

San Antonio Express-News: A Genealogy of Heroic Curiosity

by Rick Casey, San Antonio-Express News

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This is an Internet story of a World Wide Web created long before Bill Gates ever drew an anti-trusting breath.

The story starts with a tip from Sister Gabriella Lohan, whose gift to San Antonio is the trouble she stirs up as a Metro Alliance leader.

"There's a wonderful bookstore in Galway", Sister Gabriella, a Galway native told me last year. "And it has a great Web site. You must look it up".

I've always obeyed the nuns - well almost - and she was right. Kenny's Bookstore has a Web site that makes you want to crawl inside and spend weeks on end reading. I pushed the e-mail button and sent this message:

"My wife and I will visit Ireland next summer with our two daughters, who will be 8 and 10. They are great readers, and I'd like some books for them that will help them anticipate the trip and get more out of it. Can you help?

The next day a return e-mail sought my phone number, and a few days later, Desmond Kenny himself called from Galway.

"What I'd like to propose is a sort of private book club", he said after pleasantries. " It's something we do for people. You tell me about your girls, what they like to read. I'll keep a file and every couple of months I'll send you a packet of books. We'll agree on a budget. Your girls should know which ones they like and which ones they don't ".

We've received three or four packets now, loaded with lush picture -book histories, historical fiction, modern who-dunnits, and other charming offerings.

Until the most recent delivery, I thought of this connection with Galway as a fine example of how technology can make the world more personal rather than less.

The latest packet arrived two weeks ago. Two special treasures in it made the connection more than a modern nicety.

The first, noticed immediately by my older daughter is, 'With the Wind' Kevin Dolan . " It's subtitle " "A Novel of Ireland and Texas".

The book tells of an Irish lad who leaves home to escape the tyranny of the English - only to find himself caught up in the turmoil of pre-independence Texas.

Young Dolan, whose sense of injustice was forged on bitter stories of the hated British oppressors, finds Texas a far more complex place.

"Basically, I guess it is just that we came here to live peacefully in a Catholic land, to escape being destroyed by the English" he says to his brother. "And here we may have to side with either a Catholic government that's been none too gentle to its own people or with a bunch of Protestant invaders, most of them with English names. I'd just as soon side with the Indians except we're standing on land that was stolen from them. Make sense of that if you can."

The book sent all the way from Ireland, is by Bryce Milligan whose house is about a hundred yards from our own.

Better, the book is dedicated to Mary Frances Guerrero Milligan, his wife, who is one of my daughters favourite people by virtue of her personality and of her office.

She is their school librarian. My older daughter excitedly wrote a letter to Mr.Kenny to tell him the coincidence.

But if this book shows how small our world is , another one shows how tightly is wound.

"The Long March" by Dubliner Marie Louise Fitzpatrick, tells of a group of Choctaw Indians whose people in 1830 had been forced to make a brutal winter evacuation from their tribal lands in Mississippi to Oklahoma. Of 20,000 who set out only 7,000 survived.

Fitzpatrick's beautifully told story is based on a real event, in which a group of impoverished Choctaws in a1847 heard of the hardships in Ireland, where the potato famine had forced millions onto the road killing one million.

The Choctaws scraped together \$170 (about \$5,000 in today's dollars) to send to help the starving Irish. In Fitzpatrick's story, a young Choctaw rebels at, then comes to terms with, the notion of helping white people, when it was white people who had driven them from their land.

The story is hard to read with dry eyes. But for my daughters it is more than a morality tale.

The web is tied together, the circle completed in these two happy, middle-class South Texas girls.

One of their grandmothers on their mothers side was born in Indian territory in Oklahoma. Two of her great-grandparents were Choctaws, survivors of the the Long March.

On my side, six of their great-great-grandparents emigrated from Ireland after their families survived the Great Famine.

So in these girls is met two horrific miseries and one monumental act of generosity. Their conquered dirt-poor Choctaw ancestors sacrificed for their conquered, dirt-poor Irish ancestors.

Families are not good at passing on stories of great trauma. I knew of the Great Famine, of course before sending the e-mail to Galway but not from my family and not in the depth I've learned in the past months.

I had heard of the Long March from my wife, but neither of us knew of the Choctaw gift of 1847. Nor were we aware that a group named Celts and American Indians Together, headed by Oklahoman Gary WhiteDeer, is raising money still for famine relief.

It is, indeed a small world, because people like Sister Gabriella, Desmond Kenny, Bryce Milligan, Marie-Louise Fitzpatrick and Gary WhiteDeer make it so.

(Pictured above is Marian Casey enjoying the Vermont snow)

