Lily Duggan, a penniless maid in Ireland, is inspired by Frederick Douglass to emigrate to America. She loses a son in the Civil War; marries an ice merchant and turns his business into a thriving enterprise in St. Louis. Lily’s bookish daughter, Emily, is a journalist who covers the start of the first non-stop transatlantic flight of Alcock and Brown from Newfoundland. Emily asks Brown to mail a letter for her upon his arrival in Ireland. Later Emily and her daughter Lottie travel back to England. Lottie meets and marries a former Royal Air Force officer from Northern Ireland. Their daughter, Hannah, has a son named Tomas, who loses his life amid the violence in Northern Ireland. David Manyaki, a Nigerian immigrant to the Republic of Ireland, helps Hannah come to terms with the letter that was never mailed.

Special thanks to Maddy Fitzwilliam at Hobart William Smith, who interned at the NHA and helped prepare this presentation.
In 1716 the Nantucket Friends were among the first groups in America to renounce slavery.

Douglass was taught to read by the wife of the slave owner, even though teaching slaves how to read was outlawed. He secretly reading journals including the works of Daniel O’Connell.

The thought of escaping came from 2 Irishmen who worked with him at a shipyard telling him to “run away to the North”.

Frederick Douglass attended an anti-slavery convention at the Nantucket Atheneum in 1841. This was his first public speech. He subsequently spoke at the Atheneum four more times.

When Douglass published his autobiography, the resulting publicity put him in danger of capture, so he was persuaded to leave for the United Kingdom.

In Ireland he stayed with Richard Webb, a fellow abolitionist and an influential Quaker and philanthropist.

As Douglass travelled around the country, he witnessed first-hand, the devastation as successive the potato crop failures from 1845 to 1852 evolved into the Great Irish Famine.

“I confess I should be ashamed to lift my voice against American slavery,” he wrote, “but that I know the cause of humanity is one the world over.”

– Frederick Douglass on the Irish famine

Photograph by Samuel J. Miller, 1847-52

The Nantucket Atheneum as it looked when it was founded in 1834.

Nantucket Atheneum Collection
Daniel O'Connell is known as “The Liberator” and was the most famous and outspoken abolitionist. He refused to come to the US until it renounced slavery. Douglass met Daniel O'Connell at a rally. Frederick Douglass became known in Ireland as the “Black O'Connell.”

Douglass left Ireland for Britain in January 1846. Ladies in England purchased his freedom so that he could return to America in 1847.

Jumping ahead 120 years, Catholics in Northern Ireland, inspired greatly by the example of Dr. Martin Luther King and the American civil rights movement began organizing sit-ins and marches to demand political and social equality, even adapting the iconic We Shall Overcome song to their campaign.

Politician John Hume of Derry drew heavily on the writings of King as he assumed the mantel of civil rights leader in N. Ireland. In 1994 the Provisional IRA, influenced by Hume’s principles of non-violence declared a ceasefire which was soon followed by the loyalist para-militaries.

In 1997, Sinn Fein, the political arm of the IRA, agreed to join the all-party peace talks which culminated in the Good Friday Agreement of April 1998.

In 1998 John Hume was awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace along with David Trimble, the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party, for their crucial roles in negotiating the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 which end armed conflict and established the first truly democratic and inclusive government in Northern Ireland’s history.

President Barack Obama’s visit to Ireland in 2014 reawakened interest in Douglass’ visit 169 years earlier.
From Swords to Plowshares

• John Alcock and Arthur Brown were 2 British aviators during World War 1. They were appalled by the senseless slaughter. In an attempt to turn an instrument of war into an instrument of hope, they made the first non-stop transatlantic flight.

• They flew a modified First World War Vickers Vimy bomber from St. Johns, Newfoundland to Clifden, Connemara, County Galway, Ireland in June 1919.

• The Vickers Vimy was a bomber. The horrors of World War 1 was etched in these 2 pilots’ minds. Using the Vimy to cross the Atlantic turned the “sword” into a “plowshare”.

• Their flight was the first nonstop flight across the Atlantic. The NC-4 flying boat flew from the US via the Azores to Lisbon in May 1919, but it made multiple stops along the way. The pontoons (floats) were made at the Herreshoff yard in Bristol RI.

• Alcock and Brown’s accomplishment sparked international excitement. In May 21, 1938 Amelia Earhart became the first woman to fly solo, non-stop across the Atlantic, leaving Newfoundland for Ireland.

• Having difficulties with her fuel tank Earhart was forced to land at a farm in Derry, Ireland completing the flight in 14 hours and 56 minutes.

• Many historic things happened in Ireland around this time including the construction of the Titanic.

• The TITANTIC was built in Belfast, Northern Ireland 8 years before the Alcock/Brown flight.

• Water is a reoccurring theme in this book connecting Douglass to Mitchell.

• In the book, water provides a sense of clarity and expresses the sense of something new over the horizon.
In 1771, Benjamin Franklin was in Ireland, 70 years before the famine: “Ireland is itself a poor country, and Dublin a magnificent city; but the appearances of general extreme poverty among the lower people are amazing. They live in wretched hovels of mud and straw, are clothed in rags, and subsist chiefly on potatoes. Our New England farmers, of the poorest sort, in regard to the enjoyment of all the comforts of life, are princes when compared to them.”

The Great Famine struck between 1845 and 1849 when successive potato crops failed, leaving 60 percent of the Irish populace of 8.5 million without their principal food supply.
Mass starvation, disease and emigration affected large portions of the countryside. This was the second largest demographic disaster to impact either Britain or Ireland since the Black Death of the 1340s.

Most famine emigrants came to the US or Canada on poorly equipped and crowded ships that brought more disease and death to the most vulnerable, leading to the popular labelling of these vessels as “coffin ships.”

After 1850 emigration continued as a crucial factor in Irish life, resulting in a population loss of 4 million by 1901 compared to the pre-famine population of 8.5 million.

It was not until the “Celtic Tiger” of the 1990s that this net emigration trend was reversed

Today 34 million Americans claim Irish as their primary ancestry.

“a floating boat of fever and loss”--McCann

This painting of the interior of a Coffin Ship is by Rodney Charman, titled “Below Decks, 3,000 Miles To Go”. It was in the Egan Maritime Institute Collection
Immigration during and subsequent to the Great Famine provided thousands of soldiers, many of whom were recruited as they disembarked from their trans-Atlantic voyage.

During the Mexican-American War of 1846-8, an Irish Battalion deserted finding more in common with Catholic Mexican soldiers than the predominantly Protestant US army.

Tens of thousands of Irishmen served on both sides during the American Civil War between 1861-1865.

Seven Union and six Confederate generals were Irish born. An estimated 150,000 Irish-Americans fought in the Union Army. The most famous was the “Fighting Irish 69th Regiment of the New York State Volunteers. The 9th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, founded and led by Irishmen, fought in many Civil War Battles as did Irishmen who later joined the Massachusetts 28th Volunteer Infantry.

General Thomas Meagher led New York’s “Fighting 69th”, which had been founded in 1851 and was composed almost exclusively of ethnic Irishmen. Although born to a wealthy Irish family, Meagher joined the young Ireland rebellion of 1848 but was arrested and transported to Australia. He escaped to the United States in 1852, and began recruiting his fellow Irishmen into the “69th” at the outbreak of Civil War.

Embittered by famine memories and battled hardened, hundreds of Irish civil war veterans joined the secret Fenian movement and invaded British territories in Canada in 1866 and 1870 but they were successfully resisted. The invasions helped to spark support for the Confederation of Canada in 1867.
When the Civil War began in 1861, Nantucketers responded with heroic dedication to the call for volunteers to support Union troops. Even in the face of pacifist island traditions, nearly 400 Nantucket men enlisted in defense of the Union forces, with over 70 ultimately losing their lives in the war. Dozens of repurposed whaling vessels, including the Nantucket whaleship Potomac, were put into service in the Stone Fleet and sunk by Union forces in Savannah and Charleston harbors to create blockades of Confederate vessels. Other whaleships were destroyed by Confederate raiders near the end of the war.
• McCann intersperses factual events with fictional women across 2 centuries and 2 continents.

• The women fill a structural void of the book rather than an emotional need which is often done through female characters.

• On Lily Duggan, McCann says. "It's grandly ironic that, you know, a young woman can look at an American slave in Ireland and he represents freedom. And then she goes across to achieve her own particular type of freedom in the United States."

• Frederick Douglass: “The Irish, who, at home, readily sympathize with the oppressed everywhere, are instantly taught when they step upon our soil to hate and despise the Negro...Sir, the Irish-American will one day find out his mistake.”

• Lily her daughter and granddaughter cross paths with the novel's historical figures. As they do, their lives become entwined with events that made history.

• Ireland elected its 1st female president, Mary Robinson in 1990, She served until 1997.

• She redefined the role of the office by focusing on human rights at the national and international level. She was the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights from 1997 to 2002.

"...(Quakers) Ellen and Anna Richardson, of Newcastle-upon-Tyne ... bought me out of slavery, secured a bill of sale of my body, made a present of myself to myself and thus enabled me to return to the United States and resume my work for the emancipation of the slaves.” Frederick Douglass
A Brief History of Irish Politics

- The Battle of the Boyne was fought between William of Orange of Holland (Protestant) and James II of England (Catholic) in Ireland in 1690. William’s crushing victory secured the Protestant ascendancy in Ireland for generations. It retains huge symbolic importance in Northern Ireland today, where it is celebrated every July 12th.
- In the early 1700’s the Penal Laws were passed, which repressed Catholics including imposing restrictions on land ownership, education, public office, interfaith marriage and worship.
- In 1801 the Act of Union was passed formally uniting Ireland and United Kingdom thus creating Great Britain.
- Daniel O’Connell was an important politician who successfully overturned many of the Penal Laws in the 1820s.
- Various uprisings by Irish nationalists were attempted and crushed in the 18th and 19th century.
- During World War 1, British politicians promised Irish independence if Irishmen fought. Over two hundred thousand enlisted.
- In 1916, in the middle of World War I, a small group of nationalists, not trusting Westminster’s promise, stormed central Dublin in what became known as the “Easter Rising”. Though quickly crushed, the ring leaders were considered martyrs after their summary executions. The ‘hearts and minds’ of the Irish populace shifted dramatically against British rule as shown by the Sinn Fein victories over moderate nationalists in the 1918 parliamentary election.
- A bloody War of Independence swept Ireland from 1919 to 1921. A truce came in mid-1921 and a treaty secured the withdrawal of Britain from 26 of Ireland’s 32 counties, leaving 6 counties in the north of Ireland under direct British rule.
- A minority of soldiers did not accept this partition or the continuation of an oath of allegiance to the British monarch thereby igniting an equally ferocious Civil War in 1922-23. The anti-treaty forces were ultimately defeated, leaving a bitter political legacy for decades.
- The Irish Free State was established in 1922 and subsequently worked to break the “dominion status” that kept her constitutional tied to Britain. A new constitution in 1937 made the state a republic in fact if not in name.
- Ireland was officially declared a republic in 1949. The partition of the island remained intact.
A Brief History of Irish Politics

• In the 1960s tensions in Northern Ireland rose as the Catholic minority protested the discrimination and inequality imposed on them by the ruling Protestant majority at Stormont and in local government.

• In 1968 a peaceful civil rights campaign, inspired by Dr. Martin Luther King’s campaign in the United States, began sit-ins and marches to end discrimination. Initially British Army troops protected the Catholic community. Soon police brutality and Protestant resistance to immediate comprehensive reform caused increasing support for Republican paramilitary action against the state and a parallel loyalist paramilitary movement also emerged.

• The conflict was primarily ethnic, political and nationalistic, fueled by historical events and sectarianism.

• In the following three decades of conflict more than 3,500 people were killed, of whom 52% were civilians. 32,000 suffered serious injuries and the area’s economy was devastated.

• By the early 1990s, Irish American leaders called for the United States government to become actively involved in the search for a solution to the conflict. President Bill Clinton became actively involved in this quest and gave strong support to an emerging peace process upon assuming office. He appointed Senator George J. Mitchell as his Northern Irish envoy, leading to Mitchell becoming the Chairman of the peace talks that began in 1996.

• After tense and lengthy negotiations, the Good Friday Agreement of April 1998 ended the violence, and created a power-sharing government within Northern Ireland as well as various bodies to nurture political and economic cooperation between the people of the north and the south.

“Orangemen” parade in Northern Ireland on July 12
A paramilitary with a balaclava awaits
Queen Elizabeth II visits Ireland for the first time in 2011 and lays a wreath at the main nationalist memorial as a symbolic act of reconciliation between Britain & the Ireland. President Mary Robinson stands beside her.