

## PROLOGUE

**F**ROM THE EARLIEST AGE, JOHN KANE SHOWED an aptitude for drawing and creativity. As a little boy growing up poor in Scotland, he loved school, but sometimes found himself distracted by the need to put down the images that floated in his mind. All his life, as he worked in one craft or another—steelworker, coal miner, bridge builder, painter—he would be captured by an image, and he always felt the need, somehow, right away, to begin getting it down on paper or canvas or board. It was a habit that stuck with him through all his days as an American workman from the 1880s to the 1920s; it started at a very young age, in elementary school in West Calder, Scotland, where he was born.

One of the images that captured him, and drew him away from his schoolwork, was of French and Prussian soldiers, which appeared in the local press during the War of 1870. As his classroom attention drifted, the young Kane began drawing his recollection of the fierce look of the warriors. He became so engrossed in his depiction of the soldiers that he never heard the teacher's cane tapping on the desk at the front of the room. When Kane finally did look up, he found that a number of other students had gathered around him to see what he was creating. And schoolmaster Walker was furious at losing control of his whole class. By the time the boy saw what was happening, it was too late: Kane had to accept his due, a half-dozen whacks to his hand from the schoolmaster's cane.

Kane's devotion to his art, and his skill as an artist, grew through the years after he emigrated to America, even as he made

his living as a workingman who struggled to find enough time to draw and paint. Although he found more and more ways to commercialize his skills, and produced more and more exceptional work, success and renown eluded him. He was always a risk taker, moving frequently and shifting professions to capitalize on the directions taken by the US economy and manufacturing. He was driven, certainly, by his own curiosity and his questing nature, but he was also driven by an escapism fueled by his addiction to drink.

No risk in all of Kane's unsettled life was more audacious than his decision, at the age at which most people are retiring from work, to try to enter his paintings into the most prestigious of American art exhibits: the Carnegie International. Shortly after its founding as the Carnegie Institute Department of Fine Arts, in 1895, the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh had embarked on a journey to create an international art exhibit that would attract the best in the world. By the 1920s the annual exhibition—today known as the Carnegie International and held every four years—had become enormously influential in the art world. Many of the world's premier artists—including Mary Cassatt, James McNeill Whistler, Childe Hassam, Edward Hopper, Camille Pissarro, and John Singer Sargent—showed at the exhibition over the years. And such renowned figures as Thomas Eakins, Robert Henri, and Winslow Homer served on the juries that judged admittance of the works of the increasingly exclusive list of artists.

It was in 1925 that self-taught Pittsburgh painter John Kane tried his hand at getting some of his pictures into the exhibit.

No such luck.

Midcareer, Kane had taken his construction-trade skills into a new direction, making his living as a railcar and house painter. Around 1900, when he was working for the Pressed Steel Car Company, manufacturer of railroad cars, he soon became the company's lead painter. And, he reported later, during that time he developed a new passion, a new "love." But it wasn't painting that captured Kane; it was paint itself. "I now became in love with paint," he said, explaining his embrace of the material that enabled him to earn a living and, later, to create beautiful pictures.<sup>1</sup> Kane had been drawing since childhood, but now he turned his love of paint into the colorful art that would make him famous.





He went back to try the International exhibit in 1926, the year after he was first rejected. The jurors said no—in effect, thanks but no thanks. Rebuffed again, Kane might have been forgiven for thinking he was being told that the exhibit was not for a house painter like himself. Still, Kane did get an encouraging letter from Homer Saint-Gaudens, the director of the museum, and that spurred him on.

When the Carnegie jury reviewed entries for the 1927 exhibit, Kane—resolute and relentless—was there with more of his work. And this time, Kane had a bit of luck: one of the jurors was Andrew Dasburg, an artist with a broad perspective and an open mind. Dasburg had studied cubism in Paris, and he had seen the impact of self-taught painter Henri Rousseau’s work on artists there and art critics worldwide. Dasburg—perhaps inspired by Pablo Picasso’s championship of Rousseau—responded to Kane’s work and decided to advocate for this undiscovered artist.

The 1927 Carnegie International, thanks to Dasburg’s fine sensibility, included *Scene from the Scottish Highlands*, by John Kane. And the workingman-artist’s fame was launched in spectacular fashion, as the press and the world of art collectors responded to Kane’s work. Eventually, Kane’s work was part of seven Carnegie exhibits and was added to the museum’s permanent collection, as well as those of New York’s Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Art Institute of Chicago, and other museums. His work was also collected by some of the country’s wealthiest patrons, including William S. Paley, Mrs. Averell Harri-man, Dr. Albert C. Barnes, and Mrs. John D. Rockefeller.

So it was that Kane, who had been a laborer in the mills and railroads of Pittsburgh’s great industrial era and had been painting portraits and landscapes for years, was suddenly launched into a final career as an American cultural star at the ripe old age of sixty-seven. And this just a few years after Pittsburgh’s bosses, Henry Clay Frick, Andrew W. Mellon, and even Andrew Carnegie—the men who had built Pittsburgh’s mighty manufacturing machine on the backs of workers like Kane—were spending large sums of money to try to forge second careers as art collectors. This irony was something to which Kane never paid the least bit of attention.



# PART I

*Scotland, steel, and the origins of the lifelong wanderings of a master of many parts. How John Kane came to America from Scotland and began a long and extraordinarily varied working life, first in coal and coke, then in steel, railroads, and building, all the while patiently honing his skills as an artist. And how his risk-taking, seeking nature took him to many parts of the country and into activities as different as boxing with professionals and patiently teaching himself the skills of a painter and an artist.*



A West Calder neighborhood of working-class houses where Kane's parents moved a few years after he was born. *A busy scene in the Happy Land, probably Annan Street, looking east, n.d.* Courtesy Guthrie Hutton / Stenlake Publishing.



## A BOY IN SCOTLAND

**J**OHN KANE'S PARENTS, THOMAS AND BARBARA Cain (the spelling was changed later in their son's life), came from one of the most enthralling parts of Ireland: County Galway, a wild, beautiful landscape that stretches from rolling farmland in the east to a rugged and striking coastline in the west. But for all that beauty, Ireland was a nightmarishly grim location in the 1850s, when the Cains lived there: the Irish Potato Famine, at its peak in 1847, killed a million people and drove another million away in a quest for food and work before it ended in the mid-1850s.

The famine, which began in 1845 when a fungus attacked the potato fields that most Irish farmers and workers depended on for food through the long winters, was also known as the "Great Hunger." The food supply had become so dominated by the potato, introduced into Ireland around the turn of the seventeenth century, that the loss of crops was devastating to the Irish people. But it was made far worse by the behavior of the English landowners. The farmers in Ireland were all tenant farmers and their country was ruled ruthlessly by Great Britain. Under the so-called British Penal Laws, for many years Irish Catholics (most of the native population, including Thomas and Barbara Cain) were prohibited from voting or even owning their own land. When the famine struck, the British landed gentry, owners of most of the farmland in Ireland, were harsh and unforgiving in their treatment of the workers. In fact, the British not only kept on exporting much of



the food produced in Ireland to England, they actually increased the amount of food shipped away from the starving masses to provide for English subjects. There are those who consider the grotesque loss of life in Ireland to be one of history's most shocking acts of genocide, perpetrated by the English. Over the years, many Irish and British writers have written withering satires of the inhumane and selfish treatment accorded the Irish people by the English. Great bitterness toward the English is still palpable throughout the Emerald Isle today.

John Kane was born on August 19, 1860, in West Calder, a small mining town in the industrial heartland of Scotland lying between Glasgow and Edinburgh. His parents had moved there from County Galway to escape the devastation of the Great Hunger. Their choice of Scotland rather than England may well have reflected the antipathy toward the English that so many of the survivors of the famine felt, and in choosing their new home they selected a country that shared their skepticism of the English character.

Kane's parents picked the village of West Calder because they thought it a likely place for them to find work. The coal and shale industries in and around West Calder—four coal mines and a dozen shale mines—provided jobs for unskilled workers. In fact, mining was the first job that Thomas Cain took on once the family had moved to Scotland. Barbara Cain—known throughout the region as “Big Babbie”—was a hard worker, too, and after Thomas left the mines and became a day laborer she was often found in the fields working side by side with her husband. She got her nickname, according to her son, because of her expansive and openly friendly nature.

The family's first house was a small, one-room hut with an earthen floor and a thatched roof. Big Babbie was a popular figure in the region—appreciated for her humor, her wisdom, and her big heart—and she drew many visitors who came to her small house for conversation and to get advice on life. Thomas, on the other hand, was more taciturn and dour. His last job was digging ditches in the Catholic cemetery. He got sick in the cold, damp conditions, and, after a long illness, he succumbed when John was

just ten years old. Thomas Cain died before the Catholic cemetery was finished, and so he was buried in the Presbyterian cemetery nearby. He left a widow and six children.

Although John Kane was an inquisitive student who showed artistic talent, he grew up in a working-class culture that valued, more than anything, what a man could earn by his labor. Starting at the age of eight, he spent less and less time in school and more time working in the shale mines. By the age of ten, having lost his father, he and his brothers were at work in the mines full time. Kane continued to draw, and he tried to continue some of his education in the evenings, but he had left the world of his childhood and had become a working person. He later said that there were lots of children like him working in the mines. Children were supposed to be at least twelve years old in order to qualify for work in the mines, but many, like Kane, were younger. “There was a great deal of eye-winking,” said Kane of the child labor that was permitted in the mines. The shale oil industry around West Calder—just a dozen and a half miles from Edinburgh, the Scottish capital—was the source of fuel and paraffin for the manufacture of candles.

Though Barbara kept to many of her Irish ways, and was loyal to her homeland, she embraced Scottish culture for her children. She dressed the little boys in kilts and tartan outfits. The boys took to Scotland as well, taking frequent trips out into the nearby countryside for hiking and sight-seeing. Kane joined a group of local boys that formed a band, playing Scotch and Irish folk music—Kane on his beloved flute, joined by two dozen other flutes and fifes, two kettle drums, and a number of other instruments. But strife among members of the group who were of Irish descent—some Protestant and some Catholic—finally broke the band apart. Asked to play “Saint Patrick’s Day in the Morning,” the Protestant boys refused: “We won’t play that piece,” they said, according to Kane. “Our fathers said we shouldn’t.” Kane himself adopted his mother’s attitude of tolerance and acceptance, and he also adopted her practice of regular attendance at mass—both habits that stuck with him for much of the rest of his life.



A postcard view of Calton Hill in Edinburgh around Kane's time in Scotland. West Calder was near Edinburgh; Kane and his friends often journeyed into the city, and one of his memories was seeing Calton Hill. The Art Publishing Company, Glasgow. *Calton Hill, Edinburgh*. Color postcard. Author's collection.

In 1872, at the age of twelve, Kane left the mines for a better job in Young's Paraffin Light and Mineral Oil Company, making candles from shale oil. He held the position at the paraffin works for three years, and it had a great influence on his development as a committed skilled worker. "The shale which I had helped extract at the mine I now used in its refined state," said Kane. "It comes out of the mine in thick slices . . . it gives an oil which makes the finest candle grease in the world." Kane later estimated that he made hundreds of thousands of candles through the paraffin company's machine-molding process. This was his first taste of skilled work in a factory, and he took a great sense of pride in it, boasting that "his" candles were shipped all over the world. The journey of John Kane the hardworking





Packing paraffin wax lights at the sprawling manufacturing works of Young's Paraffin Light and Mineral Oil Company, where 12-year-old John Kane found work. Wicking and packing paraffin wax night lights, Addiewell works. Courtesy Almond Valley Heritage Trust.

teenager in Scotland to John Kane the proud American workingman had begun.

Kane figured that he was making more working either in the mines or the candle works in Scotland than he could earn almost anywhere else, including America. "Since the time I was fifteen I had heard a lot of talk about coming to America where work was plentiful and where wages were so high that a man could get rich in just no time at all," he recalled. "Well, work was plentiful

right there in West Calder. The wages were high, too, for those days.” Kane was making forty-five shillings a week, better than the wages of many workers in America. “Living cost less in Scotland than in America, I soon found out. Altogether this talk seemed foolish when one could do so well right in his own country.” Still, so many around Kane talked incessantly about America as the land of opportunity that momentum built in the family for a move.

When Barbara remarried in 1875, her new husband, Patrick Frazier, began to make plans for moving everyone to the United States. John’s brother Patrick and their cousins the Coyne brothers joined in enthusiastically. In 1879 Frazier left for a job in the Pittsburgh region of Pennsylvania. “When my stepfather sent for me, I didn’t want to go to America. I was doing well in my own country and was becoming more and more in love with Scotland all the time,” said Kane later. “But Mother thought I ought to go when my stepfather sent for me. And accordingly I went.” Though Kane was very reluctant, the draw of America had proven too strong for his stepfather, his brother, and the Coyne brothers, and he decided to head to Pennsylvania to join them. Later, Barbara and his other brothers would come as well.

For the rest of his life, Kane loved and missed his homeland. Though he never did return there, he painted many Scottish themes from memory, sometimes stimulated by photographs. One of them was titled *The Campbells Are Coming*, a depiction of a Highland piper based loosely on Kane’s revered older brother Patrick, who was a beloved and influential figure in the artist’s life. Patrick had served as a private in the British Army after falling for an old recruiting trick: if a soldier gave a young man a shilling, he was automatically an army recruit because he had unwittingly accepted the king’s coin. Patrick fell for it, but John did not. When a soldier chased him and begged him to get a drink with him, John was smart enough to run for his life.

► John Kane’s 1932 painting, *The Campbells Are Coming*, is in part a tribute to his beloved brother Patrick; like many Kane works, it was drawn from a combination of postcard images and memory. John Kane, *The Campbells are Coming*, 1932. Oil and gold paint on paper over composition board. The Sidney and Harriet Janis Collection. Museum of Modern Art, NY. Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY.









A postcard from 1910 showing a Pipe Major in the Fourth Royal Scots Regiment, a figure very familiar to Scotsman Kane. *Pipe Major 4th Royal Scots Regiment*, c. 1910. Color postcard 68058. Valentine's, publisher. Author's collection.

Kane's combination of wistful memories of his Scottish homeland and his great pride in his work as an American comes through strongly in recollections from his autobiography, *Sky Hooks*:

For I never went back to my childhood home though I have visited it a thousand times in memory. In America I did almost every kind of work a laboring man can do. I dug coal and helped make steel in one of the

greatest steel plants in the world. I mined coke and sank and blasted shafts for collieries. I laid paving brick. I dug foundations for two great industrial plants. I was a watchman at a railroad crossing for eight years. I helped with the manufacture of steel railroad cars. I was a carpenter and worked on the foundations of two new filtration plants. I was one of a crew that built a beautiful bridge in Pittsburgh. I helped with the erection of the four great rubber factories in Akron, Ohio. But chiefly I was handy with the paint brush. I painted houses, offices, box cars and almost the whole of an amusement park in Pittsburgh. I did almost every kind of work that a man can do.

And he found his calling as an artist.



This painting of the Bessemer Steel Company plant, the work of nineteenth-century artist William C. Wall, portrays a typical Pittsburgh industrial scene from the time of John Kane's arrival in America. William C. Wall, *The Pittsburgh Bessemer Steel Company*, 1884. Oil on canvas, Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh. Bequest of Charles J. Rosenbloom, 74.7.27. Image courtesy Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh.