

The Chieftains

Part II New York: 1833-1854

Chapter 1. Five Points



George Catlin, Five Points, 1827

New York was a noisy brawling metropolis of about 260,000 people, when Thomas and Bridget arrived on a Sunday in early August 1833. It didn't take long for them to learn, from the others at the hotel, that it was a boarding house "run by thieves" who employed a runner to bring new Irish immigrants to them fresh off the boats, then charged them

exorbitant rates--\$5 a month and impounding their luggage. "We're all looking to move, aren't we, when we can redeem our gear?" Turnover was fast; no one stayed for long, there were always rooms. When others heard Thomas was given an attic room, they said, "You're lucky you've got a wife. Otherwise, you'd be in with 7 others, or in the cellar."

The other boarders—mostly single men and a few women-- waiting to move out, were only too eager to educate the newcomers. After a meager dinner in the saloon, the women took Bridget aside and the men gathered round Thomas. Why had he left Ireland? Did he have any relatives here? How were things back in Ireland? What was he expecting? What had he brought with him? They appeared eager to share any information with him, and hoping they could help him get ahead, Thomas told them briefly about himself and Michael.

"My brother Michael O'Shaughnessy's been here two years already. He's doing well here in New York, and I expect to do better. I've been educated. I can read and write English. I was up for the priesthood." Thomas's introduction was met by looks ranging from amusement to disbelief. "I was a carpenter's apprentice for two years," Thomas went on, implying he was well-prepared for any position. Their astonishment increased.

Possibly they didn't believe him, so to impress them further, he added, "I'm looking to make my fortune here. I've a big debt back home to repay." He concluded with an appeal. Could they please help him? How could he find his brother Michael? How could he find work? How could Bridget get her embroidered tablecloth back?

Finally, one of the men spoke. “Well, now a promising lad like yourself will surely do well, won’t he, boys? You shouldn’t have any problem finding a job that’s well suited to your education and that will allow you to advance. You might decide to go to law school and become a lawyer and pass the bar, and then be made a judge, mightn’t you, since you’re so advanced as to have been up for the priesthood.” Did he detect amusement in the man’s remarks, Thomas wondered.

“Now as for your brother, where can you find him? Well, you could look around the fine area you’re in, Five Points—although not many O’Shaughnessys that I’ve heard of—not any, in fact. Or you could go over to St. Peter’s Church—it’s just over on Barclay and Church, not far that direction (signaling with a nod of his head); and ask Father Maloney for advice. No, an O’Shaughnessy shouldn’t be hard to find. He’ll show up when he hears you’re looking for him, especially with all your prospects.”

Thomas resented the implication. “Michael has a good job. He’s sent money home. He sent us our passage money.”

“Well, then he must be doing well, mustn’t he?” Thomas wondered if the speaker hadn’t winked when he said that.

After they’d had their fun, one of the men, a bit older than the rest, figured it had gone on long enough. “Don’t let O’Malley tease you, Thomas. He does that to all newcomers. Everybody gets laughed at.” Thomas hoped they didn’t think he hadn’t gotten the joke.

O’Malley resumed his prodding. “You ought to know, Thomas, as I’m sure you’ll find out, that all the good jobs are already spoken for in advance. The Protestants got here first, didn’t they?”

“But what about my education? What about my skills at carpentry? I thought things were different here. This is Amerikay!”

“Whatever you say, dear boy. The truth is none of it matters over here. You’ll find a number of us have some skills, nothing so grand as yours, of course,” he laughed, “but a few butchers, bakers or candlestick makers might turn up. But you know who got here first—“

A chorus of “the Protestants,” filled in his pause.

“. . . so they consider themselves ‘natives.’ We’re ‘aliens.’ The ‘natives’ get the good jobs. We get what they don’t want. —Of course, they came from Holland or England or Northern Ireland maybe, but they got here last century, didn’t they? You’ll find there’s a big difference. And among us Catholic ‘aliens’ coming in nowadays, they think the only Catholics with skills are the Germans. No, fact is, what they want from us is grunt labor.”

“You’d better move on,” another man suggested, trying to be helpful. “New York’s not the place for you. Try farming. Try further inland—Pennsylvania even. There’s farmland there, and more Germans and Dutch.”

“I’ve no money. I have no stake for a farm. I have to earn money to send back home. I’m already in debt.” Thomas was regretting that he had magnanimously turned over all that he had earned at the Bermingham House to his family in a grand gesture before he left, asking them to give Father O’Toole whatever they could as a down payment for what he owed for his education.

“Well, then, be a tenant farmer.”

“God help us, I’ll not do that. I could do that in Ireland.”

“Then you’ll have to be a pick and shovel man or a cartman like the rest of us.” O’Malley winked at the others. This was they were all waiting for, Thomas realized.

The older man reassured him, “Thomas, you were right to come. There’s work here, lots of work. There are so many construction projects going on right now—canals and railroads—the city is expanding northward and trains are replacing water routes. There’s work for all and more, so you probably got letters from family urging you to come. And they were right. You did well, son.”

“McMahon is right, Thomas. But the fact is—there’s a hierarchy here just like back home, and just like back there, the Catholics are at the bottom. How are you with a pick and shovel? Ever push a cart over cobblestones? As soon as you tell them your name begins with an O, they’ll give you a shovel. They want your muscle, Thomas, not your brain”

“There’s a good side to it,” another chimed in. “Those jobs are our right. Only Irish Catholics get to do them.”

“Only the Catholics will do that dirty job’ --That’s what they say.”

“But don’t be too eager. Don’t overdo it. Don’t pile your cart too high, or they’ll be asking if you’re an Orangeman”

Thomas was astonished to hear Irish in America defending such lowly jobs as their birthright. “Haven’t we left all that behind? Didn’t we hope to get away from being despised as Catholics?”

“Despised but protected, don’t forget! It’s different here. We can vote. We can get our men elected.”

“Yeh, it’s a new way of fighting for the Irish,” another laughed.

(Poor Tenements Near 5 Points- 1872 sketch, from Wikipedia)



After dinner, McMahon offered to show Thomas where to search for Michael before they retired. “It’s a noisy place, hard to sleep here unless you’re exhausted.” They walked down to the five points where Orange Street intersected with Cross St. and Anthony Street. “Here in the Sixth Ward somewhere, you can bet your brother’s lurking. This area is the old dumping ground for former slaves, and now it’s the Irish who’re moving in. He’ll be around here somewhere. You can look for him from where Park Row and Broadway intersect over to the west, up to Canal and Walker on the north, and over to the Bowery and Chatham on the southeast. Not a nice neighborhood, as you can see. Not exactly what

you had in mind when you left Galway, is it? They never told you about Five Points did they in those letters? But this is where most of us live—in this slum full of tenements.”

When Thomas returned to the tenement with McMahon, he found that Bridget wanted to go out with him and have a look for herself. After all, they had come across the ocean to live here and have children and raise them here. She wanted to see their new home. Thomas didn’t want her to know about the Sixth Ward or Five Points, but steered her toward the waterfront. Apparently she had already heard something from the ladies.

“Thomas, do you know this is called the Whiskey Ward? Some of those women must surely be prostitutes, the way they talk about heading out to the saloons for the evening, to meet new friends. I think we’d better look for a room somewhere else, out of the Whiskey Ward.”

<http://www.talkinbroadway.com/oldnewyork/>



Thomas didn’t enlighten her. What could he do about it at this point? “We need something to lift our spirits, Bridge. No, we won’t go to a saloon. I have a surprise for you.” McMahon had said the East River was not far, so they walked down Chatham and over Roosevelt till they found themselves with a view of the great ships pulled up along the wharf, with their bow sprits jutting far across the docks, almost hitting the frame storehouses. Ferry boats were pulling out and in. Walking along South Street, under the bow sprits, they came upon their own ship— *North America*, docked where they’d left it

that morning. Now they saw it was in a slip labeled *Liverpool Packets*, right next to the one for the *London Packets*. There was a connection to where they'd come from, right near where they were living.

When they realized how close they were, and how they had been taken in by the runner and paid him to take them those few blocks, they looked at each other with chagrin. "Amerikay is full of surprises," Thomas laughed.