

Love's Legacy

Viscount Chateaubriand
and the Irish Girl

DANIEL FALLON

Foreword by Gerald Gillespie

Praise for *Love's Legacy*...

“What a delightful, informative, and moving read this is! Part biography, part literary history, part family chronicle, and part journey of discovery and self-discovery, *Love's Legacy* tells the story of the great French romantic writer François-René de Chateaubriand, the extraordinary origins and history of the cosmopolitan and peripatetic Fallon family, the author's love for his father, and, ultimately, the mystery at the heart of a family's past—all recounted in a crisp, lively, and elegant prose. Most highly recommended.”

—Richard J. Golsan

University Distinguished Professor and
Distinguished Professor of French, Texas A&M University

“In this delightful genre-bender of a memoir, a distinguished scholar sets out to verify or disprove a family legend that links him—perhaps through a suppressed scandal—to the great French writer Chateaubriand. Daniel Fallon's enthralling true story of his quest and its outcome is at once a literary-historical romp, a suspense tale with a twist ending, a love letter to his colorful forebears, and a resonant meditation on the meaning of legacy and inheritance.”

—Amy E. Schwartz

Opinion and book editor, *Moment Magazine*, and award-winning former editorial writer and op-ed columnist, *The Washington Post*

“Daniel Fallon's extraordinary tale of Chateaubriand's early life in exile in England during the French Revolution captures the ambivalent feelings of a young French aristocrat in love but also draws on the author's personal fascination with Chateaubriand. This work of literature is both biography based on rigorous scholarship and a fanciful exploration of the ‘what ifs’ of life. *Love's Legacy* has all the ingredients of a good read: charm and wit in

equal measure, intrigue, and even suspense. It will astound and thrill anyone, surely inspiring some to read or reread well-known works by the great French romantic writer.”

—Tom Conner

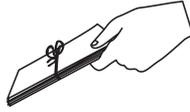
Professor of Modern Languages
and Literatures, St. Norbert College, and author of
Chateaubriand's Mémoires d'outre-tombe: Portrait of an Artist in Exile

“By presenting an absorbing arc of ancestry, Daniel Fallon reveals a side of Chateaubriand too little recognized, yet as instructive to students of the influential French romantic writer, politician, and diplomat as it is compelling to today’s reader of biography.”

—Steven Mansbach

Distinguished University Professor and Professor of Art
History and Archaeology, University of Maryland at College Park

LOVE'S LEGACY



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Viscount Chateaubriand
and the Irish Girl

DANIEL FALLON



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For Mary

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Of the several *chateaubriandistes* who engaged me, one couple stands out. I owe a special debt to the kindness and personal care of Professor Jacques Gury and his wife, Odile. They guided me and my wife through several homes in the countryside of Brittany where Chateaubriand spent time in his youth, fed us galettes for which the Bretons are famous, and accompanied us to Mass in the Saint-Malo Cathedral. Through his continuous correspondence, Professor Gury ensured that I was never far from Chateaubriand and his Breton roots.

I thank Carolyn Gates and Jean-Philippe Gury for their assistance in providing translations of essays and materials from French to English for my study. I have also benefited, as will

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Foreword

Dr. Daniel Fallon is so well known nationally and internationally as a top US-based academician and adviser on education and cultural programs that it may surprise some readers to encounter him here as the teller of a family legend stretching over many generations. From the start, we find ourselves in the grip of an unfolding great story, one rooted both in the glamorous heyday of European romanticism and in the adventurous opening of the New World nation of Colombia, Fallon's own birthplace. The autobiographical narrator, who speaks also as a serious historian, almost faces the necessity to split himself into multiple personalities as he simultaneously pursues inquiries into French literature and his own ancestry to discover the secrets of his family's legacy. In Fallon's account, a kind of timeless romantic fairy tale competes with history until, ultimately, they merge in a higher synthesis.

This reviewer is only one of a number of people in several countries who at intervals have enjoyed earlier glimpses into Fallon's historical research. Over recent decades, with archival zeal and earnest exploration of pertinent sites, the modern savant Fallon has plumbed the life and writings of Chateaubriand and likewise the patterns and records pertaining to the viscount's possible son, Thomas Fallon—Daniel Fallon's great-great-grandfather—born to Mary Fallon in London around 1800. And there is, as crucial further background, the distinguished history of the Fallon family for two centuries in Colombia, with their multifarious achievements in the arts and sciences as well as political life. Thus, *Love's Legacy* bears a rough analogy to an iceberg, most of which, the assiduous research pursued over decades, rides invisible under water supporting the brilliant top—the book's concluding revelations.

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Present-day readers are privileged to follow Daniel Fallon, inheritor of this saga, as he articulates the many stages of discovery and analysis. Among other things, assuming the role of a supernarrator, our investigator narrator retrospectively interprets an earlier major author's challenging practice of "occultation" (a useful term borrowed here from research into pre-Enlightenment, especially mannerist, painting and literature). If Chateaubriand happens to be observing from somewhere in an afterlife, he surely must be pleased by the effort Fallon has made to decipher for today's readers key instances in the viscount's own famous autobiographical writings where he apparently transposes the identities of lovers to protect both his own social status and the welfare of others in the less-tolerant world of his times.

Central among vexing puzzles is whether, during the political restoration in France, an already married and prominent Chateaubriand took pains to foster the elite education of the youthful Thomas Fallon only out of love for the boy's Irish mother and gratitude for her assistance during his days of penurious exile in Britain or because he actually was Thomas's father. An open admission of paternity by Chateaubriand would have unleashed harsh laws in both France and Britain and would have wrecked the families involved. As Thomas's descendant, Daniel Fallon has at his disposal to solve this mystery the additional instruments of modern science nonexistent in the revolutionary era. In later stages of his quest, Daniel Fallon meticulously pursues scientific avenues in keeping with today's standards to determine any biological link to Chateaubriand. The pursuit of forensic research of several kinds lends the narrative one of the prime qualities of detective fiction (incidentally, a genre largely spawned in the romantic era). As a humanist loyal to the modern scientific approach, Daniel Fallon does not hedge his findings. After they have been passed through the filter of science, the final gathering of the several evidentiary threads adds zest to the book's close.

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Today's readers will gain historical perspective as they ponder the modern narrator's analysis of who presumed what in the early nineteenth century and as he weighs this legacy against the accrued information from his vigorous new searching. The quest for answers is the motor force. But something else of great worth emerges quietly and convincingly in the picture the narrator portrays of his own father, Carlos. In references to him, the family romance seems recapitulated more expansively with its own special traits. After glamorous youthful adventure to China, Carlos effectively changed nations through the act of settling in New Orleans, where his father was serving as consul general of Colombia, and, as Daniel Fallon's family research shows, he evolved into a (North) American who evinced traits of an irrepressible polymath. Something of the extraterritorial roaming and widely branching inquisitiveness of Chateaubriand and Thomas Fallon seems to have blossomed again later in Carlos, on whom his son casts a fond and appreciative eye.

Daniel Fallon gives us a very personal book, a both fascinating and factually specific account that exhibits at the same time something archetypal: the risk-taking spirit in the unfolding of the larger human story.

—Gerald Gillespie

Professor Emeritus of Comparative Literature and
Professor Emeritus of German Studies,
Stanford University

Preface

The research behind the narrative in the following pages began in 1989 when I inherited two letters written in 1817 to my great-great-grandfather, Thomas Fallon. One was signed by the famous nineteenth-century writer François-René de Chateaubriand and the other conveyed his permissions and was signed by his secretary. I knew that Chateaubriand was widely regarded as the founder of modern French literature, having directly influenced generations of French literary figures who followed him, creating a uniquely French aesthetic. Why had the esteemed writer, flamboyant diplomat, and audacious autobiographer dictated an affectionate note to my great-great-grandfather? What was the relationship between them? How did their lives intersect? These letters demanded answers from me, a scholar working among scholars, and launched me on a quest of discovery.

Early findings from my quest led to an invitation to present my work in preliminary form in the *Bulletin de la Société Chateaubriand* in 1996.¹ I subsequently delivered invited lectures in Brittany during the sesquicentennial anniversary of the death of François-René de Chateaubriand in 1998, first at an event organized by the US Consulate in Rennes and later in Saint-Malo for the Société Chateaubriand.² My research continued well beyond this time, competing with the demands of unrelated full-time employment. Ultimately, the accumulated evidence resulting from my discoveries came into focus as a coherent tale that is the subject of this book.

A description of the colorful events in Saint-Malo on the 150th anniversary of Chateaubriand's death, July 4, 1998, offers a fitting prelude to the story I relate here. I experienced directly how this somber celebration underscored Chateaubriand's stature as a

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revered figure who had greatly impacted French literary tradition and inspired many by his adventurous spirit and range of roles in life. The ceremony began with a pilgrimage to the Grand Bé, the tiny uninhabited island just beyond the shore of Saint-Malo that is home to Chateaubriand's solitary grave, a setting reflecting his love of the sea. To take advantage of low tide, which enables pedestrian access, the procession began at 9:45 a.m. At the graveside, the assembly, numbering hundreds, sang "La Marseillaise" in preparation for speeches from the deputy mayor of Saint-Malo, René Couanau; the renowned editor of Chateaubriand's works and president of the Société Chateaubriand, Pierre Ribertte; and, finally, an emissary from the Vatican's pontifical council for culture, Cardinal Paul Poupard. An honor guard of French cadets, as well as a contingent in eighteenth-century Republican Guard uniforms, stood at parade rest throughout the event. A choir of Breton fishermen, in denim sailing clothes, sang seafaring songs, accompanying themselves with traditional Breton folk instruments. The local high school band played somber funeral music. Others observed the festivities from the sea in boats. The sky was overcast and gloomy, just as Chateaubriand would have liked it, given his penchant for melancholy.

The following morning, a Sunday, occasioned a grand celebratory Mass in the Saint-Malo Cathedral, befitting an author who had written an influential book on Christianity. The Mass began with a procession of twenty knights of the Order of the Maltese Cross—a society that had once initiated Chateaubriand—wearing white robes emblazoned with large black crosses. Organ music swelled full-throated from the large pipes, while the smaller pipes produced sounds resembling a chorus of trumpets. An altar boy swinging an incense-packed thurible was so inspired that the sanctuary swiftly filled with perfumed smoky vapor, challenging noses and eyes. The cardinal officiated in the presence of priests from

Preface

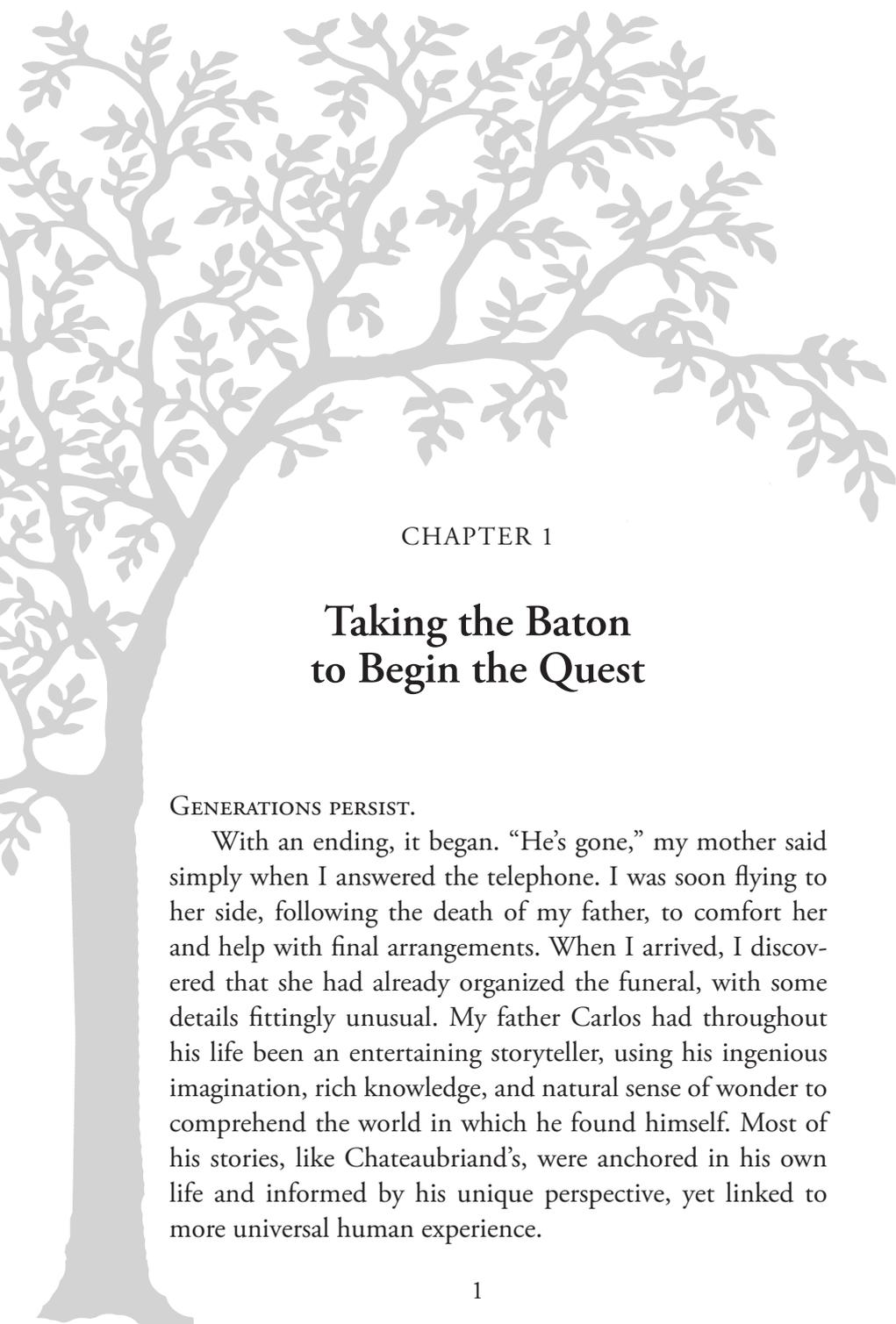
sixteen local parishes, who assisted in the ritual blessing of the sacrament. A stirring choir sang intermittently. It was the kind of high religious spectacle that would have thrilled Chateaubriand. My host, Professor Jacques Gury, whispered to me that no other French writer could command this kind of ecclesiastical respect. Chateaubriand had been a Catholic and a sinner, he explained, and had managed each role with aplomb and finesse, an apt commentary on a writer who had both extolled the artistry of Catholic Church ritual and lived a flamboyant lifestyle unconstrained by Church-condoned behavior.

Love's Legacy focuses on aspects of Chateaubriand's life, character, and literary intelligence in the context of the times and customs in which he and his contemporaries lived, leading to an adventure as I sought to resolve a genealogical mystery related to my own ancestors. Since many of the sources that bring this chronicle to life are recorded only in French, translation presents a special challenge. Words, which convey meaning, are important guideposts to understanding in a historical hunt for clues to a puzzle. Therefore, I give English translations as I lay out the research, but to allow readers of French to confirm fidelity of meaning I have provided notes containing the French originals in important instances. In some cases, I have benefited from recent English translations in the public domain,³ but even then I have occasionally interpolated meanings based on my own understanding. This exciting venture of both professional and personal exploration brought me closer to French civilization than I had ever anticipated. It has been a rich and fulfilling journey.

—Daniel Fallon

Santa Fe, New Mexico

March 2021



CHAPTER 1

Taking the Baton to Begin the Quest

GENERATIONS PERSIST.

With an ending, it began. “He’s gone,” my mother said simply when I answered the telephone. I was soon flying to her side, following the death of my father, to comfort her and help with final arrangements. When I arrived, I discovered that she had already organized the funeral, with some details fittingly unusual. My father Carlos had throughout his life been an entertaining storyteller, using his ingenious imagination, rich knowledge, and natural sense of wonder to comprehend the world in which he found himself. Most of his stories, like Chateaubriand’s, were anchored in his own life and informed by his unique perspective, yet linked to more universal human experience.

My father had also been afflicted all his adult life with what he called “a religious hang-up,” resulting in virtuous rebellion against the agents of Church authority on the one hand and irksome submission to deep religious feelings on the other. Raised a Catholic in Bogotá, Colombia, Carlos had left the Church angrily after being forbidden to read Darwin. As he had explained to me later, he had gone out on his own, tracked God down, and had a productive conversation. God had told him that as long as he led a moral life and tried to avoid hurting other people he could read Darwin or, for that matter, any book he wanted.

Carlos's complicated feelings about religion had inspired him to familiarize himself with as many world religions as he could. This aspiration could have partly reflected a desire to keep some measure of belief in magic, but he had also reasoned that the worst calamity would be to die, go to some afterlife, and find the wrong god in charge of the place. Available evidence and his practical logic had led him to conclude that the odds of an afterlife were diminishingly small. Nonetheless, given the constraints of contemporaneous knowledge, he could not reduce the probability to zero. That meant, by his calculation, it would be prudent to prepare for an afterlife just in case. Further reasoning convinced him that the best protection was to believe in all plausible gods simultaneously, with equal fervor. His motivation was so strong that it prompted him to learn ancient Sumerian, Greek, Hebrew, and Latin, so he could study original religious texts on his own. In this respect he mirrored Chateaubriand, whose study of Christianity was enhanced by his familiarity with age-old languages.

Carlos had made good progress in assimilating religious teachings of indigenous peoples in the far reaches of the Upper Amazon, where he had spent his early career as an officer in the Colombian Navy, and of other societies, especially teachings relayed by seafarers of the Pacific Ocean. As an adolescent held

prisoner in northern China for eighteen months, for example, he explored Chinese religious beliefs. He also found ancient Egyptian religious teachings persuasive, understanding them better than many scholars.

My sister and I were not raised as Catholics. After we moved to Washington, DC, however, when we were seven and eight, respectively, my mother insisted that we go to church on Sundays so we could understand what religion in the United States was all about. My father's solution was to take us to a different church each Sunday until he found one that satisfied his criteria: the sermons had to be thoughtful, scholarly, and interesting; and the congregation had to read books. We ended up joining the First Congregational Church of Washington, DC.

When, late in life, Carlos retired to the coast of North Carolina, he found himself surrounded by Southern Baptists and unclassifiable evangelicals. He chose to exercise his fine sense of dialectic in this environment by reverting to Catholicism. He liked the way it was viewed by most local inhabitants as a sinister cult embraced by weak-minded sinners with suspicious ties to foreigners. Carlos explained to me that he had actually never left the Church but had gone on sabbatical to allow it time to mature. In the meantime, the Church had obliged by modifying its teachings and permitting worshippers to read books, including Darwin. Carlos's sudden discovery of the value of Catholic ritual, provoked by a change in his life circumstances, was much like the abrupt conversion Chateaubriand experienced, causing the French writer to extol the Church in his famous treatise *The Genius of Christianity*.

Following Carlos's death, my mother arranged with the little Catholic church in Southport, North Carolina, for a funeral. Informed by deep knowledge of my father, however, she understood that he would not want to take chances with the afterlife.

Since he had taught her that many religions required a deceased person to arrive in the netherworld intact, she would not let his body be embalmed. To meet local health codes, she therefore had the funeral conducted within seventy-two hours of his death. Before the coffin was closed, she carefully placed inside it a package containing a silver dollar—for him to give the boatman when crossing the river to the other side—and provisions for the trip, including tins of sardines, some rye crisps, and a compass.

The clouds that had accompanied his death gave way to sunshine on the bright morning of my father's funeral. My mother was the first to notice the solitary gull circling overhead before it glided down toward us as the casket was being blessed for lowering into the sandy coastal soil. "It is a salute," she said softly, taking my hand as the bird flew off toward the sea. Pressing her hand, I thought silently, "What else could it be?"—allowing the supernatural world, whose presence my father had nurtured within me, to flow once more into the rational, habitual, temporal domain of my everyday life.

Seeing the gull supplanted my sorrowful emptiness with hope and confidence, the bird's dependence on the sea linking it to that vast water world covering more than seventy percent of the earth's surface, as old as the planet itself, symbolizing eternity—an enticement of fascination and wonder for every generation of humankind. Carlos, for instance, had loved the sea, becoming a sailor at age fourteen and later, as a young man, commander in chief of the Colombian Navy before immigrating with us to the United States late in 1940, when I was two years old. During World War II, he had enlisted in the US armed forces, acquired US citizenship, and risen quickly to the rank of captain in what was then the Army Air Corps. After 1945, he had supported our family as a lecturer and writer before teaching himself, through self-organized study at the Library of Congress, what was needed

to acquire a license as an engineer, an orderly profession that satisfied the aspects of his inexhaustible intellect related to science, mathematics, and design. Within five years of starting as an engineer at a local firm, Carlos had advanced to corporate staff of RCA Corporation, having established a new branch of engineering.¹ When his earning years had trailed off, he had chosen to retire by the sea, that comforting expanse on which he had discovered an independent life away from the home of his parents.

After the burial, we returned to the house to receive friends and other guests. When everyone had left and my mother was resting, I went to my father's study. On the desk in front of me lay the memorial service program. The cover read simply: "Carlos Fallon, January 21, 1909–February 12, 1989." Nearby were his file cabinets, containing the records he wanted me to have. I opened a drawer labeled Family and removed several manila folders. Suddenly I remembered from some distant past an observation made by a friend: "The death of a parent is always devastating." Since my father's death had been both natural and expected, I had not felt the loss with much force until now, with these files about our family in hand. As I began to sort through the folders, which his fingers had so often and so carefully touched, with heightened awareness I realized that he was no longer a resource to answer any lingering questions I might have about the contents of the files or the fascinating tales he wove from them. When he and I had sat together in his study, the files had often been the launching point for some fabulous tale sprung from our ancestry. Never had I felt the need for interpretation, because my father was a gifted storyteller, whose voice immediately drew my attention away from the documents and into a Technicolor world of people from another time experiencing life as they found it, with all its compelling twists and turns.

As I delved into the files, they began to conjure titillating unfinished business. My father had carefully protected the old

documents, endowing them with the mystery one feels in stories about treasure maps or hidden codes. He had not kept them away from me or treated them as secrets. He had simply stored them, perhaps for his own further study or for me or others to explore. Just as we cannot expect a child to remember the moment of first recognizing a parent, I cannot recall first becoming aware of the papers. In my mind they were always there. Now that they were mine, however, I felt a pressing need to understand them. Only later would I learn that with this gift my dying father was handing me a repository of love, launching me on a mission of discovery.

Suddenly, disturbing my reverie, four white envelopes fell from a folder in my hands to the floor. As I picked them up I noticed, displayed on the front of one envelope in the less-secure handwriting reflective of my father's old age and recent illness, a message written in pencil: "These envelopes (4) contain the letters from Hyacinthe Pilorge (Chateaubriand's secretary) to young Thomas Fallon about his education. They are all falling apart and have to be pieced together—the dates may be important."

Inside the envelopes were the remains of a smaller envelope and two old letters turned brown and brittle by the chemistry of air with paper over the nearly two centuries since they had been written. The paper had broken into numerous small stiff pieces, but I could see the writing, in French, on several of them. One piece revealed the dramatic flourish of a signature that seemed to form the letters *Cb*, suggesting to me a relic of the presence of Chateaubriand, who had figured prominently in our family lore.

I knew that among my father's magical family stories, one was about an Irish girl named Mary O'Neill and the famous French writer and diplomat François-René de Chateaubriand. When Carlos lowered his voice to invoke the past, I, along with other listeners, traveled with him to whatever time and place he

beckoned forth. We were drawn into a world of people long gone yet alive in the tale unfolding before us. I suppose, like any child in the presence of a talented storyteller, I would sit quietly while Carlos invoked his magic, never feeling a need to memorize the filigree of details that sustained the rapture of each moment. In my mind the narratives occupied a universe belonging to Carlos. I imagined he would always be there to tell them again.

Now, with these extraordinary old documents in front of me, I struggled to remember what my father had said about them. Fortunately, he had committed some of the story to writing. When he was forty years old, he had completed an engaging autobiography in his characteristically imaginative style that, released by a well-known publisher, had sold through two printings nationally. A passage in the book recounted how Carlos had first heard from his father the story of the Irish girl and her mysterious French friend, the writer Chateaubriand.²

According to the intergenerational oral history, the story begins with a girl, as good stories must. Mary O'Neill, about twelve years old, lived in London sometime in the 1790s, Carlos said his father had told him. Although this was a time before picnics were acceptable for polite society, she would often leave school at midday and take her lunch to a nearby park. One day in the park she saw a gentleman, or so she assumed from his bearing, although he was obviously down on his luck. His clothes were tattered, his eyes sunken, his cheeks gaunt, and his hands trembling. So she offered him some of her meal. At first he politely refused, but eventually he succumbed, and accepted the food. Mary recognized right away that he was French. Indeed, in those days of revolutionary tumult in France, there were many destitute French aristocrats in London.

The next day she returned bearing lunch for two, and they met again. After several days, she asked her family if she might

offer the spare room in the attic to the poor gentleman, who obviously needed a place to stay. Initially, Mary's request was met with resistance, since the attic room was to be kept available for newcomers from Ireland who needed temporary lodging while looking for work. But since the space was currently empty Mary ultimately prevailed. With permission granted, the stranger moved in and proved an exemplary boarder. He stayed for several months, supporting himself through writing and translating essays for French papers in London, then he moved on.

Some years later Mary blossomed into the loveliest young woman in the city, as girls often do in family tales. An Irishman named Patrick Fallon courted her, swept her off her feet, and married her. Shortly thereafter a son was born, whom they named Thomas. The Frenchman unexpectedly reappeared about this time, around 1800. He had determined that the terror in France was subsiding and he could now return with reasonable prospects of safety, so he wanted to say good-bye to the young girl who had saved him. Struck by the beauty of the woman she had become, he congratulated her on her marriage and her lively baby. Then, moved by the encounter, he exclaimed, "To thank you for rescuing me in my hour of need, let me undertake the responsibility of providing an education for your firstborn son!" He then returned to France.

When Mary and Patrick's son, Thomas, finished primary school, the Frenchman, François-René de Chateaubriand, was duly notified. Thomas Fallon was then sent to the Collège Royal of Amiens, France, where he received a first-class education provided through the largesse of Chateaubriand, who had been granted the title of viscount in 1815 by King Louis XVIII. The Frenchman's affection for the boy did not end with support of his education. In 1822, after Thomas had finished college at Amiens and returned to London, Chateaubriand arrived there as French

ambassador. During the summer, he apparently commissioned an oil portrait of the young man, which he presented to him. When Chateaubriand left in the fall, according to my father, he made a gift to Thomas of his horse. Later Thomas, while riding the horse in Ireland, was stopped by the British police and asked to show that he had paid a tax on the horse. "No," Thomas replied, "I don't pay taxes to the English king, and neither does my horse, who is named 'Georgie' after the present king, George Three-and-a-Half, who presumes to call himself George IV yet has shown that he is but half a king." Thomas seems to have lost the horse in that exchange.

The family's oral history continued with exploits of Thomas and his descendants, right down to my father's life events. Missing from the story, however, was clarity about the nature of Chateaubriand's relationship to Mary O'Neill and Thomas, although tender reminiscences of Mary lingered over generations in our family, as well as admiration for the Frenchman and his support of Thomas's education, reflected in part by the fact that my grandfather retained in his library all of Chateaubriand's published works.

I knew from my father's storytelling that Thomas had emigrated from England to Colombia around 1830 and had married a beautiful, compassionate creole woman there, Doña Marcela Carrión de León y Armero. At first, Thomas had supervised the silver and gold mines in Tolima province, eventually becoming mining engineer for all the mines in the Republic of Colombia, including the emerald mines in Muzo, the coal mines in Nemocón, and the salt mines in Zipaquirá, serving successively each president of the developing nation. Thomas and Marcela had had three children. Two daughters, born in 1832 and 1836, had died of typhoid fever in their twenties. Thomas and Marcela had died within a few months of each other in 1863, leaving

their son, Diego, born in 1834, bereft of his childhood family in the New World on the eve of his thirtieth birthday.

Diego Fallon became a nationally revered poet of Colombia, one of the forerunners of the style known as magical realism in modern Latin American literature. His son Diego José, called Dieguito—my grandfather—had pursued a career as a diplomat in the service of his country. My father, Carlos, had been head of the Colombian Navy at the time of my birth in Cartagena, before we left for North America, which is how I came to be raised in an aspiring middle-class immigrant family in the United States.

Now, in the remains of carefully guarded, timeworn letters, my father had provided me with a material gift concerning our ancestry, mediated through five generations. It was as if my dying father had passed me a baton for the next leg of a genealogical marathon whose goal was to clarify the past to enlighten the present. What was I to make of this apparent challenge?

At first, I felt a surge of responsibility. My father's weak handwriting seemed almost a plea: *Don't let these documents disappear!* Then I recognized the familiar pull of curiosity: Why had these letters survived so many generations? What had led Chateaubriand to write to my great-great-grandfather Thomas Fallon? How had Chateaubriand directly or indirectly affected the arc of the family from which I had descended? Could I trust the stories my father had so vividly related? Finally, having dedicated my life to serving my colleagues in the academy, I heard the call of scholarly duty. These letters were important artifacts that would surely shed light on the biography of a famous historical figure. Ultimately, these fragments of letters from a time long gone called me to make sense of the story of Viscount Chateaubriand and the Irish girl.

To begin, I needed to quench a curiosity about François-René de Chateaubriand. To most speakers of English, his family name suggests, if anything, a steak recipe. It is true that Chateaubri-

and was a notable epicure, having secured the lifelong personal services of a chef widely regarded as the best in Europe. More importantly, he was also an ambitious adventurer, a flamboyant diplomat, and a gifted writer regarded as the founder of modern French literature. He left an indelible mark not only on the society of his time and on admirers who have discovered him since, but on five generations of the family into which I was born.

The colorful recitations of the Chateaubriand story within my family were surely based on something that really happened, I thought. Nonetheless, I knew that an honest account begun by forebears could be unwittingly and cumulatively reshaped through retelling over generations as details lost through layered forgetting were perhaps embellished with patches of imagination wrought to hold the story together. Driven to learn more as accurately as I could, I began my quest by engaging the charismatic Frenchman directly.