

AN OVERVIEW OF THE ORIGINS OF THIS WEBSITE

By Hugh Munro Carter

When I moved to England in 1953 my father seized the opportunity for a European visit, and arrived in 1954. Getting to Ireland to explore family roots was one of his priorities.

I was not interested in ancestry, but at his urging we zeroed in on Mountrath about 60-70 miles south west of Dublin. Family lore had it that my great great grandfather, Robert Carter, had emigrated from there to Ontario. I remember my father and I sitting under a tree having a cup of tea in a vicarage garden in Mountrath, talking with the vicar. My recollection is that my father related the family legend but got nothing in return. With hindsight I now realize he had no knowledge of how to approach genealogy, and ask the right questions.

He learned nothing, and so the legend passed down by his parents remained unchanged: Robert Carter had been an officer in the British army, and had arrived in Spain too late to participate in the Peninsular Wars. After returning to Ireland, he emigrated to Canada, hastened by being out of favour in some way with the church. It was also thought that Robert's father, William, had been in the army.

As it turned out, the legend had only fragments of the actual story. Robert was in the army, but he was not an officer; he may have gone to Spain but more likely served in America, and presumably took part in the war with the United States of 1812-1814. He must have liked what he saw sufficiently to choose Canada as a suitable place to live. We have also learned his father was a farmer with a property in Rathdowney not far from Mountrath.

After that visit, I thought little about ancestry until about twenty years later, in 1976, I decided to return to Canada. Suddenly, I

realized I might never be close to Mountrath again, and I ought to make another visit.

Mountrath was a dreary quiet town; clearly it had known better days. At the time Robert Carter lived there in the early 1800s, it was busy. Iron was mined and wrought. Cotton manufacture employed 150 spinners and weavers, and a further 500 wove calicoes in their homes. Stuff-weaving also employed many; a large brewery and malting establishment and a vegetable oil mill rounded out the manufacturing scene. Additionally, it was a market town with two weekly markets, and two fairs a year. We have one reference to Robert as "Bob the Weaver". He joined the army when he was 21 and perhaps weaving was his trade until then, although there are references to his living on a farm.

At the time of my visit in 1976 the town looked distressingly poor, without any sign of brightness or colour in the shops or houses. Manufacturing had departed long ago. Even the meagre foliage appeared a tired green unrelieved by flowers or plants. The houses were from a bygone age, narrow, pressed up against each other, and right on the sidewalk. Even though it was September, the air was damp and cold. A drive around the town did nothing to lessen my poor impression.

The warm reception of Canon Hugh Gray, vicar at St. Peter's, Church of Ireland made a huge difference. [The Church of Ireland is the Protestant church in Ireland, affiliated with the Church of England.] He readily led me to the vestry where the parish records were kept and gave me *carte blanche* to look into the many books and records and to make any notes I desired. *It was here that my passion for genealogy was born.* What a thrill to find many CARTERs listed in an old spidery handwriting as far back as 1750, not only in the books of baptisms, marriages, and burials, but also in other records such as the Vestry Book, and a Register of Vestrymen.

I knew that the maiden name of my great great grandfather's mother was JULIAN, and in addition to many Carter references, I found a few Julians. The room was damp and cold, and my fingers were numb, but the adrenalin was flowing so that I didn't care. I was grateful when

Canon Gray appeared with a hot cup of tea and a biscuit. Today, many years later, it would be unusual in most parishes to encounter his warm welcome. Custodians such as Hugh Gray have become jaundiced by the great number of people seeking records, many of whom are more tourist than genealogist and are not motivated with a passion for ancestry, and they have little respect for being careful about old records, most of which are fragile.

Also, most records have deteriorated instilling reluctance among their custodians to allow them to be handled. Some record books have even been stolen or defaced. Pages I was again allowed access to much later, in September 2000, (under the watchful eye of the archbishop who held them in his home) were brown and crumbling, many of which I had seen in good condition 25 years earlier.

On that first visit in 1976, I took away pages and pages of notes from the record books. I then looked around Mountrath for other sources. Numerous Carters were listed in the local telephone book, and I called several and visited a few. A memorable encounter was with Jenny Carter of Ardlea about five miles east of Mountrath. Jenny was standing near the house when I drove into the farmyard across rough cobblestones. She was a large bulky woman, almost my height, dressed in the nondescript, shabby long black clothes from shoulder to ankle worn by many of the older Irish country women. Unkempt hair mostly covered with a black shawl, and of course no makeup, but a warm, friendly, smiling Irish face.

On hearing my name - Carter - and learning I was on the ancestral trail, she walked over, threw her arms around me clasping me to her ample bosom with, "Welcome and God bless yer, cousin! Come in! Come in! Yer'll be takin' a cup of tea, for sure, for sure."

She fluttered and flustered as she bustled around to place a chair for me on the dirt floor. The massively thick walls had grime on what was once a whitewashed surface. Into a huge fireplace she swung a large kettle on an iron arm attached to a medieval upright spindle. A variety of cooking pots hung from similar arms attached to the same spindle. (Right out of Dickens!)

Over tea I learned she was 73 and her husband Thomas 83. He sat saying very little, seemingly addled with age. Although physically spry and active, she was also a bit muddled. Her knowledge of the Carter ancestry was scanty, and she had no knowledge of any family records. She did say that her husband's father was Andrew Carter (maybe Andrew William) and he had married Mary Ince, both of whom were buried in the churchyard at Roskelton. She believed Thomas's grandfather was also named Andrew and he had married Margaret Isobel Crosbie. She felt the farm had been in the family "for a long time." I could not find any evidence in what they told me that we were related, but I suppose we must have been a few generations earlier.

Later that day I visited Thomas's sister, Mrs. Sadie Martin at Dunmore, Durrow (nearly 20 miles south of Mountrath) and heard contradictory information. Sadie told me that her grandfather was not Andrew but John Carter whose wife's name was Ellen.

My next visit, to Father John Carter, generated an amusing story. He seemed indifferent to the pursuit of ancestry saying he was more interested in the living than the dead. A valid viewpoint, but in his case he seemed defensive because of his lack of family knowledge. He had the simplistic view that all the Carters in the area were related, "one way or another," and that limited his genealogical curiosity. (He was wrong, because I encountered Carters in the area who, one generation back, had come to the area from Cork, and there were probably others.)

He was quite tickled, however, about how his father became a Catholic, and told the story with some relish. Among his father's contemporaries as a Protestant teenager, there weren't enough of them to play football (soccer) on their own, but the Catholic boys were entirely friendly and welcomed them to join in with them. The young Protestant footballers were eventually invited to church socials for young people. They became more and more integrated with their Catholic pals, and some of them, including Father John's father, started going to the Catholic Church, embracing the faith.

"Here am I a Catholic priest," laughed Father John, "I wonder what I would have become if my father had not played with the Catholic boys?"

Somewhat discomfited that he didn't have hard facts for me, he referred me to a cousin, Sister Xavier Carter who was Anastasia Carter before she took holy vows. I visited her at the convent in Kilkenny. She was a little flustered that she couldn't answer questions on the spot, and invited me to write to her. Her reply, which I have on file, didn't add anything useful toward linking her Carters with ours.

From that trip of genealogical exploration in Ireland, I returned to England with a large list of data, almost entirely from the church records held by Canon Gray. The task of sorting and sifting the entries and notes was daunting. I made huge charts with the items arranged in chronological order to try to discern connections, and especially to find some link with the Carters who went to Canada - Robert, his sisters, Mary (Polly), Jane and Eliza, and his brother, James Julian¹. I was unable to do so, and have been unsuccessful to the present day, (October 2009)

This is surprising because all five were said to have been born in Queen's County (now Laois), Ireland. The tombstone in Fife cemetery, Otonabee, Ontario of Eliza Carter (who married John Fife) says just that: "BORN AUG 2, 1798 IN QUEEN'S COUNTY, IRELAND". When I was researching Canon Gray's books, I noticed one was missing. It was book No. 2 of Baptisms, Marriages, and Burials, and I suspect the answers we want are in it.

James Julian Carter, who appears to be the younger brother of Robert and his sisters, was born in 1810. He emigrated to Canada 1836-7. One child died at sea en route. After his untimely death in 1847, his family moved to Crook's Rapids in Percy Township, and the family grew up there. Even with this related family, and I have talked to some of his descendants, no connection to Queen's County can be confirmed.

I have searched the parish records that are available in and around Mountrath with no success. However many parish records are unfortunately lost. The only firm evidence is Robert's army attestation

papers where it is recorded that he was born in Rathdowney, several miles south of Mountrath.

The delving and digging goes on.

That's how I became fired up to pursue family history. It has all the thrill of a whodunit - looking for clues in many unexpected places, evaluating each one found, attempting to fit them into the big picture, and trying to solve the mystery. The rewarding bonus of this exercise for any genealogist is that *YOU* are the core element in the whodunit. Adding to that fascination is that the search is never ending. Each new person added to the tree leads to still more. The tree blooms.