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Remembering "Islandderry"

by Freda Bingley (née Waddell)

(1) THE BLACK TIN BOX

There was a faint smell of a wet chimney and the hiss of a gas lamp but I was centuries away. I was alone in the old house which had been the home of our family for centuries. My Aunt was in hospital with a broken hip and I had come to the house to clean up, and make sure all was secure. It was a good thirty miles from my house so it seemed simpler to stay the night and then I could go and see her in the hospital before heading home.

It was at the back of the airing cupboard, a black japanned tin box with a big padlock and our name on the top - WADDELL - in white paint. I had the key along with the others my Aunt had given me. And I knew it was the deedbox that my father had told me was in the bank and in it were kept the family papers. I had no idea why it was in the house, and yet I knew it was there for me.

What did I find? Wills from the early 17th century with money and furniture left to the younger children. The eldest was always left the estate, out of which he had to find the money left to the others. The housekeeper and the rest of the servants were named as well. And how little they really had to leave. Would you leave your dirty grey leather breeches to Barney the plowman?

There were many of the marriage settlements that had used to have to be drawn up before a marriage to ensure that at least part of a bride's dowry would be divided among her children. Lists of moneys received from tenants. Land bought and sold. Money borrowed and lent in the days before banks. Commissioning papers for those who had served in the Militia of 1798, the Peninsular and other wars and in the East India Company. Bills, receipts, all the paraphernalia of lives long gone.

In the past someone had tried to sort out the papers. There was even a family tree. We had cousins in Monaghan!! But where did the earliest Alexander come from and was he a son of James the first Waddell in Dromore?

But what was this - who was this John Waddell of Newby Hall in Yorkshire and why did we have the same coat of arms? And then a roll of legal documents - all about a Barony in Bedfordshire being claimed by someone called Chetwood - The Barony of de Wahull of Odell. It appeared that it was given to a Walter of Flanders by William the Conqueror. That was strange. Youngsters always used to call my mother Mrs. 'ODELL'.

And there were maps showing the tenant farms and other parts of the estate long since sold. Some were of individual fields and these were stuck to pages of music 'Miss Peggy Woffington's New Madrigal'.

I never got to bed. I just went on sorting and trying to read the spidery writing. Morning came and there was still a great pile unread. I put them all back in the black tin box and put them away. Maybe I would have a chance to see the rest another day. Time went by. My Aunt died and the house had to be sold and the box went uncatalogued to the Public Record Office. And there it lay until I retired and started the long process of unravelling the past exploits of my family.

But even now, as I am writing, I can recall the smell of that wet chimney and the sound of hissing gaslight, and the feeling that all my family had come back to surround and encourage me.

(2) THE DUEL

Last year I went home but the house has lost its roof and the walls are tumbling down. So I scrambled through the shrubbery and found the walled garden. Once it had been a proper garden, an Irish acre not a measly English one, with an other half acre of orchard besides. But now it was a mass of overgrown fruit bushes and ancient trees among the weeds. The high wall of stone still stood and the little doorway with the pockmarked stone beside it was still there.

As a child I was told that the marks were the result of a duel. And I went around asking all and sundry What duel?, who fought the duel?, when did they have the duel? Silence - no one knew. And the matter might have rested there but I hate mysteries.

Decades later I started to sort out the history of our family. Some had been attainted for High Treason, others were "respectable" - Lawyers, Sheriffs, Militiamen, Soldiers, Writers in the East India Company. Others departed to foreign climes - America, Australia, New Zealand. Some just died and left no imprint of their lives.

Time past and as I lived far from home I decided to search for others of my name close by in the hope that I might find some of the long lost links, and discover where my family had originally lived. Well you know what it is - someone tells somebody else and they pass it on to another person and before I knew where I was, there were letters arriving from all over the globe. And not only that, many were able to tell me of others who were also on our family trail. One of these energetic souls lives in Louisiana U.S.A. and what a grand person she is at sharing all her research with everyone.

One of the problems one finds is that there is always an accumulation of 'Johns, Willys and Hughs' who you know belong but where they fit in, you haven't a clue. And why did they name everyone Mary, Martha, Susan and Jane in every generation? There is no possible way of telling which was which a man's wife or son.

Hope springs Eternal and one day a fat envelope arrived written in an unknown hand. Martha my friend in Louisiana had passed my name on to another American enthusiast and what was this? A DUEL - THE DUEL? - eureka! ! Ah! But wait - no mention of where it was fought. However the name is right, the period likewise and what is wonderful is that this man who fought and ran away had a family who have kept records.

He was married to Isabella Brown of Lisburn and when he fled he took his son Hugh with him and they reached America. He fretted for home and came back to Ireland to die but he never returned to his old home. His son succeeded in life. He was a General in Militia in the War of Independence, married well, died prosperous in N. Carolina, leaving sons. What a wonderful surprise. It made all my searching worthwhile.

And the next letter brought me a copy of Young Hugh's will, his portrait, a copy of our coat of arms and more information about all his descendants. In his will he left £100 to his sister Hannah (Anna) in Ireland. He was born in 1734 and died in 1773. For a time he was Secretary to the Governor Arthur Dodds, who came from County Antrim, and was Governor of North Carolina.

I wonder if I shall ever know why Hugh Waddell fought a Duel beside the little door into the walled garden at Islanderry Dromore in the County of Down? But who knows maybe I will find out more about Isabella Brown and her daughter Hannah.