

## Grasshopper Hill Gang Immortalized in Literature

The writer and poet, **Christopher Morley** (1890 – 1957), lived in Baltimore **on Park Avenue**, just west of Mount Royal Hill, for several years in his youth while his father was a professor at Johns Hopkins University. Morley is famous for his novel, *Kitty Foyle* which was made into a film with Ginger Rogers. Morley's biographer, Helen Oakley, in *Three Hours for Lunch: The Life and Times of Christopher Morley*, writes of young Christopher's fear of **Grasshopper Hill**:

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achieved the rank of Ph.D. There were so many of them that his family nicknamed him "Doctors" in their honor.

For Lilian Bird Morley, the change was less congenial. She could not stand in the way of her husband's career, but she did miss her garden. At the back of the house at 2026 Park Street, Baltimore — her new address — there was only a yard filled with rubble. A space of about thirty feet between the kitchen door and a six-foot wooden fence was all she had to work with, but she made it bloom. She planted some especially hardy purple iris (iris are tough and enduring) the roots of which Christopher moved many years later to his own Long Island home.

The Baltimore house faced a paved highway, and lots extended for half a mile between the end of the brick-paved and Druid Hill Park. The empty streets were not beautiful, and they were not safe. Gangs of belligerent Irish boys from the Grasshopper Hill region would come looking for likely victims. More than once Lilian saw her school-age sons come running home in terror.

There were pleasures for Lilian to offset the disadvantages — notably the friends, new and old, including their English

Morley wrote a semi-autobiographical novel called *Thorofare*. In a chapter set in Baltimore, (in this fictional story he changes the name of the city of Baltimore to "Chesapeake") Morley describes a gang of boys called "The Mount Royals" with a leader named Spike McMechen. He must have based this fictional gang on the "belligerent Irish boys from Grasshopper Hill," and Spike McMechen was probably named after McMechen Street in Baltimore which was directly across from Elm Street on Grasshopper Hill. In his story, the protagonist, Geoffrey, is a boy whose family has recently moved to Chesapeake (Baltimore) from England. In this passage, the author, Morley, gets his revenge on the belligerent gang of Irish boys:

"Excursions of this dangerous tribe, which dominated the heights of Park Avenue and Mount Royal Terrace, had even spread across the Valley of Jones's Falls. Spike McMechen was their satrap...at some apparently peaceful corner the shrill two-fingered whistle, the patter of pursuing feet (so lightly, swiftly shod), the mocking hateful cry, "Ya-a-y, English! C'mon kids." Stones or snowballs filled the air, and even flight was vain. Evidently to Spike McMechen and his gang of "Mount Royals" there seemed to be something peculiarly offensive about the bare knees of Geoffrey...Unconsciously, the roving Mount Royals carried on the ancient traditions of Chesapeake (Baltimore) hooligans. They were only once thoroughly routed. Aunt Bee was shopping at the North Avenue market when she saw Jeff and Skinny, unarmed, chivvied to despair by the group (Mount Royals) with hockey sticks. Rushing forth with umbrella and a head of cabbage, she hurled the vegetable like a grenade, and laid about fiercely with the other weapon. The enemy dispersed in shocked amazement. Even her Quaker conscience never reproached Aunt Bee for this militarism; what startled her most was that the widowed mother of the smitten McMechen called on her later and thanked her for what she had done."