

De Gaulle's Irish roots traced to Co Down clan with military prowess

Paris Letter: researchers trace 'last great Frenchman' to McCartan family

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Lara Marlowe



Seán McCartan claims only the most tenuous blood tie to “the last great Frenchman”. His 17th century ancestor, Owen McCartan, was the brother of Gen Charles de Gaulle’s forebear Patrick McCartan, who was hanged and beheaded by the British at Carrickfergus in 1653.

Thérèse Ghesquière- Diérickx’s relationship is closer: her paternal grandmother Victoria was the sister of de Gaulle’s grandmother Julia. Julia descended directly from John McCartan, the son of Patrick, who left Co Down for France when William of Orange became king in 1689.

Together, McCartan and Ghesquière-Diérickx, a retired office administrator in Belfast and a retired magistrate in Lille, have reconstructed the history of de Gaulle’s Irish roots back to the 11th century. McCartan researched the Irish ancestors, Ghesquière-Diérickx the French. They published *The McCartans of Kinelarty* this year.

A well-documented injustice left the deepest impression on McCartan: “The fact that Sir George Rawdon sent Patrick to his death, and it was Sir George Rawdon who got Patrick’s land.” The wound may be 361 years old but it still sounds fresh when McCartan recounts it. Rawdon, the supervisory judge of the trail of Irish rebels, became the principal beneficiary from their deaths.

Claim to nobility

Anthony’s grandson Andronic was more successful when he travelled to Dublin Castle in 1836 to have the family’s pedigree certified. Without the document obtained by Andronic, McCartan and Ghesquière- Diérickx could not have completed their research.

The shared heritage is a source of pride in both countries. “At our book launches in Dublin, Newry and Ballyduggan the McCartans were coming out of the woodwork, all claiming to be related to de Gaulle,” says McCartan.

Ghesquière-Diérickx says she and her cousins have a “visceral attachment” to their Irish roots. She believes de Gaulle inherited his military prowess from the McCartans.

“As a boy, he was sent to a Jesuit college in Tournai. When he came home to Lille on weekends he visited the battlefields of Fontenoy and Malplaquet, where the Irish [troops serving with French kings] covered themselves in glory.”

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De Gaulle's "Irish" grandmother Julia died in 1912, when he was 22 years old.

"Julia had a strong personality," says Ghesquière-Diérickx. "She transmitted the interest: she was the link."

By chance, de Gaulle's other grandmother, Joséphine Maillot, wrote a biography of Daniel O'Connell without knowing her son would marry a woman of Irish origin. De Gaulle read the book in childhood.

Cross of Lorraine

Ghesquière-Diérickx says her cousin "had too high an idea of France to let his personal feelings" intervene in dealings with Britain. But McCartan believes knowledge of his ancestors' persecution at the hands of the British affected de Gaulle's behaviour: "I would say so. History has a lot to do with it."

When de Gaulle resigned after losing a referendum in 1969 he sought refuge in Ireland, spending six weeks in Kerry and Connemara before visiting Dublin.

"It was a kind of instinct which brought me to Ireland," he said in a speech at Dublin Castle. "Perhaps it was because of the Irish blood which flows in my veins – for we always come back to our origins – but also because it was Ireland."

When Eamon de Valera received de Gaulle warmly at Áras an Uachtaráin, some 30 members of the McCartan clan were invited, including the father and brother of Seán McCartan. De Gaulle had declined their invitation to visit Co Down, because it was still attached to the UK.

'The great giraffe'

John Montague

Pierre Joannon, Ireland's consul general on the Côte d'Azur, compared de Gaulle and de Valera at length in his 1991 book *De Gaulle and Ireland*. Both were devout Catholics with a "mystical conception" of their national destiny. Both had led resistance movements and both failed to achieve their goals. Dev did not reunite Ireland, and de Gaulle was cast aside by the country whose grandeur he struggled to restore. Forty-five years later, France reveres him.