

The Wild Geese

One night as Festus Conroy of Murvey, Galway, lay dying, he called out to his son for water. After a brief exchange about nothing in particular, the dying man abruptly asked that he be buried in Gorteen Cemetery, Galway. The last thoughts of Festus Conroy, like those of many of the Wild Geese of Ireland, were of going home.

The term "Wild Geese" to many brings to mind the flight of Canadian Geese, their long necks extended, flying in a V formation at the close of an autumn day. But to the Irish, "Wild Geese" are the young men of Ireland who left their native land for service in the armies of Europe and America and, by extension, the Wild Geese are all of the men and women who have left and will leave Ireland for that which they cannot achieve at home.

The first of the Wild Geese took flight after the Battle of the Boyne. In the late 1600's the Irish supported King James II, Catholic King of England, in his losing struggle with William of Orange. Allied with James and the Irish was the Catholic King of France, Louis XIV, who had promised to send aid to Ireland to help James stave off the powerful Orangemen. Before the aid arrived, James was defeated at the Battle of the Boyne on July 12, 1690. James fled to France.

The Irish forces under Patrick Sarsfield continued the Jacobite war for another year, but after losing their stronghold at Limerick on October 3, 1691, the Irish forces surrendered. The rules of warfare being different in those days, the victorious William gave Sarsfield the choice of returning to his lands in Ulster and swearing allegiance to Parliament and the new king, or taking his army and leaving Ireland forever. He departed Ireland with 10,000 soldiers for service in France. The flight of the Wild Geese had begun. For the next hundred years, until the French Revolution, the Wild Geese and their descendants served France as the Irish Brigade. Fighting on a foreign battle field, Sarsfield was killed two years after his flight, his dying words setting the theme of the Wild Geese, "Oh, that this were for Ireland."

The Wild Geese served not only in the French army but also in the Spanish, Austrian, English, and even Russian armies. The O'Rourkes are a case in point. After the defeat of James, Owen O'Rourke emigrated to France to rise to the rank of Viscount and Baron of Breffny. Count John O'Rourke was created a peer of France by Louis XV. Cornelius settled in Russia where his son General Count Joseph Kornilievitch O'Rourke distinguished himself as one of the generals who defeated Napoleon. Other Irishmen thrived in exile. Maria Theresa of Austria appointed Ulrich Maximilian Count Brown (b. Limerick 1705) as Generalissimo of all Austrian forces in 1752. In our own War for Independence, Marquis de Lafayette brought at least one Irish regiment, commanded by Lt. Col. Barthelemy Dillon (b. Ireland 1729). These troops were part of the force which defeated Lord Cornwallis at the Battle of Yorktown Heights.

Another of the Wild Geese gave his name to Jones Beach. Major Thomas Jones, who fought with King James at the Battle of the Boyne, received what is now Jones Beach as part of a grant from his father-in-law Thomas Townsend in 1696. Major Jones is buried in Grace Church graveyard on Merrick Road in Massapequa.

Although the Wild Geese left their native land to serve in foreign armies, they never forgot they were Irish. As Gaelic began to decline in Ireland, it survived as the language of the Irish brigades with orders, pass words, and the speech of officers being in Gaelic. For many

of these soldiers their fondest dream was to return to Ireland with a large army to drive out the English invader. As an 18th century poet put it:

*The Wild Geese shall return
and we'll welcome them home
So active, so armed, so flighty a flock
was never known to this land to come
Since the days of Prince Fionn the Mighty.*

Although the English have now departed from part of Ireland, the Wild Geese continue to fly. As Thomas O'Hanlon said in his book *The Irish* (1975): "The Irish are citizens of the world. When the time is propitious, they migrate with the natural instincts of wild geese, travelling ancient routes to Boston, London, Vancouver or Sydney." But wherever they travel, and no matter how long they have been away, whenever a few gather together, like Festus Conroy, the talk always turns to talk of home.

(written by James Conroy & originally printed in 1985)

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