

## ***Bessie Quinn : Survivor Spirit by Ursula Howard - Book Review***

Subtitled "From Galashiels Mills to Garden Cities - The Story of an Irish family in Scotland 1845-1922", is the compelling story of the author Ursula Howard's paternal grandmother, Bessie Quinn, born to Irish immigrants living at the time in Galashiels, where she spent nearly half her eventful life.

The book narrates how Bessie's parents, from the worst-affected West of Ireland, were part of the vast diaspora fleeing the "Great Hunger" of the 1840s, and followed different and circuitous routes before they met; father Owen Quinn from County Leitrim via Liverpool and Haddington, and mother Mary (Lyons) from County Sligo, via Glasgow, Haddington and Walkerburn. As they grew, Bessie and her siblings chased jobs, moving between the Borders, Lothians and Clydebank, where two brothers worked in the Singer sewing machine factory before the family split and Bessie moved South.

In 1904 her life changed when working in Keswick, where she met various liberal-minded reformers. There she attended a talk by Ebenezer Howard, founder of the Garden City movement, which campaigned for improvements in urban planning in order to improve the condition of their residents. She later met Ebenezer's son Cecil, whom she married in 1907 and thereafter told nothing of her previous life. They settled at newly-built Hampstead Garden Suburb, where they raised two sons, one of whom was the author's father.

They and their father were devastated when Bessie died in 1919, of Spanish flu, her system probably compromised previously by TB. And suddenly, her backstory was gone, to be later painstakingly unearthed by her granddaughter Ursula, who describes finding Bessie with her family in the 1881 census, shattering the later family myth that Bessie had been an orphan.

Wide-ranging in scope, the author describes living conditions, at times harrowing, in rural Ireland, Borders towns, Edinburgh, Clydeside, Keswick and London, and the ongoing social changes and attitudes of the times. She demonstrates how forensic scrutiny of available records can bring the characters to life, with the gaps filled by the author's imagination.

The book is rigorously researched, (indeed, the author acknowledges assistance from BFHS, in particular Elma, Christine, Bill and Jared), and the main text is followed by comprehensive notes and index. The text itself is liberally illustrated with contemporary photographs, and is preceded by that fairly rare item in biographies, a clear and readily interpreted family tree.

Although of general interest to those keen to learn about social history in the period described, the Garden City and linked radical/liberal movements (eg Art and Crafts, temperance and suffrage), local readers will be particularly interested by the chapters covering Galashiels and Walkerburn late 19th century. Borderers with Irish ancestors would also find it of interest.

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