

A Taste of My Life: Texts and Poems

By Carlota Caulfield ^[1]

How many Cubans are there of Irish ancestry? *From Ticket to Ride (some ways to play my tunes)*

In the forties my father moved to New York in search of his destiny. There he learned to make brilliantine in blue, red and golden colours - to give a beautiful sheen to the hair. In his free time, when he could break free from his alchemistic captivity, he would go to listen to Cuban music at the Park Plaza Hotel in Manhattan. Those were happy times, and years later became a topic of conversation with me, always so curious about foreign lands and convinced early on that my father inhabited a magical world.

A few days ago, while listening to a CD of 'Cuban Blues' by Chico O'Farrill, I remembered that in the New York of those stories of the mid-forties, Chico and my father had met at one of the Siboney Orchestra's concerts at the Club Cuba in Manhattan, and saw each other again in Havana in the mid-fifties. The jam sessions on the terrace of Chico's house on D Street in Vedado, our neighbourhood, became so famous that even my father, not particularly fond of Afro-Cuban jazz, couldn't resist dropping in once in a while to that much-talked-about terrace. I listen to the 'Rhumba Abierta' of Chico's 'Afro-Cuban Jazz Suite,' and then I imagine Chico back in New York, doing arrangements for Count Basie and Ringo Starr, and I see myself turning into a Beatles fan during my teenage years in Havana.

Haggadah [2]

*Hasta los nombres
tienen su exilio
(Even names / have their exile)*

José Isaacson, *Cuaderno Spinoza*.

A polytonal history: Taking an Irish canoe currach to cross the sea

Some years ago, I opened my archives - the real ones and those woven through the
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recollections of others and my own imagination. Documents and fog bridges fell out. Once more I began drawing the space of my cartographies with their psychological, political and cultural effects: I found myself playing hopscotch on a map where my name was written in different sounds.

After a risky journey of *anamnesis* (or my effort of remembering), the pieces of the family's collage appeared, building a road that begins and ends nowhere and everywhere.

'In principio erat verbum' said Saint John in Latin and Moisés de León added in Aramaic 'millin de-hidah' and the words riddled with allegory. Not far away by Biblical and Cabalistic standards, in the city of Dublin, Ireland, a warrior-poet by the name of Milesius Ó Cathamhoil told his people that according to an Irish legend (created by him?), the prophet Jeremiah and his disciple Baruch visited Ireland around 580 BC; others connect the Irish with the Ten Lost Tribes. (Was my great-great grandfather reading *The Annals of Inisfallen?*)

Let's go ask the spirit of King Toirdelbach of Munster sitting on his throne in 1079 and speaking with five Jews visiting Ireland (from where?).

While they wanted to secure the admission of their families to the Emerald Isle, the King was humming a big 'No'. But Milesius politely replied, 'Yes, come, my beloved children'. And in 1232 a fellow known as Peter de Rivall received a grant for the 'custody of the King's Judaism in Ireland'. The rest is the history of my father's ancestors (by now documented by Solicitors, Clerks, and Mythmakers).

The *Irish Encyclopaedia* tells me that the few Jews who went to the island were merchants and financiers. Some refugees from Spain and Portugal settled in Ireland at the close of the fifteenth century. Many of them were expelled, but fortunately they returned in 1655, in the time of Oliver Cromwell and the Commonwealth (difficult times for the Irish).

And the city of Dublin became a 'centro storico': the Liffey, 7 Eccles Street, Duke Street, Fenian Street and O'Connell Street seen by Leopold Bloom from the top of Nelson's Pillar and *the Cityful passing away, other cityful coming, passing away too: other coming on, passing on. Houses, lines of houses, streets, miles of pavements, piledup bricks, stones. No one is anything.*

'The sea, oh the sea, is a grádh geal mo chroí,' bright love of my heart

*The autumn solitude of the sea day,
Where from the deep ' mid-channel, less and less
You hear along the pale east afternoon
A sound, uncertain as the silence, swoon-
The tide's sad voice ebbing toward loneliness...*

Thomas Caulfield Irwin

My great-grandfather Richard Michael was an Irish merchant and trader who had some commercial success. It is true that he was not as popular as Richard Hennessy, a Cork emigrant, who founded the famous Cognac firm. He was from Dublin and he developed the habit of living for travelling.

According to Caulfield trivia, this merchant soldier went to Spain on a mission from the British Army (things get a little confusing here). He fell in love with the Catalans, in particular with Doña Antonia María Rebeca de Pons y Tudurí, native of Mahon, Menorca, Balearic Islands. She was the only daughter of Emanuel Pons y Fuster, a Merchant, and Carlota Moynihan from Palma de Mallorca. Emanuel came from a family of *conversos*, called *chuetas* in the Balearic Islands and I don't know more. Carlota was the daughter of another Irish merchant and a Catalan woman and I am at this point entering the 'inconnu'.

The name Caulfield, originally Ó Cathamhoil, occurred in many Irish historical references, but from time to time the surname was spelt Caulfeild, Caulkin, Calkins, Cawfield, Cawfeild, Cawfield. It was not uncommon to find a person's name spelt several different ways during his or her lifetime, firstly when he or she was baptised, another when that person was

married, and yet another appearing on the death certificate. (Please, let's add to these changes the ones that the spelling of my name suffered in Cuba. I had many identification cards with names like Coffee, Caultfeld, Caulfieldi, and Garfield. Did the bureaucrats at the ID office know that I love cats?).

Notable amongst my family were King Conn of the Hundred Battles, a warrior who died in the Battle of Clontarf in 1014, Thomas Caulfield Irwin, poet, Amach Caulfield, architect and one of the first defenders of animal rights, and my grandfather Edward Henry Caulfield de Pons, lawyer, merchant and traveller. In the New World, my ancestors played an important part in building nations, railroads, bridges, and writing business letters.

Gibraltar, London, Paris, Havana: My Grandfather

Born in Gibraltar, my grandfather Edward Henry grew up in London, studied law and travelled the world. He left me an exquisitely written document about himself. It is one of my family treasures. Dated in London and signed by Sir William Anderson Rose Knight Locum Tenens, Lord Mayor of the City of London, part of it reads: '...to whomsoever it may concern - Be it hereby notified that Edward Henry Caulfield, Esquire, who has resided in Paris for upwards of 14 years, whose present private and business address is No. 10 Avenue de Messine, in the same City, and who is Secretary of his Excellency the Conde de Fernandina (Grandee of Spain) has added to his said name that of de Pons, and will henceforward be known only by the name of Edward Henry Caulfield de Pons.'

I approached Edward Henry's life with love and fascination. The enigmatic figure of my eccentric *abuelito irlandés* would emerge in letters sent to him by Philip August Crozier, his British lawyer. If Edward Henry were alive today would he have sung to me his adventures with his English woven on a Gaelic loom, with his adopted French (he was an ardent francophile) or with his beautiful Spanish? He was a master in the art of conversation (what a pity that I did not inherit it) and he possessed a

genius for satire; he was an expert in 'slagging', a very Irish thing that means telling stories in a cruelly amusing way.

How to get to the Centre of Things?

Wearing good walking shoes, I began searching for the sounds of my grandparents. I found my way into the archives of the Church of 'Santo Cristo del Buen Viaje' of the City, Province and Diocese of Havana:

On the fourth day of November, all proper requirements have been complied with. The three canonical admonitions were published in the Church and at the Sacrament of the Cathedral of the City; the bride has obtained her parents' counsel and Sacrament of Penance was previously received. I, D. Pablo Tomas Noya, Presbyter, Parish Priest in charge of this Church, did attend at the marriage which, personally and as ordered by The Holy Church, was contracted by Don Eduardo Enrique Caulfield aged forty-one years, unmarried, merchant, native of Gibraltar and residing at number fifty San Ignacio street, a legitimate son of Don Ricardo Miguel Caulfield, native of Dublin and Doña Antonia de Pons, native of Mahon, Menorca, the Balearic Islands, and Doña Mercé Carlota Jover, aged eighteen years, housekeeper, unmarried, native of Barcelona and a resident of number seventy six Amargura street, etc. (Book 11 of Marriages of white persons, page 71, serial number 102).

After they married, my grandparents were at the centre of many fascinating things. I found myself at 'el centro', their *tertulias* - their literary and musical gatherings. Their house at Calle Mercaderes, and later on Calle Amargura in Old Havana, became a cultural ghetto where the traffic of foreigners created a new inspired geography. They travelled anywhere. My grandmother Mercé (Nena) Jover played the piano and read poems (she liked Bécquer and Folguera) while Edward Henry Caulfield de Pons, besides playing the fiddle and the violin, behaved like an avant-garde composer, moving around pieces of furniture in order to make the *salón* more musical.

Let's drink a glass of red wine, Irish beer or Cuban mojito with my ancestors and their

friends! Evenings of music and storytelling bring full days to a pleasing conclusion. Let's open up memory once more and jump out her window.

Còr que vols? / Sweet Heart, what do you want?

My grandmother Mercé had beautiful white hair and very curious eyes. She was a good talker and loved recounting anecdotes about her life with my grandfather. Blasa, my nanny, told me that she had a nice soprano voice and loved traditional Catalan lullabies. She was an overpowering, demanding and intelligent woman who rebuilt her family's fortune when my Irish grandfather died, leaving his family almost in penury. Her good luck and strong spirit kept her alive and well. Maybe we can talk here of the luck of the Catalans and not the Irish?

An Irishman's heart is nothing but his imagination: My Father

Francis-Francisco: handsome, witty, quiet, generous. He loved New York, had few but loyal friends, knew many people, never played a musical instrument, and my dear daughter: - Never forget you are Irish.

*They say that clouds are pure secrets Of children
And that playing hopscotch, hide-and-peek,
'The Queen,' and 'My house's patio,'
Are bygone things.*

*When I was a child
I liked to play with the sky,
To walk looking upwards,
To spin around until I fell down,
To discover those marvellous clouds
Looking like old men's heads
Curled-up snakes, long noses,
Top hats, sleeping foxes, giant shoes.*

*And it was so good to play
'You see, I see, I see, ... I see.'
To speak of the snail which leaves for the sun.
And what pleased me most was the song about
Señora Santana which my mother sang*

When she sheltered me.

*They said that clouds
Are pure secrets of children.*

*When I walked hand-in-hand with my father
Through the streets of Old Havana,
The little Chinese restaurants
Showed their red-and-white checked tablecloths
And the oyster-stands looked at each other
From opposite corners.*

*To go to the Casa Belga for books
Was a daily trip.
That passion of mine for pencil-cases,
Coloured crayons, and erasers
Crowded into small wooden boxes.*

*They said that clouds
Are pure secrets of children.*

*And I remember the blue bicycle
With rabbits' tails
And the never-used roller skates
And the enormous brown piano
And the Pinocchio my aunt Charlotte
Kept in a narrow wardrobe
And 'Ring-Around-The-Rosy'
With bread and cinnamon.*

*When I was a little girl
I liked bald dolls and stuffed clowns.*

*They said that clouds
Are pure secrets of children...*

Notes

[1] The author is a Havana-born poet of Irish descent, based in Oakland, California. She is the author of nine books of poems, including *34th Street and other poems*, *A las puertas del papel con amoroso fuego / At the Gates of the Paper with Burning Desire*, *The Book of Giulio Camillo. A Model for a Theater of Memory*, *Quincunce/Quincunx* and *Ticket to Ride. Essays and Poems*. An anthology of her poems *A Mapmaker's Diary* is forthcoming from White Pine Press this autumn. Carlota Caulfield teaches Spanish and Spanish-American Studies at Mills College, Oakland, California.

[2] *Haggadah*. The Sephardic Jews refer to the first night of the Passover celebration as the *haggadah*, which means 'the telling'. The Passover is one of the Ancient Spring Festivals. It provides Jewish families with a time to recall the Exodus from Egypt.