Given the focus of the Irish American Archives Society on historic preservation, it seemed imperative that the IAAS document the making of the Johnny Kilbane Sculpture Fighting Heart for posterity. Looking back at other community initiatives to commemorate the Irish presence in the city—such as the Irish Cultural Garden and the Famine Memorial—all too little information has been preserved about the people and processes that led to the development of these projects.

A “home movie” of the dedication of the Irish Cultural Garden in 1939 was retrieved at a yard sale and donated to the Western Reserve Historical Society a few years ago, but very few of the people who can be seen in the short movie can be identified. (The 1939 film footage can be viewed on our website on the Mystery Photo page at www.irisharchives.org.) What were the sacrifices made to accomplish the ambitious garden project in the midst of the Depression? Who made these projects happen and what was their motivation? Some of the answers can be reconstructed; a history of the original development and more recent renovation of the Irish Cultural Garden can also be found on our website on the Local History Links page.

However, the IAAS wanted to be able to leave behind a fuller and readily accessible record of the Johnny Kilbane Sculpture Project. We had many of the events associated with the project filmed and photographed, including sculptor Rowan Gillespie at work in his studio outside of Dublin and during the installation of the sculpture in Battery Park. The “raw” video footage of Gillespie at work, split in seven short segments, can be found on our website on the Johnny Kilbane Sculpture Project page. The documentary film and commemorative book, described on page 2, incorporate this “raw” material, along with interviews, background information, and more.

The sculpture installation team was drawn by Terry Joyce from the Laborers International Union Local 310, the Bricklayers Local 5 Ohio, Norris Brothers Company, and MK Masonry. All of the labor and equipment for the installation itself were donated—though the creation of the plaza and landscaping surrounding the sculpture were part of the project costs.

In 2015, Irish American Archives Society plans to convene a Teacher Resource Task Force to assist with the creation and dissemination of teacher resource materials that take advantage of research and information about aspects of Cleveland history that surfaced during the Johnny Kilbane Sculpture project. IAAS will work with local teachers and historians to pull together a resource packet that will address such topics as Johnny Kilbane and Boxing, artist Rowan Gillespie and his process of bronze casting, the public art process, aspects of the history of the Detroit Shoreway Neighborhood. A grant from Cuyahoga Arts and Culture will help to launch this initiative, which starts with an attempt to offer contexts for understanding the Johnny Kilbane Sculpture in Battery Park. But long-term, we’d like to call attention to the Irish American Archives Society as a resource for local history instruction in general. Any teachers interested in participating should contact Margaret Lynch at iaasadmin@gmail.com.

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Kilbanetown Comeback: A Documentary Film about the Making of the Johnny Kilbane Sculpture

Galway-based filmmaker Des Kilbane has family roots in Achill Island, where Johnny Kilbane’s father came from, and is distantly related to the boxer. He’d heard about his famous relative as a child, but started thinking seriously about telling his story after reading as an adult that heavyweight champion Mike Tyson classified Johnny Kilbane as among the top featherweights of all time. Des Kilbane created a documentary about Johnny’s career as a boxer, filmed on Achill and in Cleveland and titled Fighting Heart, to honor the centenary of Kilbane’s first featherweight boxing championship in 2012. The documentary was a hit at the Cleveland International Film Festival in 2013. When the director heard about the sculpture project in Cleveland, he quickly proposed to document the process. With the assistance of cinematographers in Ireland and Cleveland, he conducted interviews and shot footage that illustrated three intertwining story strands—the of the descendants of Johnny Kilbane, of sculptor Rowan Gillespie, and of the Cleveland community. Kilbanetown Comeback is the result, and it’s also screening at the Cleveland International Film Festival—this year! (See details about the screenings of Kilbanetown Comeback on page 3.) In the meantime, the original documentary, Fighting Heart, can also be seen this month on WVIZ TV on March 29 at 7 pm and 11 pm.

Fighting Heart: A Commemorative Book about Rowan Gillespie’s Sculpture

To commemorate the sculpture project in print, IAAS turned to Roger Kohn, sculptor Rowan Gillespie’s longtime biographer and friend. Kohn has written and designed publications about individual works by Gillespie and has also authored Rowan Gillespie: Looking for Orion, a monograph about the sculptor’s work to date in 2007. Roger Kohn and Rowan Gillespie were in the US for the funeral of a dear mutual friend in January 2014, when Gillespie was also scheduled to come to Cleveland to make a design presentation for the Johnny Kilbane Sculpture project. Kohn accompanied the sculptor to Cleveland and visited the potential sculpture sites with Gillespie and also sat in on Gillespie’s presentations, to IAAS supporters and to Detroit Shoreway community members, of two different approaches to the Kilbane commission. Having met the “players” involved and observed the community process, Kohn was subsequently able to write about the project with the insight of firsthand experience. The 24-page, full-color book will be available for sale to coincide with the documentary screening.

Buy your ticket to the March 22 Capitol Theatre Screening through IAAS and benefit the Johnny Kilbane Sculpture maintenance fund!

- $20 ($10 donation to IAAS): Documentary screening, March 22, 7:30 pm at the Capitol Theatre (1390 W 65th Street)
- $50 ($30 donation to IAAS): Documentary 7:30 pm at the Capitol Theatre, “Meet the Director” afterwards at Stone Mad Pub (1306 West 65th Street)