

## Ergo Sum

by Kevin McHugh

*The following narrative, composed after my first return to Ireland since my student days at the University College Dublin in the late 1960s, describes the siren call of my adopted homeland and the uncanny circumstances that led to my return. This is an abbreviated version of that account, compressed at the request of a friend. The original has grown like an Irish mile into a book-length narrative of 120,000 words. The whole business began with a poem I entitled “Ergo Sum” (Therefore I am), also the title of this work.*

In her adolescence, my daughter Katie spared me the father-chilling question, “Dad, where did I come from?” For that information, she quite wisely turned to her mother. With feminine precognition she intuited correctly that Daddy was a coward and that he, like many other fathers, would find *this* subject taboo for polite conversation with his “little girl.” So she took me by surprise when, at twenty and a student at Xavier University, she asked once more—but this time of me—where she had come from. “Tell me,” she said, settling bird-like into the couch, “about my family history.” (Whew.)

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Three years before, Kate had witnessed my search for that history, one that took me back to Ireland nearly thirty years after my student days at University College Dublin in the late sixties and culminating in symbolic Irish citizenship. Social Security was to blame. Form SSA-7005-SM-SI (1-95) to be exact. It had dropped innocently into my life, addressed to my mother, Ellen *Gara* at my Cincinnati address. That *was* my mother’s name, but it was my mother’s maiden name and one, legally speaking, she had left behind at the altar in 1946 when she married my father and became Ellen *McHugh*. After his death, Mother moved to the Cincinnati area to be near granddaughter Katie (and later grandson Brendan). She died in 1989. But the “Message from the Commissioner of Social Security” mysteriously nose-dived into my letterbox six years later. Somehow, I really think my mother had something to do with this “chance” occurrence, and that possibility lends an air of mystery to my quest for her family roots.

I telephoned Social Security to find out how their card had wound up at my address (they had no idea) and to inform them that Ellen Gara, a.k.a. Ellen McHugh,

was deceased and that, just to set the record straight, *my* mother had not been born in 1920 and not 1914, as indicated in their correspondence.

“Oh, no, Mr. McHugh,” said the official voice with matter-of-fact finality, “I’m sure our records are correct.”

“Prove it,” I demanded, my “Irish” up.

They did. In fact, with their information and with corroborating evidence from the 1920 U.S. Census, I determined that Mother and her older sister Catherine had both lied about their ages (mother by six years, her sister by seven), no doubt to compete with the twenty-somethings for the returning GIs at the end of World War II. That they had “stretched the truth” and that the two sisters had carried their secret to their graves helped to explain why Mother had never talked much about her own family history. A staunch Irish Catholic, she abhorred lies and so, guilty of this sin, she sought to escape others through her silence. Sure, I knew that her family, like my father’s, was “Irish”—I thought in the same way as all my friends growing up were German, native-born, hyphenated Americans. I had no idea that Mother was a first-generation citizen or that my own ethnic roots lay so near the surface. The epiphany explained more. I had grown up in a home charged by my mother with an appreciation of “things Irish”—a difficult task in a town as German as Lake Woebegone is Norwegian and where the name *Kevin McHugh* never sounded as American as *Othmar Schnipke*. It also helped to explain how, like a salmon returning to its home waters in the spring, I had been lured to the National University of Ireland and how daughter Kate has begun her own journey homeward.

My curiosity piqued, I ordered a search of the National Archives and found the naturalization records for my maternal grandfather, Patrick Gara (wives were naturalized with their husbands). From that information I obtained the Ship Passenger Arrival Records and, finally, the Pennsylvania Department of Vital Statistics for my grandparents’ death certificates—the last arriving *the day before my first trip to Ireland since 1969*. I scanned the forms. Both Patrick Gara and Catherine (Phillips) Gara had been born in County Mayo, the former in Glenmullynaha Townland near the market village of Charlestown, the latter from just up the Dublin Road in tiny Carracastle (or as it had been spelled “Carrycastel”). According to the Pennsylvania death record, her parents (my maternal great-grandparents) were Charles and Bridget (Walsh) Phillips. Catherine had been born in 1885, but I learned later that she, too, had lied about her own age, shaving ten years on the voyage to America.

The tug of my own history (what a friend referred to as my Irish DNA) had been acting up for some time before spring’s primal pull took me and my then fifteen-year-old son, Brendan, “home” to my old Dublin turf and to Mayo. The “kids” were older, my professional life, secure. Preoccupied by swimming with or against the currents of day-to-day life, I had been unable to raise my head enough to see the further shore of the past which, as I approached fifty, called to me like a siren. I had been away too long.

Afraid of disappointing Brendan, I cautioned him as we entered Charlestown, parting a herd of commuting cattle like some low-budget Moses: “I’m not sure we’ll meet anyone who knew your great-grandfather Patrick. Maybe all the Garas have emigrated.” They had, I learned. In fact, of the forty-three families who lived in the same Townland of Glann with the Garas, only six remained. And so, up the highway we pattered, crossing a patchwork of level pastureland and past a green sign with white letters, “*Ceathru Chaisil*,” and below that, “CARRACASTLE.” It was hard to tell where the village started, but then it became apparent that we were in it—a sprinkling

of homes, some deserted. Brendan spotted two, large, white-plastered buildings. “Stop here,” he said suddenly. “Stop here.” He pointed to the red and white sign, “Davey’s” and in smaller letters, “Ale House, General Grocer.”

“You’ll want to be speaking with Vincent,” the proprietor told us when I asked about family roots. Vincent, as it turned out, was Vincent Coleman—a retired schoolmaster, a highly regarded genealogist, and now a dear friend—who by coincidence lived just across the road. Vincent and wife Chris “adopted” us that afternoon, they fed us and they have provided us a homeport in Mayo ever since. He determined first that there were two Charles Phillips in the local records, both of whom had daughters named Catherine. To determine which one of the two had been our forebear, he advised us to talk with a retired postman named Jim Ruane, living in a nursing home in nearby Ballaghaderreen, County Roscommon. “Don’t volunteer the name Walsh,” Vincent cautioned us, realizing that Catherine’s mother’s maiden name would be the key to our search. “Jim may just want to oblige you.”

The old postman was more than happy to see us, though even to my ear his accent was hard to cut above the Elvis Presley tunes blasting over the rec-room radio. When we did get around to “business,” Jim shook his head; he couldn’t remember Catherine Phillips’ mother’s name. I volunteered the first or Christian name, knowing it would be as common as rain and would give nothing away. “Bridget,” I anted.

“Walsh,” he answered immediately—and then traced the Phillips land to its present owner. Coincidence?

That afternoon Vincent piloted Brendan and me down narrow borreens (country lanes) and tractor tracks beyond his own home and just past Jim Ruane’s aging farm. The Phillipses and the Ruanes had, it turned out, been neighbors. In fact, baptismal records later revealed that Jim’s father, John Ruane, had been my grandmother’s baptismal sponsor in 1875—and not 1885 as she claimed. Eventually, we located the cottage from which my grandmother had emigrated to America. Over two hundred years old, it stands roofless but its walls rise still and timeless beneath the trees of Calvagh Townland. Not far away stretched Barroe Bog, from which Catherine Phillips’ father and his before had cut the peat turf that they burned as fuel to heat their tiny-two roomed, earthen-floored home. “Do you feel it?” Vincent asked after Brendan and I had stood, rooting ourselves in this our ancestral geography and in their familiar topography: the fields they worked (just over five acres), the bog they walked, the Ox Mountains rising blue-green and low against the western horizon. I did feel it and at once understood why Vincent found reward in moments like these and not in money. The DNA was stirring.

“Your mother was a Phillips,” Vincent reflected. He closed his eyes and seemed to sort through the files of his mind. “She would have had dark, black hair. Fair, pale skin. Blue blue eyes. And,” he added, “an intelligent look.” He had described my mother. Of the Phillips family I learned little. “It’s an English name,” I observed to Vincent. “Yes, it is,” he replied. “Possibly born on the wrong side of the blanket,” he noted, a polite way of telling me that the English lords had long ago “bedded” the locals. “There was a lot of that.” And there were a lot of Phillipses in the area, as well. That my grandmother’s family had survived the Famine on slightly more than five acres speaks well of their landlord, the Viscount Dillon, who ruled with compassion during those hard years.

With Vincent’s help we found the Garas (more commonly the O’Garas, the *O* meaning “son of”), resting in an old cemetery beside a ruined country church. Michael O’Gara, Mother’s cousin, had been buried there in 1976. Most of the family had emigrated

to America or to England. Most of those who had stayed and survived, daughters, had changed their names in marriage. Two years later and again with Vincent's help, my wife and I met several O'Gara relatives, Mother's eighty-seven-year-old cousin, Imelda Flanagan, who could have passed for her twin, and Imelda's son Terence, of Kiltimagh, Co. Mayo. And through Terence we found in Carabeg another cousin, another Michael O'Gara, seventyish, ruddy-faced, wide-smiling and white-haired, dressed in traditional West of Ireland farmer's Sunday attire—white shirt and black suit jacket—to greet cousins from “Amerikay.” The Flanagan clan, too, had ties with the Norman (English) Jordan family. Cousin Imelda passed along, at Terence's urging, the hushed family history of the “blue blood” running in Flanagan veins that betrayed other “wrong side of the blanket” liaisons.

Of the Garas we eventually learned a great deal more, a long and detailed family tree dating to 1815, provided by a Gara relative from Virginia I had never met. The same Carracastle pub proprietor who directed us to Vincent Coleman pointed our way to the castle of the O'Gara clan, *Moygara*, overlooking Lough Gara in neighboring County Sligo. It's an out-of-the-way place today, well off the tourist map. The O'Garas had, in fact, been important chieftains in the area. One Fergal O'Gara had provided and patronage and financial support for a classic of Irish history and literature, the monumental *Annals of the Four Masters* in 1632. Oliver Cromwell's forces ousted the clan a short time later, sending many to the Continent, where they served in the Irish Brigades of the Austrian and French armies, rising through the ranks to command. Another served as a general under Napoleon. Still others wound up as merchants in Brussels. The castle, though a ruin, gives testimony to O'Gara power, rising with four-cornered and castelated on the hill of Mulagatee. “This,” I gestured to the stony history surrounding us and with just a wee bit of exaggeration, “this is *your* castle, Brendan.” I thought I could hear the stirring of his DNA.

And as for Jim Ruane—“He died,” Vincent Coleman told us by phone the day after our return to America, “the day you and Brendan left Ireland. You were the last with whom he shared his wealth of information.” Coincidence? I think not. It had been Providence all along. Thank you, Ellen Gara.

And thank you, Vincent Coleman, for your warm and generous welcome, your wisdom, understanding and fifteen-year friendship. For me you are the face of Ireland. You have empowered me to see the countryside or County Mayo as home. Thanks also to Chris, his wife, whose door has ever been open; her teapot, always full.