
Opening Extract from...

The Largest Baby in Ireland After the Famine

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Chapter One

The funeral, 1956

The townland of Ballymully lies between the Sperrin Mountains and the lowlands west of Lough Neagh. Clouds of flies attracted by any light come up from the largest lough in the British Isles, and darker flies come down from the marshes and small loughs of the mountain. They drop into the milk in the parlour, appear on the windows in thick clouds of blackness, and swarm across yards at dusk, when children say, 'The midges are eating us alive.' They are the characters of early summer evenings, of hayfields and byres and the rumps of fat livestock. Water insects, flies of the lough, they suit these lands, they suit the flatlands down to the lough, and the wet marshes up to the mountain, and the deep dank glens.

They populate mid-Ulster, the east and the west, the north and the south. Each year they live and die in their millions as they lived and died in their millions before the Scots came, before Normans, and Celts and St Patrick. They came before faith came – before Roman Catholics and Anglicans, Presbyterians and Baptists. Faithless flies, they live for a day.

She was carried down the lane on a bitterly cold day when the wind came in from the east. Her pine coffin raised high to the level of the hedgetops bobbed up and down in

rhythm with the pallbearers. All six-footers, their sturdy pace set a distance between the coffin and the mourners dragging behind.

The women stood on the step watching and listening. They saw the men parade her between the old beech hedges, steer her under the laburnums and past the gooseberry bushes. Through bare spots in the hedge, they saw her on the brae. At Archie's sharp corner, she gently slipped then rose again.

They presumed some change of hands.

Maggie Martin, Sadie Boyce and the Gibsons were together again. They were looking down and over the lanes that were leading her away.

She was dressed in brass and wood that gleamed through the faint light of a very short day. They picked her out amidst the mass movement of mourners. Her warm dressage distinguished her still.

Amongst her mourners were sons and daughters, and grand- sons and granddaughters, and all other near and distant relations whose family connection was O'Malloran and Duffy and Campbell. In the small confines of house and yard and lane, they seemed a multitude.

Her neighbours were there.

Sadie Boyce commentated the procession. Sadie missed nothing, she knew every pallbearer, aunt and uncle and cousin. She nor any of the women were going to town. Funerals were men's business. Sadie pasted down her hair and swathed around herself her thick black shawl – in no apron, she hardly recognised herself – and said all her Sadie words about dying and weather and wind.

Courageous or mad, she was the only person that day to mention Felix Campbell.

Maggie Martin cried. Her lips, child-like incongruent in her old woman face, quivered, 'A wil' wind,' she said, then turned her ear to the wind. She couldn't help wishing Sadie would shut up just this once, but for Sadie talking was life's only natural activity, she'd hardly abandon it now. Maggie tried to compose herself. She moved away until she couldn't hear a word Sadie spoke, not a breath, sigh nor gasp of it.

There were only three men left behind.

Black Willie stood at the top of the lane distractedly fingering his lapels, gnawing his gums. He'd seen down the hill she was dead, and without second thought, just one foot in front of the other, blind the way we are, he'd walked down the hill into the wake. When she came to the townland – he remembered it vivid, Felix Campbell brought her, waltzed her round the brae – it had been the talk of the land. Even now Felix Campbell wouldn't spare the drop of saliva to save him. Well, now it was different. Out of his mind like a madman. That they hadn't spoken in years was neither here nor there, it's the nearest neighbour you'll fall out with. Willie chewed his gums, and fretted at something unsettling him, like he was in half a mind to follow her. Willie stood his ground so long that the dogs, as at any heat, lay down beside him.

Tommy Boyce sat on the stone in front of the dairy, a group of children before him. Tommy was slabbering, breaking in and out of speech, dancing words to all the voices he heard, soldiers and farmers and bridgemen.

‘Aye, Sarah-Ann O’Malloran,’ slurred Tommy as the prelude to some great and sad oratory presumed consummated only in Tommy’s fertile drink-sodden mind. Sarah-Ann’s first words at the bridge were addressed to Tommy, and the spirit of that exchange, its wit and verve, was what took Felix’s breath away forty years before. Of all his ramblings, ‘Fairies and leprechauns,’ in the context he now invoked them, were most rooted in Tommy’s experience. He made to go after the coffin, but stumbled.

Immediately she died, Felix Campbell had foreseen the con sequences, and was afraid.

All her children, and her children’s children, and their children who were her great-grandchildren, would congregate at the same time at the same place. Her large ramified family would attempt to pass through his own small doors. Most had never been over the doorstep. Some he knew only by story or thin snippets of conversation, some he knew by sight. He had his life. They had theirs. Death complicated that simple dichotomy. The living can’t ignore the dead. They would all, even those who’d never forgiven her, come to the funeral. They would come from near and far, from morning to night, for three days they would come. Their huge teeming numbers would crawl up his lane, and over his land and fields and all the places he called his own. They would fill the atmosphere with their unspoken resentments. They would grieve at his convenience. Despair rose in him when he thought of it.

Felix imagined then their amorphous multitudinous mass, each face the same as the last, and wished that the

thought of no wake had ever occurred to him. Why had it? Why had he tormented himself? Much as he tried, he could not reverse his mind's own history. It was two minds. It was wake no wake, and it construed the impossible as possible, it construed wake, no wake, and it accommodated mutually exclusive worlds. Felix clenched and unclenched his hands, and thought, 'Wake no wake,' until he thought he'd go mad.

The practical problem was how to accommodate them. The house might take a hundred, with forty in the room, another thirty in the parlour, and the same again in the bedroom if they stripped it of furniture. He knew there would be more. Well, they'd just have to stand in the yard. They could stand there, and be beholden to him for opening his house and yard to them to pay their respects to their mother or aunt or grandmother, or whoever they thought she was to them. They'd all be thinking she was somebody to them, more than anybody else. Well, they were nothing to him, and could think and say what they liked. When they asked him how he lived up that lane so far away from anywhere, he'd just answer that there's nothing but yourself at the end of a long lane, and a long lane isn't far enough. They'd know what he meant.

In the event, they stacked up Sarah-Ann's tables and dressers, and squeezed the wardrobe through the too narrow doors, then carted out her table still covered in heart tablets. They sorted through all the wornout small things, aprons and stockings, tablets, barley water, rosary beads, holy water, that had been the touchstones of her physical existence. Only hours before, she had moved

between their material existence, eating her biscuit thinking she'd eat another one, smoothing down her apron with purpose, filling the oil lamp, watering plants between waterings. Then small things had a future. Now small things were pathetic, abandoned. Felix packed them in baskets, and even though she was dead, her things were as real as if she was living. He imagined the last sip of water, the last walk across the room, the last twitch of the eye, the last breath. The last breath was all that separated them. He thought he could feel it still in the room. Sarah-Ann's daughter Mary came first. She came by car in black. Her hair was a pure soft white as if she'd had a good life, and her face tough and lined as if she hadn't. She wore a black dress of velvet, and matching gloves and shoes, and she stepped carefully as a queen, and said a smart hello, then, like a visiting dignitary, extended her long gloved hand.

Felix followed her directly to the body where she crossed and blessed herself, and wound round her fingers the beads that were round Sarah-Ann's fingers, until the rosary wound round both women, living and dead. Felix looked until he could no longer. Someone sat him on the step, for air, they said, but he slumped forward, as if any moment the formless slackness of him would collapse. Saliva ran down over his old man's chin, and his eyes watered. Already his body had given up its reflex reactions.

No one knew when he went to the glen. When his son, Jim, tried to tell him that the funeral proper was on its way, that the mourners, children and cousins and half-cousins,

and priest were at the chapel, he heard nothing, acknowledged nothing, just bent over, even this minute was down there digging, folding out his old gnarled body over the spade, and looking up at the red beech tree, not winter ravaged but how he saw it, spreading out its majestic copper branches to shade her in the summer. He was an old man. She would never again lie beside him.

Chapter Two

the largest baby in ireland after the famine

Sarah-Ann O'Malloran's birth was romantic. Or at least the story of it. Or, more correctly, the version of it that, originally propagated by her father, embellished by her grandmother, survived in those old enough to remember it.

Sarah-Ann O'Malloran was born in Cookstown in February 1879 when Queen Victoria was on the throne, Bismarck was in Germany and the Ottoman Empire was in decline. Sarah-Ann made her own history. Weighing in at thirteen pounds, her mother heralded her unique poundage, the locals marvelled at a 'thing that big that couldn't eat solids, potatoes or turnips' and speculated on how she would feed it. Just over thirty years after the Famine of the mid-1840s, her neighbours had never seen a baby so big. Unharnessed by heritage and unaffected by dietary deprivation, Sarah-Ann made a vigorous entrance into the world. She came kicking and screaming, looking as raw, said her da, as a badly skinned rabbit, but she was the full length of two. They rocked and cradled her to calm her extreme anxiety at being born, and then they washed her and saw that she was really as large a new

baby as has ever been cradled or washed. Her face was round and red and covered in fine down, and her legs were thick and solid and long. Her mother thanked the patron saint of childbearing, prayed to the saint of infants, and the saint of fortune, to guide her from harm. In that order was Sarah-Ann's past, present and future peremptorily, and piously, arranged.

At the time of her birth, weather statistics were collected with care; storms and hottest days, rainfalls and fog were logged and charted, and in February 1879, the century's fiercest snowstorm was recorded. But not the birth of Sarah-Ann. This emphasis on weather is not incongruous: Irish weather is infinitely variable, even in a day, and humans multiply themselves with ease. It was then with perfect ease that Sarah-Ann came into the world. She was born in a roadside cottage, which had thin stone walls, a wide stone hearth, and two rooms both for living and sleeping. In only one aspect was the house distinguished from a million others. It had a purple door.

Purple is a colour rarely found in Ireland. The Irish are not flamboyant nor given to attention seeking by means of differentiated houses; even today the houses are pebble-dashed bungalows rarely painted any colour except in the occasional seaside town. In 1879, house-dwellers whitewashed their houses every few years according to economy and preference. Their doors they painted less frequently, preferring to expose their red and green eaves to the wind, rain and sun, and, over long years, create a soft weather beaten look, not in the least conspicuous.

The purple then aroused suspicion. What sort of people were they to differentiate themselves? What had inspired them outside of influence? And the practical question: where had they found purple? Perhaps one of the household had travelled abroad, expanding his horizons, as foreign travels are supposed to? No, the house shared the gross untidiness and slovenliness of the poorest hovels; there could have been no means for travel. All the more bizarre, since poverty and garishness rarely met in bygone days. The colour of poverty in Ireland was dirt coloured, drab and dreary and grey. Only much later, when past nobility's passion for colour was mimicked in overstuffed rooms, did poverty and gaudiness become synonymous. Whilst the inferior palate of the typically poor results in such lapses in form, this instance was not in that category. The door's beautiful purple jarred with no other colour.

The truth is that Sarah-Ann's family were susceptible to whimsy, and a certain non-conformity. Too, they were afflicted with a burning unconscious aspiration to artistic expression, inadequately satisfied in the minor medium of doors.

Thus imaginations were stirred. Amongst people who lived after hunger, amongst women infamous for shorter lifespans than their menfolk, it is easy to see how the birth of a robust daughter could precipitate an exaggerated response that, leading from one thing to the other, from one neighbour to the next, results in a tale to make things bigger than they are.

Chapter Three

Felix Campbell, 1916

At forty-three years of age, Felix Campbell, a farmer working a small farm on the upper reaches of Ballymully, was seriously preoccupied with the first major decision of his life. Perforce of character and circumstances, he was making this decision without the counsel or influence of a single human being.

His decision, no doubt a paltry thing to those daily confronted with variety, complexities, possibilities and choice, was for him an enormity. Each morning he awoke empty headed before the realisation of his situation set in. Each night he paced the room back and forth; fearful to sleep, and fearful not to. He felt his solitude as a terrible bind.

Where he had previously scorned the opinions of others, he now frantically wished for acquaintances whose judgements were available to him. Not that he didn't have acquaintances, of course he had, it was simply that he had never before ventured to request advice of a personal nature. The best type of potato seed, improvements in ploughing or cattlefeed he had consulted on many times, though often more as a matter of courtesy than genuine necessity – he felt himself to be better informed than any other man he encountered. It was another wiser and less practical advice that he now required, and that he so little

knew how or where to seek out. That such wisdom as pertains to matters of the human heart was in infinitely shorter supply than the sparse degree of agriculturally scientific knowledge available in the mid-Ulster of 1916 was of only the slightest comfort.

Had he in any way been the type of man capable of exposing his dilemma to the criticism and wisdom of another, he may have confided that he had started to have the strangest dreams about a woman who came to him all dressed in purple, with a half wry smile on her lips, and said, 'How we create our ancestry, how we divert ourselves, how we pervert,' and challenged him to contradict her. But he was as dumbstruck in dreams as in life – he didn't know women. Disappointed in him, the barefoot beauty, her hair caught in briars, disappeared in the undergrowth.

'There is only the ancestry given us,' was his belated response. Weaned on Protestant Sunday school, the Bible and sword drill, the spiritual dimension to his dream was not lost. He became convinced that, through her, some unknown message was being sent to him, and that he must talk with her. He had no concept of how to achieve such a thing. How could he possibly approach her, let alone confess that he was a man who had dreams, and that she was in them?

Previously a man of solid purpose, his mind was reduced to the contortions and configurations of the indecisive, as if some brain fissure had chopped up his thoughts into a million fragmented pieces. Hundreds of times each day he rationalised that he must speak to her, and that the

matter was simple, and each day resolved to approach her, to broach the matter of his dream with her – yes, he would most certainly approach and warn her. Again and again, he worked out in his head the words he would use, sometimes scribbling these into a book, at other times speaking them out loud in a plan for social interaction. Even his practices were clumsy and embarrassing. Just as frequently he realised that the barriers to his communication were insurmountable, floundering him further into indecision.

His three dogs and five cats, companions of a sort, were no consolation. Forbidden to enter the house, they loitered around the doorstep, awaiting their master's presence. Discerning the changes in him, they became resentful. In the late spring they moved to the bottom byre, where they suspiciously observed him and his movements, which, so recently a source of opportunistic feeding, were now a matter of irritation. Against a common enemy they were united, dog with cat and vice versa. But in face of their protest, Campbell was oblivious.

Until his dilemma, his daily circumstances had little changed since the night ten years ago of his parents' deaths from heart attacks. His father's fatal attack was so sudden and enthralling that the sight inspired his wife to mimic him. She died ten minutes after her husband, and had only such time and freedom available to her as to take off the apron she always wore and to scream in agony and desperation. It may even have been relief. Felix rarely ate with enjoyment thereafter. At the time he conducted himself well, made efficient and practical arrangements.

The house was cleaned up, the minister invited, the wake laid out. They were buried on the same day, in the same grave, leaving their only son and heir to make the most of his newfound freedom. 'You kept your head,' said a number of souls anxious on account of his anatomy. This he did, by attempting to maintain as far as possible the customs and routines of his father's house. He rose early as his father had done, farmed the land his father had farmed before him, and went to bed early after studying his papers and books. If he had ever contemplated another method, this impulse appeared to have been truly suppressed.

Felix's isolation, so convincingly explained by himself, may simply have been bad luck. His ancestors had located themselves at the top of a lane at the head of a glen at a time when such a choice would have been admirable. When the Campbells first settled in Ireland, the country was in violent turmoil. By 1916, when times were gentler, a dominant location no longer offered such simple solution.

Reduced, squandered, divided to ninety acres, the present day farm was bounded to the north by Carndaisy Glen – beautiful, peaceful and treecovered, the locals attributed its precipitous ravines to the actions of fast-moving streams, though it was the Ice Age made its beauty. To the south, east and west Felix raised cattle, and with more modern techniques had three blades of grass where his father had grown one.

Lugubrious in grey sandstone, the large Campbell house sat square squat into the hill as if it was part of the hill

that rose up steeply behind it. It was damp and run-down, and even people well acquainted with it remarked that, from the outside, they didn't know which chimney came from which room, nor which window.

Felix had never married, and, indeed, was blessed, and cursed, with all the appearances and characteristics of an ageing Irish bachelor. That is, he knew nothing of women, and was convinced there was little good to be known. When he was twenty-five, he'd courted his cousin, but quickly grew bored with the palaver of the thing. Social historians would later report that Irish bachelors were a phenomenon, traceable to the aftermath of the Famine, but Campbell, born twenty-three years later, didn't know this. How lucky not to know, and how harsh for the individual striving in his independent fashion to be so regarded.

Always cautious in his affairs with others, he had long held that the extent to which a man's life has value and joy is the degree to which he is free from convention and responsibility. This, he elaborated, can only be truly achieved in isolation and independence from other human beings. True to his philosophy, he had never voiced his reasoning to any other person and was unlikely ever to do so. Whether his argument was genuinely inspired from a deep-seated aspect of his personality or a self-delusory version of his circumstances is impossible to determine, since we can hardly meaningfully isolate a man's opinions from his character. In any case, the argument he made well suited the life he led.

He had no one to confide in. Who would he tell about dreams and sitting alone in the glen and feeling the presence of another whom he had never met or spoken to, and who would he tell that, more and more, he thought about dead ancestors turning mad? Who would he tell such things? Who would suspect him of madness? Maggie Martin was insufficient confidante for any man, and none for him. She gossiped, and ate to excess, and not least was it against her that her involvement in his washing was the reason it was known by acquaintances that, no matter how fatigued he was from the rigours of a working day, he never once wore his daytime clothes in bed. He watched her lift clothes to the clothesline, and saw her fat arms hang down like a web, and her legs thick as tree trunks. All his life he knew Maggie. She loved the mountainy men. They brought her heather from the peatbogs, and rhubarb for jam, and because she did Felix's washing she was not averse to implying in company that there was more to their relationship than met the eye. He knew it and indulged it. If people talked, he dismissed it, knowing people will find any malice to amuse them.

He observed the paradoxical nature of his dilemma. How often the strength and conviction of human feeling stands in sharpest and most painful relief to the ability to act – the perversion of the human condition. Men inclined to great artistry with no talent whatsoever, lovers living in solitude, ugly women whose natures required remarkable beauty; these are the commonplace, the mark of the human spirit that seeks to create in itself conflict and confusion. And Felix Campbell, by nature a bachelor,

fulfilling his bachelorhood, had lived alone in the tranquil townland of Ballymully, had been passive in the rural tradition, had scorned the tribulations of high emotion.

When the dreams first started, they ignited an interest in his nature that he had never before dared to indulge. He questioned why, and how, he had come to be alone. He heard, almost for the first time, the silence in his house and in his heart, and remembered, with sadness, the constant sounds and noise of his childhood. There had always been some noise, something to join his senses with the outside world. Now he experienced the world as utterly silent, and was fearful. There was nobody or nothing in life that extended him beyond himself.

Yet he looked the same. When he went to the bridge on the Sunday afternoon – it was his major social engagement – he lay quiet and self-contained by the bridge as he had always done, and made the detached comments he had always made, which were so denigrated by bridgegatherers, who, like Irishmen everywhere, want only to hear and know a man's passion, not his considered opinion, the life taken out of it by consideration.

And when Maggie Martin came to do his washing as she did every Thursday, he sat in the house with her, and talked to her about all the things they had long ago established they would talk about, which were washing and shirts, and farming and weather, and the goings on of neighbours.

And when he worked on the farm, turning horses and ploughing and tending to cattle, he seemed the same man who had always turned and ploughed and tended.

And when he went to the town, where he went every Monday since the outbreak of war, to collect The Times, there was no change in his aspect. He bought The Times once a week, and because of this weekly gap in the world's unfolding history of war was required to complete in imagination what he didn't have in newspaper, but this too was the same as before. All outward activity unchanged. Dressed every day with all the care and fastidiousness of a London gentleman getting ready for his club, did his regular daily exercises, and, for the comfort of it, wound up his dead mother's clocks, and, at night, watched the dark descend on the glen and the mountain as it does every night, even long ago when the glen was covered in ice that slid down over the world, and sliced through the world and made Carndaisy Glen the edge of his world.

Felix Campbell grew up in a glen with a glenshaped soul, and baptism in his heart, and catechism in his mind, and a meeting house, and a Church of Ireland clock striking on the hour, and despite all that would do what he had never learnt from home, or church, or history.

And disrupted everything in and outside him.