

Angela's Ashes



Frank
McCourt





Frank McCourt (*right front*) in the playground of Leamy's School in Limerick, Ireland, circa 1938.

ANGELA'S
ASHES

A Memoir



Frank McCourt

SCRIBNER



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*This book is dedicated to my brothers, Malachy, Michael,
Alphonsus. I learn from you, I admire
you and I love you.*

Acknowledgments

This is a small hymn to an exaltation of women.

R'lene Dahlberg fanned the embers. Lisa Schwarzbaum read early pages and encouraged me. Mary Breasted Smyth, elegant novelist herself, read the first third and passed it on to Molly Friedrich, who became my agent and thought that Nan Graham, Editor-in-Chief at Scribner, would be just the right person to put the book on the road. And Molly was right.

My daughter, Maggie, has shown me how life can be a grand adventure, while exquisite moments with my granddaughter, Chiara, have helped me recall a small child's wonder. My wife, Ellen, listened while I read and cheered me to the final page.

I am blessed among men.

ANGELA'S ASHES

I

My father and mother should have stayed in New York where they met and married and where I was born. Instead, they returned to Ireland when I was four, my brother, Malachy, three, the twins, Oliver and Eugene, barely one, and my sister, Margaret, dead and gone.

When I look back on my childhood I wonder how I survived at all. It was, of course, a miserable childhood: the happy childhood is hardly worth your while. Worse than the ordinary miserable childhood is the miserable Irish childhood, and worse yet is the miserable Irish Catholic childhood.

People everywhere brag and whimper about the woes of their early years, but nothing can compare with the Irish version: the poverty; the shiftless loquacious alcoholic father; the pious defeated mother moaning by the fire; pompous priests; bullying schoolmasters; the English and the terrible things they did to us for eight hundred long years.

Above all—we were wet.

Out in the Atlantic Ocean great sheets of rain gathered to drift slowly up the River Shannon and settle forever in Limerick. The rain dampened the city from the Feast of the Circumcision to New Year's Eve. It created a cacophony of hacking coughs, bronchial rattles, asthmatic wheezes, consumptive croaks. It turned noses into fountains, lungs into bacterial sponges. It provoked cures galore; to ease the catarrh you boiled onions in milk blackened with pepper; for the congested passages you made a paste of boiled flour and nettles, wrapped it in a rag, and slapped it, sizzling, on the chest.

From October to April the walls of Limerick glistened with the damp. Clothes never dried: tweed and woolen coats housed living things, sometimes sprouted mysterious vegetations. In pubs, steam rose from damp bodies and garments to be inhaled with cigarette and pipe smoke laced with the stale fumes of spilled stout and whiskey and tinged with the odor of piss wafting in from the outdoor jakes where many a man puked up his week's wages.

The rain drove us into the church—our refuge, our strength, our only dry