

## The Tip: Shoe Shops, American Dreams, and the Ultimate Irish-American Hard Luck Story

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### Abstract

*The Brockton-Irish story may, in many respects, be representative of Irish-American neighbourhoods located in large urban centres of immigrant Irish settlement, but we need to know more about life in the smaller ethnic Irish neighbourhoods to be sure of this assertion. We also need to record personal recollections of life in The Tip and other such locales from the children of the immigrant generations while we still can. This is an attempt to record the remembrances of one of The Tip's own and frame them within an evolving Irish-American historical narrative. The story of the Tip, as we will see, presents a case-study of the Irish-American experience that fills in some of the enduring gaps in the historical narrative while revealing one of the enduring ironies within its familiar historical course.*

*Keywords: Brockton; Irish; shoe-industry; Irish immigrant; twentieth century*

One of the most colourful neighbourhoods in the great Shoe City of Brockton, Massachusetts, the Tip was home to Irish Americans who lived, dreamed, and ultimately prospered. They worked to ensure a more comfortable life for their children, and their success can be measured by the versions of the American dream lived by their descendants south of Boston and across the country; for the most part, happily ignorant of how those dreams came to be. This irony frames the story of a neighbourhood populated by successive generations of Irish-Americans, and the larger narrative of Irish-American history. We are well-versed in the major themes anchoring the Irish-American historical narrative—the story of an immigrant people who rose on the cornerstones of church, labour, education and politics to acceptability and assimilation. We are familiar with Irish-American progress in Boston, New York, and Chicago, and in the other major centres of immigrant settlement. Persistent attention to the Irish experience in these cities has produced a venerable ethnic narrative populated by prominent churchmen, journalists, labour activists and politicians. But what of smaller centres of Irish settlement? Should places like Brockton, Massachusetts, and its Irish neighbourhood The Tip be considered microcosms of large metropolitan areas like New York or Boston? While twentieth-century records allow us to track the progress of the Irish through

Brockton's religious and political spheres readily enough, what do we know about being Irish in The Tip, and what should we remember about that experience? The Brockton-Irish story may, in many respects, be representative of Irish-American neighbourhoods located in large urban centres of immigrant Irish settlement, but we need to know more about life in the smaller ethnic Irish neighbourhoods to be sure of this assertion. We also need to record personal recollections of life in The Tip and other such locales from the children of the immigrant generations while we still can. This is an attempt to record the remembrances of one of The Tip's own and frame them within an evolving Irish-American historical narrative. The story of the Tip, as we will see, presents a case-study of the Irish-American experience that fills in some of the enduring gaps in the historical narrative while revealing one of the enduring ironies within its familiar historical course.

The pillars of labour, church, politics and sports that wrought The Tip's hard-boiled ethnic identity not only accorded the neighbourhood its distinctive Irish identity; they served as mechanisms for successive generations of its residents to gradually relinquish their ethnic character. The price of progress, The Tip experience demonstrates, was paid in a momentous trade-off for Irish-Americans. Since the early 1800s, the Irish in the United States had struggled against cultural and political mores that sought to exclude them from mainstream American acceptance. Within a harsh American cultural climate, Catholic Irish immigrants deployed their available resources to advance economically and politically. Categorized as an Old Immigrant ethnic group by the end of the nineteenth century, the children of the Famine survivors of the 1840s and '50s overthrew earlier Protestant Irish identities and established cultural and political platforms that allowed them to advance. These cultural and political structures proved stubbornly objectionable to native-born Americans through to the twentieth century, however—an irony that hallmarked their history for more than a hundred years. Irish Catholic affiliation with organized labour, an insular education system, a well-fortified political culture, and sustained interest in the fate of their ancestral homeland across the Atlantic allowed them to scale the ladders of economic progress and cultural acceptance *and* preserve their distinct ethnic character, despite negative enduring through several generations. The double-edged sword that defined the modern ethnic Irish historical experience in the United States was eventually dulled by the same forces that transformed neighbourhoods such as The Tip by the later twentieth century, as we will see—the forces that replaced one irony of history with another of lasting significance.

Bill Brennan was born in The Tip section of Brockton, Massachusetts, on October 6, 1933, and lived there until he married in 1962. Members of his family lived there from about 1900 until 1994. His maternal grandparents came to Brockton in the late 1890s and settled in The Tip shortly after the turn of the century. After renting a number of single family houses, they purchased a three-family dwelling at 95 E. Ashland Street at the very heart of The Tip in about 1914. His family occupied that property until 1994 when the last survivor moved into a nursing home. Bill Brennan's personal memories allow for a translation of historical materiality—the remembrances and recollections we commonly treat as 'historical' sources—into a history of one of the smaller ethnic neighbourhoods and the subsequent illumination of collective Irish-American themes.<sup>1</sup> The Tip's geographically-isolated neighbourhood on the east side--the 'wrong side'— of the tracks in Brockton provides a useful case-study for consideration of the constructs beneath such commonplace terms as 'Irish-American,' 'ethnic Irish,' and 'identity.' The Irish made a critical contribution, of course, to the process by which Colonial era "settlers and colonists" were reconstructed into

<sup>1</sup> David K. Dunaway and Willa K. Baum, eds., *Oral History: An Interdisciplinary Anthology*, (Lanham, MD: Altamira Press, 1996), 94. Barbara Tuchman distinguishes between "history gathering" and "history making" in "Distinguishing the Significant from the Insignificant."

the “immigrant” culture subsequently associated with American settlement. As the largest ethnic group to challenge the WASPish hegemony evident by the mid-nineteenth century, Catholic Irish immigrants were required to “assimilate” into the American nation established by their white European Protestant predecessors as a prerequisite of basic acceptance. The negative effects of the natural disaster of the Irish Famine, compounded by British government inability to alleviate the episode’s brutal force, were naturally transplanted to the United States by the massive Catholic Irish immigrations of the 1840s and ‘50s. The cultural baggage of a million and a half incoming Irish took cogent forms in New England industrial towns such as Brockton, as the Irish established the cultural and political agendas that came to define their identity for the next century.<sup>2</sup> The insularity of such neighbourhoods as The Tip preserved these cultural and political platforms within their physical and philosophical dimensions, as evident in the remembrances of a native son. Personal memories of an Irish-American neighbourhood not only shed light on a distinct and pure ethnic experience, but also on the major ironies underpinning Irish-American history. Recording these personal memories also obliges us to contemplate the role of this type of mediation in creating, gathering, and making history.<sup>3</sup>

The distinct character of The Tip, the profound impact of the Great Depression on its inhabitants, the shattering impact of World War II, and the rapid collapse and death of the neighbourhood determined the course of Bill Brennan’s life. He was raised within the cocoon of its embrace, and much of his adult life has been spent analysing the impact of family, neighbourhood and Brockton, and the ethnic working class experience in general. In observing lightning-fast changes on Irish ethnics, their neighbourhoods and the old mill cities, and in mulling over these experiences as an adult, he saw that while no neighbourhood was exactly like his, similar lives were certainly led in ethnic enclaves in New England’s old mill cities. Capturing his own experience within a historical narrative and researching the flavour of life in what he describes as near-ghettoes revealed The Tip and so many other ethnic neighbourhoods in New England as small, insular worlds overwhelmed by forces in play far beyond the enclaves; wars, depressions, alien political ideologies, technological change, shifting demographics, globalization, government initiatives and a host of other forces. The tales of ethnic Irish life he published engage the Irish-American historical experience through the medium of fiction but the facts of working-class Irish culture and its influence over his own identity and that of his fellow-ethnics refused to fade away. Their engagement represents a journey into The Tip--and into the shop-floors and alleys and baseball fields that made Irish-America. Here is Bill’s story:

## Brockton

To understand The Tip, a little background on the City of Brockton leading up to the rise and fall of The Tip might be helpful. The city is the northwestern most jurisdiction in Plymouth County, Massachusetts and is about eighteen miles due south of Boston. Its recorded history dates to colonial times when descendants of the Pilgrims began their natural expansion beyond the bounds of the original settlement. Famous personages were involved as Massasoit sold a large tract of Native American owned land north and west of Plymouth that included what is now Brockton to Miles Standish in 1649.

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<sup>2</sup> Eric Foner and Lisa McGirr, eds., *American History Now*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011): 358-375. Mae M. Ngai explores these constructs and their meanings in “Immigration and Ethnic History,” Quotation, 359.

<sup>3</sup> Joan Shelley Rubin “Nixon’s Grin and Other Keys to the Future of Cultural and Intellectual History,” *Modern Intellectual History* 9, no. 1 (2012): 218. Rubin highlights the central issue of mediation.

Before the Civil War, demand for footwear in the rapidly growing nation was growing exponentially and Brockton was a centre for the development of small shops using the latest methods of production. Near the beginning of the great conflict a machine that could stitch the upper to the sole of the shoe revolutionized production and this, coupled with many other improvements, led to further consolidation of the industry, and Brockton was ready with power and access to labour for the expansion of the industry: The Industrial Revolution was on in Brockton, The Shoe City.

The descendants of the Pilgrims could not keep pace with the need for labour in Brockton and immigrants from Sweden were among the first at the shop benches. Still the demand for workers was insatiable and other groups were soon welcomed. Of these only three groups impacted my life in any way during the period of the narrative: Lebanese, Lithuanian and Franco-Americans. The latter two groups had their own neighbourhoods similar to The Tip and the Lebanese immigrated directly into The Tip. There was a substantial African American community near the centre of Brockton, but only two families of the racial group lived in The Tip and are involved in my story.

The population of Brockton grew rapidly as the shoe industry expanded. Fantastic growth was noted with each census beginning with a modest 3,939 souls in 1850 to a fantastic 66,254 in 1920. High double digit percentage growth was noted in each decade. Typical numbers such as those in 1900 showed a population of 46,063 of which well over 6,000 were employed in some aspect of shoe manufacturing.

Decline of the shoe industry began in earnest after World War I. The city's population also dropped slightly after 1918 and through The Great Depression and rose after World War II, but that is immaterial to my story of The Tip.

## **My Family**

Sadly, I know very little about many of my family members. My father, also Bill Brennan, was born in Brockton but because of financial pressures on his mother and father, he was sent to Biddeford, Maine to be raised as a boarder by a French Canadian family. He returned to Brockton as young adult (always cherishing his other family in Maine). He served in The Great War, returned home and joined the Brockton Fire Department. He collapsed when I was an infant and died when I was three – an only child, and I have virtually no direct memories of him.

My mother, Helen Gertrude Sullivan Brennan was born in Brockton in 1900. She went to work in the shoe shops while in her teens. She and my father were married in 1928 and lived in the homestead on Ashland St. in Brockton where I was born in 1933. She was consigned to the shoe industry as a girl and when the industry died she moved into clerical work.

My grandparents arrived in Brockton late in the nineteenth century and the maternal kin settled in the Tip where my narrative begins. Unfortunately my paternal grandparents died before I was born and all I know about them is their surnames: Brennan and Delahanty. As far as their antecedents in Ireland, I am completely ignorant.

My maternal grandparents Henry Patrick Sullivan of Charlestown, MA and Nellie Carney of Clonmel, Ireland moved as a married couple to Brockton in the mid-1890s. He was a house painter and she a housewife and mother. Nellie was the only Irish born member in my family of that generation, and I knew of no other Irish born person still alive in The Tip

when I came along. The Sullivans moved from Ireland to Boston among the first waves; they originated in Cork.

My grandmother was fluent in both Irish and English. She made an effort to teach her children Irish but given the isolation of the family and the overwhelming presence of English not much headway was made. She made fits and starts at teaching me the language, but she passed away when I was ten years old and already incorrigible with few Irish words to my name.

The Sullivans had five children, four boys and my mother. One boy fell from a tree and died when he was ten. Another drowned when he was in his early twenties; he was the father of a boy and a girl and an unborn son. The girl was shot to death at age twelve in a very questionable accident.

On the Brennan side my father had two siblings, a boy and a girl. The male lived in Brockton all his life but we weren't close. The girl became my beloved aunt who lived in Worcester where I visited her and my cousins regularly.

Hardship was a way of life during the period of my childhood. My family protected me from the financial state of the clan to the greatest degree possible during The Great Depression, but it was very clear that we were desperately poor. My father, dying and dead, my grandfather crippled by rheumatoid arthritis, and only three workers present, my mother, one of her brothers and his wife (Who died in about 1939 or 40) faced the future. The shoe factories were operating an extraordinarily low level, and all three workers averaged few days of employment each month. Only the coming of war loosed the spigot of money in the neighbourhood.

## **Geography and Topography: Physical and Personal**

As I remember, the manmade and natural boundaries surrounding The Tip meant limited paths of entrance and egress. For most of the twentieth century the neighbourhood was bounded on its western perimeter by the New York, New Haven & Hartford rail lines. Minor exceptions in full membership in The Tip were made for a few Irish families from the other side of the tracks on N. Montello Street, but there were really only two entrances to the neighbourhood on the west: E. Ashland and Elliot Streets under the two railroad bridges. Two other openings were very minor. The bridge over the tracks on E. Battles Street was rarely used, and a hole in the fence in the middle of the old Mulberry Playground that youths and a few daring (or foolish) adults used to cross the tracks of the railroad right of way constituted a gutsy shortcut. On the north The Tip was bound by E. Battles Street and by Donnelly's woods. The Donnellys were a relatively moneyed Irish family that developed many of the houses in The Tip. Their name died out, but the last daughter married John Flynn, and the Flynn family retained their social status until the neighbourhood collapsed. There was no exit to the north, except via a long walk through these woods. During the thirties, the forest was frequented by packs of hoboes and drunks and, as a result, remained quite frightening to parents.

On the east, Trout Brook formed the boundary. This was a highly-polluted small river that we natives knew as Salisbury Brook. There had been no trout in that water in living memory, but broken furniture and other refuse was abundant. There were only two exits on the east: E. Ashland Street and Elliott Street over bridges across the creek. To further isolate (and insulate) The Tip on the east, on the north side of E. Ashland Street on both sides of the brook lay an extensive swamp, including a peat bog that spontaneously caught fire many times during my youth. On the south side of E. Ashland Street and east of the brook there was

a polluted city dump where we would occasionally shoot rats for sport. On the south, The Tip was bounded by the NY, NH & Hartford freight yards—another frightening area after dark as this wild land was also used by bands of hoboes and drunks.

When it was first established in the late 1800s, The Tip was a virtually all-Irish enclave. It was, from its beginning, the most famous (or infamous) Irish neighbourhood in Brockton. People from its rival Celtic neighbourhood, The Bush, would argue otherwise, but The Bush, like The Tip, is no more, so this settles the argument. The Tip was one of several ethnic neighbourhoods centred on St. Edward's Church, but I sensed we were the group with the lowest social standing compared with Irish from North Main Street and points west of that city-dividing thoroughfare. Around 1910, a pioneering group of immigrants from Lebanon moved into The Tip. They were not particularly welcomed by the Irish, although these Arabs were Maronite Catholics—a Christian sect affiliated with the Roman Catholic Church. I am proud to say that my family was among the first to recognize their right to live in peace and harmony in the neighbourhood. About half of my childhood chums were Lebanese, and my longest-enduring friendship in life is with a Lebanese man of my own age. The friendship began when we were toddlers and remains in good standing to this day.

The Lebanese had their own parish, St. Theresa's Maronite Catholic Church. When I was a boy it was located in an old wooden structure on N. Montello Street, within easy walking distance of The Tip. That church played an interesting role in my upbringing. One of my Lebanese chums tipped me off that the old pastor spoke no English, and this led to a period of freedom from the mortification that goes with confession. I would regale the old fellow endlessly with tales of my many sins and great depravity and, in turn, he would mumble something in Arabic or Latin—it mattered not which as I wasn't listening—that I deciphered as my penance, always very light. This gift went on for more than a year until, as I was generously ladling out fantastic sins of the most decadent types and stopped for breath the old fellow interrupted my spiel and said in accented but otherwise fine English, "You really have been a bad boy. I'm going to forgive you again, but you really must change. This is your penance..." Suffice it to say it was extremely severe; from that moment I cut down on my sinning as best I could and returned to St. Edward's with a far narrower definition of what constituted an offense against The Almighty.

Ethnics other than Lebanese or Irish and older Protestant residents of the neighbourhood made little outward show of their beliefs in the face of overwhelming Catholicism. All were accepted providing they were decent folk, especially if the sons could play baseball and whist. Boys with bad tempers and tendency toward bullying were ignored and marginalized.

During the later years of the Great Depression, a couple of dozen or more other families—all poor—moved into the enclave. Such incursions increased rapidly after World War II, and by the late fifties or early sixties, the neighbourhood I knew as The Tip was rapidly dying. Only a few old families, indeed only the oldest members of these families, remained until they died out. I believe that they are all gone now, as are almost all of the Lebanese families. Only as an adult did I come to recognize that The Tip, like many such enclaves in the old mill cities of New England, were the places where immigrants began their climbs from despised and feared newcomers to fully fledged members of mainstream American life, and the young people flew to all corners of the world leaving hardly a trace of themselves in the havens that produced them.

## Work

Work, the blessed practicality that ranked above all others to unemployed immigrants, drew the Irish and later the others to The Tip. There were jobs available for Tip denizens in the burgeoning shoe industry. The shoe factories—shoe shops, as we called them—began production long before The Tip was founded. Brockton was a major producer of men's shoes during the Civil War and grew exponentially until sometime after the turn of the twentieth century. Even the reviled Irish of the immediate post-Famine years could get jobs in these shops. They had to live someplace, and neighbourhoods like The Tip evolved in less-salubrious geographic locales. They grew to provide lost cost housing for the Celtic workers. As many have noted, the Irish, despite the contempt and animosity of the descendants of the Plymouth and Massachusetts Bay colonies, had a giant leg up on later comers like the Lithuanians, Franco-Americans and Lebanese through familiarity with the English language. They were among the foremost of the upwardly mobile immigrants drawn to America by the Industrial Revolution and the push of the Famine. By the time I became aware of things, the Irish had progressed to the point where they held many foreman jobs. They had also begun their rise in urban politics and the civil service and had, in general, begun to enter the middle class of New England in general and of Massachusetts and Brockton in particular. For example, the first mayor of Brockton I remember clearly was of Irish extraction-- Joe Downey (Mayor 1942 -1949).

## Immigrants and The Tip

Of the immigrants in the city, only the Lebanese directly impacted the Irish youths of The Tip. They were assimilated into the community with more than a little difficulty. Put upon as they were when they arrived, the Irish initially went nativist when it came to accepting the Lebanese. Their Christianity was questioned, and they were labelled 'Syrians' which offended and saddened them deeply. By the time I was born much of the nativism had subsided, and all the youths in the enclave were accepted as equals with the exception of the African Americans.

There were two Black families. We played together and they were treated as equals in sports and in the Ashland School classrooms. My cohorts never spoke badly of either family, but I sensed an unspoken barrier in things social.

The two abutting ethnic neighbourhoods, the Lithuanian Village to the north of The Tip and the French Canadians to the south played almost no role in our lives until we moved on to higher grades in school outside of the neighbourhood. The boundaries of Donnelly's Woods on the north and the New York, New Haven & Hartford freight rail yard on the south were truly formidable preventing almost all interaction with our near neighbours.

I don't recall meeting live Lithuanians or Franco-Americans until I entered the seventh grade. Shockingly, I found they were perfectly normal American youths with whom I and other Tip kids interacted without difficulty or incident forever after.

## Culture

The Tip was ideally located in relation to the shoe shops. Workers could walk through Donnelly's Woods to many major factories in the Lithuanian Village area to the north. Bus service at Main St. was available to those factories and others in all direction. The adult fare in the thirties was five cents. The Tip was also part of St. Edward's Parish, which was made up of mostly Irish worshippers. I had the strong feeling that we low class louts from The Tip were the unwanted stepchildren of the parish. The Ladies Sodality had few members from the

neighbourhood and Lace Curtain types from west of Main Street appeared to have the inside track with the priests. One of my friends was an altar boy, but none of the men seemed interested in cracking the inner circle of parish leadership. Religious vocations were not for the denizens of The Tip. There were no spare children for the Church coming from that place. Children worked as soon as they could and they put the proceeds on the kitchen table every Friday night. Priests and nuns were called from social classes well above ours.

The annual parish reunion was perhaps the great social event of the year, and the National Guard Armoury on Warren Avenue, far from the neighbourhood, was the site of the event. Food cooked by members of the Sodality, amateur entertainment and good natured kidding by those priests with senses of humour made the night great fun. A typical statement that I recall to this day began with the priest, Father McCann – ordinarily an extremely stern man - setting up his joke. Our principal usher was Dom Noonan and he led his assistants into the church when it was time to pass the plate. “Mr. Noonan, a great man and a great worker for the Church has always been a little slow to know when to begin the collection, but we have worked out a system that works perfectly, and he flies to his task as soon as I yell out, ‘Dominic, go frisk ‘em!’” Of course, the house roared its approval. The annual Policeman’s Ball and the counterpart sponsored by the firemen were popular in The Tip; with little of the push back faced by their bands of brothers of today. This is likely because so many of our residents were beginning to be appointed to these forces. The great tragedy of the time, the Strand Theatre fire of 1941, killed thirteen firemen, two of whom lived in The Tip. It was a great blow to us, especially since my late father had been on the force with them and the widows were close friends of my mother.

The main event each week for all families was Sunday dinner. In my house we had three (or occasionally four) related families living together in the three story, three-apartment house, and each week the preparations devolved upon one of the women to host the event in turn, with help from the others that was freely given. Often, we raised our own chickens and, except for Thanksgiving and Christmas, when we had turkey, the slowest young rooster or hen gave up the ghost for our ritual. On a semi-regular basis, the more prominent Irish ladies of The Tip, my mother among them, would serve high tea for each other. It was symbolic of their aspirations, if not their present state.

Cards were played by men, women and children up to the mental challenge. Whist, the major precursor to contract bridge, was the game of choice and was played by adults in the evening in the residences. All of the parishes sponsored whist parties, especially for women. The boys – but not the girls – played in the daytime. In good weather, we played in the Mulberry Street Playground or on the steps of the Ashland School from which the police would roust us on a regular basis. Status within the Tip for play was very important for all groups. Only success at baseball exceeded being sharp at whist among male youths. But the principal reason for being in The Tip was work, and our adults did not have time for much frivolity. I have no doubt that we were way behind the more prosperous neighbourhoods in social and cultural activities.

## Education

The Tip had its own elementary school, the Ashland School; a four-room wooden structure that in my time offered four grades taught by three teachers; the second and third grades were combined in one room with the one remaining room held vacant. Thus children could avoid having to leave The Tip for the outside world without a guardian until they reached eleven or even twelve years. The name of the school was derived from its location on the northwest corner of E. Ashland and Mulberry Streets. It was moved two blocks to its final destination

shortly before I was born in order to accommodate an oil company that required a tank farm to be located on the NY, NH & Hartford main rail line. The resultant environmental damage and health threats to the neighbourhood were not an issue. Certainly, no public meeting involving the residents was ever held at which they might voice their concerns. My mother and her siblings went to the same school building (at its old location) and I and my chums learned our ABCs on Emmett Street. I had my first epiphany in that school in the second grade. We were reading aloud and Miss Dighton directed everyone to take their seats. In a few minutes, the principal and fourth grade teacher, Miss Sullivan, returned with her and I was called to the front of the class and asked to read aloud from a rather difficult text. Instantly, I realized that I'd been singled out for the fluidity of my oral reading, and I read and hammed it up for Miss Sullivan with great purpose and inflection. My life was forever changed that day; I was certified as a reader. It was my job from that day to this to read and to read still more. The school building was abandoned by the city sometime in the early 1950s and burned to the ground a few years later, another relic of The Tip gone forever. I can assure you that I was living in Virginia when the tragedy occurred and had no hand in setting the fire.

## Sports

The major sports were played by the boys of The Tip, but baseball was king of the mountain. While Brockton High School's football team drew huge crowds, the activity in the neighbourhoods that was played as long as the weather permitted was baseball. The ability to play it well guaranteed social standing regardless of race, creed or colour. We had two African-American families living in The Tip, and our baseball was integrated long before Jackie Robinson ever set foot in Ebbets Field. Boys began to play as soon as they were old enough to shag flies and run down foul balls and became integrated into sandlot teams as soon as an opening in right field became available. There was absolutely no parental involvement, and the older boys were cruelly objective in weeding out those with two left feet. The city's Catholic parishes sponsored teams for high school-aged boys, and games were quite well attended as the teams travelled about the city. But the centre of activity all summer centred on the almost nightly games of the City League that were played at O'Donnell's Playground, about a fifteen minute walk from The Tip at the hub of Brockton's population. Teams of excellent adult players, including many from The Tip, were sponsored by ethnic clubs, shoe factories and other large businesses. Key games drew many hundreds, and even thousands of spectators. Vendors sold ice cream and soft drinks, and everyone had great fun. These games were eventually killed off by competition from television and the mobility created by widespread ownership of automobiles that opened up new forms of entertainment in the late 1940s and early 50s.

## Decline

The Tip's decline began even as it was being settled, but it took many years for the inhabitants to realize it. Major causes of the decline included forces of globalization we are so familiar with today. Beginning in the late thirties, complaints surfaced when friends of the family visited and talked about the state of the shoe industry. The constant fear that was expressed was that Italy was taking over much of the industry and that Italian workers were willing to work for half that of Brockton shoe workers. The din rose and shifted its focus and enmity to Mexico and, of course, now moves on to China, Brazil, India and even Africa. Globalization was sufficient in and of itself to destroy the Brockton shoe industry and to doom worker enclaves like The Tip. It was as unstoppable then as it appears to be now. Industries like textiles and shoes that have significant non-skilled or semi-skilled labour input

migrate to places where labour costs are lowest. The old New England mill cities were slated for their fate even before they reached their peak output.

Automobiles constituted another factor of significance in the decline of The Tip. Irish and other workers could easily live in other parts of the city or even in the surrounding towns with little of the old prejudices remaining in the open. The coming of low priced cars like the Ford Model T permitted workers to work farther and farther from the factory floor. Societal changes from WWI also played a key role. I've read accounts showing great shifts in American societal norms going back to the Civil War, but these changes became obvious after WWI. Prohibition, the role of women, and the sinking reputation of institutions such as the Church led directly to new freedoms for all and lack of respect for sources of authority. Young men and women in The Tip were not immune to these pressures. Likewise, the Great Depression resulted in economic changes with severe repercussions for The Tip. Demand for shoes and shoe products sank as people spent less on fine shoes and even low priced shoes were bought as infrequently as possible during this greatest of economic catastrophes in American history. The strain on residents of The Tip was enormous. For example, my mother, a skilled perforating machine operator, worked only sporadically in the thirties. The same went for my uncle Joe, the experienced and clever last maker, and most of our neighbours employed in the shops. Even civil service jobs were subject to pay cuts and labour strife rose. My father, a city firefighter, was the only person in the house employed on a full time basis, but he collapsed when I was an infant and died when I was three. These were excruciatingly difficult times for my family, and most of our neighbours suffered just as badly.

The coming of the World War II revived the shoe industry as purchases of American goods by the Allies and the mobilization of U.S. forces masked the underlying problems until the demobilization of the military forces of the world. Even months before V-J Day in August 1945, however, orders from Allied governments were cancelled and the old troubles rose once again. Societal changes from earlier times accelerated during and after World War II, but programs instituted by the federal government to assist returning service men in their reintroduction into civilian life pushed The Tip to a quick and painful death in less than a decade. The GI Bill literally transformed America and The Tip. Returning veterans were provided many benefits, but two in particular (assistance with the cost of education, and housing benefits) proved wonderful for the veterans. They were, however, devastating in their impact on ethnic enclaves like The Tip. The effect of demobilizing millions of American military personnel in a matter of mere months after the war ended could have been economically catastrophic, but the vast majority of the returning men wanted to go to school – basically to college - to better themselves.

The GI Bill gave returning servicemen the wherewithal to pay for school and to receive a stipend sufficient even to provide for a family as they prepared for far better futures than they had ever contemplated. GI home loans served as the backbone of a post war construction boom that was the basis of a thirty year period of prosperity in the country. But, as these young veterans moved to massive new suburban neighbourhoods, they siphoned the life and energy out of The Tip, out of Brockton, and indeed out of most of the old mill cities of New England. The GI Bill is one of the greatest societal success stories coming out of the war and, indeed, of the entire twentieth century. As a recipient of the benefits, I can attest to its value. But there has been little note of the adverse impact it made on old run-down places like The Tip and on factory cities in general. While I covered this subject lightly in my novel, *Murphy's War*, I think that there is great potential for scholars in examining the total impact of this great program.

The development of Route 24 from the Boston area in the north through Brockton on its way to south to Fall River in the early 1950s, while not part of the Interstate Highway system, was built almost to these standards and was later connected to it. Route 24 encouraged further development of suburbia, and siphoned off even more relatively successful young families from tired old places like The Tip.

## Epilogue

While I continued to live at home in The Tip after I graduated from high school, the neighbourhood as I had lived it and as it had been described to me by family and neighbours was dying rapidly. I served in the army from 1953 to 1956 (from the safety of bases in the U.S.) during and after the Korean War (1950 -1953) and qualified for my own GI benefits. Returning physically to The Tip for rations and quarters while I went to college, it was clear to all that I, like almost every other young person in the old place, was marking time until I was ready to move out. In my fourth novel, *Charity for All*, I told a tale not only about the plot line but a fifty-year retrospective of what had become of the offspring of those who had the overwhelming life experience of growing up and living in The Tip. After many years, the oil company tank farm next to the railroad tracks was closed and its property was bought and cleaned up by the local electric utility. That company continued its physical expansion on the east side of Mulberry Street and southward on E. Ashland Street, eventually purchasing and demolishing all of the houses on the north side of Ashland Street from Mulberry Street to well past Emmett Street, and seriously altering the geography of The Tip.

None of the old neighbours visiting today for the first time in fifty years would even recognize the neighbourhood. What remains is just another rundown source of housing for poor people in a rundown old factory city. The Tip is gone and long forgotten by all but a few folks my age and older, but I thought that it was well worth my time and effort to attempt to describe life in the old place from a very personal perspective. I have no regrets for having done so, and I hope that for scholars of such working class enclaves my novels will serve as more than footnotes to working class history.

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Bill Brennan's recollections help break down barriers between lived experience and the writing of history. As others have done, such as Paul Fussell in the context of the World War I, and Irish-American scribes such as Pete Hamill and Tom Hayden in writings on ethnic life and culture, Brennan's memories frame Irish-American struggle and progress within a neighbourhood bounded by explicit physical and cultural boundaries. The story of The Tip as an Irish enclave dependent in large measure on the shoe shops, but also on the ethnic foundations constructed within their parameters, reveals a neighbourhood reflective of both national and international progressions and an enduring ethnic identity over the course of the twentieth century. Bill Brennan's memories emanate from the "dynamic repository of collective memory"<sup>4</sup> defining places like The Tip—for, otherwise, how did ethnic identity survive as long as it did? The factors of work, faith, education and sport sustained the collective sense of Irishness within The Tip, as he has recounted. But, as he also noted, the disintegration of the neighbourhood also wrought the destruction of the identity it housed. So when did the ethnic identity of The Tip cease to exist? When did it evaporate or, when, in other words, did it cease to operate as *the* prime characteristic of these Brockton residents? As Colin Calloway has written in the context of Scots-Americans, identity need not be based in some kind of prescribed authenticity. "What matters about identity" Calloway suggested, is

<sup>4</sup> Alessandro Arcangeli, *Cultural History: A Concise Introduction*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), 103.

“not whether it is real or mythological...based on historical record or the imagination of its inhabitants, but whether it exists and whether a large number of inhabitants subscribe to it.”<sup>5</sup> Once the residents of The Tip physically dispersed, they replaced their ethnic consciousness with new lives in cities and towns and suburbs and locations more reflective of ethnic success than the old neighbourhood. They replaced one collective identity with another, and thus, their ethnic identity could not continue to exist in the same way.<sup>6</sup> Ironically, as Bill Brennan has shown, it was only when the residents of The Tip achieved their American Dreams as full-fledged, acceptable Americans that the loss became evident. Should the socio-economic conditions that played such a large role in the generation of their ethnicity and identity, but which Irish-Americans sought to overcome at the first opportunity, now be mourned as a loss of momentous proportions? Should the disappearance of a neighbourhood such as The Tip, and the ethnic identity preserved within it, be lamented as the end of an era of major significance for Irish-Americans? Ultimately, should memories of places like The Tip be formally archived so that future generations of Brennans and Kellys and O’Connors and Donnellys might know something of their heritage? In a world where forces of globalization engulf us and where unsettling questions of national and personal identity continue to arise, and as Bill Brennan’s rich remembrances strongly suggest, the answer ought to be yes.

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<sup>5</sup> Colin G. Calloway, *White People, Indians, and Highlanders: Tribal Peoples and Colonial Encounters in Scotland and America*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 269.

<sup>6</sup> J. J. Lee and Marion R. Casey, eds., *Making the Irish American: History and Heritage of the Irish in the United States*, (New York: New York University Press, 2006). The Irish-American history field offers rich insight into these questions; see particularly the essays in Peter Quinn’s *Looking for Jimmy: A Search for Irish America*, (Woodstock and New York, The Overlook Press, 2007), Mary C. Kelly, *Ireland’s Great Famine in Irish-American History: Enshrining a Fateful Memory*, (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), and James Silas Rogers and Matthew J. O’Brien, eds., *After the Flood: Irish America, (1945-1960)*, Dublin and Portland, OR: Irish Academic Press, 2009.

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## Appendix:

### The Novels

While written separately, the first three novels form a coherent (I hope) body of work. While not a true trilogy, they follow a general but overlapping time line encompassing most of the first half of the twentieth century. The characters are composites of my family, friends and neighbours in the Tip and other ethnic enclaves in Brockton. The plots were developed to show at least some of the forces that were arrayed against those trying to hold the old working class places together in the face of an overwhelming tide that was running against them. I remain convinced that great outside forces that have no direct impact on the day to day lives of isolated places like The Tip can still greatly influence the behaviour of individual residents, and the first three books address some of them.

The next two novels, **Charity for All** and **Gray Hearts and Greenbacks**, are set after the demise of The Tip as an Irish neighbourhood and are an attempt to show the behaviour of the children and grandchildren of The Tip as they went through life unconsciously influenced by the old place.

My latest novel, *Harrigan*, is a prequel to all of the previous books. The politics of the Irish in The Tip ranged from far left to far right, and Catholicism took in the entire spectrum from ultraconservative to very liberal. These conflicting attributes arose somewhere, and I took a whack at them.

The first book, *A Tattered Coat Upon A Stick*, is set primarily in a fictitious neighbourhood in Boston that closely resembles the Tip. At the time, I wasn't sure that using the actual setting and characters that could easily be recognized would serve my purpose adequately. The novel sets the stage at the beginning of the twentieth century in the Tip and quickly broadens out to place the neighbourhood under the outside stresses that made the period from about 1914 to 1930 among the most tumultuous in American history. It examines the impacts of The Great War, Prohibition, the Boston Police Strike, anarchy and most importantly places the infamous Sacco and Vanzetti Case in the context of places like the Tip. The case which was the inspiration for the great conflicts in the novel sprang out of personal incident from my early teens in which two old neighbours and friends from the Tip, men in their fifties, almost came to blows over murders that occurred a generation earlier, the

famed payroll robbery and murders in Braintree, MA that became known around the world for all time as Sacco and Vanzetti.

*Au Revoir, L'Acadie* sprang from a visit my wife and I made to the Museum of Work and Culture in Woonsocket, RI. My wife grew up in the Franco-American neighbourhood in Brockton that was separated from the Tip by about a quarter of a mile on the south by the New York, New Haven & Hartford Railroad freight yards. It might as well have been a thousand miles away given the parochial nature of the two enclaves and the physical separation caused by the many tracks and spurs. As I courted my wife, I came to see that the problems faced in the French neighbourhood were not dissimilar to those of the Irish in the Tip. Early in our married life, I became far more familiar with the world of these Franco-Americans, and the visit many years later to the Rhode Island museum opened up a number of stories that permitted the telling of a tale of ethnic rivalry and labour strife between these groups. This story delves into the problems of the Tip and others like it in the Great Depression and the early years of WWII.

*Murphy's War* is the only one of the novels actually set in the Tip. By the time I got to this story, I was more confident in what I was attempting and thought it best to try to get right into the neighbourhood. I also realized that almost no one was alive who could even remotely identify my characters with actual people who had once trod the streets of the Tip. It was also clear that books of the kind I was writing were never going to sell in large numbers so there was no point in being cute about the settings or the actors. The protagonist, Tom Murphy, is among the first in the Tip to achieve professional status however tentative his perch might be. He is a graduate of a non-accredited law school and gains an army commission in the Judge Advocate General Corps only through the rising political fortunes of his father. Within months of going on active duty in Washington, Pearl Harbour is attacked and he becomes caught up in the decision to remove ethnic Japanese from the West Coast. The conflict between duty and conscience is severely tested, and the question soon boils down to whether the history of prejudice against his parents and grandparents in the Tip is fresh enough in his mind for him to come to the defence of another group being mistreated by the government based upon race and ethnicity. It is a heavy burden borne by him as the morality play unfolds. The plot covers the WWII era.

*Charity for all* is a retrospective of what has happened to the descendants of the denizens of the Tip. It is set in the same fictitious mill town as *Au Revoir, L'Acadie* that, like the Tip, has been totally transformed by changes in the greater world outside. Most of the old timers are dead and the origins of the town have been forgotten – or never known - by most of the current residents. The plot has nothing to do with the Tip but is a tale about corruption in a Massachusetts school system that is based on a true story. In the course of action, however, the old heroine of original Yankee stock must plunge into the midst of what remains of the ethnic stock in one of the last watering holes for such types in Brockton. She also deals on a day to day basis with Franco-American, Irish and other middle class ethnics who have become homogenized Americans much like most ethnics across New England and the country. They have largely forgotten where they came from, but on the whole are nice people and well integrated into society. That the villain of the tale is an Irish American fails to even raise an eyebrow. The Tip is dead! Long live the new order of homogenized America!

*Gray Hearts and Greenbacks* was inspired by actual events at Ft. Belvoir, VA. A small group of civilian employees at the Corps of Engineers centre at the fort discovered a weakness in the federal procurement regulations involving Native American tribes and villages in Alaska. Exploiting the defect, they entered into a massive conspiracy against the

government and stole millions of dollars before being exposed and convicted. I recreated the story using a similar plot line and used a number of fictional children and grandchildren of residents of The Tip as key members of the conspiracy. The intent was a monomyth that combined humour and all of the contradictions in the character of denizens of the old neighbourhood to develop a story that brought out what I thought might be the best and worst of their offspring. Inspired by such authors and Mark Twain and Henry Fielding, the novel was an attempt to fuse humour, guilt and sin to create an entertaining tale with at least some redeeming features.

*Harrigan* was developed out of the works of and about Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Theodore Parker. In my readings on Transcendentalism I'd come across numerous minor references to Irish immigrants - many not very flattering, but among much chaff there was some wheat: Irish attended the lectures by transcendental luminaries and enjoyed themselves. Since my (maternal) family was composed of almost all liberal minded Catholics, when I began semi-serious study of the American Renaissance, I had little difficulty in conceiving instances where they might well have been influenced by the likes of Emerson and Parker. My grandmother was known to have stopped the beating of a white man by an African American neighbour who had been insulted by racial slurs. Her comment was reputed to have been along the lines of, "Well he won't do that again. Now stop before you kill him or you'll be in real trouble." That Transcendentalism has yet to be tied directly to the liberal Catholicism of today is true, but I have no doubt there was an influence and that it continues to this day.