

BESSIE QUINN SURVIVOR SPIRIT

From Galashiels Mills to Gardens Cities

The Story of an Irish Family in Scotland 1845-1922

Ursula Howard

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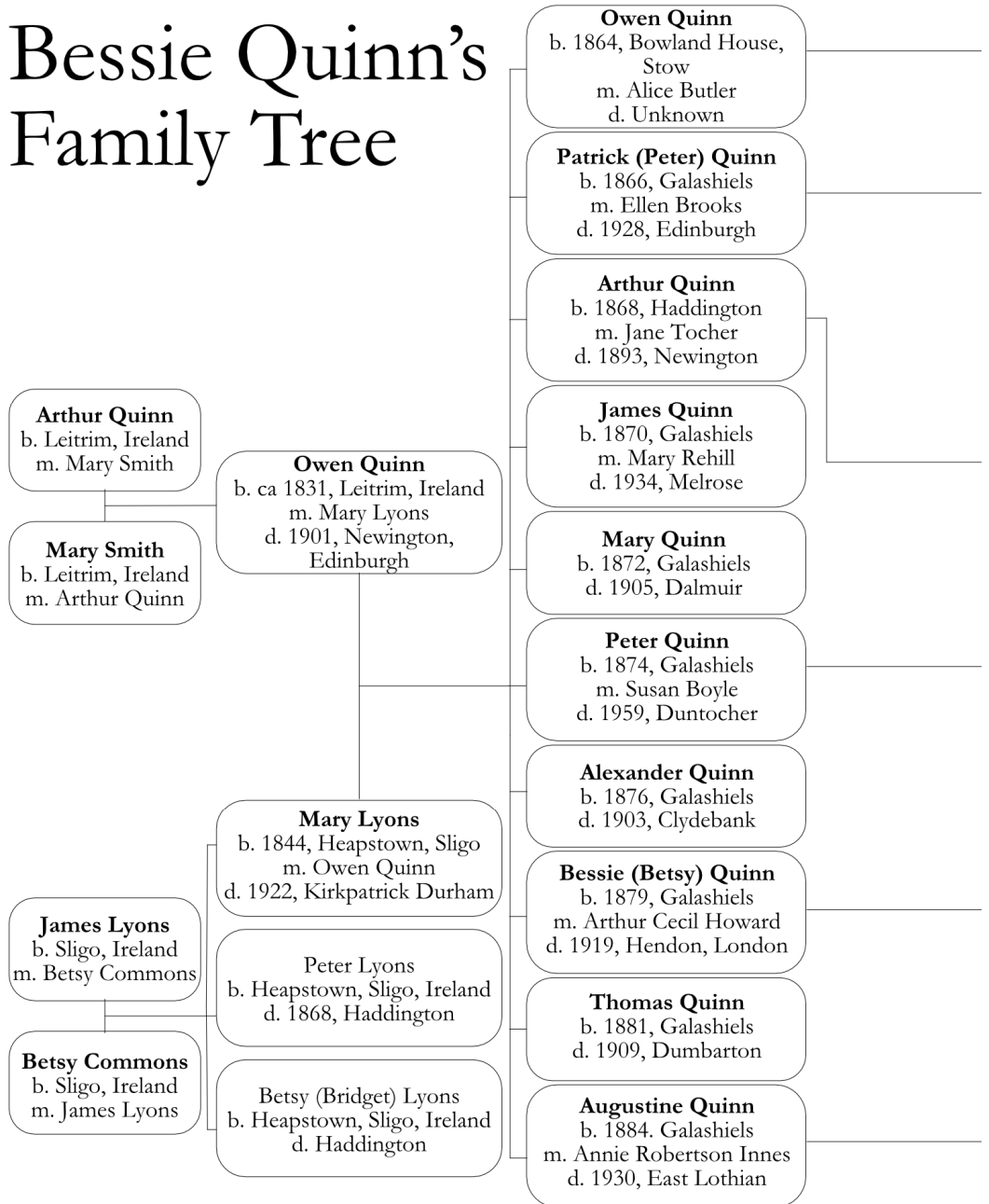


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For my father, his mother,
and all the descendants of
Mary Lyons and Owen Quinn

Bessie Quinn's Family Tree



Owen Quinn
b. 1889, Edinburgh
d. 1907, Clydebank

James Quinn
b. 1894 d. 1951

Ellen May Quinn
b. 1897 d. 1994

Barbara Quinn
b. 1902 d. 1980

David Quinn
b. 1907 d. 1985

David Forbes Quinn
b. 1936

Arthur George Quinn
b. 1892, Galashiels
d. 1965, Galashiels

John Quinn

James Quinn

Mary Quinn

Thomas Quinn

Frances Howard
b. 1939

Joy Bernardine Howard
b. 1941

Ursula Howard
b. 1946

Rosalind Mary Howard
b. 1948

Cecil Geoffrey Howard
b. 1909, Hendon, London
m. Nora LePlastrier
d. 2002, Gloucestershire

Donald Gordon Howard
b. 1911, Hendon, London
m. Mary, née Gallinger
d. 1984, Surrey

Mary Julie Howard
b. 1936

Gail Annette Howard
b. 1940 d. 2016

William Lennox Quinn
b. 1917 d. 1979

Elizabeth 'Bessie' Quinn
b. 1920 d. 2001
d. William Herning

Kenneth J Herning
b. 1949

Menzies Herning
b. Selkirk, 1973

Key

b.= Born

m. = Married

d.= Died

About the Author



photo: Tom Pilkston

Ursula Howard's working life in adult literacy and community publishing showed her how learning, determination and the power of writing can change lives. Names, voices and life stories replace silences and assumptions about the lives and culture of others.

At the Institute of Education in London (UCL) Ursula was Director of an international literacy research centre. Building on a Sussex University DPhil, her book *Literacy and the Practice of Writing in the 19th Century: a Strange Blossoming of Spirit*, (2012) was well received and widely cited. She has an honorary doctorate from Wolverhampton University and an OBE for her work in adult education.

Ursula grew up in Manchester, and has been preoccupied ever since by social history and its relevance to the present. She is a great-granddaughter of Ebenezer Howard, the son of a London pastry-cook who became the visionary founder of the Garden City movement. This new book links his astonishing achievement to the life stories of poor Irish immigrants in 19th-century Scotland – the forgotten Quinn family, one of whom defied the odds and found her own life.

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Rudkin, another granddaughter, found the images of Bessie and children in the garden and shared memories of her father Donald Howard. Rudi Paul investigated 19th-century Scottish railways and designed the Family Tree, which amazingly fits so many Quinns into a two-page spread. Tom Pilston improved old photos and took new ones. David Quinn is my happily new-found cousin, touchstone and support. He's gathered information on the Quinns, and it's been great to know that I'm not alone. Menzies Herning, another discovered cousin and Borders man, found David for me. Thank you both. COVID-19 has stopped us meeting yet. But we will, and I can't wait.

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Credits

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A Note on Sources

Official family records, including censuses, births, marriages, deaths, Catholic ceremonies, military and passenger records: Scotland's People; Ancestry.co.uk and UKCensus online. Poor Law records for the Glasgow area: Mitchell Library; Galashiels area: Borders Family History Society. Other local records as credited in the pages above.

PART ONE

*Before we get to know each other
And sing for tomorrow
And unearth yesterday,
So that we can prepare our joint grave,
You should know that I have no family,
Neither disowned nor distanced – none.*

Lemn Sissay
(from 'Before We Get Into This', in *Gold from the Stone*, Canongate
Books, 2017)

1 Hampstead Garden Suburb, London

December 1919

On a drizzly December morning, her body was lifted away, light as a sparrow, from 22 Asmuns Hill in Hampstead Garden Suburb. The signs of her struggle to hold on to life were plain. Her husband, Arthur Cecil Howard – Cecil to her – had stayed beside her through three days of sickness and churning fear. That’s how my father remembered it. He was ten, his brother was eight, and they hadn’t been allowed to see their mother since she fell ill. Huddled in each other’s arms like babes in the wood, they’d lain awake in the next room, frightened by forest noises, murmurings, thuds, gurgling coughs, and eerie moans. They slept long into the watery light that morning, heard the silence, and asked each other as they sat up: was she better now?

Three days later, on 18th December, the undertakers carried Bessie Howard, née Quinn, to Golders Green crematorium, the first in London, a short walk away from their home for the past twelve years. The low red-brick reception building sat at the edge of a wide-open space by the entrance on Hoop Lane, close to the Jewish cemetery, designed in the fashionable Italianate, Lombardic style. It was only a few years since the opening of the crematorium after years of campaigning for a more hygienic, space-saving way of dealing with the city’s dead than overcrowded cemeteries. The gardens were still being landscaped, and a few scattered plaques commemorating the first people to be cremated – many of them social reformers – were mounted on the walls, including the family’s friend, the socialist artist Walter Crane. The secular pioneers of modern burial rites had been joined by much larger numbers of soldiers, fatally wounded in the First World War. The remains of many victims of Spanish Flu were the latest casualties. After a small funeral attended by Cecil’s family and their close friends, Bessie was cremated, her ashes carefully picked over, prepared for the urn, and returned to Cecil. Modernity in death, as in life.¹

Changing attitudes to burial included the early 20th-century idea, fast becoming the norm, that it was emotionally harmful for children to

participate in funerals or other rites of death. The children of the Victorian era had lived openly with death. Dolls had black mourning costumes and coffins, and children joined funeral processions. Infant mortality and death in childbirth were then so common that they could not be avoided, especially for people who lived at close quarters. But in the early 20th century as these twin blights on families receded, forward-thinking people, inclined to agnosticism or a secular view of life on earth, thought that children's exclusion from the rituals of death would help to protect them from grief and its imagined emotional harm. Death was silenced, and speaking of grief and loss was shunned for decades, not only for children. Geoffrey and Donald were not allowed to attend their mother's funeral. They stood together, my father Geoffrey remembered, at the end of their street and knew that whatever was happening to their mother, it was something to do with the tall chimney near the Heath. The sight of a crematorium was distressing to my father for the rest of his life.

Scattering ashes in a beloved place was a custom not yet imaginable. In those early years of cremation, people in mourning must have wondered what on earth to do with the ashes in their little urn – so they just kept them. So it was that for years Bessie stayed on my grandfather Cecil's living-room mantelpiece – or was it in the sideboard? The presence of her ashes in my grandfather's subsequent homes was undisputed: first of all in the communal flat of his father, Ebenezer Howard, in Letchworth Garden City, the utopia that he had invented. Ebenezer had attended my grandparents' tiny, discreet wedding in Cumberland, and now he was the comfort at Bessie's public funeral, a subdued, warm presence in the stricken lives of his children and grandchildren. Within days of her death, plans were laid and her husband set about systematically dismantling the family home, distributing and discarding their possessions – furniture, letters, photographs – all the evidence of their passionately shared life. Then he piled his two boys into the side-car of his juddering motorbike and rode away from Hampstead Garden Suburb.

My father didn't see his childhood home again until 2001, one year before he died. Yet the presence of his mother's ashes throughout his childhood was seared on his memory, and he always held to his story. The ashes must finally have been disposed of, but no-one except her

husband, and perhaps Ebenezer, his father, knew when or where – until now. Bessie dropped into a well of silence, unbroken for a century. This is the end of the life story of my grandmother, never to know her grandchildren, who was reduced to dust and splinters and actively disappeared from collective memory by the very person who loved her most.

Perhaps Cecil and Bessie both wanted an obscure ending. The evidence has gone. All her belongings were lost, apart from three photos, a few home-sewn children's clothes, linen expertly edged with embroidered Ruskinian Greek lace, an Everyman volume of Browning's poems which my father thought was hers, and a beaten-copper kettle from the Keswick School of Industrial Arts – squatting on a stand with a jug, a sugar bowl, and a dented spirit-warmer. Arthur Cecil Howard kept to himself the facts known only to himself, and perhaps to his father, Ebenezer. He locked away every single memory of beloved Bessie, her secret stories and their life together, and carried them silently through his troubled life to his grave 46 years later, in June 1965. All he knew about her, that is. It was almost the perfect cover-up. The grief of three people was smothered, left for dead, trampled by the pace of change, their long lives obliquely shadowed by a trauma which had never been worked through, and so never softened.

The twitch of a smile in two of three surviving photographs of Bessie is self-conscious, controlled, wistful. Of course, photos were more composed in that era: the primitive technology of exposure times limited facial expressions. But there is still a tangible sense of enjoyment, of relaxed amusement even at her children's tantrums: she's the stray cat that got the cream, surrounded by comforting domestic belongings in a pretty suburban garden. She gives little away, but I don't feel she has locked the door to the place where she keeps her secrets. She didn't choose to die in 1919, a month before she became 41, two or three years after these pictures were taken, although wispy anxieties about the state of her health, her underlying frailty, may sometimes have invaded her as she touched wood about her improbably happy life with the man she had fallen for, hook, line and sinker. Over the decades, embellishing and smoothing uncomfortable memories of the poverty and the troubles of her childhood and youth,

far away from London, she might have told her own stories as her thinning plaits turned grey. That might have been possible, once the feelings of guilt had receded and the anticipated prejudices against her class, nationality, and religion felt less threatening. It is because of how she looks out at me that I feel spurred on to know her story, to picture the patterns of her childhood struggles and rising hopes. I hope I can get her blood pumping again, hear her respond to question after question. I can imagine her talking, her chary smile slowly broadening without exposing her poor teeth – and I begin to understand all that she lost, and what she found, before she herself, among millions of others that year, was lost.



Figure 1: 22 Asmunds Hill with December roses, 2021. Photo Nancy Robde

2 Hampstead Garden Suburb, London 1914–1917: Family Photos

Bessie Howard looks out at the world from three photos with her two sons: Cecil Geoffrey, my father, who was born in 1909, is aged 7–9 in the pictures; and his brother Donald, born in 1911, aged 5–7. The first image is a formal signed composition, taken in Langfier’s studio round the corner at 343 Finchley Road. Langfiers was a well-known photography company, established in Glasgow, then in Edinburgh, and then in London; Finchley Road was their second London studio, established in 1895. The Langfiers – Louis Saul, Adolph, and other family members – were early celebrity photographers specialising in images of actors, including Ellen Terry, Charles Wyndham, and the music-hall stars Dan Leno and Marie Lloyd. They had royal patronage: a picture of the young George V is among the National Portrait Gallery’s collection of 76 Langfier portraits. Some of the studio’s soft-focused images of dancers reflect the modern free-movement dance trend pioneered by Isadora Duncan. The photographer in Finchley Road is ‘R. W. Langfier’. Bessie and Cecil’s choice reflects the Howard family’s long-standing passion for photography – choosing the best artist they could find for their only family portrait. Perhaps Langfier’s Scottish pedigree appealed to Bessie. She herself must have taken a few family photos, like the one of Cecil and the boys on Herne Bay pier (Figure 54).



Figure 2: Langfier’s studio portrait of Bessie and her children

I've long been aware of the studio image, but without ever studying it before. Bessie is elegant and enigmatic, with the hint of a smile playing at the corners of her mouth, her large, slightly hooded eyes looking straight at the camera. Her linen blouse has a lace border to its square neckline, embroidered with a Ruskin-inspired rose motif. The skirt is short enough to reveal bony ankles. Medium height, slim, solid-necked, leaning slightly forward towards Donald. The boys are washed and combed, dressed in classic sailor suits with neat whiter-than-white socks and patent leather shoes: being shown off in their best outfits. Dad's hands already have the beginnings of their square, Picasso-like, solidity.

There are two more images of Bessie, informal but still staged. They were unearthed by my cousin Julie Rudkin, née Howard, another of Bessie's granddaughters. In both of them, Bessie's sleek, healthy boys are dressed for a special occasion, with shiny well-cut hair and home-sewn matching outfits. It is evident that someone took care to set up and take these pictures because – despite long exposure times – spontaneity and emotional drama escaped into the negative.



Figure 3: Tea in the garden at Asmuns Hill, Hampstead Garden Suburb

It is teatime in the garden at Hampstead Garden Suburb in one picture, with tablecloth, best china, and scones. The home-baked cake, quart-sized milk-bottle, and Bessie's bare ankles give the occasion a picnic atmosphere. She is paying attention to her boys. Geoffrey is in his smart sailor suit again, and his brother Donald in a loose linen

tunic. Dangling legs and sandals suggest that the family is relaxing on a warm summer day. Bessie is in looser clothing – a floppy *crêpe de chine* shirt. The colour might be cream. She looks as if she's flourishing, enjoying life. She and a grumpy-looking Geoffrey are looking straight at the person behind the camera. The boy looks pained, as if he's been told, please, look at the birdcage sitting on the grass. It's stylish, with a big ring on top, enthroned on a base draped with a damask cloth. Donald also looks unimpressed. A little bird is just visible on the floor of the cage. It's too dark for a canary: perhaps it is a linnet, or one of the hybrid finches or 'mules', bred as caged birds for their song. Or a whinchat with a red-tinged breast and a sweet song, common in the Scottish borders then. Like other household pets, caged birds became hugely popular in Victorian and Edwardian middle-class Britain. Perhaps too common to be a memorable possession for a child – they are not treating it like a novelty that a guest had brought along. My father never mentioned its existence.

The battered chest, a makeshift seat that afternoon, could be a toy box, but more likely it was about to store motorcycle parts, which, at about this time of year, Cecil carefully cleaned, oiled, and put away for the winter. According to my father, the parts were unpacked year after year in Spring so that Cecil could reassemble his treasured motorbike and side-car for weekend outings to Letchworth or the Chilterns, or family holidays in the Lake District, Kent, or Heacham on the north Norfolk coast. The torn labels on the trunk are a give-away. The chest must have been Ebenezer's, carrying his prototype inventions, and among his clothes letters from his wife Lizzie, received on his voyages to America to sell his machines, promote his Garden City ideas, and meet up with friends, reformers, and fellow Spiritualists.

Despite a relaxed, fond smile, Bessie's lips are barely parted; her teeth are not on display. She looks her age, and there's a weariness about her: her face is slightly puffy, her eyes half-closed. Her hands – too work-worn to show? – are hidden under the table. Is Bessie still not quite middle-class and English enough – or still too Keswick-Letchworth-Bohemian – to know or care that a milk jug and silk stockings are essential to uphold middle-class tea-party standards, even in the garden? There are no guests visible in either garden picture, although the laid table and sailor suits point to a special occasion.

Bessie's husband Cecil, my grandfather, is probably behind the camera, an avid photographer, like all the men of the family. His uncle Frederick Harrison, married to Ebenezer Howard's sister Elizabeth, was a thriving professional photographer. Many of the family photos which survive were taken at his studio in Norwood, south London. And Cecil's favourite uncle, Ebenezer's long-lost radical socialist brother, Harry Caswell Howard, had been an avid photographer and camera expert.

What were they celebrating with a tea party that warm afternoon? The slightly ragged, overgrown hedges, long dry grass, and lilies – day-lilies? – suggest high or late summer. If this is September 1917, it was a warm dry month in London. September 1916 had been too cold for such outdoor treats. All four of their birthdays, and Grandfather Ben's, were in the winter, so perhaps the little party is the tenth anniversary of Bessie and Cecil's wedding – September 5th 1907; or were they marking the date they'd first met in Keswick?

It feels a happy afternoon. Perhaps Cecil's sister Kathleen Daisy (Kitty) brought her children across the road from number 7, Asmunds Hill. I remember her making any gathering cheerful, well into her old age. Maybe Grandfather Ben had brought one of his friends, fellow peace-lovers, social reformers, architects, literary giants, and advisers to his Garden City project. George Bernard Shaw and H.G. Wells were trusted friends of Ebenezer and visitors to the Suburb – in which Shaw held shares, just as he did in Letchworth. He and Ben held similar views about the war: that both sides were to blame for causing it, and that the working men of Germany, Britain, and its empire were the hapless victims of powerful elites. Ben's music-hall idol Marie Lloyd, who lived the other side of Finchley Road in Golders Green, was a friend and Garden City supporter who might have been there; if not, tales of her exploits and the singing of her songs were staples of parties given by Grandfather Ben. The dynamic, exacting 'benevolent tyrant' Henrietta Barnett, founder of Hampstead Garden Suburb as well as Toynbee Hall in Whitechapel, was another possible guest, but I don't think so. Bessie is probably too relaxed for that, and the children are not on their best behaviour. It's more likely they were put out by too much adult talk and were making their presence felt.

In the second garden picture, taken in the same season, probably the same year, Bessie is wearing a new outfit, similar to the one in the tea-party photo, but this time a thicker white cotton blouse, probably lined poplin, has replaced the *crêpe de chine*.



Figure 4: Bessie and the boys in their garden

The boys are both in sailor suits, open sandals replaced by patent leather pumps and white socks. It feels like a deliberate photo occasion, and the mood is altogether more tense. Bessie is indulgent, breaking into a smile as if she is amused by something mischievous that one of the boys has said. Or she is trying to cajole Geoffrey out of a strop. She is in profile, and the nose, which looks so straight full-face, looks longer, more pointed, slightly beaky. She's amused by something, and it feels as if a storm is just passing. Geoffrey is smouldering, perched on the arm of the bench, square hands clasped, and looking away. I know that clasp; it was exactly the same when he was 90. Two model ships lie beached on the grass – hurled in fury? – below Donald, who snuggles up next to his mother, in pride of place, a triumphant smile playing at the corners of his mouth. She has one arm round him, and you can see tips of – swollen? – fingers holding the handkerchief that she has used to wipe his tears and snot away. She feels like a kind onlooker and comforter, not a stern nor even a very firm parent of rather wayward boys. Her fingers betray a hard-working life. Her bony ankles, straight high forehead, long legs, solid neck above a slim body,

and solid clasped hands (partly concealed) are Quinn family features which reappear among her descendants.

The two model steamships in the garden have either just arrived as gifts, or have emerged from Cecil's workshop. He was a skilled carpenter, chiselling Arts and Crafts motifs on useful objects such as trays and pot stands. Perhaps he made the ships for outings to the Round Pond in Kensington Gardens, which my father remembered as a favourite place for sailing model boats. They could be souvenirs from Grandfather Ben, who'd always brought back presents for his own children from trips to America in the 1880s, heralded in newsy love letters to his wife Lizzie – boats and balls for Arthur Cecil, 'dollies' for the girls. Eighty-five years later, Ellen May Quinn remembered the excitement of great ships launching on the Clyde near her aunt Bessie's home. And Alex Quinn could have hammered in the rivets of the world's then largest passenger liner or polished its miles of woodwork. Grandfather Ebenezer may well have crossed to America on the *Lusitania* in its heyday. But the luxury steamship lay at the bottom of the North Atlantic. Requisitioned as an armed merchant ship for the war effort, it was torpedoed by a German submarine off the coast of Cork on 7 May 1915. 1,198 people lost their lives. Ebenezer Howard, lover of ships, compulsive traveller, a man opposed to any war on land or sea, may have been dismayed by these reminders of deadly destruction lying on the grass.

The war may have featured in their conversations during those afternoons: September 1917 was three years into its horror. Cecil worked directly for ministers at the Ministry of Munitions – and there were already Quinn family casualties at the Front (which Bessie may have heard about). There had been German 'Gotha' airship attacks on London in June, killing 162 civilians. Yet like much of English life in the war years, this family scene feels far removed from battlefields and trenches. The Battle of Passchendaele – the Third Battle of Ypres – had been raging since July. In 1917 the whole world was in turmoil. Russia was embroiled in the war, and in the midst of revolution. The Tsar had abdicated, and two months later the Bolsheviks overthrew the interim government, set up the Soviets, and pulled Russia out of the war at the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. Germany had launched unlimited submarine action, and America joined forces with the allies.