

Looking Back: Our Irish Legacy

Tom Wolfe (August 9, 1981; rev. November 2007)

Because the Wolfes have always claimed to be Irish, it seems fitting that we look back today to both the history of the Wolfes and that of Ireland itself. The past is everything to the Irish, and that past is shrouded in mysticism, which has always been considered more important than reality. Thus, dedicated Irish mystics like Wolfe Tone, Lord Edward Fitzgerald, Robert Emmet, Smith O'Brien, Patrick Pearse, and today's IRA hunger strikers have all gone to their deaths for a cause supported at first by few and approved by little more; yet, the public eventually rallied to their support because there have always been poets and balladeers around to create demigods out of confused and desperate mortals. From the grin slaughter resulting from Wolfe Tone's Rising of 1798, for example, there arose the stirring ballad known to all would-be Irish revolutionaries, "The Rising of the Moon":

Down along yon singing river, that dark mass of men was seen;
High about their shining weapons floats their own beloved green;
Death to every foe and traitor! Forward strike the marching tune.
And hurrah, my boys, for Freedom! 'Tis the Rising of the Moon.

"In Ireland, states one writer, "the past is the present and the present won't be important until the future has arrived and the present becomes the past."

Ireland's problem with the English all began, of course, because of a woman. Had Tiernan O'Ruairc, a truly unfortunate Celt, been single rather than married, there might never have been an English invasion, and nearly eight hundred years of British rule might have been avoided. It seems that O'Ruairc was angry with Dermot MacMurrough because the latter had borrowed the former's wife, Dervogilla, a matter not to be taken lightly even today – either wife-stealing or naming her Dervogilla. O'Ruairc raised an army and invaded MacMurrough's lands. The latter promptly fled to England with his pretty daughter Eva. Finding King Henry II, he asked him to invade Ireland and smite O'Ruairc in the process. Now, the king had a large family to find kingdoms for, so the idea appealed to him. He gave MacMurrough permission to recruit a force of Norman-English. (The Normans, from the northwestern province of Normandy in today's France, had successfully invaded England a hundred years earlier, in 1066.) As a pretext for invasion, Henry persuaded the Pope, an Englishman named Adrian IV, to grant him permission to invade, the excuse being some obscure ecclesiastical irregularity dating back four hundred years, to a Papal conference in the 8th century.

Richard Fitz-Gilbert, Strongbow to the Irish, invaded Ireland in 1170 with a small band of well-armed Normans and received MacMurrough's Eva as a prize. Strongbow's Normans established a few beachheads in eastern Ireland and added some names to Irish and American history like Fitzpatrick, Fitzgerald, butler, burke, and, dear reader, even Wolfe. These Norman Wolfes, like their friends the Burkes

and Fitzgeralds, were an avaricious lot, carving huge chunks of previously Celtic lands for themselves, mostly in counties Kildare and Limerick, the Kildare land being known as Wolfe Country. Their attitude seems to have been, "What is mine is mine, and what is thine is mine also."

The writer is unaware if the Norman family is the one from which we've descended. There are at least three other possibilities. There is an old Celtic name called Mactyre or O'Mactyre which becomes Wolfe in English. There was a pre-Norman Wulf who arrived with the Vikings in the 10th and 11th centuries, and there may have been a Prussian family (Prussia was the largest kingdom in what later became Germany) by that name who came to Ireland in the 16th century seeking religious freedom after Martin Luther's beliefs were accepted by the Prussian king. (During the Reformation, one embraced the King's religion if one valued one's skin.) It is this Prussian family whom the writer's Uncle Melvin believes to be our direct ancestors. If so, the writer has no evidence.

It is the Norman Wolfes who are the most well-known in early Irish history though. The Wolfe name appeared again in Irish history during the Penal days of the 18th century. They clearly had land and money. It is not clear if we are related to them or another family, nor is it clear whether this is the Celtic, Viking, Norman, or Prussian branch. It is probably, though, that this is our family line, if for no other reason than that they had money. We know that John R. who emigrated in 1846, had money, and because this was highly unusual among Irish Catholics, it seems reasonable to believe that this pro-English family is our line of ancestry.

The struggle for Irish freedom from England grew more complicated when the Protestant Reformation spread to England and sectarian as well as economic differences manifested themselves in Ireland. There had always been hostility between the haves and have nots in Ireland; now, many of the haves were Protestants as well, making religion even more of a division within the country.

Two years after the first English colony was planted in Jamestown, Virginia, the English established another one in northeastern Ulster. In 1609 and later, the English settled thousands of Scottish Presbyterians (first cousins of the righteous Puritans). From that time until the present, Protestants rather than the native Catholics have had the advantage in employment. When Ulster, minus the three counties of Donegal, Fermanagh, and Cavan obtained home rule after World War I, these "Orangemen" set about systematically denying Catholics of Northern Ireland their basic civil rights, reducing them to the status of America's Southern blacks before the 1960s. Catholics could not own land or homes (with a few token exceptions), they could not vote or hold public office, and most of all, they were usually the last hired and the first fired. The British parliament dissolved Ulster's parliament in 1972 and restored many of the Catholics' rights, but guerrilla war now rages between terrorists of the IRA and the Ulster Defense League, with Britain pledged to keep Northern Ireland within the United Kingdom. Once again, Irishmen are killing Irishmen. All of the because of a decision made in 1609!

Religious warfare became especially serious throughout the 17th century. In 1641, there began a huge rebellion against Protestant landowners in Ulster. The Wolfes apparently lost all or most of their land as a result. Oliver Cromwell crushed the rebellion in 1652. One-third of Ireland's Catholics died during the eleven-year struggle. In 1690, the former Catholic king, James II, led an Irish army against the new Protestant king, William of Orange. James' defeat at the River Boyne, north of Dublin, is celebrated every July 12th by Orangemen. These wars have had a lasting effect on Irish mythology.

After the defeat at the Boyne, Parliament determined to punish all our ancestors through the Catholic Penal Laws, hoping to make them a permanently impoverished race of serfs.

1. No Papal-approved priests were allowed.
2. No Catholic could hold a public office.
3. No Catholic could vote.
4. No Catholic could teach children about Catholicism.
5. No Catholic could enter any professions and most trades.
6. No Catholic could hold land.

Irish humor was not totally obliterated during this period though. Over the gates of Bandon in County Cork allegedly appeared these words:

Enter here Turk, Jew, Or Atheist,
Any man except a Papist.

To which were added the following words one night:

The man who wrote his wrote it well,
For the same is writ o the gates of Hell.

A delightful but probably apocryphal story going around during that period was that the Anglican archbishop of Dublin was so delighted that a Catholic named Myers had joined the Church of England that he held a dinner honoring this man and his most singular act. In front of many Protestant notables, Myers was asked on what grounds he had decided to reject Catholicism. "The grounds! He growled. "Why, twenty-five hundred acres of the best agricultural grounds on the county of Roscommon!"

The Penal Laws, which were mostly repealed by 1782, effectively removed Catholics from public life. Thus, nearly all the great patriots and political leaders of the 18th and 19th centuries were Protestants, usually descendants of Cromwell's soldiers. Nearly all the leaders of the Rising of 1798, for example, were Protestants, including the most famous patriot of them all, Theobald Wolfe Tone. Therein lies a tale well told.

William Tone, Wolfe Tone's grandfather, lived on the Wolfe estate beginning in 1706, as did his descendants throughout the century, including Tone's mother, a servant in the home of Theobald Wolfe. The reader doubtless awaits with baited breath details regarding the Tone Connection, but the writer's Cousin Jack has deliberately confused him on this matter. The gist of it all seems to be that the great patriot, Wolfe Tone, is unrelated genetically to the Wolfes; however, he may have been the illegitimate son of one of the Wolfes.

Credence is lent to this theory in that Tone never once mentioned the Wolfes in his memoirs although they had played such a large part in his life, and by the curious actions of Lieutenant Governor Arthur Wolfe in 1794 and 1798. In 1794, Tone was implicated in a treason trial involving a fellow member of the Society of United Irishmen, which was devoted to independence and republicanism. Using his position in the British government to advantage, Wolfe helped persuade army prosecutors to spare Tone. Why did he do this? One historian phrased it this way: "Making use of his aristocratic friends' influence with the government..." he agreed to various governmental demands, including emigration. It somehow pains the writer to think of his ancestors as pro-English aristocrats, but that is one of the risks one must accept when looking too far up the family tree.

In 1796, Tone accompanied a powerful French invasion fleet to Bantry Bay in County Kerry where a "Protestant wind" kept the ships from landing the troops. For the week or so while the fleet was thrown about the bay, Irishmen in Kerry busied themselves feeding British soldiers rather than French ones! The writer's great, great grandfather, Richard Wolfe from Listowel, Kerry, may have been one of them. Digging deeply into family history can be a melancholy task sometimes.

This brings up two points often overlooked in Irish history. Seldom have Irishmen actually fought to replace British rule in Ireland, usually fighting instead to redress land grievances. Secondly, those government troops used to subdue the "Wilde Irish" were usually Irishmen themselves. The British used much the same technique in India and Africa; thus, when Tone's rebellion in 1798 was brutally crushed, the soldiers doing most of the slaughtering were poor Irish farm boys serving in the Royal Irish Constabulary and in the regular army.

Tone did not escape attention either. He was captured, convicted of treason, sentenced to be hanged, beheaded, disemboweled, and quartered. In his memoirs, he allowed that so long as the hanging occurred first he didn't care a flip about the rest, although he later panicked, attempted suicide, and succeeded after a week of agony. Right before the suicide, Lieutenant Governor Arthur Wolfe once again tried to help Tone (did he think he owed the arch-traitor something?), but this time the army would not consider releasing him.

The Kunta Kinte of our Wolfe family was John R. Wolfe of Listowel, County Kerry, born in 1824. His father was Richard Wolfe (possibly spelled *Woulfe*). Since the family was wealthy at a time when nearly everyone was quite poor, he received what great uncle P.B. Wolfe called an "excellent education." This probably meant a college education or at least *some* college education. P.B. Wolfe further states that

his father, John R., helped organize the “Young Ireland” Party. This probably is incorrect although he may have had something to do with a local branch of it. Had he really been a founder, the chances are good that he would have either been arrested or run out of the country, and there is no evidence of either of those happening.

Young Ireland was begun in the late 1830s by a group of largely Protestant intellectuals who wanted to rebuild Irish nationalism. Their leaders were, among others, Thomas Davis and Smith O’Brien. Through their newspaper, they generally supported Daniel O’Connell’s efforts to gain political freedom for Catholics and some sort of home rule within the empire. All went smoothly until the potato famine strike.

There had been many potato famines before in Irish history but nothing like this one. When the blight began in 1845, it affected about half the farms in Ireland, with the potatoes actually turning black in people’s hands. It was worse a year later, and in 1847, the last year the crop failed, perhaps a million people had actually died from starvation! The poor croppies couldn’t count on a decent meal until the next harvest, September, 1848. Starvation, disease, and emigration reduced the population of Ireland from around eight million in 1800 to about four million in 1860 and to two million by 1920. The Famine had reduced Ireland to a mere shell of its former self.

When the Famine began, Daniel O’Connell set aside his efforts to gain home rule for Ireland and concentrated upon persuading Parliament to give practical aid and comfort to Ireland’s starving population. In this, he met with some limited success, possibly saving a few lives. This angered the young lions who comprised Young Ireland, and they began to openly criticize him for not being sufficiently nationalistic. By this time, John R. Wolfe was probably one of O’Connell’s critics. In early 1848, the leaders of Young Ireland resolved to lead another rising. Perhaps that is what prompted Wolfe to emigrate. The plans were hardly a secret since the British knew all about them and crushed the handful of rebels immediately. It is possible that John R., with a lovely Belfast bride named Honora Buckley and several young children, decided that discretion was the better part of valor and headed west. This may be just wild speculation, but this is not a doctoral dissertation and a little fanciful conjecture adds a little spice to the narrative. It *is* true, however, that members of Young Ireland were in a lot of trouble by the time of Smith O’Brien’s rising. Besides, since John and Honora Wolfe were relatively wealthy, why wouldn’t they have wanted to stay instead of risking their futures in a strange land three thousand miles away? This is interesting and somewhat gratifying, at least to the writer, because John R. seems to have been the first Wolfe to possibly antagonize the British. All the others seemed to have supported them and were often even in their pay! Maybe John R. wasn’t a horse thief after all, as was alleged by the writer’s father, Ray Wolfe, but it’s nice to know he may have had a spark of rebellion in him.

Like so many Irish American immigrants, John and Honora soon became totally engrossed in the struggle to tame their new land, first in Ottawa, Illinois and then in Lost Nation, raising ten children as Americans. It has been 161 years since John and

Honora crossed the water with their growing family to begin their American experience, and as of this writing, a sixth generation of Wolfes graces this troubled planet. Let us hope their efforts are better than ours.

May their days be filled with blessings
Like the sun that lights the sky,
And may they always have the courage
To spread their wings and fly!