

## **“THE FLOATING CHURCH”**

Based on a personal autobiography by John Byrne  
and the book “Wreck and Rescue” by Rev B.S. Huntington  
(Published in 1872, Library of Congress #BV2678.B85 H8)

**Killarney Lakes, Ireland, 1818** – John Byrne, the youngest of 11 children is born to Edward Byrne and Anne O’Sullivan Byrne. John was the classic free spirit and rebel, a happy go lucky sort of kid who regularly got into trouble. The Byrne household, like most at that time, was a religious one, and the kids were schooled in scripture every Saturday and Sunday. By the time the Byrne kids were 12 years old they could recite almost any passage in the Bible. They also were a “Church of England” family, which was quite unusual in heavily Catholic Ireland. John was the youngest but he was the Hymn/Song leader of the family, with the gift of an amazing voice. But John studied the Bible because he was forced to, not because he wanted to or enjoyed doing it. John was more into “what was real” and became enamored with the British Troops who were stationed in Killarney, and who would often visit his father at the Byrne home. So, at 16 John grabbed any money around the house he could get his hands on and ran away to Dublin to enlist in the army. He did this 3 times, but the first two were aborted as his father tracked him down and bought him back. The 3<sup>rd</sup> time John would be successful in joining the British army, but this would be the last time he would ever see his parents.

**India, 1838** – John arrives in India, which the British had ruled for about 80 years now, but there was increasing fighting and resistance. Here begins John’s downward spiral: “For 10 years I feared neither God nor man.” John’s troop transport ship had barely avoided shipwreck while navigating the Cape of Good Hope. His friends were all “drunkards and infidels”. His officers turned against him, and the “guard room and dark cell were often his portion”. He was disgraced and was often seen without his shoes and hat. (this is the military mind you) Filled with shame, John tried to commit suicide by walking out into the ocean to drown himself, but when he got close “all the teachings came back to me” and he was petrified to be faced by God’s judgment. So he wept and went home to the barracks. He

started listening to missionaries a bit, but nothing stuck. All the while 30 to 40 men were dying from Cholera every day, and rum was the primary Rx so they could drink themselves numb. One night Byrne passed out drunk on the steps of the barracks' huge water tank. Upon awakening he realized that had his foot slipped he would have died a fairly horrible death. John subsequently found sobriety for 2 years, and rose up in rank often commended. He had even volunteered to go fight in China, but their mission was called off somewhere in the Pacific. John snapped, and was so angry he put down a bottle of rum, went ballistic, and was imprisoned for misconduct. When he was released from prison he was handed a letter postmarked from Ireland, as both his parents had died. His father had offered one last prayer/wish before he died, that his "wayward son somewhere overseas" be saved. John, shaken to his core, went to reflect in private.

**India, 1850** – After 12 years of service John received his discharge from the British Military and got a job at an Indian School connected with the London mission there. This did not last long due to his shameless drinking/intemperance.

**Ireland, 1851** – John returns to Ireland 13 years after he ran away. Only one sister remained out of 10 siblings, the others had relocated to the US. The same year he sailed to NYC and was taken in by a kind sister, but John repaid her kindness with ingratitude as he continued to be a drunk, and would always be at "the rum shop, the theater, or in jail". He then went to Philadelphia to see a brother, who had heard everything and rejected him coldly. He went to a church, the only place that would take him in, and he overhears the words of another's prayer "How can I give the up?". These words would have a profound on Byrne.

**New York, February 1854** – John enlists in the American Navy and he's almost immediately tested. 4 days out from Rio Di Janiero the ship meets a major storm: "Mountains of waves" tossed the ship, first breaking the mizzen mast, then the breaking main mast itself leaving the entire crew in terror. There was nothing to do at this point but huddle and pray in the bowels of the ship, and they were delivered! John was then struck with inflammatory rheumatism (extremely painful), and for 10 months did not

have the use of his hands or his feet. John would literally just lie on the deck and weep. He then had yet another near death experience in Honolulu, where had another sailor not grabbed him, he would have died while tripping over a spare mast. John was so full of self-hate, he was at a loss of how he could still be alive after all he'd gone through. Then, near the Sandwich Islands in 1855 John has a revelation: Once again he overhears some scripture "whomever believes in me shall be saved". Could that possibly mean somebody like me? John thought. Surly it must! Yes! Finally John was reborn, and joy would fill the air around John for the rest of his life. He would literally sing rejoices from here on out. His new Faith was immediately and severely tested by his shipmates, who cut down his hammock in the midst of sleep, injuring him severely as he fell across a large chest. Byrne didn't flinch, maintaining his gratitude through the pain. They continually threatened to burn his Bible, etc. until one day John over hears "It's no use with John Byrne, what he has is the real thing." John Byrne would never be bothered again. On the ensuing final voyage back to New York, John would convert four more sailors, seems he has quickly found a nack for doing so...

**New York to Ireland, 1856** – John returns to New York and gets a room at the "Sailor's Home" like so many did. He gains employment from the NYC Bible Society as the Society's rep among seamen in the various vessels and boarding houses. At the time the New York harbor was teaming with ships and sailors from all over the globe. But still the wanderer, John would leave for Ireland in July, 1857 with his sights set on becoming a lay missionary in India. He arrived in Liverpool on July 21st, then to Dublin, then back down to Killarney to visit the graves of his parents. He never made it to India, as his bad leg had been bothering him – and he was in such high demand in Ireland as a missionary who would fill rooms and captivate hearts with his passionate stories and songs for God. There were no sports or much entertainment back then, this was it and John was the star. He also found many friends in London of "kindred spirit", including one "Clara Burt" who would later come to NY and become "Mrs. John Byrne".

**New York, 1858** – John returns to New York as India’s revolution is in full mode. He is admitted as a patient at the “Sailor’s Retreat” on Staten Island for his chronic ailing leg. Although in pain, John would be full of God from the moment he woke up to the moment he went to sleep. Soon after his infectious ways and enthusiasm had the entire Sailor’s Retreat reading scripture, and his room was always packed with visitors. In May, 1859 Dr. Moffat, the attending physician, marveled at how John single handedly changed the entire culture at the hospital with his “simple and unaffected earnestness”. All were so sad to see him go, but John had enough strength back now to go back to “his work”.

**New York, June, 1859** – “The Floating Church of Our Savior”. The reverend B.S. Huntington hires John Byrne to be a Lay Missionary” at the church, which literally floated in the harbor amongst the ships. Each Sunday was a spectacle at the Floating Church as it was “the place to be”. It was a vibrant hub and would be packed with hundreds of animated sailors speaking a myriad of languages, ultimately leaving with armfuls of “good reading” for their months long voyages over sea. John kept journals of his daily activities, which entailed: the conversion of many a sailor, several daily prayer meetings, visits to hospitals, the visiting of docked ships, and many conversions of the feeble on their deathbeds.

**New York, “Floating Church” 1860-1867** – John Byrne, with his infectious charm, hymn singing, his inimitable Irish brogue, immaculate dress, and his “unaffected earnestness” continues his work and becomes quite well known and revered along the docks. A living legend, he may as well have been able to walk on water. He now has close friends in high places such as “his brother in Christ” sugar refinery owner JC Havemeyer, (whose brother was the 3 time mayor of NYC). If John met a widow who needed a sewing machine, he got it for her. He’d get the money from JC, or from any one of a number of benefactors and move on to the next one. He was burned by “fakes” more than a few times, which saddened him, but ultimately he was unstoppable. Until his bad leg (which always hurt) caught up with him.

**New York, June, 1866** – John must now be in the Sailor’s Retreat hospital full time, as he was in constant agony. But despite the pain he was said to always have a sense of peace over his face. It was

like the pain drove him deeper and deeper into his Belief. Like before at the Sailor's Retreat he held prayer meetings, hymn singings, and scripture readings – and the Spirit swept like wildfire through the hospital until the day he died. It is said that at his “moment of truth” with his room filled with his wife and loving friends, John sat up, stretched his arms out in the sign of the cross, and laid back down and died. But no one cried. All were in relief, and in subtle awe from the True peace on his face...

## **THE END**

**Notes:** This is a basic bullet point timeline of Mr. Byrne's life gleaned from his journals and other publications. We see any Feature Film or Television Series as being centered in and around The Floating Church at the end of Pike St in NYC, with Byrne's larger than life self-destructiveness, alcoholic trials, prison time, and near death experiences being revealed in flashback fashion. It will tie in nicely to his work sermons, conversions, last rites, etc, as these traits are the very things that make it easier for Byrne to reach the disaffected. We'll have an opportunity to question faith and fate, to question God's existence, and to question alcoholism, dependency and the addictive personality. All against a backdrop of a bygone era without: electricity, automobiles, baseball, football, basketball, telephones, radio, TV. But they did have: Kerosene, Civil War, Lincoln, Irish immigrants coming in droves, and the NYC Draft Riot. The Floating Church was the center of it's particular Universe and a vibrant hub of activity. But on Sundays it was on another level, packed to the rafters for every service with Sailors from every country. This was the only game in town and John Byrne, the most humble man in the Universe, was the star of the show.