
Tony Small

In the mid-eighteenth century, Dublin had become the grandest city in the English speaking world, with the exception of London itself. Its magnificent Georgian squares and town mansions easily matched those found in Mayfair, London's most elegant district.

Dublin was the seat of government in Ireland, with an Irish Parliament, under British control, located in the heart of the city. Dublin, closely tied to Britain, shared in its glory, most elegantly displayed in its Georgian architecture and in the courtly grandeur of life for its upper-class. At the summit of this social structure, and above all else, was the English Monarch, King George the Third, seated in solemn grandeur on his throne in his palace in London. King George was personally represented in Ireland by a Viceroy, who lived in the splendid Viceregal Lodge in the immaculate 2000 acre Phoenix Park on the outskirts of Dublin. The most imposing private home in Dublin was Leinster House, built by James Fitzgerald, 20th Earl of Kildare, to celebrate his elevation by the King to the first Dukedom of Leinster, Ireland's eastern and most wealthy province.

For generations the Fitzgeralds wielded great political power in Ireland, shifting their allegiances when necessary to protect the family interests. Greatness had been achieved with consummate skill through a series of canny marriages, and by serving a succession of Irish, Norman and English Kings, while successfully maintaining their Irish identity with occasional spectacular acts of Irish defiance.

James Fitzgerald, now a Duke, had reached the pinnacle of the Ascendancy, the Anglo-Irish aristocracy. The Duchess was English and the daughter of the Queen's Lady of the Bedchamber. It would be difficult for any family to get closer to Royalty than that.

The Duke was seen as an important ally of the King in Ireland, and in 1781, was being honored by a Royal visit to Leinster House. A splendid levee was held to allow the more docile Irish grandees to come and bend the knee, and as loyal subjects, to kiss the gloved hand of their Monarch.

King George was never an easy guest. He only felt really happy when in his own home, St. James' Palace. On this occasion he was even more grumpy than usual. The recent dispatches from his favorite General, Lord Cornwallis, were not what he would have wished them to be. Those disobedient Americans were so cunning, but worse still, they were so resourceful and so courageous. "If we lose in America", he grumbled to the Duke, "disobedience will be seen to have been rewarded, and who knows what may follow, Ireland may be next, and then England will be injured, isolated and impotent". The Duke murmured his sympathies and gave assurances of his family's undying loyalty. Secretly the King did not trust the Irish as far as he could spit. . .even James. . .remember he was a Fitzgerald, and they had a bad history, as far as the English were concerned.

The Duke had his own problems. His wayward seventeen year old fifth son, on whom the Duchess doted, had gone and joined the 19th Regiment of Foot without his father's permission, and had promptly volunteered to join General Cornwallis' forces in the American colonies. No word had been heard from Lord Edward for months. The Duchess was distracted and was incessantly nagging her husband to demand that the King order the incompetent General Cornwallis to send her son home at once. Otherwise she would use her Bedchamber influence to get him back.

Little did the King, or the Duke, realize how badly things were going, for them both, in those distant colonies.

Eutaw Springs, South Carolina, 8th September 1781

From swampy springs the Eutaw rose
 Flowed laz'ly through the creek
 No cotton now. . ."All done gone",
 Fields empty, weedy, bleak

Owners, slaves and goods, all fled
Great houses gutted, crumbling,
Tony Small, a slave in hiding,
Heard guns of war a'rumbling

Americans charged through British lines
Then came back retreating,
Little gained by either side,
None losing, none defeating

That final battle, Eutaw Springs,
Needlessly extended,
One thousand killed and nothing gained,
The war would soon be ended

Darkness fell,
Soldiers, dead and dying,
Like a shadow Tony moved
Among the bodies, prying

Scavengers stripping corpses,
Emptying their pockets
Fighting over badges, buttons,
Killed for chains and locketts

Repelled, ashamed, Tony left,
Then stopped, he'd heard a sound,
Returned and saw a body move,
Groaning on the ground

A youth, helpless, overlooked,
Thigh gashed, and nearly dead,
Tony raised him in his arms,
White breeches soaked blood red

Tony's hands were gentle, healing,
Urged the boy to live,
Tending him as best he could,
Shared all that he could give

For days he lay in Tony's hut
His wounds Tony binding

A friendship grew between these two,
Their destinies entwining

They slowly made the 60 mile journey to Charleston with Tony carrying the injured Lord Edward most of the way on his back. "Tony you must return with me to Ireland, not as a slave, but as my servant. I will pay you wages and you will be a freeman". Tony needed little persuasion.

Black servants, recruited from the Jamaican sugar plantations were not uncommon in upper-class London families. One, Francis Bishop, can be seen serving at table, in the picture of the Doctor Samuel Johnson Club Meeting in our library. Black servants in Dublin were exceedingly rare.

Tony stood over 6 feet tall, was broadly built and handsome, and endowed with natural grace. He had a high intelligence and Lord Edward arranged for him to spend time learning to read and write and he was taught French by the Fitzgerald's governess, the language used by servants on special social occasions. He was adored by the Duchess for having saved the life of her favorite son. With remarkable ease Tony made the transition from the fetid conditions of slave-life in South Carolina to life in Dublin with Ireland's Premier Duke and family. Lord Edward was proud of his Tony's achievements, arguing that his personal qualities must have derived from an African lineage as distinguished as the Fitzgerald's. Tony was his constant companion and became a well recognized figure in Anglo-Irish society.

But Lord Edward was troubled. He began to harbor uncomfortable feelings about his position in the Ascendancy and particularly about his title. Had not Thomas Paine, whom he greatly admired, ridiculed titles in "The Rights of Man?" He wrote, "There were no titles in the Garden of Eden and no such animal as a Duke or Lord". The presence of Tony was a daily reminder of man's injustice to man. To his family's

great anger, when on a visit to Paris to attend a French victory celebration, the son of the Premier Peer of Ireland, and great-great grandson of King Charles the Second, in a defiant act in the Fitzgerald tradition, publicly renounced his title, and pledged to lead imprisoned Ireland to its freedom. "I knew something like this would happen," roared King George in his palace, "Every Fitz is a bastard!"

Little has been recorded of the remarkable relationship between the Irish Aristocrat and the ex-slave, and the role, if any, Tony played in Edward's conversion to rebel, but in Stella Tillyard's most readable recent biography "Citizen Lord," from which I have drawn freely, I learnt of a painting of Tony, which speaks volumes about their relationship.

The painting was commissioned by Edward to hang with the other portraits of family members painted by the great artists of the day, Sir Joshua Reynolds and Thomas Gainsborough.

Significantly Edward chose an Irish landscape artist. He believed he could not trust a portrait painter, especially an English one, to capture Tony's true character, a noble Samaritan who had saved his life. The portrait painters he knew were more at home with blue-eyed society beauties with lily-white skin and rosy cheeks, or haughty male dignitaries wearing powdered wigs. A landscape artist was more sensitive to the beauties of nature and would more readily recognize Tony's natural qualities.

He trusted and liked Thomas Roberts who had painted scenes in his family Kildaire estates, lovely scenes, filled with the character of the surrounding Irish countryside.

Roberts had a difficult brief. The portrait had to be an honest portrayal of the subject as well as conveying the exalted image of Tony held by his patron. It had to be part heroic and part humble. Never before

had Roberts had an assignment like this. Sir Joshua Reynold's portrait of Omai from the South Seas had been a great success, but then Omai was a prince, who had been received by the King. Roberts accepted the challenge and produced a remarkable work.

Tony stands in the middle of the picture, on his left is a nervous looking white pony and on the other side the Fitzgerald's favorite white poodle, crouching playfully. The two white animals are a contrast to the dark-skinned Tony. He is not painted as a servant. There is nothing meek or servile about him. Tony who was over six feet tall towers over the pony. His name, given by his owner, was a joke.

His facial expression is lofty as he gazes out beyond the viewer, his eyes somber with melancholy dignity. There is no smile. His dark brown hair is piled high and hangs shoulder length. The highlights of his face are tinged light amber. His face is slightly turned to the right, showing his left ear with a large golden ring. His clothes are remarkable. He wears loose red pantaloons and a red jacket trimmed with ermine and tied about the waist with a gold sash. A cloak of rich brown hangs from his broad shoulders. He wears gold slippers.

Tillyard describes Tony as conjuring up an image of "a Renaissance Magi."

A telling part of the painting is its setting. Tony stands outside the gates and grounds of a grand house, a clear reminder of where he stood in relation to the Ascendancy, from which Edward had also begun to distance himself. A wooded Irish countryside, with its tall and ancient trees, fills the background and all is being to be lit by the dawn of a new day.

It is as if Tony is deep in thought, thinking about the future and what it might hold in store. His expression is one of foreboding. On the next occasion

his friend was wounded in battle would he be there to tend his injuries and save him?

The history of the failed Irish uprising in 1798, led by Edward Fitzgerald, in which he died of unattended wounds in a British jail, tells us that Tony's apparent presentiment, captured in his expression, was fully justified.

Edward Fitzgerald's name has joined the long roll of Irish martyrs. Several biographies have been written, the most recent in 1997.

In some Tony gets a passing reference, in others he is ignored. Stella Tillyard does him proud. Above all, the portrait, is the most eloquent expression we have of Tony Small. He was unique, the only black person known to have played a significant role in Irish history.

The helpful staff of the Cincinnati Art Museum discovered a past reference to the painting, not as a portrait of Tony Small, but as a portrait of the pony, "Wild Sir William" and a French dog, attended by an East Indian barbarian!

Thanks to our Club's art historian, John Wilson, who made a special search of the art archives on a recent trip to London, we have learnt that the portrait remains safely in the hands of the Fitzgerald family. The 85 year old 8th Duke of Leinster lives the life of an English country-gentleman in Langston House, Chadlington, Oxfordshire.

The old Fitzgerald home, Leinster House, now houses the Dail and the Seanaid, the Irish Parliament, the center of one of Europe's most vibrant nations. How Edward would have gloried in the irony of this!

Ireland

No longer just the underdog

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A land of mists and barren bog,
With England no longer foe,
That fire, first lit so long ago,
Burns bright,
Edward and Tony Small,
In memory, you both stand tall

Robert Smith