

Where's this going?

I've been writing these blogs for the past three years. It has been a journey of discovery. I've uncovered lives, connections and stories that I never imagined. It's part family and social history, and part memoir. But where are they going? I plan to collate and edit them into a form that might make them suitable for publication. There are a few more I have already drafted, but I see an end in sight. Looking through the blogs some highlights jump out.



Martha McWilliams, back left, with her Logan cousin in front, Ballymena 1934.

The pieces collectively sketch the overarching story of my maternal and paternal families from a few generations after the Plantation of Ulster. Themes of religion, emigration, farming, and Orange activism stand out.

There was the discovery of my McWilliams great grandparent's connection to the religious Ulster Revival of 1857 and the generational echo down to my own church upbringing. And on my mother's side, the Davis family had a challenging transition from late nineteenth century Orange Unionism to active participants in an Independent Ireland.

There has been a rich mosaic of stories from the generation of my maternal grandfather, Richard Davis, the siblings born between 1861 to 1882: of brothers James and Robert and their army service; of William and his emigration to join the South African police force; of John and his bumpy journey from his Leitrim roots to County Meath; of Thomas's emigration to Toronto, followed by his Dromahair sweetheart Minnie Gillmor, their marriage and his transition from house painter to real estate businessman; and of putting some colour on the undoubtedly strong, yet almost invisible character of Mary Jane, Richard's only sister; and of Richard himself, his challenging fortunes and the impact on his family's lives. And added to that of Herbert Gillmor, Richard's brother-in-law, through his numerous near-death experiences in World War One, to emigration and a colourful farming life and tragic death in Goodfare, northern Alberta.

Through these stories I've discovered many relations, cousins I'll call them all. For example, Clive and Cedrick Davis in South Africa, the McWilliams cousins noted below and Davis cousins in Alberta and the U.S.

A recent genealogical DNA test I took turned up McWilliams cousins in Canada and the U.S. 'Do you know your Cullybackey cousins?' they asked. No. For some reason, we had very little connection with wider family members. The initial contact was with the DNA of Willard McWilliams and his family outside Ottawa in Canada. Similar to some members of the Davis family, they had emigrated from Ireland around the 1850s, to settle on the Trim

Road, Navan, Ontario, where they are today. Their family's thorough genealogical research traces our roots back to my great great great grandparents, James and Margaret McWilliams both buried around 1817 in the Old Cemetery in Ahoghill. That puts their births around the middle of the 1700s. There are more stories to come here, I think. One possibly tracing the McWilliams North Antrim roots back to Scottish planters drawn into North Antrim in the early 1600s by Randall MacSorley MacDonnell at Dunluce. *(Any additional DNA by Davis or McWilliams family members would help deliver better results here. Volunteers? I used the genealogical specific site Family Tree DNA who have links to the North of Ireland Family History Society <https://www.familytreedna.com/> and <https://www.nifhs.org/> There are links to DNA testing and results at NIFHS.)*

An early discovery was the contribution of my mother, her sister and her brother to The Schools Collection, a 1937 compilation of folklore by National School children. Their school books are part of this collection which resides in the National Archive of Ireland. In some cases where the lives of distant relatives have been faint or near invisible, I've enjoyed bringing a few of them to life with a certain amount of creative licence. I followed another Davis family who settled at Lurganboy near Manorhamilton during the 18th century, thinking that they might have been related to the Davis families from Glenboy and Boggaun. It appears that they have no connection and their family trajectory is very different. The Lurganboy story tells of their nineteen-century movement into the professions and commerce in Ascendancy Ireland. One family member, Thomas, was MD at the workhouse in Manorhamilton and then at Derry where he died and is buried. His legally-trained brother, R.E. Davis was for many years Secretary to the Sligo Leitrim Northern Counties Railway Company. Their story is worth writing up at some stage.

There will be a few more blogs before this series of stories comes to a close. However, if the experience of writing them over the past three years is anything to go by, I expect another twist at any moment. The photograph above was posted on a website by June Norton, a cousin a few days ago.

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