

The Absent Prince

In search of missing men

a family memoir

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The Absent Prince

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*Absent thee from felicity awhile
And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain
To tell my story*

Hamlet Act 5, Scene 2
William Shakespeare

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Introduction

When my parents died in the late 1990s, I inherited a great many papers and documents. What I discovered about my family shocked me and yet, I realised that by choosing not to throw away their letters and journals, Peter and Lea had made a courageous and far-reaching decision: they had bequeathed me a gift. As their only child, I understood that if I wished to tell their story fully and honestly, I needed to consider their lives and the lives of my grandparents and great grandparents, in a wider context and, above all, without judgement or reproach.

Peter and Lea met at a tuberculosis sanatorium in Davos in 1946. Peter was studying at St. John's College, Cambridge. Lea, who had left school at fifteen, was a dental assistant. In 1951, my father went to the United States where he spent four years at Groton School in Massachusetts. He taught the sons of the gilded elite, worked as a yardsman in the Chicago Stockyards and travelled across the Atlantic in the heyday of the great ocean liners. Peter and Lea married in 1955 when they were in their late thirties. Due to her history of TB, Lea was denied a visa to join her husband in the United States; reluctantly, Peter returned to the UK. In 1959, they founded The School of English Studies, Folkestone where Peter became a pioneer in the development of the teaching of English as a Foreign Language.

Lea, homesick for her native Switzerland and still struggling with the side effects of tuberculosis, returned home for long periods of time. Peter, ever in pursuit of new and cutting edge

teaching methods, travelled extensively. He taught in China shortly after the death of Mao Tse-tung and in Bulgaria during the Cold War. Whenever my parents were separated, they wrote each other long letters: my father's are passionate and eloquent; my mother's, heartfelt and sad.

The Absent Prince follows the chronology of diaries and personal letters across several generations. I have endeavoured not to judge actions, only to reflect on choices and decisions. In writing, I introduce my own story when it is relevant and when I recognise the unconscious repetition of family dynamics.

Some names have been changed to protect anonymity.

Chapter One

The Faithful and the Faithless

I'm very fond of newspaper vending machines because they are so delightfully un-twenty-first century. They are entirely mechanical, have no moving parts and only accept coins. But their days are numbered. Before too long, the only remaining example will be on display at the National Museum of American History in Washington.

When I drive long distances in America I like to pull up in small towns, park my car on Main Street, offer up my seventy-five cents for a local newspaper and settle down in an unchained coffee shop. I give myself over to understanding the lives people lead in communities such as Monroe, Wisconsin or Beaufort, North Carolina and the section of the paper that allows me to do this most fully is the obituary page. From an obituary I get a sense of what was important to a person; the tone of writing tells me how the deceased was seen by others; I learn about family and personal tragedies, the opportunities offered during a lifetime and the consequences of accepting or declining those opportunities.

In 1978 my father, Peter O'Connell, was living in Bulgaria where he heard tell of an old woman in the mountains near Sofia who could accurately predict the day of your death. Dad told me of his intention to visit her: he thought it would be useful to know how many years he had left, so he could

prioritise his interests and plan his time better. I never had the courage to ask him about his visit, but I often wondered whether he lived his life differently with an anticipated date of death forever in mind. It's not something you can easily forget; unless you develop Alzheimer's, which my father did, so perhaps that fact got swallowed up with so many of the others. I wonder too whether the date the oracle predicted turned out to be the correct one: September 5th, 1998.

I was on a sailing boat in Narragansett Bay, off the coast of Rhode Island, when I heard the news that my father was dying. I was a hostage to circumstance, unable to return to land until the following day and I went below deck in search of solitude. On the wall of the cabin I read these lines from the poem *Merlin and the Gleam* by Alfred, Lord Tennyson:

*And so to the land's
Last limit I came--
And can no longer,
But die rejoicing,
For thro' the Magic
Of Him the Mighty,
Who taught me in childhood,
There on the border
Of boundless Ocean,
And all but in Heaven
Hovers The Gleam.*

I found the words soothing and oddly appropriate. My father had a profound need to believe in something beyond the limitations of time and space and he spent a lifetime seeking to

make a spiritual commitment, to offer his devotion to a god who would protect him from the turbulence and uncertainty of life. Shortly before he died, he wrote in a letter to his aunt: *I wish most heartily that I could find it possible in my heart and in my mind to accept the gospel of Christ. I have prayed often and fervently for faith but there is only silence.*

In a talk I gave at a memorial dinner in 1999 to celebrate the life of my father, I said that the religion with which Peter most identified was Buddhism: 'It's the only one which makes any real sense,' he used to say. Twenty years later, having read his letters and diaries, I recognise that sense had little to do with it. He settled on Buddhism rather like a butterfly alights on a bluebell. It was a feeding station, a brief opportunity to rest awhile before resuming his lifelong search for meaning and connection. Peter pursued many different traditions, from Christian Science to Indian mysticism, but like a homing pigeon, he invariably circled back to his Catholic roots. Throughout his life he remained both repelled and captivated by Christianity.

Our lives are conditioned by our collective inheritance, our genetic formula, the conditions of the present and our biographical choices. If the first three are especially damaged, the ability to productively manage the last can be significantly affected. I am interested in the threads that weave family tapestries: the warp threads on the loom that are set up under tension, the ones created by war and exile, by death, loss and grief. The weft threads pass back and forth across the warps, creating the story and shaping the lives of individual family members. Eventually the warps are obscured by the relentless movement of the wefts, but they remain, holding the picture in place, unconscious sources of the difficulties we continue

to weave today.

*You have to do your own growing, no matter how tall your
grandfather was*
Abraham Lincoln

My grandfather, Harry O’Connell, lived with us until he died in 1968 when I was nine years old. Grandpa spent a lot of time in his room. As a small child, I was curious to know what he did in there every day. One afternoon, I crept along the corridor and looked through the keyhole. He was resting in bed, and I was shocked to see a huge hole in his leg. I felt a combination of horror and betrayal. Why hadn’t my grandfather told me about this? We were a team, he and I. I would climb onto his lap and lay my head on his chest, listening to the thump, thump, thump of his beating heart, inhaling the smell of whisky and pipe tobacco and feeling the scratch of his tweed jacket against my cheek. He called me NGF – ‘The Nicest Girl in Folkestone’ or the ‘Naughtiest’, and we had an unspoken understanding that the first version belonged to him. When my parents went out for the evening and left him in charge, he allowed me absolute freedom to do what I wanted; this included watching hours of television, often until I decided for myself to switch off and go to bed. My father had a very strict policy about television. Every morning he and I would sit down with the TV section of the newspaper in order to allocate my daily allowance, both in terms of time and suitability.

So, Grandpa had a secret and it was clearly a big one; one that he couldn’t share with me. I wondered who he talked to

about his leg with the hole you could poke a stick through and how it came to be there.

Harry was born in Ireland in 1891, the seventh of eight children. When he was nine years old, his eldest brother, Jack, was banished from the family home for dating a Protestant girl. My great-grandfather, Henry, left money on the kitchen table with a note, instructing his son to buy a one way ticket to America. No-one knows for sure what happened to Uncle Jack, but it's thought that his outspoken political opinions led to his early death in a street fight.

Harry was sent to St Patrick's College, Cavan on a clerical scholarship and then to the National Seminary. He became increasingly disillusioned with the hypocrisy of the clergy. Having witnessed an intoxicated priest lose his balance in the choir loft and fall to an ignominious death on the altar, Harry renounced the Catholic church. He enrolled in medical school but was repulsed by the blood and gore of the dissecting room. Eventually, with all his options exhausted, Harry left Ireland for England. At the outbreak of war in 1914, he applied, unsuccessfully, to join His Majesty's Navy, eventually signing up as a private with the Royal Fusiliers. He spent the next two years on the Western Front.

Unlike Jack's misdemeanour, a *spoiled priest* could not so easily be concealed, and when Harry left Ireland to fight for the Protestants, he became the second son to be ostracised by the family.

A young woman leaves Ireland and moves to England. A year later she returns, wearing elegant clothes and expensive jewellery. Her mother asks her where she got the money to buy these fine things: 'While I was in England, I became a prostitute,' she answers. The mother is horrified: 'You became

a what?’ The daughter repeats that she became a prostitute, to which her mother replies: ‘Oh, thank goodness. I thought you said you became a Protestant’.

I laughed out loud when my cousin Dominic told me this joke, but in the same moment, I understood the profound sense of betrayal my great-grandfather would have experienced as a result of the choices made by his two sons. Oliver Cromwell’s armies arrived in Ireland in 1649 and began killing Catholics and confiscating their land. He outlawed their religion, denied them the right to vote or receive an education and banned all Irish literature and music. Being Catholic was central to Irish pride and identity and aligning yourself, in any way, with a Protestant was seen as a betrayal of the worst kind.

Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.

The Gospel of John 15:13

My grandfather fought at the Battle of the Somme and was wounded at High Wood in July 1916. The Royal Fusiliers suffered particularly high losses, including all their officers. Harry had been given his stripes back in England, but had turned them in upon being told that, as an officer, he could no longer go out drinking with his mates.

Much has been written about the bloody and pointless slaughter at the Battle of the Somme and the horrific conditions the soldiers experienced: the relentless exploding of shells and machine gunfire; the liquid mud in the trenches; the icy duckboards from which a man could slip and drown in water

only a few feet deep; the smell of latrines and rotting corpses, the rats, the lice, the trench foot and the sickly-sweet smell of gangrene. There was no comfort at the end of a day, no hot bath and clean pyjamas, no loving warmth. At daybreak, each soldier was issued with a daily ration of alcohol in the hope that doping him with whisky would stop him from going mad with fright. Every man carried a field dressing and this was the first line of treatment for the wounded – one soldier caring for another. They fought on, maintaining a bravado beneath which lay extraordinary tenderness and an often unbroken bond of loyalty.

The war poet, Robert Graves, who fought at High Wood, observed that religious devotion during World War One was rare. He describes a Catholic priest, offering his blessing to a group of soldiers as they prepared for battle, rallying them with the cry that if they died fighting for the good cause, they would go straight to Heaven. One can only imagine that the German Catholic priests inspired their troops with the same sentiment.

The following is taken from a letter written by my father in 1990:

Harry and his section were on a break in their trench, rifles resting against the back wall. A German sniper had positioned himself in clear view of every 'Tommy' in the trench. Suddenly there was a shot and a bullet went through the barrel of the first rifle. A pause and then another. The British soldiers got the message and began signalling bulls or near misses. The German sniper shot through every rifle and avoided every man in the British trench. I've always been grateful to that

German and realise that I owe my life to a good sport (but a bad soldier, I suppose).

I once rescued a sharpnose shark in North Carolina. It had got caught between two rocks and was lying in shallow water, languidly slapping its tail fin. Its eye was a pale iridescent green circle and the unearthly beauty of it made me gasp. When I looked into that shark's eye, I saw nothing that made me afraid, only the splendour and vulnerability of another living creature. I flipped the shark over with the help of a branch and, having recovered, it returned to deep water. I felt oddly elated afterwards, like I'd done a really good thing. I'd saved a life, even if that life would have been lost, sooner or later, to a Core Sound fisherman or to another sea creature: that sharpnose was alive because of me. What I felt was a drop in the ocean compared to what the German sniper must have experienced. Perhaps some of those resting Royal Fusiliers went on to die in battle; maybe some like Harry O'Connell survived the war, fathered children and lived a long life. My life, as it came to me through my father and my grandfather, owes a debt of the utmost gratitude to a German whose name I do not know, whose face I would be unable to recognise in a photograph, but whose memory is anchored and honoured in our family.

In July 1916, two British cameramen were sent to the Western Front to compose a pictorial record of World War 1. In one frame, the camera pans a company of Royal Fusiliers. The men stare unflinchingly into the lens, some smile and wave their caps and rifles; one man is wearing a German *Pickelhaube*. Did he find the helmet lying on the field of battle or did he have to kill the *Boche* by running his bayonet into the soldier's soft

flesh, cracking ribs as he twisted it and withdrew the blade? Did my grandfather kill Germans with his bayonet too? I suppose he must have done. I pause the film and scan the faces, hoping to recognise Grandpa, but I don't see him. I wonder whether some of those soldiers knew Harry and how many of them were to die in the battle for High Wood?

On his 25th birthday, my grandfather was shot in the right leg, and a piece of shrapnel from an exploding shell pierced his lung. When Private O'Connell arrived at the military hospital in Southsea, he was told that his leg would have to be removed as gangrene had begun to spread. Fortunately, his cousin, who was a well-known doctor in the area, examined the leg and insisted that it was not to be amputated. Thus began a period of care and convalescence and, for Harry, the promise of a gentler and kinder life.

Harry's ward sister, Grace Arnold, was much loved by the soldiers in her section. She was known for her kindness, her raven black hair and lavender blue eyes. In spite of stiff competition, Harry's Irish charm captivated beautiful Nurse Arnold and on January 5th, 1918, Harry and Grace married in a Protestant ceremony in South London. In December 1918, a month after the war ended, their son Peter was born.



Harry and Grace on their wedding day, 1918

*When I go from hence, let this be my parting word, that what
I have seen is unsurpassable*

Rabindranath Tagore

According to Peter, his father rarely spoke about the war and, when pressed for details, would simply say: 'It was the greatest experience of my life'. How does a man find words to speak about such things? How does he integrate his battle memories into a post-war life and his subsequent roles as a husband and father? Harry O'Connell and many thousands like him fought, not for God and Country, but for each other. They went into battle out of love and loyalty to their brothers in arms. There is a fellowship of fate during war that has a quality and depth that seems to take precedence over everything that follows, even family. At the core of extreme physical pain, aching loss and lifelong grief, lies love.

In his autobiography, published in 2007, Harry Patch, the last surviving soldier of WWI, revealed that Armistice Day was not the day he remembered the fallen. His Remembrance Day was September 22nd, 1917, the day his pals died in battle. He was, he explained, always very quiet on that day, and didn't want anybody talking to him.

Every year, my grandfather resisted celebrating his birthday, insisting that he didn't want to see a show in London or go to The Tavernetta in Folkestone for dinner. How can a man continue to celebrate the day of his birth when it coincides with the day he almost lost his life, with the day so many of his friends lost theirs? July 16th was Grandpa's Remembrance Day, the day he lost his pals and, like Harry Patch, he didn't want anybody talking to him.

On July 21st, 1969, my father woke me in the early hours of the morning and told me that something very important was about to happen. He carried me into the sitting room where I was astonished to see my mother and the au pair sitting in front of the television. I had already had my daily quota of 'the idiot's lantern' as Dad called it, so I knew that this must be something very important indeed. I am grateful to my father for not leaving his ten-year-old asleep in bed that night, for recognising the significance of Neil Armstrong's: 'One small step for man, one giant leap for mankind'. Thirty years later I had a brief encounter with the astronaut Eugene Cernan at a watch fair in Switzerland: The last man on the moon was advertising the first watch on the moon. He had recently published his autobiography and as I was curious to see a moonwalker

close up, I stood in line for the book signing. His inscription reads: *For Una – Dream the Impossible – Gene Cernan*. In the final chapter Cernan is in the garden with his five-year-old granddaughter and she points up into the sky at her grandfather's moon. Cernan, trying to use words and ideas that a small child will understand, explains that it's far, far away in the sky, out where God lives. The little girl looks at him in amazement and says she hadn't realised that 'Poppie' had gone to Heaven when he went to the moon.

Like the Twelve Apostles, the Twelve Moonwalkers were missionaries for mankind, but they were not men of God; they were test pilots, men who could exercise self-control whilst facing the ever present possibility of death. If the computer system failed or if they sprung a leak in their suits, they would die. Pete Conrad, when asked what it felt like to stand on the moon, replied: 'Super...really enjoyed it.' The more thoughtful answers seem to come much later, when the astronauts are old men. They speak of the moon's majestic beauty, of the blacker than black sky and the beautifully illuminated blue marble that we call Earth. Astronauts and soldiers face death with an immediacy that is rare, and this offers them an opportunity to recognise the vulnerability as well as the tender beauty of life on our planet.

The tendency to regard one's opponent as a fool or a knave, or both, is a deplorable feature of life. We should always be ready to acknowledge that the other man has motives as pure and ideals as lofty as those that we claim for ourselves.

Peter O'Connell, diary entry, July 1945

In 1934, Harry and Grace arranged for their fifteen-year-old son to correspond with a German boy. In the summer of 1935, Karl-Friedrich was invited to Wallington to stay with the O'Connells, and the following year Peter visited the Flinsbachs in Hamburg. The friendship between the boys continued after they left school.

In 1937, Karl-Friedrich writes:

Dear Peter, I am now in the Arbeitsdienst (working camp). At 5 o'clock we get up. After breakfast there is a flag display. At first it is very hard to work like a farmer but we have much fun and we are all so happy. In the afternoon we have drill but without weapons. Sometimes we hear dance music in the evening (but no jazz).

The letter is stamped with a swastika.

A year later, Karl-Friedrich writes from Hannover, where he is at university, studying to be an engineer:

It is already two years since I was in England. Oh Peter, I have a little homesickness to you and your parents. I spent there the best time of my live. Don't forget me, Peter. Your friend, Karl.

On December 31st 1938, Karl writes:

This Christmas we had a marvellous tree. My mother spread boiled starch over the branches and then shed salt on them. It looked like a tree covered with snow.

This was the last letter Peter received from his friend. He continued to write to him throughout the war, but he never heard back. In 1948, a letter arrived from Louise Flinsbach, Karl-Friedrich's mother:

*My dear Peter,
May I still call you so? In our thoughts you will always be Peter, the old friend of our Karl-Friedrich. We were so very glad hearing from you after such a long time. Alas, my Peter, our boy is missing since Stalingrad. Our hope for seeing him again diminishes more and more.
Peter, you may be assured that you were never forgotten by Karl-Friedrich and us. We have often spoken about you. Karl-Friedrich always mentioned your parents with great regard and affection.*

My grandparents could have chosen a French or Spanish penfriend for their son but they specifically picked a German boy. I wonder what went through my grandfather's mind as he made ready to welcome the son of a man who, just a few years earlier, might have put a bullet through his head? Or, then again, might not?

Harry was twenty-six years old when he married Grace, who was five years his senior. In view of the 700,000 British men who died during World War One, Grace would have felt fortunate to have found a returning soldier who was not only gentle and charming but still had all his limbs. The British Army had granted Harry a full disablement pension and he supplemented this with his inventions. He was initially quite successful, but, during the Depression, his business ventures began to fail with

increasing regularity.

Grace Arnold came from a family of successful entrepreneurs. Her maternal grandfather, George Leonard Turney, was a factory owner, the Mayor of Camberwell and a governor of Dulwich College. A street was named after him in South London and he died a wealthy man. Grace's paternal ancestors were less distinguished. Her father, Charles Arnold came from a long line of commercial travellers, and it was a tremendous shock to GL Turney when his daughter Jessie eloped with the flour salesman. He broke off all contact with her and they were not reconciled until shortly before the birth of her tenth child, Dorrie, Grace's youngest sister.

Grace's brothers were adventurers and pioneers. Arthur fought in the Second Boer War. Bert and Edgar founded the town of Black Diamond in Canada, and Edgar later travelled to Western Australia where he became a gold miner. Leonard set up wireless stations in Egypt before founding MK Electric in 1919. It was into this trail-blazing, overtly masculine family that my grandfather married. Harry O'Connell grew up in more modest circumstances. The son of an Irish farmer, he had no experience of homesteading or gold-digging in far-flung corners of the British Empire. He was a man in exile and, unlike the Arnold brothers, Harry did not feel the steady hand of his male ancestors guiding him from behind. He was viewed with suspicion by his swashbuckling brothers-in-law, who questioned whether the young Irishman would be a good husband to their sister Grace.

When Grace was sixteen years old, her mother died of pneumonia, and she was left to care for her father and raise her three younger siblings. My great-grandfather suffered from cerebral

thrombosis and his increasing paralysis gradually altered his once kindly personality. It was not until he died when Grace was twenty-five that she found herself free to live her own life. Her choices, as an unmarried woman in Edwardian England, would have been limited. She became a nurse and, when war broke out, she was assigned to the Portsmouth military hospital to care for wounded soldiers returning from the Western Front.

Peter often spoke about his mother's kindness and her ability to create a container for men whose minds and hearts were as broken as their bodies. Grace had spent nine years caring for her father, a man who had won regimental prizes for swordsmanship in the Yeomanry Cavalry and who must have felt deeply frustrated by his advancing paralysis. I imagine my grandmother secretly welcomed the flirtations of the soldiers at Southsea hospital. She had made great sacrifices in her young life and the gentle, yet persistent attentions of Private Harry O'Connell must have soothed her sad heart. After years of caring for others, Grace yearned for solid ground, for someone dependable and kind who would take care of her. Harry had a hole in his leg, but otherwise his wounds would have seemed minor.

Maybe Harry nurtured the same dream. At last, he had found someone who would love and care for him. Finally, he could belong somewhere and to someone. Grace was beautiful and compassionate, but she also understood the ugliness and the grief of war. She and Harry knew what it meant to watch men die, men with whom they had created a bond of friendship. Harry and Grace were soul mates; they were two peas in a pod.

Harry never took Grace home to meet his family in Ireland and not simply because his new wife was an English Protestant.

Following the Easter Rising and the Irish war of Independence, men like my grandfather were no longer welcome in Ireland. As a Catholic Irishman who had voluntarily served in the British Army, he belonged neither to the unionists of the north nor to the republicans of the south. In March 1918, when conscription was introduced in Ireland, many Irishmen declared that they would take to the hills or die fighting in their homes rather than join the British Army.

Harry and Grace's marriage, according to my father, was not a happy one. Peter's perspective, I came to realise, was coloured by his own experiences and the challenges he faced as an only child of separated parents. His family narrative was reduced to good and bad, believer and non-believer, the faithful woman and the faithless man.

I have very few photographs of my father's childhood and no letters, diaries, papers or books. The family home was bombed during The Blitz and nothing survived; nothing but my grandmother's bible. The black leather is worn to a crumbling brown and on the inside cover is a dedication:

'Be ye kind one to another'

To Gracie with love from Harry, Sept. 1926

The full verse, taken from Ephesians, 4:32 is:

Be ye kind one to another, tender hearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you.

Below Harry's words, Grace has written in a firm hand: *Christ the solid Rock I stand, All other ground is sinking sand.* I feel sad that Harry's ground was so unsteady; sad that Grace was unable to lean into him in her search for affection and protection.

Harry O'Connell was a man untethered, afloat in a vast ocean without islands. He had ceased to belong to his family, his country, his religion and, for the rest of his life, he struggled to recover a sense of solid ground. I never knew my grandfather to get angry or sad, and he was rarely joyful. I imagine that by the time I was born, his grief had withdrawn to a place so deep that no-one could hear the weeping. He signed his birthday cards to me with a simple, one-word 'Grandpa'; no good wishes, jokes or reflections. He had no hobbies, no male friends; he never went for walks or out to dinner. He rarely left Folkestone except once, in 1961, when he joined my parents on a holiday to Switzerland. In spite of his reclusive tendencies, Harry was extremely popular. Perhaps, due to his own unspeakable experiences, he acquired the reputation of being a good and gentle listener, especially with young people. My cousin, Nigel Metcalfe, remembers Grandpa as a quiet man who offered very little of himself. *When he did speak though, you listened carefully because what he said was invariably thoughtful and well considered.* Every evening at six o'clock, Harry would enjoy a large malt whisky, and when asked if he took water with his whisky, he replied: *Water rots your boots, imagine what it does to your stomach. The only thing to take in whisky is more whisky.* I suppose he had a drinking problem, although I never saw him drunk. He was mellow and charming and no-one could have imagined the aching grief caused by his wartime experiences, and the huge hole it blew through his heart.

In 1974, a Frenchman, Philippe Petit, walked across a wire fastened between the Twin Towers of the World Trade Centre in New York. He had no safety harness and over a period

of forty-five minutes, Petit made eight crossings. The walk was unauthorised, but no-one was willing to risk either a rescue attempt or an arrest mission for fear that the young man might fall the quarter-mile to his death. It strikes me that my grandfather's life, after the age of 25, was a kind of internalised version of Petit's journey along the tightrope; it required tiny steps, a Zen-like focus and a very small world. Harry survived by a process of concentrated withholding, both of his joy and his rage. He rarely judged or advised, he never enthused or shared; he simply listened. For those who knew him, his priest-like ability to pay attention was a great gift. For those who loved him, for those, like his son, who needed his guidance and approval, his warmth and engagement, it was a profound loss.

One of my favourite obituaries is for Beulah Mae Whitehead of New Bern in North Carolina, who died in 2015 at the age of 90. She had eight great-grandchildren, thirteen great-great-grandchildren and was a lifetime member of the Missionary Baptist church. In my imagination, Beulah Mae cradles her great-great-grandbabies, speaking softly and welcoming each one into her large and faithful family.

All I know about my own great-great-grandmother in Ireland is the name of one of her daughters, born during the early years of the Irish Potato Famine. Eliza Daly, my great-grandmother, married and gave birth to eight children, the seventh of whom was my grandfather. I don't know anything about Eliza's experiences during The Great Hunger, when a million died and a million emigrated. I don't know whether her memories as a

small child affected her ability to be a kind and loving mother towards her many children, or whether terrible hardship formed a brittle shell around her good heart. My great-grandfather, Henry, was ten years older than Eliza and would have experienced the Famine as a young boy. I have never known raging hunger; I have never had to witness those close to me starve and die simply because English Protestants hated me for who I was – an Irish Catholic. Harry had hoped to escape what he considered to be his father's narrow political and religious views, but an unconscious loyalty guided him to Northern France, where he witnessed his friends die on the battlefields simply because the 'Boches' had been taught to hate him and his comrades for who they were – 'Tommies'.

Harry's nemesis was his brother-in-law, Jack Metcalfe, who had been raised Anglican but converted to evangelical Christianity after the war. In 1917 he married Grace's sister, Dorrie. Together, Dorrie and Jack founded The Wallington Bible Institute. Jack was a charismatic preacher, and all but three of the ten Arnold siblings joined his church.

My father's religious upbringing was complex and conflicted. My grandfather had lost his faith in the Catholic seminary and my grandmother, who had been raised as a Baptist, found a natural fit with the doctrinal certainty of The Wallington Bible Institute. Peter remembers his mother sitting for long hours at the table, reading and annotating her bible with a pencil. Judging from some of her references, Harry was already struggling with debt and drinking regularly in the public houses of Wallington.

Publicans and debtors are the scum of the earth and are synonymous with wickedness. They have no religious status, writes Grace

in her Bible.

She considers too the sin of adultery:

Adultery is like stealing. According to Hebrew law, restitution can be made for stolen goods. The Adulterer, however, can never make restitution for his sin.

Harry's Catholic family would have agreed with Grace's views on adultery; equally, the O'Connells would have considered the status of their Protestant daughter-in-law to have been beneath that of a prostitute. Jack Metcalfe told his sons that he would rather they married prostitutes than Roman Catholics, and his youngest son, following in the footsteps of his Aunt Grace, duly married a Catholic. Harry must have struggled to understand how a political battlefield in France could so swiftly have been replaced by a religious war zone in Surrey. Harry's denial of religion and Grace's salvation through religion created a perfect storm, and Peter stood on the fault line, struggling with a small boy's inability to choose between two people, both of whom he loved and depended on for his physical and emotional survival. This early religious conflict resulted in powerful feelings of guilt and alienation that my father struggled with throughout his life.

The three youngest Arnold daughters, Grace, Ruby and Dorrie, gave birth to three sons within three months of each other, and the boys were christened together in April 1919. The cousins, Peter O'Connell, Toby Fleming and David Metcalfe, grew up together and remained very close throughout their lives. All three followed in the footsteps of their great-grandfather Turney, and became successful and respected men in their

chosen fields.

Harry O'Connell had no visible ancestors, no religion and no palpable pride in where he came from. Peter's internal landscape, therefore, resembled a tree with roots and leaf cover on one side, shallow earth and bare branches on the other. It would have made it hard for him to feel anchored and balanced in life. My father was raised as an Arnold, surrounded by a clan of aunts, uncles and cousins. The O'Connells belonged to the past, and my grandfather's family was as good as forgotten.

Peter and his cousin Toby attended Dulwich College, a prestigious private school where my father proved to be a natural scholar and a conscientious student. In 1937, shortly before he was due to sit his final examinations, the Headmaster called Peter into his study and explained that his father had not paid his fees and regrettably, therefore, he could no longer remain as a pupil at the school. Unable to take his exams, he lost his place at Cambridge to read Medicine, and the shame of this experience, together with the unspoken rage he felt towards his father, was something Peter carried with him for the rest of his life. Shortly before he died, at a time when Alzheimer's had claimed most of his mind, my father called me, sounding distressed and apologetic. He told me that he was in the debtors' prison in Dover for non-payment of taxes, and he hoped I would forgive him for the terrible shame he had brought on the family. I thought of all the times Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs had returned his cheques, explaining that they had already received his income tax payment for the year, and I felt helpless in the face of his desperation. I realised too that the shame belonged to his father, and that Peter had dutifully carried it for almost sixty years.

Peter left Dulwich College in 1937 and found a job as a clerk at Guthrie and Co East India Merchants. He referred to this period in his life as *deeply humiliating, bleak and shameful*. The threat of war offered an opportunity for liberation, and Peter tried repeatedly to join Her Majesty's Navy. Eventually he wrote a letter to the First Sea Lord:

My Lord,

I am extremely anxious to serve in His Majesty's Navy in time of war, and as all my efforts to enter any of the Reserves have failed, I am presumptuously writing to you as Head of the Navy. It was my ambition to be a naval surgeon, but, owing to financial difficulties, I had to give up medicine. One volunteer is worth ten pressed men and the only obstacle to a logical transfer from the Territorial Army is red tape or the good King's regulations. I feel sure that a few words spoken in official quarters would be sufficient to extricate me from this difficulty and enable me to join the RNSR. I should be extremely grateful to your Lordship for any assistance in this matter.

*I have, Sir, the honour to be, Your obedient servant,
Peter O'Connell.*

Peter never did fulfil his ambition to become a naval officer. Instead, he joined the Royal Signals and, in 1941, he was posted to Northern Ireland: *I went into the army, very happy to be away from the troubles at home*, he writes.

In February 1942, after just eight months as a serving soldier, Peter was invalided out of the war with suspected tuberculosis. He spent four months at a hospital in Belfast, and was

subsequently transferred to a sanatorium in Bournemouth. I always had the impression that my father felt rather inadequate, even humiliated by his lack of military distinction during World War II, especially in comparison to his two cousins: Toby served on a minesweeper in the Red Sea and David was decorated for his bravery at Dunkirk.

During his year of enforced rest, Peter read a great many books and kept a literature journal, in which he wrote detailed summaries and reflections. It was an attempt to use his time fruitfully, and also perhaps a way of regaining the momentum of his lost schooldays at Dulwich. He critiqued his own work, and in the margins, offered himself suggestions for improvement. The books, which he borrowed from the Belfast Public Library, ranged in subject matter from economics, divorce reform and politics, to African missionaries, American history and Arctic exploration. His favourite subject, however, was Irish history and the Catholic Church.

For more than two decades, Ireland and the O'Connells had existed beneath the radar, and it was during his time in Belfast that Peter first made contact with his family across the border: *I spent my days serving the King Emperor and my evenings mixing with the rebels*, he writes. In Virginia, County Cavan, he was fed and loved by his aunts and he drank whisky with his cousins, developing a particularly close bond with his father's namesake, Harry O'Connell.

My grandfather's sister, to whom he was closest both in age and affection, was Molly. When Harry was invalided out of the war in 1916, his medals were sent to Aunty Molly. My cousin Ralph told me that as children, he and his siblings had been warned by their mother never to touch the suitcase on top of

the wardrobe because it contained their Uncle Harry's war medals. 'One day,' she told her children, 'he'll be back to collect them, and we must keep them safe'. In the West of Ireland, it is still common to say to a child: 'To whom do you belong?' rather than: 'What's your name?' After my father died in 1998, I began researching my Irish family history. I telephoned every O'Connell I could find in the Virginia phone book, believing, correctly, that once I told them 'to whom I belonged', they would point me in the right direction. At a family reunion a few months later, my cousin Ita approached me and said in a quiet voice: 'We've been waiting for you. We knew that one day you'd come'.

There is a generational amnesia that, to a greater or lesser degree, appears to be present in all families, and my father's interest in Ireland was something he found distinctly confounding: *It's strange how strong the pull of Ireland is to 'exiles'. I observe with some amazement the same force in myself. Born and raised entirely in England with an English mother and dozens of English relations, I still find myself cheering for Ireland at Twickenham and I have a very warm feeling for the country and its people. God bless Ireland.* I can relate to this pull. I have three passports, and for the past twenty years I have chosen to travel exclusively as a citizen of the Republic of Ireland.

One of the books my father read during his time in Belfast was *The Irish Republic* by Dorothy Macardle. It documents the years between 1916 and 1926, the period known as 'The Crossness'. My father writes with rage and indignation about the unconscious colonising of Ireland by the English. Peter, at twenty-four years old, would have known all about the insoluble nature of divided loyalties, of England against Ireland,

Protestant against Catholic and the confusion he felt about the ways of his mother and those of his father.

In 1966, my grandfather decided to have the walls of his bedroom painted in repeating bands of green, white and orange. My mother, who had a flair for interior design, was appalled by this display of bad taste. The colours, I realised many years later, are those of the Irish flag. In 1969, the year after my grandfather died, my father took us to Ireland where he made a big to-do about explaining the flag's historical significance: green symbolises Irish republicanism and the Roman Catholics; orange represents William of Orange and the Protestants, and the white band in the centre is the hope for eventual peace between the two.

In July 1942, my father was discharged from the Bournemouth Sanatorium and relieved of his wartime duties with the Royal Signals. Peter describes this period in his life as *the homeless years* when he cared for his mother, who was suffering with pulmonary tuberculosis, and drifted ever further away from his father. Through no fault of his own, he had seen very little warfare. Perhaps, if he had experienced more frontline action, he and Harry might have been able to share an understanding of what it meant to defend your country, kill your enemy and lose your friend to a foreign bullet. They may not have spoken about the things they had seen and done during two world wars, but the bond of shared experience, of physical and emotional trauma, might have provided Peter with an opportunity to reflect on the origins of Harry's silence, and the depths of his father's broken heart.

In the Spring of 1944, Peter and Grace were living at The Graham Hotel in Brighton, and it was from this address

that Peter applied to and was accepted by St John's College, Cambridge to read History. The war raged on, but for Peter life became gentler and kinder. He played cricket for Magdalene College, ate roast chicken and waffles with his friends, Lethbridge and Symons, punted to Grantchester for *Rupert Brooke* worship and swam in the Cam. In his diary of July 21st, he writes:

Midnight – the moon is shining between white lacy clouds and the gable heads and turrets of Second Court stand out dark against the pearly sky. It is at such times as this that the spirit of Cambridge speaks to those who have any ears at all. The beauty of the evening and a disturbed mind drew me away from Barkers' 'Greek Political Thought' as dusk fell and I wandered along the Backs, listening to the wind whispering in the long tresses of the willows and watching the moon glittering on the still waters of the Cam. Lethbridge and Symons appeared in the magic gloaming, swimming like a couple of nyads from Trinity Bridge up to the Bridge of Sighs. Puffing and dropping silver beads of moonlit water they climbed out onto the bank and we went back to Symons rooms in Third Court for coffee and a yarn. Coming back through Second Court the mystery and loveliness of this old Tudor building held me in a spell; the oriel window of the combination room gleamed in the moonlight and I could see the ghost of unhappy Charles proposing to the woman who became his devoted wife and evil genius, the ill starred Henrietta Maria. Ghosts thronged the shadowy court for John's has had close bonds with English history for the past 400 years and if all who have resided in Second Court and who have

become famous in their country's annals were to return, we could dispense with text books and learn our history orally. It would not be the most dispassionate and objective history, but it would certainly be vivid.

In order to supplement his grant, Peter followed in the footsteps of his maternal grandfather and worked as a travelling salesman during the long summer holidays. By day he peddled toilet seats in the East End of London and at night he returned to his rooms at the Cambridge Club on Montague St where he dined with the Principal of Gordon's College in Khartoum and the former Chief Justice in Singapore. It was a curiously conflicted life.

How pleasant and gracious life is in Cambridge! I'm longing for next year now I'm truly re-established in mind and body or at least within measurable distance of it. Thank God for Christian Science.

August 1945

During his first year at Cambridge, Peter abandoned his mother's evangelical Christianity and joined the Christian Scientist student group. Mary Baker Eddy, the founder of the movement, believed that prayer and bible study, combined with an understanding of science and medicine, could restore individual health and transform character.

Grace remained in Brighton, and in spite of the good sea air her tuberculosis did not improve. Her younger brother, Leonard, who had made his fortune with the invention of the three-pin plug, chose to gift his sisters, Grace and Ruby, the

sum of one thousand pounds each. Peter suggested his mother use the money to seek a cure in Switzerland and eventually, she agreed. In the late summer of 1946, therefore, Peter travelled to Davos in search of a sanatorium for his mother.