

The Irish in Paris

For centuries, the passionate and sometimes persecuted Irish have felt a peculiar sympathy with Europe's self-anointed capital of sophistication.

BY MAX BYRD

BOTH INSIDE AND OUTSIDE FRANCE, SURELY THE most representative Frenchman of modern times is Charles de Gaulle, World War II hero and general, founding father, and first president of the Fifth Republic. With his magnificent Gallic horn of a nose, protruding like a great scalene triangle from beneath his brown kepi, he is a symbolic figure as recognizable as the Eiffel Tower, and almost as tall and inflexible. His very surname means “of Gaul,” and it links his identity firmly to the core national identity, that original semimythic Gaul of antiquity that Julius Caesar so neatly divided *in partes tres*.

It may come as a surprise, then, to recall that when de Gaulle was finally forced, partly by his own Gallic stubbornness, to leave the presidency in April 1969, he did not simply retreat from Paris to his family home in Colombey-les-Deux-Églises, in the heart of the Haut-Marne countryside. Most French people of a certain age will recall the very dramatic photographs snapped a few weeks later, among the last official ones ever taken of de Gaulle. They are in the customary black and white of newspaper photographs of that era, and they show him rigid and stiff backed as ever, hatless, dressed in a suit and dark overcoat, walking with a cane along a beach. A bleak

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gray ocean surf breaks off to his left, symbolic perhaps of his grim state of mind after his fall from power.

What most people will not remember is that the beach was near Heron Cove in West Cork, County Kerry, in the Republic of Ireland. And what almost nobody will remember is that, when asked, de Gaulle explained to a few straggling members of the press that he had come to Ireland in order to be near the cradle of his ancestors. De Gaulle himself was divided *in partes duas*: That most representative and identifiable of modern Frenchmen was part Irish.

Part Irish! Franco-Hibernian! It is a notably unsettling fact—as if Sir Winston Spencer Churchill had revealed that he was really Italian. But the lineage is not in doubt. De Gaulle’s maternal great-grandmother bore the not-quite-Gallic name of Marie Angélique McCartan and was herself the descendant of one Patrick McCartan, who fled from Ireland to France in 1645, in self-imposed exile.

This McCartan was one of many Irish rebels of the mid-17th century who found their lands confiscated by the occupying English and who instinctively took refuge in France, the eternal enemy of perfidious Albion. In a second wave of exiles, after the victory of William of Orange in 1690, Patrick McCartan’s son



After leaving the French presidency in 1969, Charles de Gaulle realized a lifelong ambition when he visited the land of his mother's ancestors, the McCartans. Photographers captured him walking near Heron Cove in County Kerry, Ireland.

John would join the famous Wild Geese of Ireland (*Oies Sauvages*) who came to France, formed the Irish Brigade of the French Army, and settled more or less permanently into French life, though always with one murderous eye fixed on the conquerors across the Channel.

De Gaulle's family history, however, belongs to a much greater pageant of immigration and split national identity. The Irish had been coming to France—to Paris in particular—well before 1645. And not all of the immigrants were soldiers. As is so often the case in European transplantations, there was a religious dimension.

In 1578, well in advance of the Wild Geese, Father John Lee, a priest from Waterford, Ireland, settled in a tiny building on the rue Saint-Thomas in the Latin

Quarter of Paris. And there he welcomed six young Irishmen as students in what he rather grandly declared was the “Collège de Montaigu” in the University of Paris (the earliest “official” Irish outpost I know of in Paris). Like the McCartans, Lee and his six young men had fled their ancestral island because of English oppression, in their case a succession of brutal antipopery measures known as the Penal Laws, which had effectively shut down Catholic seminaries all over Ireland. The Irish church, defying the English, had sent priests like Father Lee all over the Continent to train new priests who could return, openly or not, to Ireland. There were similar enterprises in Lisbon, Prague, and Rome. Yet for whatever mysterious reasons of affinity and social chemistry, those other institutions failed to take deep root or else simply did not

flourish. But the Irish in Paris were quite another story.

The Collège de Montaigu prospered so well that by 1677 a series of moves brought it, now as the Collège des Irlandais, to a spacious new setting, still in the Latin Quarter, on a pleasant, gently sloping street that would eventually become the rue des Irlandais. From here, the Irish priests and seminarians fanned out into Paris life

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like ducks on the Seine. They bought more and more property and rose to prestigious professorial chairs in the Sorbonne. With a cheerful disregard of the Sixth Commandment, they educated a great many young soldiers before they entered the Irish Brigade. When the Revolution came, the college's buildings were briefly confiscated (a familiar Irish fate) and turned into a school for French boys—Napoleon's brother Jerome studied there for a time. In 1790 students from the Irish College played a Christmas game of soccer on the Champs de Mars, using, with remarkably poor judgment, the new Altar of the Fatherland as a goal. When a scoring kick destroyed the Altar, angry French spectators would have lynched them, had not General Lafayette himself arrived with troops from the National Guard and a young orator named Patrick McKenna calmed the mob with an inspired paean to Ireland's quest for *Liberté*.

Through it all, the Irish in Paris maintained a certain recognizable, even stereotypical, national identity. The 18th-century political philosopher Baron de Montesquieu dryly observed that the Irish students were so poor that they came to Paris bringing "nothing with them to meet the bare necessities of life, except a formidable talent for argument." At the end of the century, in an otherwise bureaucratic report on a recalcitrant Irish-French soldier, the Revolutionary Committee of Public Safety paused to remark, with very English-like exasperation, that "republicanism

does not easily penetrate into Irish heads."

Yet argumentative and stubborn as they might be, during the latter 18th century these Irish priests and their students seemed everywhere, deeply woven into Parisian life. When the Bastille fell, there was an Irish prisoner in it, a Dubliner who had served in the Irish Brigade. The priest who ministered to its inmates, for 40 livres a month, was one Thomas MacMahon.

And when the black day came, Louis XVI was given his last Communion by a cleric from the Irish College, Father Henry Edgeworth, who then accompanied the doomed king to the place de Grève and stood a few feet behind him on the plat-

form, praying as the guillotine fell. Dr. Guillotin himself is thought to have taught briefly at the Irish College.

The question of who is French and who is not originated in a little known pre-Revolutionary law known as the *droit d'aubaine*, which can be translated roughly as the "law of windfall or good luck." It grew out of the absolutist nature of the French monarchy in the Old Regime, and it simply stated that if a resident foreigner died on French soil, his money and property belonged thenceforth to the king. (Confiscation was not exclusively an English appetite.) The way around this was to become a naturalized citizen, but the process was long and expensive; of the tens of thousands of foreigners in France, only about 50 a year were naturalized before 1789.

The Revolution would eventually repeal the *droit d'aubaine*—not for nothing was the term "citizen" so resonant in those tumultuous years—but even earlier, beginning in 1684, the *droit* had been waived by royal decree for Irish priests and soldiers, because all of them were presumed to be Jacobites (supporters of James II and his descendants, longtime Catholic pretenders to the English throne). Throughout the 18th century, Irish merchants, the third great class of refugee immigrants, were also drawn to Paris in



An Irish cleric, Henry Edgeworth, prayed with doomed Louis XVI before his execution in 1793.

impressive numbers, especially in banking and the wine trade. They too were given waivers from the *droit d'aubaine*, not to mention numerous other concessions and benefits prompted by the reflexive financial support of the crown for all things anti-English. By the end of the century Paris had become, if not precisely a little Dublin, the de facto place of asylum for Irish patriots of every kind, one anchor of a great political and intellectual bridge that united two very different countries against a common enemy.

From this point on, it is astonishing how often Irish names begin to appear in the history of Paris. On my desk sits a densely printed book called *Biographical Dictionary of Irishmen in France*,

by Richard Hayes, which contains several hundred short biographies of Irish men and women who settled in and around the capital in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. (Outside Paris, their greatest concentration may have been in the wine country of Bordeaux.) In military matters, a thick and entertaining volume by the same writer, rather suggestively titled *Irish Swordsmen of France*, recounts the lives of six notable Irish generals who fought in the *Grande Armée* during the Napoleonic wars.

In politics, there is the famous Irish revolutionary Daniel O'Connell—"The Liberator"—who came to France as a schoolboy. O'Connell had a wide puritan streak in his makeup and was one of the rare Irishmen who did not take to the free and easy morals of Paris ("a proud but filthy city," he called it). He left it for good on the same day that Louis XVI was guillotined, but his blazing passion had already made such an impression that many years later the great 19th-century chronicler of Parisian life Henri Balzac remarked, "I would like to have met three men only in this century: Napoleon, Cuvier, and O'Connell." (O'Connell was the subject of a biography by Charles de

Gaulle's grandmother, this time on his father's side.)

Equally distinguished is the career of Patrice MacMahon, whose grandfather fled to France from Limerick in 1691 for the usual reasons. He would reach the rank of general in the Crimean War—and enter both French history and French literature with his immortal reply to the commander at Sebastopol who advised him to retreat: "*J'y suis. J'y reste.*" ("Here I am. Here I stay.") For a later victory, in Italy, MacMahon was named Duke of Magenta. And in 1873 he moved into the Hotel de Matignon on the rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré, as president of France. He would hold the office for the next six years. Today, you can stroll from the Arc de Triomphe up the broad and elegant avenue MacMahon, stop in a pub, and raise a glass of Hennessy cognac (Richard Hennessy,

royal patent 1765) in his honor.

Not only generals and politicians have represented the Irish in Paris over the past two centuries. Long before the American “Lost Generation” of Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald in the 1920s, Irish bohemians and artists cleared a Parisian space for themselves. The great-grandmother of such bohemians, one might say—were she not the subject of one of the most erotic paintings in all of French art—was a spectacular royal courtesan named Marie-Louise O’Murphy, commonly known as La Petite Morphil. Born in 1737, she was the fifth daughter of an Irish cobbler in Rouen. At the age of 14 or 15 she became a dancer in the Opéra in Paris, where Casanova spotted her and introduced her to the painter François Boucher. Boucher thereupon painted her lying on her stomach, legs spread wide in invitation, ripe as an apple. Casanova is said to have left the painting, as a calling card, in a place where Louis XV would happen upon it. He did, and for two years La Petite Morphil held a special place in the king’s favor, until she spoiled things by trying to displace Louis’ official mistress and one of the great sexual generals of all time, Madame de Pompadour

(who might also have remarked, “*J’y suis. J’y reste*”).

More memorable still are the three great modern Anglo-Irish writers who, though astonishingly different from one another, each sought out Paris at an early age and made it their home. The first, Oscar Wilde, followed a classic trajectory and came to Paris shortly after leaving Oxford—“For Irishmen,” remarks Wilde’s biographer Richard Ellmann, “Oxford is to the mind what Paris is to the body”—and there Wilde was to live, on and off, for the rest of his life. He spent his honeymoon in the Hotel Wagram in a room overlooking the Tuileries Gardens. In sad and ironic symmetry, he returned to Paris for good after his scandalous affair with Lord Douglas and died in another hotel, the Alsace, in 1900, at the age of 46. He lies buried in the cemetery Père Lachaise.

The allure of Paris for Wilde—and for James Joyce and Samuel Beckett afterward—was not only its sensuality. Their instinctual Irish distrust of England was never far below the surface. To them, Paris was the most civilized possible place of exile, one that—unlike certain other cities—properly valued art and artists and gave them both freedom and *tolerance*. Or to put it another way, when else have three

such splendid writers felt such repulsion from their natural literary magnet? Paris was not London—Paris was the very opposite of London. “He came to Paris to stay a week,” Ellmann writes of Joyce, “and remained for 20 years.” “I am not English,” Wilde liked to say. “I am Irish, which is quite another thing.”

Beyond these writers’ heavy-lidded, frowning distrust of the English nation lies something else: their deeply conflicted attitude toward the English language, which was at once their glorious inheritance, burden, and spur. One of



Soon after young Irish beauty Marie-Louise O’Murphy posed for this provocative portrait by the painter François Boucher, she came to King Louis XV’s attention and he took her as his mistress.

the indisputable masters of our tongue, Wilde nonetheless insisted that there were only two languages in the world worth learning, French and Greek. Like Beckett, he wrote almost as often in French as English. And he once described himself with a complex irony that both Beckett and Joyce would have understood: "*Français de sympathie, je suis Irlandais de race, et les Anglais m'ont condamné à parler le langage de Shakespeare.*" ("French by sympathy, I am Irish by race, and the English have condemned me to speak the language of Shakespeare.")

The Irish are still in Paris, a boisterous, prosperous, fully accepted presence. There may be between 10,000 and 15,000 permanent residents, according to the Irish Embassy. The casual tourist is struck by their voices on the streets and by the number of Irish pubs scattered throughout the city. Father Lee's ancient college on the rue des Irlandais sits just a few blocks southeast of the Pantheon and serves now as the Irish Cultural Center, with a busy "multimedia center," a chapel, and a large dormitory for students. A reader who runs his eye down the pages of the Paris equivalent of the social register will still pause in surprise at names such as O'Gorman and MacCarthy. (My own French teacher on an early visit was a native Parisian named Alice Mahoney.)

Why this should be remains a mystery, to me at least. Beyond religion and a certain Celtic admixture, do the Irish and French share something else? The same sensual and tragic view of life? Does the Irish gift for language—no small part of de Gaulle's inheritance—fit them especially well for the passionate and lyric power of French at its best? Or is it perhaps simply no great surprise that, with the help of a common enemy, the two most talkative and argumentative races in Europe should find each other so compatible?



Samuel Beckett, at work at the Odeón Theater in Paris in 1966, often wrote in French, perhaps agreeing with fellow Irishman Oscar Wilde that English was a burden.

Quite possibly, however, I am looking from the wrong end of the telescope. Paris, incomparable Paris, makes its siren call not only to the Irish. One of its earliest visitors from the New World was that most representative and symbolic of the Founding Fathers, as completely American as de Gaulle was French. Thomas Jefferson came to Paris in 1784 and left it, reluctantly enough, in 1789 to take up his post as George Washington's first secretary of state (reluctant in part, perhaps, because of his affair with the artist Maria Cosway—said to be Irish-Italian!—whom he had met at the Paris grain market in 1786). As a buffer against the wilderness, Jefferson carried much of the City of Light home with him—some 86 great crates of wine, mirrors, armchairs, curtains, even wallpaper, so that afterward, in Virginia, Paris glowed in his mind. "I do love this people with all my heart," he wrote a friend in 1785. French by sympathy as much as anyone could be, he might have been speaking on behalf of four centuries of the Irish in Paris. ■