

*The Legacy of Words Fran Claggett*

I begin with words, with the sounds, knowing that the only way we can hear sounds is to create silences, the spaces between the sounds. First, my own legacy: to whom do I owe my love of language? How can I chronicle my own Odyssey, my attempt to get home to the Ithaca of my lifelong absorption with/in words?

The spoken word is my legacy, nothing written down. The stories began with my grandmother, lying in the double bed we shared on her long visits, listening to the stories of the child, her mother, who came from Wales to live with her American aunt and uncle, telling of the promises of school and a good life, but translated into the cold attic room, and washing dishes and laundry, and dusting and sweeping all of the rooms let out to boarders, and not going to school at all. And then, the best part, the gentleman boarder, twenty years her senior, who felt sorry for the fourteen year old girl and took her away and married her. There were those stories, over and over, told in the dark in her lilting Welsh voice.

And there were the stories of my mother's Scottish grandmother, born and raised on the small island of Tiree, mythic in my memory of the young couple on their wedding day, the groom going off on the ritual fishing expedition, the bride waiting on shore for the first catch of their married life. Then the storm, suddenly and fiercely catching the small fishing boat, sweeping the young man overboard to his drowning, the bride, watching from shore, seeing her life drown before her. If not for that storm, she never would have

left the small island of Tiree, gone to Edinburgh, met my great-grandfather, borne my grandfather, moved to America, to Ohio, where he would marry the daughter of the young Welsh girl.

"Where did you get your interest in words?" I asked my mother, who loved to play Scrabble, work the crossword puzzle, and watch Wheel of Fortune. For it was words, not ways with words, but the words themselves that fascinated her. "I don't know," she answered. "My grandmother learned Latin and Greek on Tiree. Your grandfather loved words; he knew most of Shakespeare by heart." I was staggered. Latin? Greek? Shakespeare by heart? My grandfather who had worked in the coal mines with his six sons all of his life?

And the five daughters, what of them? Words captured them, kept them in school, and made them into teachers, as well as world class anagram players. Aunt Carrie, the last time I saw her, a few months before her death at 89, beat me blind. Aunt Betty, the aunt whom I most admired for her intellectual and philosophical interests, the aunt whose mind was always razor sharp, now dulled by Alzheimer's, still responds to the wooden block letters, still makes words out of words, the old familiar smile briefly flashing before the circuit closes over again.

Anagrams and Shakespeare. What is the connection? "Words, words, words." Words, through the grandfather from Scotland, son of the woman raised on the island of Tiree, where she, like the other children on that barren island, went to school, studied literature,

learned it by heart. In the small mining town in Ohio, one family read together in the evenings, by kerosene lamps; my mother, uncles, and aunts--all eleven of them--spoke "proper" English, often to the ridicule of the other children. Their speech has none of the southern Ohio linguistic patterns that would reveal their childhood home.

No-one in the family had ever gone back to the island of Tiree. The name itself became Ithaca for me, carrying as it did the story of the wedding day tragedy and representing the origin of my fascination with language. And so I wandered my way to Tiree for all of them--the aunts, the uncles, the grandmother, the mother--most of all the mother, to create the memories that they could not invent for themselves.

It was an Odyssey. There was water to cross. There was a small plane. There was rain and wind, cold summer weather in the Hebrides. And on the island, nothing taller than a shoulder-high bush that would not bend in the winter gales. Sheep and cows obscured homes built into the earth, roofs slanting up from the ground. The island seemed deserted as we walked to the tavern inn, the only accommodation; it wasn't until we opened the door that we discovered the center of the island, gathered noisily in the pub. From there we could see the graveyard where we found seven stones attesting to the sometime existence of the MacDougals; and the next morning we walked to the school--the school where Flora MacDougal had learned Latin and Greek, learned Shakespeare by heart, later to teach it to her son.

By these devious means, we receive the legacy of words.