

GENERAL JOHN C.O'NEILL

As a young lad my late father, Patrick told me stories of a ancestor of ours General John Charles O' Neill a Monaghan man who led a fenian raid into Canada from Buffalo. Like many young lads I paid little interest to the many tales of the time, only years later I began to take note of all aspects of Irish history. This John Charles my father talked about was a first cousin of his grandfather, also named Patrick, whose father was also Patrick who was a brother of John C, his father being named John.

On a recent visit to North Monaghan-South Armagh where our family originated from, I met up with Seamus, Bernard and Charlie O' Neill who no doubt are also related, as their family are in that part of Monaghan-Armagh since at least the beginning of the 19th century. I also met a local farmer named Jim Mohan who has a great interest in the family history of O' Neill and has been very helpful to me in my research. Indeed Jim can recall Gen. John O' Neill's youngest granddaughter Ruth leading the local Lisnagire Pipe Band to the birthplace of the Gen. in September 1969. She was one of three grandchildren, the others being Helen O' Neill Martin, (died 11 Sep 1991) and Grace O' Neill Nansen (died April 1988) Ruth died Dec the 2nd 1993 in and is buried in Holy Cross Cemetery San Diego.

Derek Warfield of the famous Wolfe Tones ballad group and a great Irish-American historian, has a special interest in the Fenian Movement has been a great inspiration to me and I've no doubt that the story of John O' Neill will be truly elevated before Derek hangs-up the pen.

General John O' Neill was born in Drumgallon, in the parish of Clontibret, Co. Monaghan, Ireland on the 9th of March 1834. He had a brother Bernard and a sister Mary. His mother's name was Elizebeth, (Beth).

At the opening of January 1834 the black plague passed over the northern part of Ireland, a neighbouring family of the O' Neills were stricken with the disease and John C's father also named John went to their aid and in turn contracted the disease and died a couple of months before John was born.

In late 1835 John's mother Elizabeth left Ireland with young Bernard and Mary, bound for America, where they settled in Elizabeth, New Jersey.

Her name is still remembered locally as in Beths Lane, this lane been the lane to the old homestead, and Beths Well, which is situated just below where the O' Neill home was. Stone from the house now forms part of the wall at the top of the laneway. The old house is clearly marked on the First accurate Survey of Ireland 1831.

In the 1860 Valuation of Tenements for the Parish of Clontibrit in the townland of Drumgallon (note; an A instead of an O), Eliza was still described as the occupier of house and lands from the lessors, namely a Patrick Collins.

Young John O' Neill stayed behind in Ireland, and was reared and educated by the wishes of his grandfather, who by all accounts was a strong Nationalist and had a deep hatred of English rule in Ireland.

Indeed when John left Ireland in 1848 to join his mother in New Jersey he was never to forget his deeply held christian views, his history, his country and her patriot dead.

It was December 1848 at age of 14 when John arrived in Elizabeth New Jersey, he continued his education for a further year and then worked as a travelling agent for a Catholic publishing house.

In 1855 John opened his own bookstore in Richmond Virginia, which he sold off in 1857, for one reason that been to get involved in a military career. The Second United States Dragoons were based in Richmond and were ready to leave to quell the Mormon Rebellion in the summer of 1857 John enlisted, but got quickly frustrated with the lack of action, the Dragoons were not involved in any fighting, he deserted them in 1858 . In San Fransisco in 1859 ,he met his future wife Mary Ann Crowe an Australian of Irish parents, and the following year surrendered to Capt. Adams of the United States Drogoons and was quickly restored duty without trial.

At the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861 he was a sergent with the 1st United States Cavalry (formally the Dragoons) stationed in San Fransisco Having made the trip to New York via Panama, his regiment volunteered for action in the Union Army ,and was immediatly involved in the battles of the Peninsular Campaign

In December 1862 he was 2nd Lieutenant in the 5th Indiana Cavalry and by April of 1863 he had been promoted to 1st Lieutenant. He resigned from this regiment in 1864, because he felt he should have been given another promotion. In the summer of 1864, at his own request ,he was appointed Captain in the 17th United States Coloured Infantry, from which he also resigned in November of the same year because of his impaired physical condition, having been wounded above the knee in Nashville the previous year, and he also suffered from varicose veins of both legs.

The official records of the Civil War indicate John O'Neill was a unusually active and a brave officer.

On the 27th of November 1864 John and Mary Ann Crowe were lawfully married by the Rev Isaac P. Howell in St Marys Church ,Elizabeth New Jersey in the presence of George Mackin, the other witness been John's sister Mary . John and Mary had 3 children, John Hugh, who was born in Nashville on the 2nd of March 1866, Mary Ellen was born on the 26th of August 1868 in Washington D.C. and Kate was born in O'Neill in 1875.

Early in 1866 John became interested in the Fenian Organization whose goal was to help free Ireland from the chains of British rule and oppression. The famine, or rather the starvation of the Irish , because there was plenty of food in the country in the middle of the 19th century, with herds of cattle and flocks of sheep belonging to the English landlords wandering the fields in sight of the poor Irishmen women and children who were left to eat grass

and nettles on the side of the road, dying in their millions, had an everlasting effect on people like John O'Neill.

So when the proposed invasion of Canada by the Fenians, who intended to occupy the country, and use it as a bargaining point for Ireland's freedom presented itself, John was not found wanting, and was only too eager to strike a blow at England in any part of the World he seen fit. In fact at a address to the Fenian Movement in Philadelphia in 1876 he said;

I have always belived in striking at England wherever we could reach her, and wherever the English flag floats and the English government is recognized and there are English soldiers in arms to defend the flag and maintain the government I hold that the Irish people, particularly the Irish Exiles whom her oppressive laws have driven from their native land, have a right to go there and make war on England.

Fenian leaders differed on the invasion of Canada, with John O'Mahony argued to organise funding and arms in America for supply to Ireland, while other leaders like Randell Roberts insisting on the invasion of Canada could be easier and fairly instant, knowing quite well, it would be easy to fill the ranks of the Fenians with fresh ex Civil War soldiers from both the Union side and the Confederate side.

"Fightin General Tom Sweeney a native of County Cork was elected to implement the plan to invade Canada. On the 27th of May 1866 John O'Neill pulled out of Nashville with 200 men on a north bound train, picking up another couple of hundred before reaching Buffalo the following morning, where they awaited further orders.

It was the fact that Sweeneys appointed Generals did not turn up, which put John O'Neill in command of the raiding party. Hence the title General John O'Neill.

The sun was rising on morning of June the 1st 1866, when Gen, O'Neill and his band of Fenians landed on Canadian soil, and so the 'Battle of Ridgeway' had commenced.

He was the first Irish Nationalist to use the term "Irish Republican Army" and he carried the flag of the I.R.A. into the battle .

Historians have described O'Neill as a military genius in the way he led and conducted the invasion, he out-fought and out-witted the British in every aspect of the battle, and had it not been for the half-hearted approach by other Fenian leaders, the outcome would have been far different, instead with virtually no back-up, and American support waneing at this point, he seen little point in in any further activity, and surrendered to United State Marshalls on his return to American soil.

Although bitterly dissapointed at the outcome, because he believed had more effort beem put into this well planned operation, it would have put the British occupation of Ireland into a different context alltogether.

John O'Neill tried unsuccessfully at two further invasions of Canada one

from Malone on the Queens birthday , 25th of May 1870 and the final one on the 5th of October 1871 at Georgetown MN.

When Gen, John O'Neill was a prisoner in Vermont in 1870 he conceived the idea of resettlement programmes in the mid-west for the Irish who had survived the Famine and Coffin Ships, who had landed on the east-coast of America from Ireland and where many were living in overcrowded and poor conditions.

And so, in 1872 and 1873 he travelled through the states of Minnesota, Wisconsin, Iowa, Illinois, Missouri and Nebraska in search of the best location for his project.

He concluded that Nebraska possessed the greatest advantages for settlers, it was located between the two extremes of temperature, and it offered pure water, fertile land, and millions of acres of free government land.

During the early part of 1874 Gen John , gave lectures along the east coast, encouraging the poor Irish that there could be a better standard of living for them if they were to follow him back to the plains of Nebraska.

O'Neill was totally convinced they had a lot more in common with rural America than the dire poverty and miserable centres which they then resided in.

On the 12th of May 1874 he reached a area of land 180 miles north of Omaha with his first band of recruits now known as O'Neill.

The idea of new colonies to John O'Neill could have been two prong , firstly to improve conditions for the new Irish in America, secondly he had never given up hope of his ultimate goal, ridding Ireland of English rule. The following quotation indicates this.

“ My heart is with the Irish people. My earnest desire is for the amelioration of my race. For this reason I urge you (potential colonists in the east) to colonize and possess the land, and all other advantages will follow. As a powerful means to that end I would inculcate temperance and economy in order that you may save your money for this noble purpose”

He brought a further 102 settlers to O'Neill in 1876 and with the help of Catholic Bishop Right Reverend O'Connor who organized some finance, he brought his last settlement of people in March-April 1877.

It was by no means easy for the early settlers, some left soon after arriving, the scourge of grasshoppers destroyed their crops, communications with the outside world was poor, the nearest post office was fifty miles away, and they were over one hundred miles from the nearest railroad point. In fact these early settlers were the real heroes, people who against all odds were determined to help build this great town. A town now known as the “Irish Capital of Nebraska”.

In 1877 while on a speaking tour in Little Rock John developed a heavy

cold,he went back home to O'Neill,but his condition deteriorated and was admitted to St Josephs Hospital Omaha in November 1877. He later suffered a stroke,then developed pneumonia and died on the 8th of January 1878.

The people of O'Neill to-day are proud people,proud of their roots,proud of their forefathers, who since have not alone come from Ireland, but the four corners of the World to build this truly,warm,friendly and beautiful town.

As someone who shares the same beliefs of Gen,John O'Neill,(I've been a member of Sinn Fein for almost 30 years now) that been a free and Independent Ireland . An Ireland without British interference,where all the children of the nation are cherished equally.

The spot where John O'Neill was born in County Monaghan,straddles the English border of South Armagh, in fact as a child he would have played in the fields which are now occupied by Britain and her army. Sadly his dream is still not a reality

In conclusion I wish to thank the following for their continuing help in my research; Jim Mohan,Drumgallon, my brother Vincent, my mother Bridget O'Neill of Saggart Co Dublin, Ben Maryniak of Buffalo,Richard Martin of San Diego and David Owen of Ridgeway.

To the people of Omaha,who have been so good to both myself and my wife Cathy I say thank you ,especially The Sweeneys,The Acient Order of Hiberians, The United Irish Organizations of Nebraska,Bill and Howard of The Historic Centre _____

A special thanks to the kind people of O'Neill Nebraska for their invitation to me to be their Grand Marshall of the St,Patricks Day celebrations it is a huge honour. I want to thank most sincerly, the O'Neill Chamber of Commerce, with a special word of thanks to their chairman, Pat Fritz. O'Neill is blessed to have someone of the calibre of Kathy Manoucheri who has a great interest in O'Neill and it's past,and has been most helpful to me in my research.

Happy St,Patricks Day 2000
Gerard O'Neill