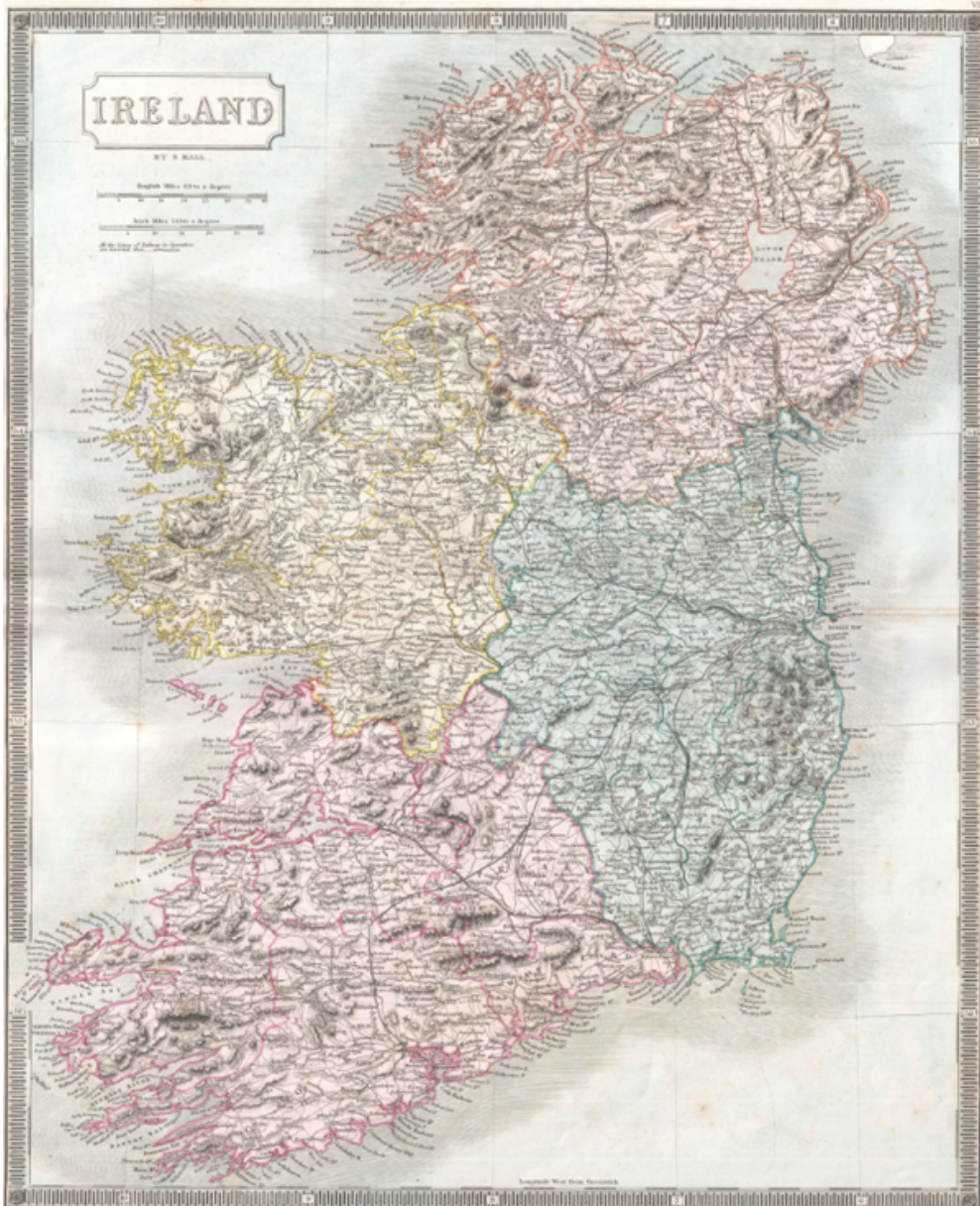


THE LETTER-WRITERS



Ireland, circa 1850.

All of the letters in this collection... over 800... were written between 1941 and 1945 by members of the Kiley family: Charles Kiley, his fiancée and then wife, Billee Gray Kiley, his two brothers John and Edward Kiley, and his mother, Ella Fay Kiley.

The Kileys (or Kielys, as the name was originally spelled) emigrated to the United States possibly from the Munster province of Ireland, in the southern part of the island, then part of Great Britain. William Kiely, born in 1852 came to this country, following or traveling with at least one brother, Jeremiah Kiely, who was born in 1836. Around 1875, William married Bridget Coghlin, the child of Irish immigrants who had been born in Jersey City, N.J. in 1856. William and Bridget had nine children, six of whom



Charles Nicholas, with Charles (left) and John (right), circa 1916.

lived to be adults, before Bridget died in 1891, probably in childbirth. William died in 1892, orphaning his six children.

Charles Nicholas Kiley (he had been baptized as Kiely, but the baptismal record was changed to the more “American” spelling) born in 1885, was just 7 or 8 when his father died, and he was raised, as far as we know, by his uncle Jeremiah. In 1911, he married Ella Fay (or Fahey), born in 1889, in Kingston, N.Y. Ella’s mother, Elizabeth Reilly, known as Lizzie, was born in Jersey City; her father, William, may have an Irish immigrant. Charles and Ella lived in Jersey City and eventually had six children: John (1912), Charles (1913), Josephine (1917), Edward (1920), Eleanor (1922), and Elizabeth, known as Betty, and later as Bette (1924).



Ella (right) circa 1917, holding Josephine. Charles is in front, left and John on the right. The girl kneeling on left is unknown.

was reported by Ella's granddaughter Annice who got it from her mother, Eleanor... even her daughters never saw her in anything but outer clothing, even in their own house, no matter what time of the day or night it was.

There are just a handful of pictures of Ella, taken with her children or with other people, and three film segments from her son John's movie camera, of Ella visiting her sons at Fort Dix in 1941 and 1942, and at her daughter Eleanor's 1942 wedding. In each of those three segments, Ella wears an attractive and flattering hat... a different hat in each segment.

There is just one surviving letter from Ella, sent to Charles in January 1943.

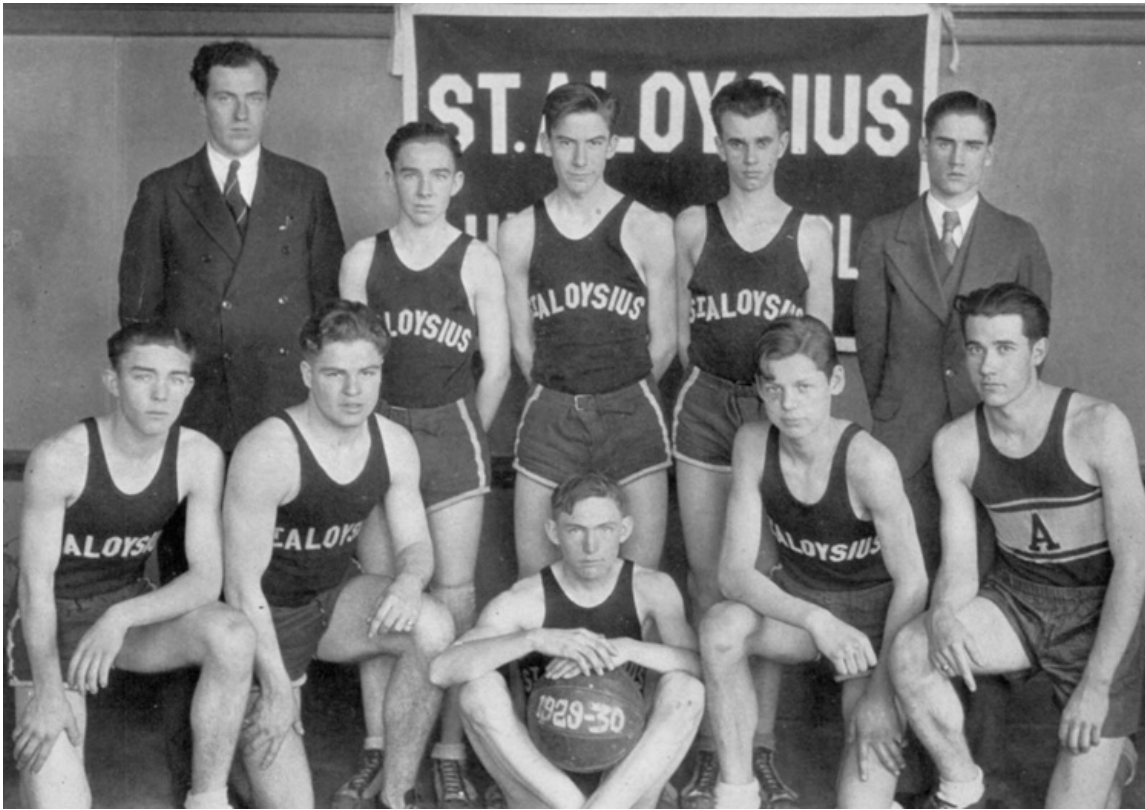
Ella Kiley

Ella Fay married Charles Nicholas Kiley, always known to his children and grandchildren as Pop, when she was 22 and Pop was 26.

We know almost nothing about Ella as a person, except that she loved her husband and children, and that she was devastated by the 1929 death of her daughter, Josephine, at the age of twelve. Her son, Charles, never talked about her. One fact about Ella has survived, which



This picture, taken around 1910, may be of Ella (left on steps) and her mother, Elizabeth, with Ella's half-brother, Frank McGurk (Lizzie had married again after Ella's father died in 1900).



St. Aloysius' basketball team, 1929-1930. John, a senior, is in the back row, left, next to the coach. Charles, a sophomore, is in the front row, left.



John at his ordination, 1939.

John Kiley

John Kiley was the oldest son of Ella and Pop. Ella had wanted to name him Raymond; she always called him “Ray,” and so did the rest of the family. He went to St. Aloysius grammar school and high school in Jersey City.

John always had a love of writing and journalism: even though he took many part-time jobs to help support his family, he saved enough money during

his high school years to buy a typewriter so he could work as a freelance writer for the local newspaper, the Jersey Journal. His 1930 high school yearbook, of which he was editor-in-chief as well as one of the illustrators, shows that he also edited a monthly school magazine, that he played on and managed the junior and senior baseball team, that he played basketball and was the stage manager for the school theatre.

After graduating from Seton Hall University, John studied at the Catholic seminary in Darlington, N.J. He was ordained a priest in 1939 and was assigned to the Blessed Sacrament parish in Newark. In 1942, while remaining a parish priest, he was also made assistant archdiocesan director of the Catholic Youth Organization (C.Y.O.).

All of Eddie's letters that survive were written to John, who kept them all, even the envelopes, the postcards and two Christmas cards, including one

sent from France in 1944. He also kept a handful of Charles' letters.

There are two of John's letters in this collection, both written in early 1943 to Charles, who he always called “Kike.”



*Eddie (top) with John (right) around 1929.
The boy on the left is unknown.*

he barely got through 10th grade, with marks that would make a mother weep. Abandoning school he went to work for the Pennsylvania Railroad, at the intercession of Tom O'Connor, his future brother-in-law, shuffling barges across the Hudson from Jersey to New York.

In 1942 Eddie was drafted, despite Charles' pleading with John, to figure a way to get Eddie out of the army. As Charles put it, "I don't think Eddie will make it."

John saved 16 letters, five postcards and two Christmas cards from Eddie, written from April 1942 through December 1944.

Eddie Kiley

Eddie was always the "little brother," both in stature (he was barely 5' 4") and in age: his older brothers, John and Charles, were eight and seven years older. Like the rest of the family, he called John, "Ray."

At the time, and in the vernacular, Eddie would have been described as a scamp, perhaps as a ne'er do well. Like his brothers, he went to St. Aloysius schools, but



Eddie in 1934.

Charles Kiley

Charles was the second son in the family. To his younger siblings and to some of his close friends, he was known as “Brother.”

In 1941, Charles Kiley, 27, was a sports reporter for the Jersey Journal, in Jersey City, New Jersey, where he had worked for seven years. He was a handsome man with a charming and gregarious personality, and a wide circle of friends known as the “gang.” He still lived at home, as did Eddie and his sisters, Eleanor and Bette. They all worked full time and helped to support their parents and to pay off the mortgage on their house.

His father, Pop, was a steamfitter, and worked at the Bayonne Refinery. An honors student, Charles had to leave high school after his junior year when his father’s work was cut during the Depression. At first, he worked pickup jobs on the docks. He went to night school to learn journalism and started at the Jersey Journal as a copy boy.



Charles (second from right, front row) covering a basketball game in 1940.



Charles' going away party. Jersey City, October 1941.

In October 1941, Charles was drafted into the Army. Only six weeks shy of 28, then the cutoff age for the draft, his request for an economic hardship exemption was denied. The Jersey Journal held a banquet in his honor and promised to keep his job open for him, his “gang” gave him a loud party that went on all night, and Charles caught the bus to Fort Dix along with other Jersey City draftees.

He arrived at Camp Croft, South Carolina in early November for basic training and was assigned to Company H, 135th Battalion. During his training, he received a sharpshooter medal, learned to be a radio operator, and, typically, made many friends. On Sunday, December 7, Charles was enjoying a weekend pass in Tryon, North Carolina with two of his army buddies when the news of Pearl Harbor came over the radio.

Below and right: Charles at Camp Croft, South Carolina, 1941. Right: Jack Donnell, (left), Charles (center) and Jimmy Kirk, (right, from Jersey City).



Charles had another pass on the third weekend of January 1942. He and some of his friends decided to go to Asheville, North Carolina, about 70 miles on the bus from Camp Croft. They got rooms at the George Vanderbilt hotel, where they heard about a canteen party and dance to be held at the Asheville YMCA on Saturday night, January 17.



Charles (center) with some Camp Croft friends mentioned in his letters to Billee. Jack Donnell is standing, left; Ben Wooley is kneeling, right.

At that dance, Charles met Billee Gray and fell in love with her almost at first sight.

Over the next three-and-a-half years, Charles wrote Billee more than 300 letters; some were lost but we still have 301, plus six letters Charles wrote to John.

Billee Gray Kiley

Billee Gray's mother, Elizabeth, grew up in a Pennsylvania coal-mining town; all four of her grandparents emigrated from Wales in the 1860s and '70s. Billee's father, William Gray, was born

and raised in Delaware where his family had lived since the 1700s.



Billee, Warren and Elizabeth Gray somewhere on the road with William. 1932.

William was an engineer who made a specialty of installing the large electrically powered doors on dirigible hangars. He worked on the hangar doors at the Lakehurst, N.J. hangar, site of the crash and explosion of the Hindenburg dirigible in 1937.

In the 1920s and early '30s, the greatest period for both commercial and military dirigible flight, Billee, with her mother, two sisters, Lettie and Kay, and a brother, Warren, often accompanied her father wherever his jobs took him. The family always traveled by car in that time before straight, smooth highways, on roads barely paved or not paved at all. They lived in rented rooms and houses; the children changed schools frequently. Whenever the family was not following William from state to state, they lived with Elizabeth's oldest sister Katharine and her husband, Fred Gilbert, in Massillon, Ohio.

William and Elizabeth divorced in 1934 and Billee's mother moved with her children to the mountain resort town of Asheville. She bought a large house and turned it into a tourist home and residence called Oak Lodge that could accommodate about 25 people. Asheville's mountain climate drew many summer visitors from Florida and the other southern states in that era before air-conditioning; the town had been a health resort attractive to tuberculosis patients since before World War I.



Lettie and Billee Gray—Massillon, 1933.

By 1941, Billee Gray, 20, had been living in Asheville, North Carolina for seven years. Her two sisters had married and left home when each was just 18, and her brother, then 17 and still troubled by his parents' divorce and the absence of his father, was living in Ohio with Aunt Katharine and Uncle Fred.

Attractive yet shy and introverted, Billee worked full-time in the billing office at Ivey's, a well-known Asheville department store, a job she got right out of high school. She also helped her mother run

Oak Lodge, taking reservations, cleaning, making beds, doing laundry, and serving breakfast and dinner. Some guests were long-term residents: Billee had become very close to one, New Jersey native Marguerite Heuser, who worked at one of the local banks. On December 7, Billee, Marguerite, and Elizabeth were listening to a live symphony orchestra concert on the radio when the announcer broke in with the news about Pearl Harbor.



Billee Gray outside Ivey's, dressed for work—Asheville, 1940.

Asheville was affected by the war almost immediately. A group of Axis diplomats and civilians with their families were interned at the Grove Park Inn, a hotel of international reputation at the heart of Asheville's identity as a mountain resort, and which could be seen in the distance from the front porch at Oak Lodge.

Billee celebrated her 21st birthday on December 26th; by mid-January she had started a first aid

course, "just in case," and was worn out from long hours at Ivey's, finishing up the store's billing after the Christmas holiday shopping and the January white sales. In the days before credit cards and computers, this was a considerable job. She had attended a few canteen parties at the Asheville Y M C A for the



YMCA—Asheville, 1940.

growing number of soldiers stationed in the vicinity. At first, she thought she didn't have the energy to go to the one scheduled for January 17... and then she changed her mind.

After an initial hesitation and sense of disbelief, Billee returned Charles' love and affection. From February 1942 through June 1945, she wrote him nearly 500 letters.