

Judy Garland was born 100 years ago

IT'S BEEN said that big things come in small packages, such as computer chips or dynamite. And Judy Garland.

In the 1940 MGM musical, *Little Nellie Kelly*, the diminutive superstar (she measured 4'11") gleefully marches in a St. Patrick's Day parade, singing *It's A Great Day For the Irish*. The rousing number held special meaning for the singer/actress, whose ancestry includes several ties to Ireland on both sides of her family.

This month marks the centenary of Garland's birth, shining a megawatt spotlight on one of the greatest entertainers of all time.

Although much has been written about her personal ups-and-downs during her remarkable but bitter-sweet life, less is known about Garland's deep Irish roots – a connection that underscores the grit, talent, and charm that made her a beloved icon worldwide.

She was born Frances Ethel Gumm on 10 June, 1922, in Grand Rapids, Minnesota, to vaudeville performers Frank Gumm and his wife, Ethel (nee Milne).

As the youngest family member, 'Baby' began her stage career at the tender age of two when she sang *Jingle Bells* during a Christmas show. She soon joined her two older sisters into showbusiness, performing as part of the Gumm Sisters.

While growing up in a musical household, their father often serenaded the girls, whose warm rendition of *Danny Boy* served as a bedtime ritual. Then, in 1926, the family moved to Southern California, where the siblings studied acting and dancing under the watchful eye of their overbearing stage mother.

The trio would eventually change their professional name to the Garland Sisters, and young Frances transformed into 'Judy', inspired by a popular Hoagy Carmichael song at the time.

AFTER BECOMING a solo act, the 13-year-old Garland signed a movie contract with Metro-Goldwyn



By Christopher Warner

Mayer in September 1935. Shortly afterward, however, tragedy struck with the sudden death of her father due to spinal meningitis.

The heartbreak would be the first of many for Garland – both personally and professionally – as she embarked on her path to stardom in Tinseltown.

The journey would not be easy.

She played a singing hillbilly in her first feature film, *Pigskin Parade*, a musical comedy about a pair of rival (American) football coaches.

The 1936 movie starred Jack Haley, who would later be cast as the 'Tin Man' in *The Wizard of Oz*. But before he and Garland skipped down the Yellow Brick Road, MGM paired her with fellow teenager Mickey Rooney, eventually collaborating on nine films together.

Following its publication in 1900, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* by L. Frank Baum had been adapted into several plays as well as a 1925 silent movie. But MGM's version would be different. Much different.

Right from the start, Garland was eyed as the top choice to play the part of Dorothy Gale, an orphaned farm girl who dared to dream big. But concerns over her bankability led some film executives to briefly consider casting a far better known (and more marketable) young actress to wear the ruby red slippers: Shirley Temple.

In the end, however, Hollywood's studio system and contractual issues would ultimately dictate the outcome, allowing Garland to showcase her wide range of talents – presented in vivid Technicolour no less. Interestingly, the role also mirrored some of the same hardships experienced by her maternal great-grandmother, Mary Elizabeth Fitzpatrick, who was raised in a Dublin orphanage before venturing to a faraway land.

ACCORDING TO the U.S. Library of Congress, *The Wizard of Oz* ranks as the most seen film in movie history. Garland's performance of *Over the Rainbow*, a ballad in which she blends a gentle innocence with profound emotional depth, earned an Oscar for Best Original Song. Additionally, the rising starlet received an Academy Juvenile Award at the 1939 gala ceremony.

Garland would go on to star in a slew of hit musicals, including *For Me and My Gal*, *Meet Me In St. Louis*, and *Easter Parade*.

In July 1951, the songstress performed a series of concerts to sold-out audiences in Dublin. Held at the Royal Theatre, the relaxed, informal shows often featured a barefooted Garland belting out her most popular tunes, including an Irish version of *A Pretty Girl Milking Her Cow* (Cailin Deas Cruidte na mBo).

Despite her offstage struggles, Garland continued to perform while also finding time to raise her three children (Liza Minnelli, Lorna Luft, and Joey Luft).

Throughout her life, she actively supported various causes, too, including the Civil Rights Movement and the presidential campaigns of John F. Kennedy and Robert F. Kennedy.

At the age of 47, Garland passed away on 22 June, 1969. She was later interred in a mausoleum named for her at Hollywood Forever Cemetery in Los Angeles. Fittingly, a memorial statue of her beloved co-star 'Toto' can be found nearby. ■