

**JOHNNY  
KILBANE:**  
**FIGHTING HEART**

A SCULPTURE BY ROWAN GILLESPIE

**This booklet is dedicated to**  
the memory of Dr Martin T Hart

The publishers would like to thank  
Kevin O'Toole, Marianne Mangan and Des Kilbane

JOHNNY KILBANE – A FIGHTING HEART  
A sculpture by Rowan Gillespie

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# JOHNNY KILBANE: FIGHTING HEART

A SCULPTURE BY ROWAN GILLESPIE

## THE JOHNNY KILBANE STORY

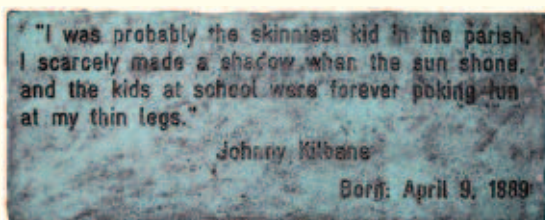
John (Johnny) Patrick Kilbane held boxing's World Featherweight Championship title for eleven years from February 1912 to June 1923; an extraordinary record never since matched – the longest uninterrupted tenure of any boxing title in the history of the sport. He was inducted, posthumously, into the Ring Boxing Hall of Fame in 1960, being elevated to the International Boxing Hall of Fame in 1995. Consistently rated within the top five greatest Featherweights of all time, his fame as a prizefighter entered folklore as the pugilistic expression 'to be Johnny Kilbanned' entered the American lexicon, conferring legendary status.

This son of Irish immigrants from Achill Island, County Mayo, was born on April 9th, 1889 at West 28th Street in "The Angle" district of Cleveland in the parish of St Malachi. His mother Mary died tragically when he was just three years old and John, his father, lost his sight following a stroke three years later. The youngster's childhood dreams to become an actor or gymnast were shattered as this slightly built lad had little choice but to drop out of St Malachi's school in the sixth grade to help support the family.

He was obliged to seek work as an unskilled laborer in Cleveland's railroad yard by the docks. Tremendous grit and determination were needed to escape this pre-ordained destiny to join the immigrant workforce that serviced Cleveland's burgeoning steel industry in the early part of the twentieth century. Johnny was particularly unsuited to a life of manual labor being, in his own words, "probably the skinniest kid in the parish. I scarcely made a shadow when the sun shone, and the kids at school were forever poking fun at my thin legs."

He was soon, however, to be seduced by the romance of "the lights and the crowd" at

▼ Johnny Kilbane shadow boxing at the height of his career.





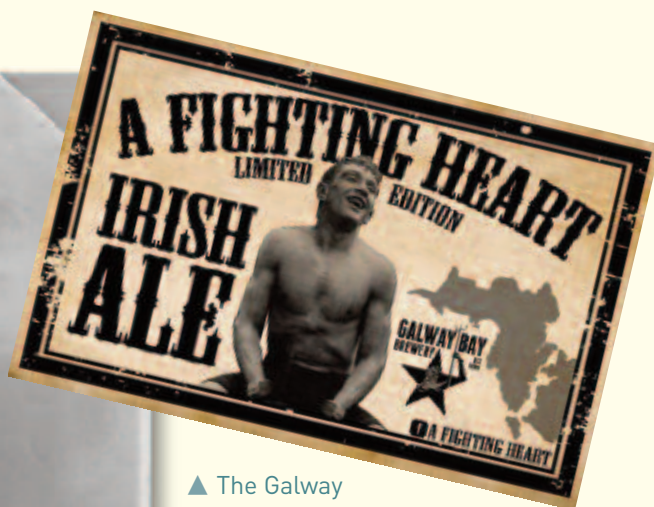
▲ Johnny Kilbane taking his extended family for a drive (top). Above, with daughters Mary (left) and Helen (right). Helen died tragically at the age of six.



Cleveland's La Salle boxing club. Encouraged by his friend Perk Gibbons, he came to the attention of professional fighter Jimmy Dunn who, impressed by the youth's "desire" and "speed" was to become his manager. Dunn was quick to put his skinny protégé to work shoveling sand to develop his chest and stomach muscles.

But a life of unskilled labor has its limitations. It soon became apparent that the only way to sustain his family was for the young Johnny Kilbane to enter the prizefighting arena as a professional. He once said, "Show me a business where I can make more money than I can in the ring and I'll never fight again. I don't fight because I like it. I fight because it means a living for my family and myself." Having beaten fellow Irish Clevelanders Tom Mangan and Tommy Burns on points, his third ever professional boxing match in 1907 against the much heavier "Kid" Campbell ended with Campbell being knocked out in the sixth round. Kilbane was paid the princely sum of \$25 for his labors – but he had already sensed his potential for greatness. Many more rounds followed, including a well-publicized "grudge match" victory over his neighborhood rival from The Angle, the un-related Tommy Kilbane, who later became





▲ The Galway Bay Brewery in Ireland produced the limited edition 'A Fighting Heart' Irish ale to mark the 100th anniversary of Kilbane's celebrated victory against Attell.



his friend and sparring partner.

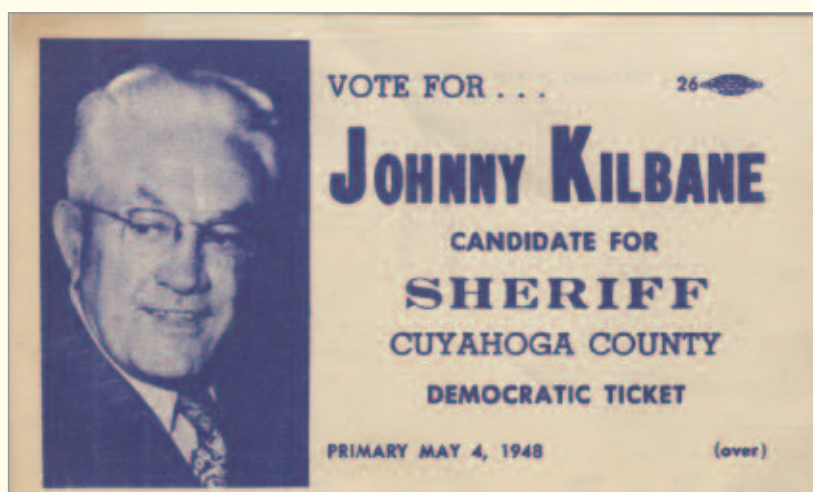
By the age of twenty-one, Johnny Kilbane had already established himself as a professional prizefighter. In October 1910 his reputation earned him a match with the World Featherweight champion, Abe Attell at the Hippodrome in Kansas City, losing on points. But he was now in a position to move uptown to Cleveland's genteel Herman Avenue. He married his childhood sweetheart, Irene McDonnell at St Colman's church and by 1913 they had two daughters, Mary and Helen. His extended family of relatives and in-laws now numbered eight and, as sole breadwinner, the pressure for him to succeed at the highest level was becoming immense.

Under the expert tutelage of Jimmy Dunn he had developed a scientific, psychology-based approach to capitalize on his tremendous drive and lightning reflexes. In February 1912, he was offered a second opportunity to fight Attell. A World Title Fight with the champion, who had now held the title for a record six years, was scheduled in Vernon, California. Before the fight, Kilbane announced, "I am going to take the championship title back to Cleveland with me. I fought Attell two years ago. I was then a novice, but he did not bother me



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with his punches. As he was the champion and I was a beginner, I did not mix it with him. It will be different this time. I am going to beat him. I have set my heart and head on winning and I am surely going to make good." According to witnesses, Attell tried an assortment of illegal tactics to retain his title, to no avail. The historic twenty-round bout led to Johnny Kilbane being crowned Featherweight Champion of the World. The California crowds wanted to meet and greet the new champion, but this staunch family man slipped away from the crowds to walk "up and down the beach with Mrs Kilbane, pushing their baby carriage". The cheering crowds would have to wait.

As he stepped down from the train at Cleveland's Union Station on St Patrick's Day, March 17th, 1912, a throng of 200,000 fellow townsmen came to greet their conquering hero; more than had come to meet any visiting President. The town was painted Erin green and such was his fame that, the following month, the area around his home above Edgewater Park was dubbed "Kilbane Town".

A hundred years later, in March 2012, a very special ceremony took place at the former Kilbane residence at 7413 Herman Avenue on Cleveland's West side. Cleveland's Landmarks Commission dedicated a plaque (bottom left) and an enhanced street sign, officially labeling Herman Avenue "Kilbane Town". To give a deeper insight into the euphoria surrounding Kilbane's triumphant return, Judge Ray Pianka quoted from a hundred year-old edition of Cleveland's daily newspaper, *The Plain Dealer*: "The explanation of all this was not so much in local pride, particularly Irish pride,

*as in the habits and character of the champion, which makes it possible to accord such recognition to him. Kilbane, modest and without poise, is hailed as one whose living has been clean and whose pride in his wife and his baby, his loyalty to his blind father make him perhaps the first champion fighter who may be compared to Jack London's idealistic "Heroes of the Ring"; high praise indeed.*

Kilbane had overcome seemingly insurmountable obstacles to capture the hearts of not only the Irish community in Cleveland but also those of a far bigger world beyond. But it was his fine moral character that stood him apart from the rest and put him on a higher pedestal altogether. Johnny's clean living style and devotion to his family did much to bring respectability to a sport that was, at the time, generally considered to be disreputable and riddled with corruption.

Johnny Kilbane held the World Title until June 2nd, 1923, losing to Eugene Criqui in New York. This was his cue to retire from the sport, becoming a referee and the operator of a gym for youngsters from a similar background to his own. In 1928, capitalizing both on his fame and flawless reputation, he campaigned for the office of Sheriff of Cuyahoga County. This initiated a desire to enter politics, which led to his election as a State Senator in 1941. The street urchin from The Angle had quite literally fought his way up through society, against overwhelming odds, to become the highly respected elder statesman of the Irish community. He ended his public career as Clerk of Courts for Cleveland Municipal Court, a position he held until his untimely death from cancer at the age of sixty-eight on May 31st, 1957.

## THE COMMISSION

It was Michael Kilbane, known as “Sporty”, who in 2012 first mooted the idea of a memorial to his famous relative, to further mark the hundredth anniversary of the momentous 1912 title fight. At the same time, the Irish American Archives Society curated a traveling Johnny Kilbane exhibit in conjunction with Cleveland Public Library.

The IAAS worked together with Cleveland City Councilman Matt Zone and the Detroit Shoreway Community Development Organization to landmark Johnny Kilbane’s house on Herman Avenue. The Galway-based film-maker Des Kilbane had made a documentary film, “A Fighting Heart (Croí Troadach)”: a “rags-to-riches” story about his distant relative Johnny Kilbane, “boxer, poet, entrepreneur, politician, and the longest reigning World Featherweight Champion of all time” – which was screened at the 2013 Cleveland International Film Festival. Momentum gathered as Matt Zone suggested a possible location for a conjectured sculptural memorial to Cleveland’s greatest son.

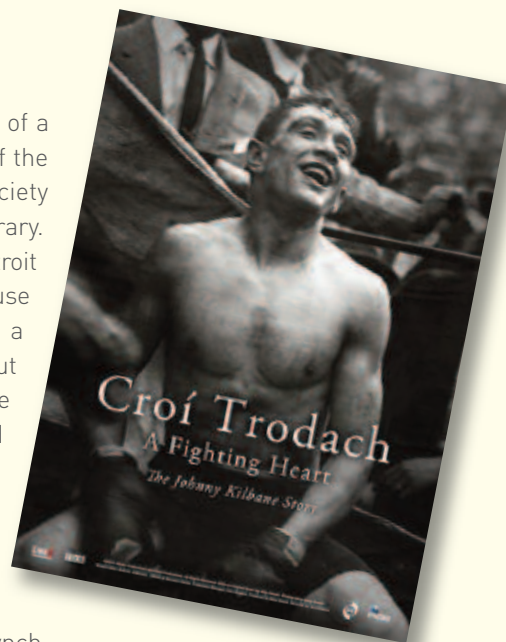
At the behest of key board member and major fundraiser Tom Scanlon, the Irish sculptor Rowan Gillespie was approached to submit ideas for the commission; Rowan duly took a call from IAAS Executive Director Dr Margaret Lynch. With a number of projects at varying stages of development, Rowan nevertheless found the challenge irresistible and flew to Cleveland to meet the selection panel.

After the interview process, an “impossible” design brief arrived on Rowan’s computer desktop in Dublin. In Margaret’s words it was “a very long list of everything we hoped that his work would express. We wanted a single sculpture to convey the story of a man’s life, and also the story of a neighborhood, of a community, of an entire city. We urged Rowan to take in the urban skyline in the distance and the ore ships on the lake and the freight trains that provided Johnny with his first jobs and are still the engines of our city’s industrial might... .. Johnny was able to reinvent himself several times in a life filled with losses as well as achievements and we wanted Rowan to link that personal story with the story of a neighborhood and a city in the process of reinvention and transformation. Tell a story that’s emblematic of the Irish American experience we said. But also tell a broader story that speaks to a city of immigrants from all over the world.”

Rowan’s suggestions for the sculpture would clearly have to meet the varied criteria and tastes of a committee – a daunting prospect for any artist. Simplicity, purity of form and creative integrity are usually the keys to success. For this reason he offers his ideas, from maquette to finished sculpture, without obligation. He will never accept payment until the work is installed and the client is content. If not, the sculpture will find a new home.

The costs of producing a life-size bronze sculpture were discussed and, in principle, accepted; although funds still had to be raised for the project. As this was the group’s first venture into large-scale fundraising, they asked Rowan to assist; a role he was also not accustomed to. But when philanthropist Jack Kahl launched the effort and offered to match any sum raised, the project developed wings. Councilman Matt Zone drove the community process forward with verve – his enthusiasm evident at every twist and turn.

The project pushed boundaries in other ways as well. Des Kilbane, the Irish filmmaker, was to shadow Rowan throughout the complex production process to make a fly-on-the-wall documentary for the archive. This was a challenging assignment for Des, as the sculptor works alone, from inception to unveiling. The workshop is very much a danger zone for the uninitiated, with molten bronze being poured into molds at 1,200°C. Heavy machinery, high voltage and explosive materials are omnipresent, more often than not accompanied by the deafening cacophony of metal grinding metal.



▼ Following the ceremony to landmark the Kilbane house in March 2012, a reception was held at the Stone Mad Pub. Rowan holds a commemorative T shirt.







▲ Rowan models and casts his maquettes in bronze on a small scale to present his ideas to a client. The bronze must then be patinated with chemicals to give an impression of the colour of the finished piece, in this case green.

▼ Rowan's two suggestions for the sculpture were greeted warmly.



Crucially, Rowan must be able to focus his concentration both in the interests of safety and artistic integrity. Importantly, the wax room and modeling studios are sacred places where Rowan engages with the spirit of his subjects. While sculpting Yeats, Hopkins, Joyce and others, these areas were definitely no-go zones. It was as if the writers themselves were directing events; spells that could not be broken lest the flow of inspiration were disrupted. Not even Rowan's wife Hanne felt able to enter the hallowed spaces.

#### CHOOSING THE SCULPTURE – AND A SUITABLE SITE

Rowan and I attended the landmark funeral of a very dear friend in Denver in January 2014. Immensely saddened by this loss, we continued on to Cleveland as Martin would have wished, to present Rowan's ideas in the form of two small maquettes cast in bronze, for the Johnny Kilbane sculpture. Margaret Lynch collected us from the airport in her Buick sedan and whisked us, seamlessly despite a mysterious but momentary grumbling transmission, to the convivial Flat Iron Irish pub/restaurant in The Flats district of Cleveland where we had a fine lunch accompanied in traditional fashion by a pint of Guinness, with Johnny Kilbane's great grandson Kevin O'Toole and his great granddaughter Erin. This was a crucial presentation for Rowan, because he felt very strongly that "if it didn't have the approval of the O'Toole family, it wasn't a runner." We were shadowed throughout by Richard Walsh, the charismatically droll filmmaker, who was adding footage to the ongoing documentary on behalf of Des Kilbane.

In response to the complex brief, Rowan had made two contrasting suggestions – impressive in their dissimilarity. The first, a young Johnny Kilbane sparring with himself as an older, wiser professional was dynamic and intense. The second solution presented Johnny Kilbane at three key stages of his life – as the young street urchin, the World Champion and the elder statesman – pure, dramatic group portraiture. Thankfully both Kevin and Erin seemed impressed and intrigued by both suggestions.

The choice of location for what was now known as the "FIGHTING HEART" sculpture

(taken from the title of an autobiographical poem by Johnny Kilbane himself) rested with the artist and we visited several possible sites. Although Battery Park was considered the prime location, Margaret was keen that all other options should be visited and considered. Our first port of call, the area around Heritage Park near the Cleveland Famine Memorial, was felt to be too urban, cluttered and overshadowed by the massive viaduct. The elevated Superior viaduct opposite, while affording an impressive bird's eye view of the city center was too isolated and quiet.

We then traveled to the beautifully landscaped Irish Cultural Garden in Rockefeller Park where we were treated to a guided tour





by former Council President, Martin J Sweeney. Modest, two-dimensional engraved plaques celebrate the great Irish Nobel Laureates, Yeats, Shaw, Beckett, Heaney and others. As Kilbane was not a cultural figure, however, it was felt that the presence of the imposing FIGHTING HEART sculpture at this location would have created an uncomfortable cultural imbalance.

Rowan's work is not monumental in scale and is therefore not intended to be seen from a distance, or admired in passing – nor are his sculptures 'statues'. They are intended to be seen in an intimate setting, hopefully interacting with the viewer and establishing an emotional connection. Anyone who has walked among the cracked and gnarled victims of his celebrated "Famine" sculpture (right), which has achieved monument status on the quayside in Dublin, will appreciate this point fully: on a rainy day the drips from these bowed, starving famine victims often reduce the viewer to tears.

Cleveland's growing prosperity is leading to a 'gentrification' in both its East and West sides and as a result, spectacular residential developments are emerging. One such area is Battery Park to the west between the Detroit Shoreway and Edgewater Park on the shores of Lake Erie – close to "Kilbane Town." In 2005, the brownfield site that was home to the Eveready battery factory until the 1970s was purchased by the Marous family. Rowan was immediately taken with their monumental vision and spectacular plans. To be present at the birth of a new community boasting Cleveland's largest residential townhouse development seemed like a wonderful opportunity. It was clear that it is destined to become a neighborhood of artists, entrepreneurs and urban pioneers and Rowan relished the challenge to position a sculpture at its very heart.

At a meeting with the ever-enthusiastic Matt Zone and Vintage Development's Chief Financial Officer John Spear, two possible locations within the Battery Park area, near the intersection of West 75th Street and Fr Frascati Boulevard, were discussed. Rowan explained that the choice of location hinged on which of his two suggestions was

► Kevin, Margaret and Erin meet Rowan's maquettes for the first time at The Flat Iron pub. Right: Rowan presents his ideas to John Spear and Matt Zone at Battery Park.



LIAM BLAKE

► Great grandson Kevin and John, the grandson – clearly happy with the proposals... Right: Tom Corrigan, president of the Irish American Archives Society, in typically ebullient, fundraising mood.





▲ Location 'A' suited the two boxers suggestion but location 'B', facing south, favoured the three figures.



selected. A circular site at the end of the Linear Park Avenue (A) was ideal for the boxers sculpture: a 360 degree concept which would not be dependent on the arc of the sun. But if the other suggestion of three ages of Johnny Kilbane was chosen, the position of the sculpture in relation to the sun became paramount. The figures would have to face south with their backs towards Lake Erie, as their faces needed illumination from the sun for the sculpture to work. Matt and John offered the perfect location: a green, soon-to-be landscaped area to the north of the development (B), with a backdrop of seasonally changing trees and beyond, Lake Erie. Battery Park was duly selected with its two possible sites.

A fundraising event had been arranged at the welcoming Battery Park Wine Bar where Rowan was required to present his two disparate ideas to potential donors to the project. The meeting was also attended by several members of the Kilbane-O'Toole family, who naturally had a major interest in this memorial to their ancestor. It became evident that although there was universal praise for the two ideas, no preference was emerging. The normally relaxed and laid back Rowan Gillespie was feeling uncharacteristically tense as he prised me away from the wine bar to return to our hotel for a brainstorming session. My diary records, succinctly, "Rowan agitated!" I was unable to persuade him to join me for a nightcap in the bar (a definite sign that all was not well) as he went off to his room to wrestle with the conundrum. It was during a sleepless night that his eureka moment emerged...

*Of course!* The Kilbane genes and physical characteristics were alive and well in the form of his grandson, great grandson and great-great grandsons. After a fine breakfast, hurried phone calls were made to members of the family and rapid re-arrangement of commitments resulted in a hastily convened photo session – and the rapid purchase of a new digital camera. Johnny Kilbane's grandson, John Kilbane O'Toole, willingly gave up his time to be photographed and his great granddaughter Beth McDonnell very kindly dispatched her two sons from school, much to their delight, to be photographed as potential models for the young Johnny. The group of three option now led the field by a wide margin.

Rowan is all too aware that those who are to live within the sphere of a public sculpture must find its presence agreeable. There will always be a myriad of tastes and observations to consider and, although the Battery Park Homeowners' Association was keen to host the work of a world renowned sculptor, there were major concerns from the outset that a figurative sculpture might not be acceptable to those whose tastes veered towards abstraction. Design by committee and compromise were never an option for Rowan, however. The choice was between the boxers or the three figures. A 'design presentation' had been set up with the original task force, including several representatives from the homeowners' association, at which fears were largely allayed. Kevin O'Toole, representing the family, IAAS president Tom Corrigan, John Myers, Jim Brennan, John Spear, Matt Zone and others gathered for the presentation at which the group of three was unanimously selected. The family in particular felt that Johnny Kilbane shown at three stages of his life fulfilled the complex brief most fully.





ROWAN GILLESPIE AND THE SCULPTURAL PROCESS

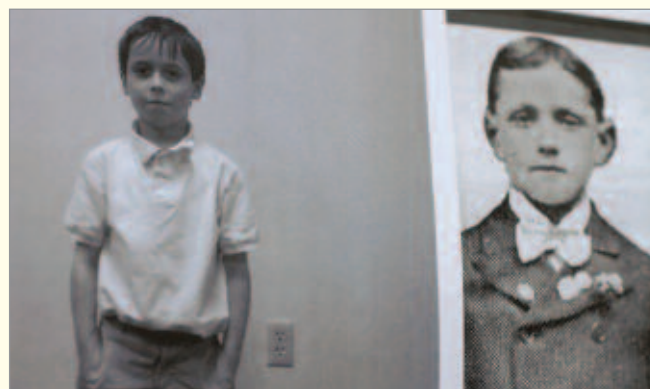
Usually, Rowan does not normally sketch his initial ideas. From inception, he thinks three-dimensionally on a small scale in easily worked warm wax, allowing his hands to feel his way instinctively through the creative process, happy to make mistakes along the way. The two suggestions for *FIGHTING HEART* were therefore modeled in wax and cast in bronze. When the raw, cast bronze emerges from the mold it requires some welding to piece the parts together, and refining and polishing to iron out any unwanted irregularities. The resultant shiny maquettes are then patinated with chemicals to emulate the natural outdoor weathering of the bronze.

Work on a life-size sculpture begins traditionally with a metal armature (the skeletal mainstay) being welded into place. Precise measurements are paramount, as the integrity of any sculpture depends on accuracy at this initial stage. Flesh is then applied to the skeleton as handfuls of clay. The clay must be kept moist to stop it from cracking and shrinking. When the flesh has been added, fine tuning creates the features.

However, Rowan is keen to embrace technological advances which facilitate the more laborious production processes and for this assignment opted for a revolutionary technique based loosely on an elementary process learned in college. He carved the figures from blocks of polystyrene, although the heads were modeled traditionally in clay. Rather than making a mold, Rowan adds a thin skin of wax to which final details are added. The polystyrene is dissolved by acetone, leaving a skin of wax at an optimum 3/16th of an inch thick. It is this skin of wax, which, when cooled and hardened, is encased in plaster, to be melted out and replaced by molten bronze. A phosphor bronze sculpture is therefore quite thin and hollow inside but it is this very quality that gives it strength. A life-sized figure still weighs about three times as much as its human counterpart



▲ John Kilbane O'Toole poses as model for his grandfather as elder statesman with Richard the film-maker in attendance to record proceedings. The young Patrick McDonnell becomes the model for his great-great grandfather as a child (below right).





▲ Rowan adds finishing touches to the wax layer on the young Kilbane's face while the polystyrene boxer awaits his wax skin graft, below.

however. A solid block of bronze would not only be prohibitively expensive, but its huge weight and bulk would become unstable, cracking as the metal cools and contracts.

This 'lost wax' process of bronze casting is an ancient skill dating from the fourth millennium BC. Six thousand years later the process remains essentially the same, and Rowan Gillespie has become a master of the art. His foundry is adjacent to the workshop and contains an impressive array of tools and devices that enable him to complete his commissions unaided. Body parts are cast in workable sections and then welded together. After assembly, a chemical patina is normally applied to the bronze to kick-start the natural weathering process. The sculpture is heated to the required temperature: around 400°C will

turn a painted-on copper nitrate solution green; 500°C will turn it black.

For his "Famine" sculpture in Dublin, Rowan chose not to add a patina, instead dropping the hot, freshly cast molds into a bath of cold water so that the rapid cooling would add a cracked, gnarled, rusty finish – a natural patina to complement the gravitas of the subject. Sculptures will age differently over time. Rowan's "Enigma" (1995) piece at Rosslare, Ireland is acquiring a palish blue-green patina from the salty air as she responds to her position on an exposed promontory at Kelly's Strand Hotel by the Irish Sea. In stark contrast, Rowan's 'torsos' near Antwerp, Belgium are turning noticeably darker as airborne particles of human and animal activity react with the bronze.



DES KILBANE



## SCULPTING 'FIGHTING HEART'

The creative process seldom runs smoothly; artists must be prepared to encounter errors of judgment and very often, face sleepless nights planning damage limitation strategies. Interpreting proportion is very subjective, particularly when the artist is so deeply immersed in his métier.

An amateur boxer was drafted in to Rowan's studio in Blackrock, south of Dublin, for the sculptor to study the finer anatomical details of a rigorously trained pugilist. Historical photographs and maquettes of a boxer in his prime are no substitute for modeling and photographing from life. To capture movement in a static sculpture is no mean task, particularly when there is little or no clothing to conceal a finely tuned, animate, muscular frame.

For the slightly larger-than-lifesize figures, Rowan scaled-up his original maquette miniatures of the street urchin and the elder statesman by 600 per cent. Johnny Kilbane, at the age of twenty-five and at the height of his powers, would be the natural focal point of the sculpture, so Rowan, working from his model, opted to enlarge the boxer by 610 per cent to add emphasis to the central character – in retrospect, a grave error of judgment. Kilbane was a slightly built man but naturally well toned at his physical peak as a featherweight fighter. But Rowan had sculpted a middleweight – destined to become a heavyweight by the time the skin of wax had been added. Considerable lateral thinking was required to solve the problem. Had he worked traditionally with armature and clay, this would have been a disaster, necessitating a complete remake – but revolutionary, untried methods came to the rescue in dramatic fashion. To delineate the entire process would require another volume entirely; suffice it to say that digital technology saved the day.

All three heads were modeled separately from their bodies in clay – a timeless method employed to more easily create the finer, lifelike features of the subject. Johnny senior, modeled closely on the facial features of John O'Toole the grandson, was the starting point. Rowan sculpted him first, before taking a silicon mold to use as the basis for Johnny the boxer, who he then rejuvenated. Thus, the skull shapes are identical and their genealogical heritage was preserved.

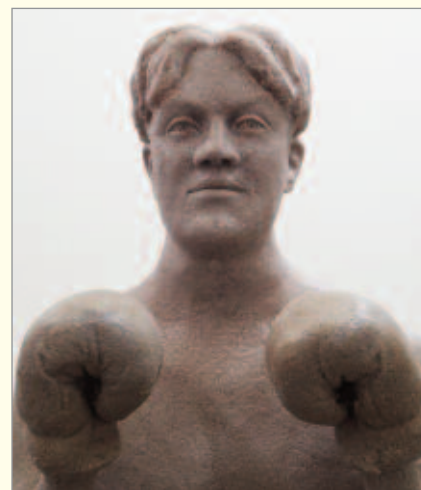
The clay heads were then given their thin skin of wax. To achieve the rough, dappled finish, Rowan used a hand-held sprayer to apply the final layer of warm wax which, when hardened, was removed and reassembled for casting in the furnace. Encased in varying grades of plaster and held together in wire reinforced cages, the body parts were duly cast in bronze. After a cold bath to remove any plaster residues, they were welded together and, in true Frankensteinian tradition, came to life. The three figures received a greenish, copper nitrate patina which will weather further – subject to the considerable climatic extremes along the windswept Lake Erie shoreline.

The re-worked World Featherweight champion stands in defiant pose, gloves raised, with a powerful, resilient jawline and determined yet amiable stare. The young Johnny posed few problems. Rowan's photographic studies of the ten-year-old Patrick, Kilbane's great-great grandson, showed a striking family resemblance and were utilized to great effect. The skinny street urchin from 'The Angle' stands barefoot, hands



▲ Rejuvenating the head of the elder statesman in clay, to reveal the youthful champion.

▼ The boxer's wax skin, approximately 3/16 of an inch thick, is applied by brush to the polystyrene body and clay head. The dappled effect is achieved by applying a final layer of warm liquid wax through a hand held sprayer.





▲ The clay coloured wax body parts are disassembled in workable sections for casting. They are encased in plaster and reinforced in a wire cage with concrete slabs clamped into place to withstand the incredible pressure of a bronze pour.

◀ Using a clever system of pulleys and lifting gear, Rowan is able, single handedly, to pour molten bronze at a temperature of 1,200°C from a crucible into his reinforced mold.

◀ The bronze solidifies almost instantly. The plaster cast is then broken apart and the bronze body parts are dropped into a bath of cold water to remove any residual plaster.

► Cast sections are welded together (the arms to the body etc) and 'made good'. At this stage, temporary spot welding (at the waist) holds all the pieces together so that final positioning adjustments can still be made. An absent waist section allows interior access so that a stainless steel armature, with mountings which will protrude through the feet, can be fitted. Finally, the bronze will receive a patina to remove all traces of the welding process.





ROWAN GILLESPIE

ROWAN GILLESPIE

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JOHNNY KILBANE: FIGHTING HEART





ROWAN GILLESPIE









in pockets, wearing outsized clothes contemplating an uncertain future with the sadness of his recent bereavement clear in his eyes. He stands on a low pedestal gazing expectantly towards his future. The third member of the group is the sedate elder statesman; Johnny Kilbane senior, modeled on his grandson John O'Toole, stands proudly at the back of the group on a raised pedestal, dapper and sophisticated in an overcoat, gloves in hand. He gazes proudly towards his triumphant past, happy to step back as the passing of time dictates.

To undertake an intercontinental journey, sculptures must be packed and crated with considerable care. Although bronze is incredibly strong, the finer details and patinated finish can be damaged during a rough transit. Rowan packs everything himself, using customized wooden crates packed with foam and reinforced with wooden struts hammered into place to prohibit any movement. All the timber was treated, stamped and certified for legal entry into the United States.

◀ After assembly, the elements of the composition are positioned on the workshop floor to calibrate the dimensions of the limestone bases.

▼ Johnny is packed with great care to begin his journey.





## A HAZARDOUS JOURNEY FROM IRELAND TO CLEVELAND

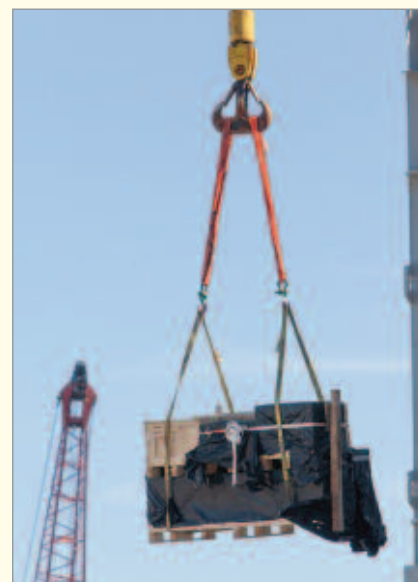
Like his forefathers before him, Johnny Kilbane the sculpture had to make the hazardous journey from Ireland to Cleveland by sea; this time not by “coffin ship” but by cargo vessel, one hundred and seventy or so years later. The wooden crates that were fashioned to contain his constituent parts were reminiscent of the conditions that victims of the Irish diaspora had to endure below deck in “steerage” as they fled the Great Famine in the 1840s.

With the invaluable help of Thomas the lifting vehicle, Rowan loaded the carefully packed crates onto the trailer behind his Land Rover. He began the three-ton tow by boarding the ferry from Dun Laoghaire across the Irish Sea to Holyhead in England. The drive across the UK is scenic but tiring. From Kingston-upon-Hull he boarded the overnight fourteen-hour ferry to Zeebrugge in Belgium. The hour and a half drive to the port of Antwerp proved to be quite memorable, as a trailer tire exploded and disappeared over the roof of the car behind, much to the surprise of its driver. Thankfully the twin-axle configuration of the trailer allowed Rowan to limp to the nearest gas station where he was able to borrow a hydraulic jack and replace the tire. In Antwerp, the Johnny Kilbane triplets were loaded onto the good ship Fortunagracht – a 447 foot cargo vessel flying the Dutch flag bound for the Gulf of St Lawrence and, via the St Lawrence river and the Great lakes of Ontario and Erie, onto the port of Cleveland, Ohio; a journey of two weeks. Margaret Lynch followed the ship’s progress, mesmerically, on [www.marinetraffic.com](http://www.marinetraffic.com) in real time... even posting its progress on a dedicated Facebook page. The newly launched Cleveland-Europe Express Liner Service has a weather dependent schedule; a little worrying, as the sculpture installation had to coincide with Rowan’s scheduled trip to attend a wedding in Denver.

However, fortune smiled on the Fortunagracht as she docked in Cleveland a few days before Rowan’s arrival. A reception committee comprising Margaret, photographer Marianne Mangan and videographer Richard Walsh greeted the vessel and its precious cargo. Despite reservations and some scolding from the Port Authority, red tape was well and truly shredded in order to record the event. The longshoremen, many of whom are of Irish origin, were only too happy to accommodate the creative requirements of the welcoming committee.

On reaching the installation site, Rowan discovered that the foundations based on his exacting specifications were actually facing the wrong way, but this did not deter our unflappable sculptor! Terry Joyce, from the Local 310 Laborers Union, called in Norris Brothers Construction who were the heroes of the hour as they worked “outside the box” with understanding and sensitivity to facilitate the installation with equipment obtained at the eleventh hour from MK Masonry. An enthusiastic team of helpers is essential for a successful installation; Rowan was in his element as he worked alongside Mo and his impressive cohort: “the best team I had ever worked with.”

The sculptor supervised the opening of the wooden crates, which had thankfully made the journey intact. The grey Irish limestone bases were painstakingly hoisted into position onto the concrete foundations. They all slotted together as planned. One by one, the three figures were



► A joyous Margaret Lynch welcomes the six crates containing the much awaited sculpture as it is unloaded from the Fortunagracht on a fine Cleveland morning - clearly content with the enormity of the accomplishment.







◀ The tension is evident as Johnny the boxer is eased from his crate and hoisted by crane into his future home.

► Rowan Gillespie, the three Kilbanes, Margaret Lynch and Matt Zone pose for the cameras following the installation.

► Johnny the elder statesman is cemented into position.



gently hoisted from their crates and lowered gingerly onto their respective bases.

Johnny Kilbane senior was the first to be lowered into position, looking rather uncomfortable as he hung by the neck from a strap from the crane's arm. The eight stainless steel rods protruding from his feet slotted into their respective pre-drilled holes in the limestone. Rowan primed them with "Hilti" masonry anchoring cement so that the fixings would be permanent. Next came Johnny the boxer. The strap fitted under the champ's arms as he was hoisted into position. Johnny the street urchin slotted in effortlessly behind them. The group was now complete. The three ages of Johnny Kilbane stand together, each with an engraved plaque – their Irish roots unquestioned as they stand supported by their ancestral Hibernian terrain.

Fitting together the culmination of months of work can be tiring, stressful and emotionally draining. Technical issues often arise and must be dealt with in situ by improvisation. Anchoring cement takes three hours to set, so, during this intense window of opportunity, adjustments can be made if, for example, one of the figures is judged to be leaning. Will the site preparations have followed his exacting instructions – well, clearly not in this case (see below right)! Will Rowan have the right tools to hand? Will the client like what they see? When in single-minded work mode, he prefers not to multitask, particularly on this occasion as he was suffering from laryngitis. Unfortunately, he had been scheduled to be interviewed for the documentary film immediately after the installation and was therefore in an uncharacteristically terse mood. However, his spirits rose considerably as he was asked to give a talk to an enthusiastic and charming group of high school students from the St Joseph Academy, who had gathered around the sculpture, valiantly, in the spitting rain.

▼ High school students from the St Joseph Academy pose happily with the sculptor shortly after the installation. The picture shows that the concrete foundations were not laid at the desired angle.



## THE DEDICATION AND UNVEILING

**A**t noon on Sunday, September 28th, 2014, Cleveland's Irish community came together with friends, colleagues and neighborhood residents at Battery Park to honor their home-grown hero, Johnny Kilbane. Rowan flew from Dublin to Cleveland for the event. In traditional manner, Pipe Major Bruce Grieg called the emotionally charged gathering to order on his bagpipes and both the Irish and American anthems were played on guitar and sung by James Kilbane who hails from County Mayo.

The president of the IAAS and master of ceremonies, Tom Corrigan, gave a rousing welcome speech, thanking the community for its crucial support. The affable Father Jim O'Donnell blessed the sculpture and gave a magnificent Invocation which related Johnny Kilbane's early struggles in life to those of the underprivileged masses who,

despite the affluent society in which they live, still struggle to survive in an increasingly polarized twenty-first century society. Matt Zone gave a typically impassioned talk on behalf of the City Council and Kevin O'Toole spoke eloquently for the Kilbane family. Project Director Margaret Lynch, who had driven the project forward doggedly from the outset summed up the occasion beautifully in a finely crafted speech and was, as Rowan puts it, "very generous with her words." She was then presented with a proclamation (left) by Matt Zone, Martin Sweeney and Council President Kevin Kelley for her tireless efforts in securing an internationally significant work of art for Cleveland. Celebrations continued at the Stone Mad pub where traditional Irish hospitality was the order of the day.

To see the finished sculpture, finally, in its magnificent setting was a tribute to Margaret Lynch. Her foresight, determination and legendary powers of persuasion know few bounds. She even coaxed me into producing this commemorative booklet – although it required little effort

as I am Rowan Gillespie's biographer and good friend. For Rowan, the fulfilment of a creative project marks the end of a long, often emotional journey during which deep levels of friendship develop. FIGHTING HEART was no exception.

But the greatest test was still to come. Were Johnny Kilbane's great grandson Kevin O'Toole and the family happy with the sculpture? They had followed events closely from the outset and had been an integral part of the project, but talking and speculation were now over and they had finally come face to face with their illustrious ancestor. FIGHTING HEART is clearly a family portrait with strong links to the present day. Kevin tells me that, for them, "the sculpture captures what it means to rise from nothing, achieve success and deal with the ups and downs of life all the while staying true to what is important – faith and family" – an eloquent, heart-felt endorsement of Rowan's talent. Importantly, Johnny Kilbane's legacy now has physical embodiment, a permanence and a point of focus long since overdue.

In the words of Margaret Lynch, "honoring Johnny Kilbane honors all the countless immigrants who have made Cleveland their home and persevered despite all odds." This universal dimension is a recurring theme in Rowan's work. His character studies are a reflection of everyman, whatever his creed – a commentary on man's rollercoaster

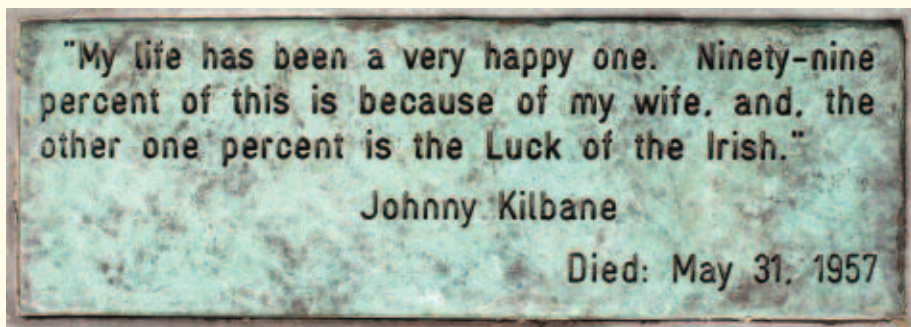
journey through life: a celebration of *spectacular* achievements by *ordinary* individuals, so much more remarkable when set against a background of hardship and misfortune. Rowan Gillespie remains true to his Irish Quaker roots... a pragmatist with a pervading optimism that the human spirit will eventually rise above and eventually triumph over adversity.

Roger Kohn, Sunningdale, 2015



▲ Margaret Lynch proudly displays her proclamation with Matt Zone, Martin Sweeney and Kevin Kelley.

▼ Johnny Kilbane's own epitaph, as inscribed on the base of the FIGHTING HEART sculpture.









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## JOHNNY KILBANE : FIGHTING HEART

*Rowan Gillespie 2014*

For when the chips of life are down  
and troubled waters mount  
A fighting heart will see us through  
However long the count



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**Dedicated September 28, 2014**



