure in the Irish pubs along Summer Street. Like his father, he was a born story-teller. With an actor’s flair for impersonation, he could keep his drinking companions entertained for hours with rousing tales of heroism during the Great Uprising of 1798.

Everyone said that Patrick Kennedy had a way with words, which was a high compliment indeed, for language was the Irishman's most potent weapon. Patrick kept his weapon honed with sarcasm; he liked to quote John Mitchel, the prominent nationalist writer of the Irish Famine, who was a master of mockery and ridicule.

"Now, my dear surplus brethren," Patrick would say, quoting one of Mitchel's most famous passages, "I have a simple, a sublime, a patriotic project to suggest. It must be plain to you that you are surplus, and must somehow be got rid of. Do not wait ingloriously for famine to sweep you off—if you must die, die gloriously; serve your country by your death, and shed around your name the halo of a patriot's fame. Go; choose out in all the island two million trees, and thereupon go and hang yourselves."

"[Sarcasm] was used for offense and defense," wrote Peter Quinn, one of the most astute observers of the Irish in America. "It was a weapon to cut down anyone in the community who might think or act like he was better than his peers."

In the fall of 1858, Patrick, now thirty-five, fell ill with tuberculosis. His complexion became pale, he lost a good deal of weight, experienced pains in his chest, and began spitting up blood. Bridget insisted that they call a doctor. By the time the doctor arrived, Patrick had hemorrhaged several pints of blood, and was delirious with a high fever. His voice was almost entirely lost, and he could only make himself heard in a whisper when the doctor asked him to describe his symptoms.

Bridget stood in the door, holding their ten-month-old son, who had been named after her husband, Patrick Joseph, and was nicknamed "P.J." Peeking from behind her skirts were her three young daughters.

"Please, can you do something for him, doctor?" Bridget said.

The doctor took Patrick's pulse. It was 124. He gave him some

creosote and nitro-muriatic acid with cod-liver oil. Under this course of treatment, Patrick's pulse fell to 100, and he was able to take a few spoonsful of clear soup. However, over the next few days he continued to lose weight, and soon he was but a shadow of the handsome, muscular man with bright blue eyes who had come to America.

On November 22—exactly 105 years to the day before John. F. Kennedy's assassination—Patrick, much emaciated and profusely sweating, emitted one last loud gurgling noise, and died.

"He had survived in Boston for nine years, only five less than the life expectancy for an Irishman in America at mid-century," Peter Collier and David Horowitz wrote. "The first Kennedy to arrive in the New World, he was the last to die in anonymity."

Edward Klein is the author of The Kennedy Curse: Why America's First Family Has Been Haunted by Tragedy for 150 Years, *available from St. Martin's Press.* *See page 2 for more information.*