

Private Corgan and the Man from Kildare

By James M. McMenamin

Presented at the Meeting of
The Chicago Literary Club
February 22, 2021

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Behind Simpson's dead-mule barricade we made ready for attack from the circling redskins. The carcasses were soon stuck full of arrows, and Woods was winged in the shoulder.

Harry McInhill, retired international banker, published author, sometime lecturer, aspiring historian, proud member of the Literary Club, and budding genealogist, switched on his desktop computer, logged in to Newspaper.com on a hunch, typed in three data variables (name, year, and location), and waited. The “match” response, which he had no real expectation of receiving, came back within less than two seconds: a death notice in the upper right-hand corner, page nine, of the *San Francisco Examiner* dated March 10th, 1903, under the headline, “Answers Call on Other Shore”. It read, in the pretentious and exaggerated style of that era:

For James Corgan, twenty years a soldier in the Nation’s army, taps has sounded just as the country was about to reward him for his long and faithful service. There are few of these long-term men left in the line, and those few are treated kindly, when the time for discharge comes. Corgan lay in the Presidio Hospital eagerly watching and waiting for the documents from the Secretary of War which would grant him his discharge and a commission in the Soldiers’ Home at Washington. The other day the longed-for papers arrived, but just a few minutes ahead of them an unseen orderly from the Great Commander approached the grizzled old veteran bearing his release from life’s army, and his commission to enter the Soldiers’ Home across the Great Divide. Quick to obey a command from his superior officer, the old soldier answered the summons, and the papers from Washington were laid in his dead hands.

Over the course of the next several months, McInhill learned that the description of his great grandmother’s younger brother, James Corgan, Private, 7th US Infantry Regiment, was not wholly accurate. Corgan served almost twenty-eight years in the regular army. He was neither grizzled nor old at the time of his death, not yet having attained the age of 60. To judge from the few photos McInhill possessed, Corgan dressed nattily in collar and black silk tie or elegant

cravat when on furlough visiting family in Aurora, and all of this on the pay of a private, a rank he retained his entire career in uniform.

What possessed a man of education to serve at remote military outposts of the Old West on low pay and poor food for decades on end? How did Corgan endure years of mind-numbing tedium and poor housing in distant Montana, Colorado, and many other places interspersed but briefly by intense moments of action and terror? Corgan served four years in Utah during which the regimental record is silent as to the occurrence of a single event of note. Yet, this was a man who travelled as a raw recruit in 1875 by rail, steamboat, and foot over 1,700 miles with 196 other enlistees from Newport Barracks, Kentucky, to Ft. Shaw, Montana, only to arrive with three fewer men than had set out, all three killed by Indians, two with throats slit, and one scalped.

Corgan chased over 500 miles on foot after the Nez Percé Indians to fight at the Battle of the Big Hole in 1877. He was present at the conclusion of what many consider to be the last engagement of the Indian Wars, at the Battle of Leech Lake, Minnesota, in 1898. He travelled 326 miles by rail in 1894 to Grand Forks, N. Dakota, to help enforce a court order during the Great Northern Railway Strike of 1893-94 only to find further advance to Devils Lake impossible because, well, the railroad men were on strike.

Harry was simply flabbergasted at the quality and quantity of data he extracted from old Army reports, census returns, and other archival records, sourced mainly from the vast databases of genealogical websites. McInhill could sometimes pinpoint James Corgan's activity to an exact date and time of day, so long as one were prepared, as McInhill was, to do the deep dive.

If McInhill never was able to unlock the mystery behind his relation's choice of career, or the circumstances of it, his researches unlocked a wealth of unexpected, surprising, and even

counterintuitive information. McInhill was not surprised to learn that Indians as a general rule were better horsemen and better shots than the average US Army enlistee of the post-Civil War period, but he was amazed to read that the US Army enjoyed its greatest success in the Indian Wars when it fought not a horse, but on foot, and in winter.

It has been claimed that the enlisted men of the Old Army, that is from the time after the Civil War to the turn of the century, consisted mainly of drunks, deserters, bankrupts, and cheats. In *Frontier Regulars*, Robert Utley wrote: “*The New York Sun*’s charge that ‘the Regular Army is composed of bummers, loafers, and foreign paupers’ was only partially accurate: there were other undesirables as well: criminals, brutes, perverts and drunkards, to name a few. But there were also active youths seeking adventure, men of varying ability fleeing misfortune, and ‘foreign paupers’ who turned out to be excellent soldiers.” McInhill supposed that Private Corgan, an immigrant from Ireland, was one such as these, but he could never prove it or get at the motivation for 28 years of faithful service at the lowest rank of the US Army in isolated outposts of the Old West. Such service brought to mind the words of Milton’s Sonnet 19:

“God doth not need
Either man’s work or his own gifts; who best
Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best. His state
Is Kingly. Thousands at his bidding speed
And post o’er Land and Ocean without rest:
They also serve who only stand and wait.”

When in late winter 1903 the papers from Washington were laid in his dead hands at the Presidio Hospital, Private Corgan waited no more.

While pondering these matters in mid-August, 2020, Harry McInhill learned of the death of his great Irish friend, Grattan de Bermingham-Wheeler, the first of his close contemporaries to pass away. It hit hard. The death had nothing to do with Covid 19. It came, rather, from complications due to diabetes aggravated by an overfondness for claret and Butler's chocolates.

But for the pandemic, Harry would have flown over to Ireland for the funeral. Since that was impossible, he attended via Zoom meeting. It did not go well. Participants new to such arrangements failed to turn off their cameras and/or microphones. Before the funeral mass began, viewers were first 'confronted' by one fellow squirting ketchup liberally over a plate of scrambled eggs which he then proceeded to tuck into with determined relish. Then came the sound of a couple engaged in sidebar conversations and gossip of the most unrelated matters and scandalous nature. Sound quality from Ireland suffered terribly. It was probably to be expected the funeral director would exit the link, which he did, and so both the video and audio feeds were lost before the service began. Such is the decorum of Zoom funerals in the time of COVID-19.

Who, then, was Grattan de Bermingham-Wheeler? One eulogist wrote: "He was a cosmopolitan, a pluralist who, for effect, frequently concealed under the guise of, a man from the bog as he himself put it, a vigorous highly cultivated curiosity about other human beings". Another wrote: "He was a fine example of a type now fast becoming extinct. With genial outlook and attitudes fixed in the mid-20th century, or earlier, and quite unaltered as he moved through life, he yet was fascinated by, and closely informed about, the trends and details of modern politics: a socialite with an underlying serious purpose to his life."

Harry first met de Bermingham-Wheeler in 1977 when the man from Kildare, Ireland, was seconded to the Chicago head office of the bank that employed them both. Grattan arrived with an introduction to the Racquet Club, which he proceeded to patronize enthusiastically over

the course of the next six months, in the company of a group of congenial local bachelor members. While in Chicago, Grattan helped plan the itinerary of Harry's trip to Ireland with his parents and five siblings. It was embarrassing for Harry to recognize, especially when one is 7/8ths Irish as he is, that he knew nothing of Ireland, its history, geography, or people, but such was the case with Harry back then. Grattan's assistance in route choices and points of interest proved invaluable given his encyclopedic knowledge of his native land.

Although his home was in Ireland, Grattan spent most of his life, from the ages of 13 to 55, in England, and over many years he achieved success in bringing together people of opposing political perspectives. This he did, his friends said, in the firm belief that once talking to each other in neutral territory they might gain greater understanding and a tolerance of widely differing viewpoints. To this end, he hosted many gatherings at his family estate, Drummin, some 30 miles west of Dublin.

Born in 1947, Grattan was home-schooled until sent by his parents to Headfort, a private boarding school in County Meath, after which he attended Sherborne, in England, where the authorities described him as 'Irish, disorganised, but very good value'. Grattan completed his studies at Oxford University's Christ Church College, where he later said he first met all his best friends. Adrian Castle, a classmate from those years, recalled that Grattan, having evidenced an innate and already chronic reluctance to make up his mind about anything important, after two terms changed his course of study from History to Politics, Philosophy, and Economics. The broad consensus among his tutors, albeit couched in the civilized language in those days customary among Oxford dons, was that he was opinionated and should work harder. Yet Grattan was unabashed when recounting how one of his tutors, not a lone voice, wrote: 'He

should think before he speaks - and one of his thoughts could with advantage be that he might conceivably be mistaken.'

Adrian also noted that Grattan gravitated towards the more agreeable realms of Oxford's social elite, and the boy from distant Kildare, deploying the charm which served him so well, perhaps too well, in later life and, without the benefit of well-placed family connections or a smart public school, was soon elected to the University's most socially sought-after dining clubs: the Bullingdon and Loder's. He was also an active member of the Oxford University Conservative Association. A third-class degree ensued, albeit in the upper half.

Leaving Oxford in 1969, after a certain amount of family prompting, Grattan looked around for a career. He first took up with a small firm of London stockbrokers. When it went out of business, Grattan changed direction, preferring, he then decided, the life of a soldier. Armed with a reference from the Dean of Christ Church, who opined that Grattan had 'plenty of determination and self-confidence' and was 'thoroughly honest and straightforward', he was accepted by the Household Cavalry. However, confronted with the reality of the sword drill, presentation, and punctuality beloved of the Guards Depot, he soon had second thoughts, and by the early-1970s had returned to the City, to be hired in 1976 by Dearborn Bank & Trust.

Three years later when McInhill was transferred to London, Grattan took the American under his wing; invited him to stay over a long weekend at the family's country house in Ireland; introduced him to a wide and deep social circle; and became a true friend, which he remained over the course of the next forty-one years. From 1979 onwards, Harry made well over a dozen visits to the de Bermingham-Wheeler home, a 250-year-old Georgian two-storey house set on 360 acres of parkland and pasture. Each visit was unique, each day full of activities: luncheons at Drummin or with friends, visits to historic sites or country houses, long walks across the

adjacent Bog of Allen, drives to famous gardens or parklands, and a dinner party almost every evening, with typically eight or twelve guests.

These gatherings, always candle-lit, were invariably animated and often bibulous affairs, with widely-experienced and talented, well-traveled, men and women. The parties went on very late into the early hours of the morning. It was not unusual to find oneself at two, or three, or even four o'clock in the morning sitting with Grattan in the drawing room finishing off the last of the dinner party's many, many, bottles of claret after the other guests had departed.

Peter Charles "Crackers" Graham, a colleague of Grattan's back then recalled just such memories as these when he telephoned McInhill on hearing the news of Grattan's passing. *I had come a day earlier, on a Thursday, Crackers said, to do joint calling with Grattan the next day on four Irish banks, followed by dinner that evening with two friends of mine. After that, we drove out to Drummin for a series of escapades around Ireland, heading west across an unseasonably cold and snowy Ireland to Kildare.*

On entering the courtyard of Drummin an hour or so later, we got out and began to remove our bags from the boot. Suddenly I was gobsmacked as a very large, pale white bird suddenly flew down onto the snowy ground beside me. As I stared in confusion, Grattan impatiently said "Pay no mind to the peahen."

This ornithological theme continued the next morning. I was awakened by the entrance of a business-like Russell Terrier, who marched proprietarily to a place where sunshine was streaming in between open shutters and slumped down on the warm spot on the carpet to snooze. It was then I heard noise outside and went to the same opening where I was astounded to discover Grattan dressed in his customary tweed jacket and necktie, walking across the sunny lawn, quacking (yes, quacking) as he went about strewing grain or cracked maize that was

promptly gobbled up by an appreciative conga line of fowl -- ducks, geese, guinea hens, turkeys, and, of course, a peacock and pea hen.

Later, we got back into our car and drove north up to County Monaghan and Castleblaney. As we approached the border town of Carrickmacross, Grattan began regaling me with stories of border violence and reciting an old saying "Twixt Carrickmacross and Crossmaglen there are no straight highways and very few straight men".

No sooner did we reach Carrickmacross, than we took a wrong turn and found ourselves down a dirty back alley next to two very thuggish and menacing looking men working on the engine of an old car. I immediately thought that it might be a situation where my innocent (and politically uninvolved) American accent should ask for directions, rather than Grattan's stentorian Oxbridge inflection. However, before I could open my door (the "gentlemen" were on Grattan's side of the car), Grattan cranked open his window, and, in a brogue as thick as Paddy's pig's asked "Would you be after tellin' me the way to Castleblaney?" They obliged, and we were soon back on the right road. I immediately began to tease Grattan about dropping into the vernacular; but Grattan kept insisting that he had never done any such thing.

After plenty of sunshine in county Monaghan, our long drive back to Kildare was in rain-soaked gloom. At Drummin, however, all was bustling with preparations for a dinner party. I think it was the next day, as nice a spring day as one could want, Grattan and I and a very pleasant young lady of Grattan's acquaintance went out to a sheep-filled meadow surrounding the ruined manor house and castle of the family later known as the Wellesleys - of Duke of Wellington fame - and watched a number of pregnant ewes dropping baby lambs as casually as a social climber would drop a name.

That evening, Grattan whisked me off to Westmeath to an ancient manor house which, at the time, was the home of the novelist and playwright J.P. Donleavy and his American wife, Mary. "Himself" was away, and Grattan warned me that all was not well in the Donleavy home. We arrived at dusk and after much banging on a front door that seemed a foot or more thick, some member of the noisy party within finally heard us and let us in. It was a most cheerful crowd, a dozen or more, as I remember, including a scion of the Guinness family with a keg of the company's eponymous beverage, several horsey ladies, a defrocked member of the Harvard faculty, and Mary herself, next to whom I sat during dinner.

A theme throughout the evening was teasing Mary concerning what she would do when Donleavy divorced her. At one point Grattan suggested that "Crackers here is about to become the heir to a great fortune." Mary immediately turned to me with friendly interest and asked, "How much?" I quickly changed the subject. I later heard that Mary, when eventually divorced, married a Guinness, and was even accused of having 'tapped a Guinness spigot or two' while still Mrs. Donleavy. Shocking!

These are adventures McInhill also remembers: a visit to the Donleavy's home at Levington Park; treks up Carbury Hill to the old castle; feeding the ducks at Drummin; Grattan's father firing off his shotgun from the master bedroom to scare rabbits away from the flower beds; getting hopelessly lost in 'Ballysloguttery' as Grattan invariably called back-of-beyond boglands. Grattan was most generous with his hospitality to McInhill and other friends during those years, both at Drummin and in London, often inviting Harry to his clubs: The Turf Club, Annabelle's, The Kildare Street Club in Dublin, and there were others besides. Because Harry and Grattan's flats were located only a few streets away from each other, as bachelors they frequently dined together, probably once or twice a week when no other entertainments or parties were on offer.

Like so many other Oxbridge graduates during the 60s and 70s, Grattan had been hired by an American bank at a time when dozens of them were rushing to establish branches in the very profitable Eurodollar markets of London. It was then thought essential to recruit graduates from Oxford or Cambridge if one were to gain entrée to the top British firms. Grattan was one of several such bankers hired by Dearborn Bank. It was also the golden age, the final days, of traditional relationship banking, a time before "Big Bang", before transactional banking changed everything. The old traditions were still observed. Harry specifically recalls the Branch's discount house broker coming round to Dearborn Bank's offices in Lombard St. as late as 1982 in top hat, as properly dressed partners in such firms then did, to discuss the money markets or purchase bills of exchange.

London in those days was still a tradition-bound place. When not out calling on clients, the banker's daily routine was unvarying. The officer staff arrived Monday through Friday a few minutes before 9:00 am to catch up on the latest business headlines and check the markets. The dealing room would call down to the lending officers to set loan margins, ask for credit limit increases, and so on. At 10 am the officers would repair to the 6th floor Colfax and Fowler-appointed drawing room for some of the best coffee in the City, always accompanied by digestive biscuits served by Oxtoby, the butler, in stripped trousers and short jacket. Having been in the employ of one or another of the several ennobled branches of the Baring banking family, Oxtoby had all the manner and bearing and reserve one would expect from a man of his profession. After coffee, officers would return to the 3rd floor to read that day's mail and telexes which secretaries would by then have opened, arranged, and distributed to each officer's desk.

Lunch with clients in the dining room off the top floor drawing room was always scheduled at 12:45 for 1 pm, and announced by Oxtoby precisely at that time, after guests

and hosts had been offered a round of sherry, gin and tonics, or Bloody Marys. Stilton and port always finished off lunch, with cigars and cigarettes on offer. Back downstairs, the officers dictated call reports, replies to the day's mail, or arrangements for client meetings or trips abroad. By 6 pm, all staff were out of the office. All that is gone now. But a very agreeable existence it was and Grattan's luncheon guests were always the most amusing and entertaining.

On a personal front, despite accumulating many friends in London, Grattan remained star-crossed in love. The love of his life was a Chicagoan his friends thought would be a perfect match. However, Grattan's chronic reluctance to make important or difficult decisions, such as that of asking the girl to marry him, contributed to her finally going back home to America. His consequent sadness was perhaps softened by his inclination for gallant but innocent flirtations with attractive women, and in time he seemed to abandon romantic ideas.

Grattan served at Dearborn Bank for about 15 years up to the mid-90s. By then, there were only two commercial lending officers left and business was drying up or becoming insufficiently profitable. So, he moved on to the private banking practice at Bank of Ireland, Berkeley Square. He suffered some ill health during the 1990s and then, for that very reason, took early retirement at around age 55, returning to the family home at Drummin.

Though having occurred earlier than planned, Adrian Castle would say that Grattan's return to Ireland in fact presented him with the perfect backdrop to his memorable combination of gregarious friendliness, strongly held but well-informed opinions, and eccentricity. On the other hand, he could be infuriating, vacillating, stubborn, selfish and frightening - behind the wheel was the only place where he was decisive, and not in a good way. Already, a somewhat peevish nature was beginning to intrude, best reflected in the framed written warning his good-

natured friend Christopher Higgins presented him one birthday and which a bemused Grattan displayed with some pride on the mantelpiece above the front hall fireplace at Drummin:

I must ask anyone entering the house

never to contradict me

in any way

as it interferes with the functioning of

the gastric juices

and prevents me sleeping at night.

And yet, as Adrian Castle would attest, Grattan's life in Ireland retained the flavor of an age that in England and elsewhere had become scarce at least 50 years earlier. People still came regularly from far and wide to enjoy what remained, notwithstanding an increasing shortage of funds: unflagging, genial entertaining. His menus changed little. Mary Donegan, his long-suffering but devoted house-keeper for the final 21 years, would prepare a starter of onion and mushroom in a cream sauce or a large helping of smoked salmon. There followed roast lamb and boiled potatoes, then fresh fruit salad and, finally, a cheese platter, with coffee and/or port served in the drawing room with the inevitable fresh box of chocolates. Cocktails or champagne began the evening, followed at dinner by white Burgundy and good claret, of which there was an unfailing supply. Luncheons would edge towards dinner, and dinner 'into the second candle', as Grattan would say, with incessant talk from interesting, talented or well-informed guests.

Life with Grattan was never dull; his generosity was legendary; and his charm enabled him to get away with much and still be loved by all. To his dining-table, always attended in lounge suit or jacket and tie, he liked to invite people of influence in English and Irish politics, and at various times they included an ex-Taoiseach, Irish government ministers, members and

former members of the UK Parliament, writers, academics, English and Irish aristocrats, as well as locals from Kildare and adjacent counties: a deliberate mix of what he used to call ‘the front and the back of the church’.

When in London, he would preside over lengthy ‘Edwardian’ lunch-parties at the Turf Club or at Mon Plaisir, an old-fashioned French restaurant that he had discovered in Soho. There he would sit, now rather hunched and heavy, clothes a little threadbare, the wide bald brow reflecting his ready chuckle or else the measured tones of his opinions, imparted slowly and with emphasis. Sometimes his voice would reach almost a squeak of indignation, as he spoke of people or things to which he took exception: the EU, for example, he placed firmly in the same department as the devil and all his works.

Grattan’s amiable cantankerousness continued to increase. A second framed warning appeared above the front hall mantelpiece at Drummin:

Have the goodness to speak with me gently

Without raising the voice

Or contradicting me in any manner.

Among people of my age, noise and contradiction

Provoke the sudden increase in blood pressure

Gastric hyperactivity and cardiovascular trouble

And I become

Very rapidly disagreeable

All of this happened while Grattan’s infirmities grew and his unwillingness to address diabetes, insomnia, and lack of exercise persisted. Yet one never heard him complain. Never. Not at all. It was as if a man constitutionally incapable of complaint gave vent to the pain and

discomfort from which he must have suffered in curmudgeonly tetchiness. Grattan's Oxford classmate reported that as year followed year, with no refurbishment of the house and without a loving wife to help keep things in good order or to maintain Grattan himself in good shape, in the sense at least of ensuring that he took his medicines, the discomfort of staying at Drummin began to deter English friends, or more particularly their wives, from going over to see him.

Harry last saw Grattan in 2018 while visiting Dublin. By then, his friend from Kildare was on a cane. For the next two years, Harry was regularly informed of Grattan's deteriorating health by friends. Adrian Castle reported that when there were no guests, Grattan would dine alone, frequently off a large bar of chocolate and a bottle of claret. Such addictions no doubt exacerbated the diabetes which overtook him, after he had characteristically declined, as unsuited to him, an operation which might have given him a few more years of life. So, he died, seemingly content, in the family home, on August 24th, 2020, aged 73.

In his eulogy at Grattan's funeral, Hugh Fitzgerald, the prominent Irish barrister, said, "Grattan had inherited two great characteristics from his varied ancestry, an appetite for history and a talent for friendship. He was inebriated by history. He wove the national with the local, the political with the personal. He wanted to know not just what your politics were but who you were, who your father was, and your father's father and so forth, if at all possible, hoping to fetch up at some aristocratic terminus. One could not fail to mark the passing of such an individual", Hugh said, "or to mark what most of the people I've spoken to over the last few days felt was the end of an era. As is said in Ireland, Ní fheicfimid a leithéid arís (**nyee fekfimid a layhate a-reesht**). We will not see his like again". It amused Harry to consider that maybe, just possibly, Shakespeare had appropriated a translation of this ancient Gaelic dictum for act 1 of Hamlet:

"He was a man, take him for all in all,

I shall not look upon his like again."

In one of his rare poignant meditations on aging and death, the great American creator of light verse, Ogden Nash, captured the mood of the last several months of Grattan's life:

People expect old men to die,
They do not really mourn old men.
Old men are different. People look
At them with eyes that wonder when...
People watch with unshocked eyes;
But the old men know when an old man dies.

Though Harry McInhill does not consider himself an old man, he is in truth closer to being an old man than a young one. Not for Harry, however, to stand and wait, nor for Harry to forget Grattan de Bermingham-Wheeler. For so many inerasable memories, Harry could not but be profoundly grateful. He considers them to be the building blocks of a well-lived life. As to the question of old age, Ogden Nash has also, in his more characteristic style, written:

Senescence begins
And middle-age ends
The day your descendants
Outnumber your friends.

Which is true, as far as it goes. But in the end, it is not a question alone of how many friends you have; it is one of what steps you take to keep and cultivate them. McInhill intends to do no less, and where better than at the Literary Club? Harry yet lives to write again.

James M. McMenamin
February 22, 2021