

## *In The Trenches*

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I have an ancestor, an Irishman from County Clare who lived in three centuries. Born in 1797, he lived all of the nineteenth century and died in 1904 at the age of 107. We as a family know a bit about him, that he was a poor Irish Catholic peasant, and married the daughter of English landed gentry. We can only imagine the details of that story. We also know that during the potato famine, her mother, who had disowned her for marrying this Irishman, refused to take her back, but condescended to save her and her family from starvation by hiring her to work as a scullery maid in her kitchen. We know that he came to the United States around the middle of the 19th. century and settled in Scranton, Pennsylvania. In 1901, at the age of 103, he underwent one of the first gallbladder operations and is written up in some medical journal somewhere. Finally, we know that he was, in my grandmother's words, "very childish" by the time he died.

I wish I could know him. I wish I could spend just one afternoon with him, to hear first hand about his life. In 107 years, he lived through the Great Famine in Ireland, the War of 1812 and the Civil War, the institution and the dissolution of slavery, the industrial revolution, recessions and depressions, the Johnstown flood, the births and deaths of four generations!

I often wonder what he did? His life took him from near slavery to freedom, impoverishment to the founding of the first labor unions. Was he a man of great faith or did he let his faith fall away when the evil hand of hatred took his wife from him? Why did he come to America? He was already 57 years old when he left everything behind. Was it his choice or was he forced to leave Ireland?

This is a man who lived an extraordinary length of time. Did he also live an extraordinary life? I don't know. We know of no great inventions with his name on them, no great speeches he made, no amazing contributions to medical science (other than a very old gallbladder). But writing about Tom Maloney urges me to ask some questions about my own life. They are questions any of us could ask about ourselves.

What will we leave behind? Will someone someday be able to trace our journey of faith? Will the stories told about us take our descendants through years of change and spiritual growth? Will any of us be remembered for being the one who could always find hope and never give up, the one who was so busy being available to others, that pain and physical limitations couldn't interfere? Will I be remembered for being a good friend? Will you be remembered for your faithfulness or perseverance?

I cannot imagine what it must be like to be forced to get on a ship and head out into the water, leaving every familiar road and shore behind to go somewhere across the world. Our ancestors all did it, even if we claim Native American blood, our ancestors were forced by their circumstances to change against their will. Peoples across the world are uprooted now, as I write this, in numbers greater than ever before. And we have a problem changing our hair color, or

hanging new paper in the dining room. But even if we do have trouble with change, whether it is our job we must change, whether we must learn to let go of a loved one, our home, our independence, we have choices. We can choose to change graciously or we can risk losing everything we are trying to cling to who we once were. We know we must change if we are ever going to effect change in our world.

As we who were born in this century look ahead to the next, we should take some time to reflect on the amazing changes that have taken place in our lives. We probably have had little to do with the big ones, the toppling of governments, war, world travel, space travel, technology, medical miracles, the great evils or the great heroism of this century? We may feel that we have been swept along in a tide of change, going forward with only a constant push from behind forcing us to keep moving. Sometimes we feel that we are controlled by the government, by our financial needs, by the pressures of Madison Avenue, by the banks, the health care providers, the massive conglomerates of the Western world! Is that what we want to tell our great- great-great grandchildren?

Do we want them to see us as sheep or as shepherds? Will it be more important to them how much money we made, or what we did with it? What kind of car we drove, or who we shared the trip with? How popular or powerful we were, or how charitable and compassionate? I know what I would ask Tom Maloney about his life. What kind of love for Margaret Webb made him risk both of their lives to marry her? How did he cope when he had to leave her buried in the ground when he came to America, and what did he feel as the ship docked in Boston harbor. I can read what happened to the world during his life in any history book, but I will not find his name in any book. But I don't want to talk to a great historical figure. He is my ancestor; I want to talk to him!

We too, are someone's ancestors. Whether we have children of our own is not important. Christ said that we could be His mother, His brother or sister, when we do the will of His Father in heaven. We are responsible for the generations to be born in the next century; we are the foundation upon which will be built the next millennium. Let us commit ourselves to leave them a legacy of gracious change, of prayerful consideration for the world they will inherit. We have been given the tools to build the kingdom of God, let us pass them on well worn.