

Jean-Baptiste Riel dit Lirlande

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It is a sad fact of Ireland's history that many of her children departed for foreign shores. One of Ireland's sons, Jean-Baptiste Riel dit Lirlande, fled British tyranny in his homeland for New France where he served as a soldier in the troupes de la Marine. He is the ancestor of the famed Métis leader Louis Riel.

What do we know about Jean-Baptiste Riel dit Lirlande? His sobriquet points to an Irish origin. His place of residence in Ireland is indicated within his marriage record to Louise Cottu (Coutu), the daughter of François Cottu and Jeanne Verdon, on 21 January 1704 at Sorel. This record clearly states that he was "de la paroisse de St-Pierre ville et Evêché de Lymbric [Limerick] en Irlande, habitant de la Valtrie."¹ His parents are recorded as Jean-Baptiste Riel and Louis Lafontaine. Furthermore, we know he was recorded as being Irish when he was naturalized in May 1710.² His wife Louise predeceased him on 26 October 1735 at Lanoraie.³ On 10 March 1749, before the notary Cyr de Monmerqué dit Dubreuil, Jean-Baptiste donated his land to his son Marc-Antoine Rielle with the consent of his other children: Jean-Baptiste Rielle, Jacques Rielle, Maurice Rielle, Gabriel Trottet dit St-Jean and Élisabeth Rielle his wife, Bonaventure Frappier and Catherine Rielle his wife, Toussaint Niquet and Louise Rielle his wife

¹Act was found at the Île-Dupas presbytery, Archives nationales du Québec à Montréal. PRDH [Programme de recherche en démographie historique], available at <http://www.genealogy.umontreal.ca>, no. 84011. No other document mentions his place of origin, not even his marriage contract, which is a private act dated 20 January 1704 and deposited with Michael Lepailleur de La Ferté, notary, Archives nationales du Québec à Montréal.

²PRDH no. 401443. In the PRDH database his surname is found as Carool on this record. However, Champagne reads the surname on this record as Le Reel. Antoine Champagne, "Louis Riel et sa famille," *Mémoires de la Société généalogique canadienne française* 20 (July-August-September 1969): 142-157, p. 145.

³Msgr. Cyprien Tanguay, *Dictionnaire généalogique des familles canadiennes depuis la fondation de la colonie jusqu'à nos jours*, 7 vols., Montréal: Eusèbe Senécal, 1871-1890; reprint, Montréal: Éditions Élysée, 1975, vol. 6, p. 566. Her death is not found in the PRDH database.

absent and living at St-François, and Basile Rielle and Pierre Rielle, minors.⁴ He died on 18 February 1753 at Lavaltrie.⁵ He has left many descendants in Québec, Western Canada, and the United States.

Confusion arises over the French sounding names and surnames found for Jean-Baptiste and his parents. Jean-Baptiste is simply not an Irish given name, yet both the son and father carry it. In Gaelic, this name would translate into *Eoin Baiste* for St. John the Baptiste. However, it is not a name customary among the Irish.⁶ We do know that on the first record mentioning Jean-Baptiste in 1700 he is recorded simply as Jean.⁷ Perhaps he just accepted the common name Jean-Baptiste to blend in with his new Canadian compatriots and he applied the name retroactively to his father. Although this might explain the use of the name Jean-Baptiste, the French surname Lafontaine for his mother is not an Irish surname and therefore remains problematic.

Champagne has suggested that perhaps Jean-Baptiste, though born in Ireland, was likely of Bretagne origins.⁸ He bases his argument on the existence of the surname Riel (and the variations Rielle and Réhel) found in that province. Bretagne is appealing as a place of origin for the Riel family because of the trade patterns with Ireland and the presence of Celtic heritage and culture in both places. This theory would neatly explain the presence of French names and surnames in family of Jean-Baptiste. Nevertheless, there is no evidence except the existence of the Bretagne surname Riel to support his theory.

In contrast, O'Farrell has suggested that Riel is derived from O'Reilly.⁹ However,

⁴This act was insinuated on 1 October 1754 with the Prévôté at Montreal. Parchemin database on CD-ROM. This database is available at several institutions in Québec including the library of the Société généalogique canadienne française. I would like to thank Denis Beauregard for searching the Parchemin database for notarial acts regarding Jean-Baptiste Riel.

⁵PRDH no. 264974.

⁶Letter from Alan Mac an Bhaired, Ordnance Survey Office, Dublin, Ireland, to John P. DuLong, 1 May 1981.

⁷Concession of land between Louise Bissot and Jean Riol dit Lirlande, Antoine Adhémar dit St-Martin, notary, 3 August 1700, Archives nationales du Québec à Montréal. A search of the PRDH and Parchemin databases reveal only two other occasions, both in 1739, when he is simply referred to as Jean in the records. These are the only exceptions to the general pattern of his name being recorded as Jean-Baptiste in a total of 41 parish register acts and 19 notarial acts.

⁸Champagne, "Louis Riel et sa famille," pp.147-151.

⁹John O'Farrell, "Irish Families in Ancient Québec" (a speech given at the Annual Concert and Ball of the St. Patrick's Society in Montréal on 15 January 1872) in *The Untold*

O'Reilly is a County Leitrim and County Cavan surname, which is in the north of Ireland, far removed from Limerick. Though O'Farrell is probably wrong in his assigning Jean-Baptiste to the O'Reilly family, he does provide evidence of many Irish surnames in New France being modified into French sounding surnames.¹⁰

So we have a dilemma here. Was Jean-Baptiste all Irish and the names in his family transformed by French clerks into French sounding names or was he just born in Ireland but of French ancestry?

We know that in New France the surname of Jean-Baptiste appears in the following forms: Carool (possibly Le Reel), Reel, Réel, Rel, Rele, Relle, Riel, Riele, Rielle, and Riol.¹¹ If we compare these spelling variations to known Irish surnames and their variations, then it is possible we might find a match or at least a similar surname. MacLysaght, the Chief Herald of Ireland and an expert on Irish surnames, wrote several definitive books on the topic. According to MacLysaght, Ryle is an Irish surname and it is similar to Riel. It is found under several variations including O'Ryall, Real, Riall, Riall, Rile, Ryall, and Ryle. In Gaelic it is spelled *Ó Raghail*.¹² There is some similarity between the sound of the Irish surname Ryle and the French Canadian surname of Riel.

According to Woulfe, as cited by MacLysaght, Ryle (or O'Ryall) is derived from O'Reilly, since in Gaelic the surname is *Ó Raghail*, which is very similar to *Ó Raghaille*, the

Story: The Irish in Canada, edited by Robert O'Driscoll and Lorna Reynolds, (2 vols. Toronto: Celtic Arts of Canada, 1988), vol. 1, pp. 281-294. Much of O'Farrell's imaginative article, including his placing the Irish Brigade in New France, can be dismissed. On p. 283, he refers to Jean Baptiste with the sobriquet of Sansouci. No document has been uncovered with this sobriquet. Out of 41 records found for Jean-Baptiste in the PRDH database, only 16 of them note an alias and in all these cases it is Irlande and Lirlande. Similarly, the Parchemin database shows 19 records for Jean-Baptiste and only four times does he use the alias Lirlande.

¹⁰O'Farrell, "Irish Families," p. 284.

¹¹Based on a survey of the surname found in the PRDH and Parchemin databases.

¹²Edward MacLysaght, *Irish Families: Their Names, Arms and Origins* (1957; 4th ed. Blackrock [Ireland]: Irish Academic Press, Ltd., 1978), p. 143; Edward MacLysaght, *More Irish Families: A New Revised Edition of More Irish Families, Incorporating Supplement to Irish Families, with an Essay on Irish Chieftainries* (1970; Blackrock [Ireland]: Irish Academic Press, Ltd., 1996.), p. 185; and Edward MacLysaght, *The Surnames of Ireland* (1985; 6th ed. Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1999), p. 263. According to this last book, p. ix, originally, the "O" or "Ó" proceeding an Irish name was placed before a grandfather or ancestor's given name, while a "Mac" was placed before father's given name. Eventually, these names became hereditary surnames.

Gaelic for O'Reilly.¹³ However, MacLysaght disagrees with this assessment. He believes that the surname O'Ryall is more likely related to O'Rahilly (also spelled O'Rahill or O'Raghill in English or *Ó Raithe* in Gaelic). He argues that this is the case because both O'Ryall and O'Rahilly are found in County Kerry while O'Reilly is found mostly in Breffny (or *Bréifne*, consisting of County Cavan in the south of Ulster province and County Leitrim in the north of Connaught province).¹⁴ It is interesting to note that the surname of O'Rahilly is found in the east of County Kerry near the border of County Limerick.¹⁵

MacLysaght's study of Irish surnames suggests that Riel is more likely derived from Ryle than inherited from Bretagne.

But what of the surname Lafontaine that the mother of Jean-Baptiste carried? During the this period several Irish men and women came to the colony of New France. Most of them had their Irish names and surnames, pronounced in Gaelic or English, altered by French clerks, in some cases, hopelessly mangled so that we can not easily detect their Irish surnames. It is very unlikely that all these Irish people have ancestry in Bretagne and France. In cases like this names are some times spelled as they sound and some times literal translated. I believe the later might be the case with Louise Lafontaine. In Ireland, nearby Limerick in County Kerry, the surname Spring exists.¹⁶ Although predominantly a Protestant Anglo-Irish family, some of the Springs were associated with Catholicism and Limerick. It is not beyond the realm of possibility that a Catholic Ryle from County Kerry married with a Protestant or Catholic Spring from the same county, moved to nearby thriving seaport of Limerick, and had a son who migrated to France and then New France after 1691.

How did Jean-Baptiste come from Ireland to France and then New France? To answer this question we must examine the military career of Jean-Baptiste and that of other Irishmen who also served at the same time in New France.

Jean-Baptiste was a soldier in the *Compagnies franches de la Marine*, otherwise known as the *troupes de la Marine*. These soldiers were called Marines because they were controlled by

¹³MacLysaght, *More Irish Families*, p. 185. For information on Rev. Patrick Woulfe's *Sloinnte Gaedheal is Gall: Irish Names and Surnames* (Dublin: M. H. Gill & son, 1923) see MacLysaght, *Irish Families*, p. 11.

¹⁴S. J. Connolly, ed., *The Oxford Companion to Irish History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 419.

¹⁵See the map in MacLysaght, *Irish Families*, p. 222.

¹⁶MacLysaght, *More Irish Families*, p. 194. I would like to thank Edward Doyle for suggesting the surname Spring. Edward Doyle, ejd2_re@move.worldnet.att.net, "Re: Irish Equivalent for Lafontaine," soc.genealogy.ireland, 22 December 2001.

the Ministry of Marine, which was responsible for the defense of colonies. Jean-Baptiste was in the company of Séraphin de Margane, écuyer, seigneur de Lavaltrie. Margane was a half-pay captain in 1694 and a full captain in 1698. He died on 16 May 1699.¹⁷ On 3 August 1700, Jean-Baptiste acquired a concession of land at Lavaltrie from Louise Bissot, the widow of Margane.¹⁸ This is the first record of Jean-Baptiste in New France and in it he is still referred to as belonging to the company of Margane. On 7 May 1702, Jean-Baptiste was the godfather at the baptism of Jean-Baptiste Cottu, the son of François Cottu and his second wife Louise Lesiege at Contrecoeur.¹⁹ François Cottu was the future father-in-law of Jean-Baptiste. In this record Jean-Baptiste is noted as belong to the company of Champigny. This is probably Jacques-Charles Bochart, sieur de Champigny, later Marquis de Ste-Marie, son of Jean Bochart, sieur de Champigny, the Intendant of New France from 1686 to 1702. Champigny became a captain in the marines in 1700.²⁰

Jean-Baptiste was one of the “Wild Geese.” This was the term applied to the Irishmen who left their homeland to serve in the armies of France, Spain, and Austria.²¹ At the surrender of Limerick, the hometown of Jean-Baptiste, on 3 October 1691, the British permitted about 16,000 Irish soldiers, with their wives, camp followers, and children, to depart for France.²² As Jean-Baptiste was born around 1670 and would have been about 21 in 1691, he was old enough to have served in the Jacobite army and to have joined the “flight of the Wild Geese” to France.²³

¹⁷René Jetté, *Dictionnaire généalogique des familles du Québec*, with the collaboration of the Programme de recherche en démographie historique (Montréal: Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 1983), p. 769.

¹⁸Antoine Adhémar dit St-Martin, notary, 3 August 1700, Archives nationales du Québec à Montréal.

¹⁹PRDH, no. 90057. Jetté, *Dictionnaire généalogique*, p. 287.

²⁰Jay Cassel, "The Troupes de la Marine in Canada, 1683-1760: Men and Material," Doctoral dissertation, University of Toronto, 1987, p. 559. Jetté, *Dictionnaire généalogique*, p. 118.

²¹The term “wild geese” is said to derive from the cargo manifest used on ships transporting the men illegally to the continent. Harman Murtagh, “Irish Soldiers Abroad, 1600-1800,” in *A Military History of Ireland* ed. by Thomas Bartlett and Keith Jeffery, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 294-492, p. 492, n. 64.

²²Connolly, *Companion to Irish History*, p. 316. Murtagh, “Irish Soldiers Abroad,” p. 298.

²³Jean-Baptiste age is best calculated from the record of his stay at the Hôtel-Dieu de Québec on 2 October 1700 when he gave his age as 30 years. Jetté, *Dictionnaire généalogique*, p. 985. His burial record, dated 19 February 1753 at Lavaltrie, gives his age as 90 years, which

In France, most of these Irish soldiers served in King James II's British army in exile.

But how did Jean-Baptiste end up in the troupes de la Marine and sent off to a remote colony of France? We will probably never know how this Wild Goose flew so far off course, but we can put his migration in context. Many Irish soldiers in France served in the army of James II, the exiled British king. By the terms of the Treaty of Ryswick in 1697, which ended the War of the League of Augsburg, Louis XIV was forced to recognize William and Mary as the legitimate sovereigns of Great Britain. He was also required to reduce his guest's exiled army. Though some of these demobilized Jacobites joined the Irish Brigade regiments, others were thrown out to fend for themselves and some turned to being highwaymen;²⁴ Enrolling in the troupes de la Marine would have appealed to several of these men as a worthy alternative to being a pauper or a thief. We know that several Irish compatriots joined Jean-Baptiste as a soldier in the troupes de la Marine in the late 1690's.

The records of Québec reveal that there were seven other contemporary Wild Geese serving in New France:

- **Aubry (Obri or O'Brien?) dit Larose, Germain.** Born around 1663 in Ireland. Arrived in New France before 1700 as a soldier in the troupes de la Marine. He served in the company of Captain Pierre Le Gardeur de Repentigny. Nationalized in May 1710. He died at Montréal on 11 July 1723. No known descendants.²⁵
- **Bellecour, Joseph.** Born around 1675 and from the town and county of Limerick, Ireland. He arrived in the colony as a soldier in the troupes de la Marine and served under Captain François Dauphin de La Forest. He died at Hôtel-Dieu de Montréal on 3 December 1701. No known descendants.²⁶
- **Fol, Jean.** Born around 1669 in Ireland. Fournier claims that he came to New France as a soldier in the troupes de la Marine, though the PRDH hospital records state that he was a matelot (sailor). He was at the Hôtel-Dieu de Québec from 16 July to 9 August 1691

would place his birth in 1663. PRDH no. 264974. This age at death is probably exaggerated and less accurate than the one Jean-Baptiste would have given in 1700.

²⁴Murtagh, "Irish Soldiers Abroad," p. 313. Mark G. McLaughlin, *The Wild Geese: The Irish Brigades of France and Spain*, illustrated by Chris Warner (London: Osprey Publishing, Men-at-Arms Series, no. 102, 1980), p. 7.

²⁵Marcel Fournier, *Les Européens au Canada des origines à 1765 (Hors France)* (Montréal: Éditions du Fleuve, 1989), p. 87, no. 37. Jetté, *Dictionnaire généalogique*, p. 28. PRDH nos. 20085 and 52022.

²⁶Fournier, *Européens au Canada*, p. 93, no. 62. Jetté, *Dictionnaire généalogique*, p. 80. PRDH, no. 49904.

and recorded as living at Sillery. It was not uncommon for soldiers and sailors to spend time at the hospital recovering from the rigors of their voyage. Nothing further is known about his fate. No known descendants.²⁷

- **Geaux (Geau or Jo), dit l'Irlande, Jean.** Born in 1664 and from the town and county of Limerick, Ireland. Fournier adds that he was from the parish of St-Pierre, as was Jean-Baptiste Riel, but this is not observed in other sources. He came to New France as a soldier in the troupes de la Marine. His officer is unknown. In May 1713, he was naturalized. Jean married on 11 August 1723 at St-Laurent, near Montréal, to Jeanne Verret, widow of Jacques Brunet and Guillaume Delisle dit Lardoise, and the daughter of Michel Verret and Marie Deschamps. His marriage contract was before Antoine Adhémar dit St-Martin on 9 August 1723. It is in his marriage contract that we learn that he was the son of David-Jean Geaux and Elie Nicard, He died at the Hôpital-Général de Montréal on 25 October 1734. No known descendants.²⁸
- **Hoc (Hoche, Houé, Hoé, Houay, Ohé, or Ouhé) dit Jolicoeur, Jean-Baptiste.** He was born around 1669 and from the town and county of Cork, Ireland. His parents were Jean Hoc and Élisabeth Ming. He arrived in New France before 1700 as a marine. He served under Captain Leverrier (probably François Le Verrier de Rousson). On 27 April 1704 at Montréal he married Élisabeth Olivier, the daughter of Jean Baptiste Olivier and Élisabeth Renaud of Sorel. He became a farmer at Montréal and was naturalized in May 1710. He died on 10 February 1741 at Montréal. He left decedents.²⁹
- **Lemaire (or Lemers) dit St-Germain, Charles,** flourished 1676-1751.³⁰ See the notule for details on this soldier of the troupes de la Marine from County Tipperary, Ireland.
- **Lirlande, Philippe.** Born about 1662, probably in Ireland. A soldier in the troupes de la Marine in the company of Captain Alphonse de Tonty, Baron de Palludy. He was buried on 27 December 1712 in Montréal.³¹

²⁷Fournier, *Européens au Canada*, p. 141, no. 307. PRDH, no. 413036.

²⁸Fournier, *Européens au Canada*, p. 146, no. 338. Jetté, *Dictionnaire généalogique*, pp. 182, 322-323, and 482-483. PRDH nos. 16199, 95145, and 154000.

²⁹Fournier, *Européens au Canada*, p. 160, no. 406. Jetté, *Dictionnaire généalogique*, p. 573. PRDH nos. 47868 and 152252.

³⁰Fournier, *Européens au Canada*, p. 180, no. 501. Jetté, *Dictionnaire généalogique*, p. 703. PRDH nos. 14371 and 270337.

³¹Jetté, *Dictionnaire généalogique*, p. 737.

Cassel found in his dissertation research on the troupes de la Marine the foreign origins for 31 soldiers serving in Canada from 1684 to 1750, 13 from Ireland, 11 from Spain, and seven from England.³² Our sample of seven soldiers, plus Jean-Baptiste Riel, would be 63 percent of the known Irish soldiers. It is interesting to note that two of these men also came from Limerick. The four with known places of origin are all from the province of Munster in the south of Ireland. Like Jean-Baptiste, they all lived around the Montréal area. Also, again like Jean-Baptiste, three of them were able to marry. Although there were ordinances encouraging the soldiers to marry and settle in Canada as farmers, few were granted a discharge. A soldier in the troupes de la Marine needed the permission of his officer to be married between 1681 and 1715.³³ Two were named Jean, but one carried the name Jean-Baptiste. Given the similarities between these men, one wonders if they came over together and were then separated into different companies. These Irishmen are all stray Wild Geese who did not end their military careers in one of the famous regiments of the Irish Brigade in Europe, but instead served in the relatively obscured troupes de la Marine in a distant colony of France far removed from Ireland.

What of Jean-Baptiste's home, the parish of St-Pierre in Limerick? This has been a confounding point because there is no St. Peter's parish in County Limerick, or in the Diocese of Limerick, at least none according to nineteenth and twentieth century gazetteers. There is a St. Peter's and St. Paul's parish in Kilmallock in County Limerick, but this is about 30 kilometers south of Limerick city.³⁴ However, Jean-Baptiste is clear that he is from the village of Limerick. So where is St. Peter's?

To locate this church we have to go back to the city of Limerick in 1690.³⁵ Limerick was Ireland's second most important city after Dublin. As a seaport on the Shannon River, it carried on trade with many places in the British Isles and the continent of Europe. The city was divided into two parts, English Town on King's island surrounded by the Shannon and Abby Rivers, and Irish town just to the south of the island across the Abby River. The city was walled at that time. If we walk the walls of English Town then we would soon come to "Peter's Cell Gate" on the east side of the town. Descending the walls we would learn that this is location of St. Peter's, a

³²Cassel, "Troupes de la Marine," p. 97.

³³René Chartrand and Serge Bernier, *Canadian Military Heritage*, 3 vols. (Montréal: Art Global, 1993-2000), vol. 1, pp. 141-142.

³⁴Census of Ireland, *General Alphabetical Index to the Townlands and Towns, Parishes, and Baronies of Ireland* (Dublin: Alexander Thom, 1861), p. 951.

³⁵For an excellent fold out map of historic Limerick see Tadhg Ó Ceallaigh, comp., *Limerick: A Handbook of Local History* (Limerick: The Treaty Press, Ltd., 1971?). This same map, with annotations, can be found on p. 8 of the *Old Limerick Journal*, 3 (Winter 1989).

church in charge of the Augustinian nuns.³⁶ To the locals it is called *Cill Peadair* in Gaelic, meaning Peter's Church, but corrupted by the English into "Peter's Cell." The church no longer exists but there is now the convent school of St. Mary's in its place.

We will never know for sure if Jean-Baptiste is a Ryle, a O'Reilly, or a Riel born in Ireland of Bretagne stock. There are simply very few records for Catholics in Ireland before the middle of the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, rather than find a similar surname in France and conclude that the ancestors of Jean-Baptiste originated there, it would be easier and more logical to assume that his Irish surname was morphed into a French sounding surname similar to it. The theory proposed here, that Jean-Baptiste is a Ryle and his mother was a Spring, both families with roots in nearby County Kerry, is a viable theory. Therefore, it would appear that Jean-Baptiste Riel dit Lirlande might have really been Sean Ryle the Irishman (or *Eoin Ó Raghail* if you prefer his name in Gaelic). He was from the Peter's Cell area of Limerick. His origins are firmly in the province of Munster, not Ulster or Connaught, and not Bretagne. He was just one of several Irishmen who came to New France in the troupes de la Marine during the 1690's and had his name and surname transformed from Irish into French.

Whatever his origins, what is so interesting about Jean-Baptiste is that by his fortunate move to New France, a land of abundant records, we get a glimpse at the life of a late seventeenth century Irish Catholic from a humble background who served a foreign monarch. For every Irish soldier we are able to document there are hundreds that we will never know except perhaps their name on a roster. And even here their name is likely to be transformed by the French clerk into something unrecognizable to the Irish. It is sad that we can know so little about the "mere Irish" when at the same time there are so many records on French Canadian habitants.

³⁶Richard Ahern, "Limerick in 1689," *Old Limerick Journal* 3 (Winter 1989): 9-17, p.11. O'Ceallaigh, *Limerick*, pp. 17, 31, and 75. Séan Spellissy, *The History of Limerick City* (Limerick: The Celtic Bookshop, 1998), p. 131.