

THE LAMENT FOR ART O'LEARY

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More than three hundred years ago, in 1691, the Treaty of Limerick was offered by the English to end hostilities between the Irish followers of King James and King William of Orange. By the terms of that treaty, all who took arms against William were to join the English Army or quit Ireland. If they agreed, religious freedom would be guaranteed to those who remained. On October 5, the Irish under Patrick Sarsfield, accepted the terms, laid down their arms and marched out of the besieged City of Limerick. Only 1,046 of the 14,000 Irish forces turned to William's banner. The rest sailed away to form the Irish regiments in the armies of Europe. Ireland never saw them again, and their grieving families called them '*na Gaena Fiadhainne*' - the Wild Geese.

History tells how well the English kept their word, for in 1697 they reversed the terms of the treaty and enacted The Penal Laws - which have been denounced as the most repressive laws ever enacted against a nation. It marked the beginning of a national persecution never before approached in its severity. Professor Lecky, a prominent British historian, stated in his **History of Ireland in the 18th Century**, *It was not the persecution of a sect, but the degradation of a nation. And indeed, when we remember that the greater part of it was in force for nearly a century, that its victims formed at least three-quarters of the nation, that its degrading and dividing influence extended to every field of social, political, professional, intellectual, and even domestic life, and that it was enacted without the provocation of any rebellion, in defiance of a treaty which distinctly guaranteed the Irish Catholics from any further oppression on account of their religion, it may be justly regarded as one of the blackest pages in the history of persecution.* The persecution began with the seizure of 750,000 acres of land and forbade the Irish their religion, an education, a profession, a vote, property, and countless other rights. One of the laws even forbid an Irishman to own a horse valued at more than 5 Pounds, and that was the cause of one brave man's death.

Art O'Leary was the son of one of those Wild Geese and like his father, he entered the service of Austria. A brave and courageous soldier, he was soon elevated to the rank of Captain of Hussars in the Cavalry of Empress Maria Theresa's Austrian Army. In 1773, he traveled to his ancestral homeland with his wife, Eileen O'Connell of the Derrynane O'Connells and aunt of the Great Liberator, Daniel O'Connell. Since a good Cavalry Officer and his animal were inseparable, the Captain brought his mount - a beautiful brown mare with a white star on its forehead - with him from Vienna. In Ireland, the captain attended a local horse race; he entered and took the top prize much to the surprise of the local English gentry.

The local landlord approached him after the race and offered him 5 Pounds for his horse. The Captain laughed at the insulting offer, but the landlord, who was also the local magistrate, demanded the horse or the Irishman would be arrested for owning an animal worth more than the 5 Pounds that the law allowed. That a free-born Continental Officer should part with a fine cavalry steed at the behest of an alien landlord was more than O'Leary could tolerate; he again refused and departed. He was declared an outlaw and troops were summoned to apprehend him. On May 4, 1773, they caught up with the 26-year old O'Leary near the town of Carriganimy, near Macroom in Co. Cork, and shot him dead. His startled horse ran back to the courtyard at Rath Laoi where his family was staying. His wife ran to it, leapt into the blood-stained saddle and the horse took her back to Art's lifeless body. Distraught, she reached into her very soul and, in an ancient Gaelic tradition, delivered a tearful caoine (lamentation) for her dead husband.

Art O'Leary was interred in the old Kilcrea Abbey in County Cork, built by Cormac MacCarthy, the builder of Blarney Castle. His wife, Eileen, expanded on her grief and left more than 400 lines of a traditional Caoine (keen) or lamentation in the Irish language. As a literary work, **the Lament for Art O'Leary** is one of the last of its kind and has taken its place as one of the great pieces of Gaelic Literature, translated centuries later by Frank O'Connor. Today, it serves to keep alive the memory of a proud Irishman, the terrible times in which he lived, and a love remembrance that began with:

Long loss, bitter grief
that I was not by your side
when the bullet was fired
so my right side could take it
my fine-handed horseman!