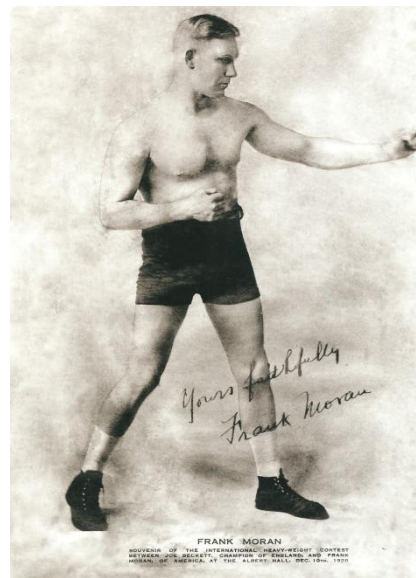


Prayers in the Parlor; Jesus, Mary, and ... Frank Moran

By Robert Gerard Byrnes

I grew up the oldest of three children in a tight knit family of five. As children of an Irish mother and an Irish American father, my brother, sister, and I spent quite a few summers back in Ireland. Most of our time there was spent visiting my mother's family in County Mayo where we would stay on my grandparents' farm.

For any Irish American who has visited Ireland there is something almost majestic about returning to Eire's warm embrace. As you gaze out the airplane window, and enter into a new time zone, the black of night gives way to the first rays of sunlight and in the distant horizon her inviting mountains can be seen. The sunlit sky soon gives way to a blanket of gray clouds and soft mist which seem to almost baptize the airplane as it prepares for its final descent before landing. A last glance out the airplane window and her pristine green hills and fields seem to stare up from below as she welcomes you back home.



Our family visits often coincided with the summer Olympics. Why do the summer Olympics stand out in my mind? Well, in the 1980s Ireland had only two television stations, RTE 1 and RTE 2. So, on the odd rainy day, when we could not run around like “mad” on the farm, we had two television stations to choose from. You could either watch Irish soaps on RTE 1 or the Olympics on RTE 2. Thankfully, my grandfather was in charge of household viewing and we were introduced to the Olympic Games. I can still see the Irish runner, John Treacy, collapsing on the track under the oppressive grip of the Russian summer. I can recall the great British decathlete, Daley Thompson, who would win gold medals in the 1980 and 1984 Olympics, and his Lucozade soft drink commercial and its catchy jingle “Luc-O-zade, replaces lost energ-ee.” I can still envision Carl Lewis winning gold medal after gold medal by sprinting and leaping his way into the record books as he became the modern day Jesse Owens. I would also come to learn about another world class athlete, one who I shared DNA with.

As each long summer day would wind down and nightfall crept over the countryside my grandmother would send us into the parlor to get ready for bed and to say our bedtime prayers. The parlor had a bed, a small fireplace, a dresser with a mirror, and a small loveseat. It also had the musty scent of burning turf and clean linen. With drill sergeant like efficiency she directed us to kneel alongside the bed and to clasp our hands with our fingers pointed up towards Heaven not folded down towards hell. We were then directed to look up to the opposite wall facing us. Affixed to the wall above the fireplace was a Crucifix, a picture of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus, the Blessed Virgin Mary, and a black and white photo of a boxer in a fighting pose which was autographed “Faithfully Yours, Frank Moran.” As we prepared to say our prayers, I stood up and imitated the boxer's pose and let fly a punch into the air. My grandmother quickly countered with a cross look and said, with her strong Mayo accent, “What are yeh bleddy doing?” I countered back “I'm like that boxer.” She looked at me with a gleam in her eye and the hint of a smile and said, “Niver mind that ol boxer, I'll box the ears of yeh if you don't be quite and say yer' prayers. Now, like a good gossler, stop acting the eejit and say yer' prayers.” So, like a good gossler, and not wanting to “act the eejit,” I knelt down alongside my brother and sister and, in

cadence, we completed the “Our Father,” “Hail Mary,” “Act of Contrition” and “Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit.”

My grandmother now proffered, “If ye promise to go right to sleep, I’ll tell ye bout the boxer and let ye have a look at his gloves.” Of course we solemnly swore we would go right to sleep. My grandmother went to the parlor dresser and proceeded to remove an old pair of brown, weather worn, leather boxing gloves. She said, “these here gloves belonged to me cousin from America, Frank Moor-in the boxer, and he gave them to me Uncle Martin, ‘God rest his soul,’ when he was here visiting.” We were like children on Christmas morning as she held the gloves out with her work calloused hands. She told us how Frank would train in the town of Westport and that he would put on a boxing show for all the town folk. She also made sure to stress how Frank never missed Mass while he was in Ireland -“Now mind ye, he’d go to Church over in Mina every Sunday when he was here visiting and he’d be dressed like a movie star and when Mass ended he’d greet every last member of the Parish.” My Uncle Tom must have overheard her and he sprung into the parlor and garrulously interjected, “Well, how ye Yanks?



Remember now, Frank Moor-in, was twice nearly champ’een of the world, he went the distance with Jack Johnson and with Jess Willard. Sure his right hand was like a kick from an ass and could knock a Connemara bull.” My grandmother smiled intently and then cleared my uncle from the parlor. She then handed us the gloves and let each of us try them on. After each of us had tried them on she took them and gently wrapped them in a piece of linen and placed them high up in the dresser, well beyond the reach of inquiring minds and prying hands.

Years later, after my grandmother had passed away and I was given those prized boxing gloves, I had the pleasure of meeting (thanks to an old LA Times Obituary piece on Frank Moran) Frank Moran’s two daughters, Cecelia Carroll Graham and Patricia “Patsy” Gillis Salkow. They welcomed me into their homes and shared with me some of their Dad’s boxing and film photos, magazine articles as well as some of their own stories about him and their families.

Frank Moran’s two daughters came from a generation of Americans who are often hailed as the “Greatest Generation” and both of them married men who gave selflessly to the “Greatest Generation” and to many generations yet to come.

Celia’s husband, Jim Carroll, was a pilot in the United States Army Air Corps during World War II. He served both as bombardier and as a navigator and earned the rank of Lieutenant. On his eighth mission, while engaged in combat over Europe, his B-17 airplane was shot down over Germany. He was captured by the Germans and held as a Prisoner of War for fourteen months in Stalag Luft 1, a WWII prisoner-of-war camp in Northwest Germany. Lt. Jim Carroll and his crew made several attempts to escape from the camp by digging tunnels, however, their attempts were thwarted and unsuccessful. They were finally released after British General Bernard Montgomery accepted the surrender of German forces in Northwest Germany, Denmark and the Netherlands.

Patsy’s husband, Allan Gillis, also served as a pilot in the United States Army Air Corps during World War II and earned the rank of Lieutenant. He served as a B-24 pilot and on his 25th mission, while

engaged in combat over Europe, his airplane was shot down over France and crash landed. Lt. Gillis and his crew survived the crash and evaded capture before being rescued and transported to England.

Both of these brave and courageous men, Lt. Jim Carroll and Lt. Allan Gillis, survived World War II and returned to the United States after the war and began their own families.

Allan Gillis would continue to serve his country by going to work for the State Department where he would be stationed overseas at the United States Embassy in the Philippines. In 1954, while serving in the Philippines, Allan would contract polio. He would return to California and bravely fight the ravages of the disease. Frank Moran, himself a veteran, and his wife Rebecca, seeing firsthand the trials and tribulations Allan, Patsy and their two young children faced invited the family to come live with them. Allan's muscles would soon begin to atrophy and he would soon lose his ability to walk. Frank, the former prizefighter and heavyweight contender, now a senior citizen, would use that heavyweight heart and strength to carry his son-in-law up and down to his bedroom and to the bathroom where Patsy would lovingly care for her husband until death would do them part in 1960.



A few years later, Patsy would meet, fall in love with and marry Hollywood film director Sydney Salkow. He, too, was a member of the "Greatest Generation" and duly served his country as a Major in the Marine Corps during World War II. Sydney's film career would take the couple to Italy. While she was in Italy, her dad, Frank, made a request, "Could she get him Rosary Beads?" Not a really hard request, after all, she was in a Roman Catholic country which is home to the Vatican. However, there was a second part to the request "Please have them blessed by the Pope." Well, Patsy jumped through and over every hoop to make sure that those Rosary Beads were blessed by Pope Paul VI and that they were sent first class mail to her father. The former heavyweight contender, now eighty-years-old, cherished the blessed Rosary Beads sent to him by his daughter.

On December 14, 1967, at the age of eighty, the final bell would ring for Frank Moran, the former Heavyweight Contender would meet that opponent that none can defeat, Father Time. Frank would pass from this earth to the Heavenly Father above. Frank would go to his final resting place with his prized Rosary Beads gently clasped between those mighty hands and pressed close to his kind heart.

As I look back on those summer nights spent on my grandparents' farm in Ireland, where my siblings and I said our prayers in the parlor, I now know that my grandmother had good reason to keep a photo of her cousin, Frank Moran, up there on the wall in the company of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus.

This article is dedicated to the memories of my grandmother Mary Keane, nee Moran; Patricia Salkow, nee Moran; and to all the men and women of the "Greatest Generation" who served this great nation so bravely and proudly.