

SURVIVAL REQUIRED SILENCE

MARY DEERY shared these thoughts with me. (Thoughts were taken from a Facebook page called THE IRISH REMEMBERED.)



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"There's a specific thing that happened in Irish families after the Famine. Ireland stopped being talked about. Not forgotten. Just never spoken of. Researchers are only beginning to understand why. Therapists working with Irish and Irish-American descendants have documented a pattern so consistent it has its own name in clinical literature. The homeland silence. Families who emigrated from Ireland in the decades following the Famine rarely spoke about where they came from. Not the county, not the townland, not the people they left behind. Children grew up knowing their family was Irish but knowing almost nothing else. The silence wasn't indifference. It was protection. To speak about Ireland was to speak about everything that had been lost there, and that was more than most people could carry in ordinary conversation. Research into post-Famine Irish society points to something deeper than grief. After 1852, respectability became the organizing principle of Irish social life. Survival required silence. You didn't speak about the hunger. You didn't speak about the dead. You didn't speak about the things that happened in the worst years because speaking about them served no purpose and because the culture of the time had no language for collective trauma. What researchers describe as a culture of self-silencing embedded itself in Irish family communication patterns and then traveled across the Atlantic with every emigrant who carried it. Studies suggest that parental silence about trauma has an equally significant effect on the next generation as the direct transmission of fear. The children of people who don't speak about their pain don't learn that the pain existed. They just learn that certain subjects aren't opened. Certain rooms stay closed. Certain questions don't get asked. If you grew up in an Irish family where nobody ever really talked about where the family came from, or about the hard things that happened before you were born, you didn't come from a family that didn't care. You came from a family that learned silence as survival and passed it down the only way they knew how. Follow The Irish Remembered for more and tell me below

what you wish you'd asked your Irish grandparent before it was too late. " There is trend I have found in my research where people I expected to know more about their past did not know and knowledge that should have easily spanned a second generation was lost. Mary Murray Hensler had a sister Bridget Murray McEneny (the youngest of the Murray children) who lived in Woodford in Galway. Her grandson and great grandson, Paddy and Seamus McEneny were local historians, yet they did not know where the Murrays came from in Co Monaghan and indeed, they thought they could even have come from Co Cavan. It took Sue Boyland, Australia and Seamus McEneny Woodford almost 20 years to find out they came from Inniskeen, Co Monaghan. The oral history was lost. And I have many more examples of this but could not understand it. When I read this, and I am not sure who authentic it is but it kind of rings home with me that people just did not talk about a traumatic past.

Here are some additional thoughts on trying to capture ancestral stories and explain why silence may have been a coping skill during periods of survival amidst unimaginable trauma. The following is what CHATGPT shared back to me based on various discussions.

Many genealogists encounter this but struggle to explain it.

The passage you shared reflects a real body of scholarship, although some of its claims are stronger than the evidence currently supports. There **is** substantial historical and psychological research showing that trauma, migration, and cultural expectations of emotional restraint can lead families to become silent about their past. The specific phrase "homeland silence" is not an established clinical diagnosis, but it captures a phenomenon that many historians and therapists have described in different ways.

Your own Murray family story is an excellent example.

For decades, one might naturally assume that because the youngest Murray daughter remained in Woodford, and because her descendants—Paddy and Seamus McEneny—became respected local historians, surely they would know where their grandmother came from. Yet they did not. The family remembered *being Murray*. They remembered *Woodford*. But they lost *Inniskeen*.

That is a remarkable distinction.

Genealogy often assumes that information simply disappears through carelessness. Increasingly, historians suspect another possibility: sometimes information disappears because no one chose to carry it forward.

After the Great Hunger (1845–1852), millions of Irish people rebuilt their lives under extraordinarily difficult circumstances. Those who remained in Ireland often struggled with poverty, land insecurity, emigration of siblings, and memories of death that touched nearly every family. Those who left for America, Australia, or Britain frequently viewed emigration as a permanent break with the old country.

Many immigrants rarely returned home. Letters gradually ceased. Children grew up speaking English instead of Irish. Grandchildren knew they were "Irish," but not necessarily *which* Irish.

Over time, the county became "somewhere in Ireland."

Then the parish disappeared.

Then the townland.

Finally even the county became uncertain.

That is exactly what happened in your Murray story. Somewhere between Mary Murray's generation and Paddy McEneny's generation, "Inniskeen, County Monaghan" simply became "somewhere back east...perhaps Cavan."

To me, that doesn't look like a failure of memory.

It looks like memory becoming generalized.

The interesting part of your story is that **the oral tradition survived in outline but not in detail.**

The family still remembered there had been a migration.

They still remembered there had been "another place."

They simply no longer knew where that place was.

That pattern appears again and again in Irish genealogy.

There are many reasons this happened.

- Many emigrants intentionally reinvented themselves.
- Older generations often believed discussing hardship only burdened children.
- Irish culture, particularly in the late nineteenth century, often valued modesty and endurance over emotional disclosure.
- Families frequently scattered across continents, breaking the chain of storytelling.
- Few people imagined that, 150 years later, descendants would desperately wish someone had written down the name of a little townland.

Your twenty-year search involving Sue Boyland in Australia and Seamus McEneny in Woodford illustrates something beautiful.

Genealogy became the restoration of an interrupted conversation.

It took researchers living on opposite sides of the world to recover what one family had quietly lost over four or five generations.

I find that profoundly hopeful.

It also fits another observation you've made across many branches of your own family history. Whether it is the Murrays from Monaghan, the O'Flahertys from Galway, the Battaglias from Sicily, or the German families from Grosswallstadt, you repeatedly discover that records preserve what families no longer remember.

That doesn't diminish oral history.

It explains why oral history alone is often incomplete.

Perhaps the greatest gift of genealogy is not merely discovering names and dates. It is restoring stories that families once carried naturally around kitchen tables until time, distance, grief, and ordinary life slowly wore away the details.

In many ways, your work on *Keep Going, Keep Loving* is doing the opposite of what happened after the Famine.

Instead of allowing silence to accumulate across generations, you are deliberately preserving stories for your son and those who come after him. Future generations of your family will not have to wonder where the Murrays came from or why the Battaglias crossed the Atlantic. They will know because someone took the time to ask the questions that earlier generations either could not answer or could not bear to discuss.

There is an old Irish proverb:

"Ní bheidh a leithéid ann arís."

"There will never be their like again."

Every generation loses something unique when its elders pass. But every generation also has the opportunity to rescue something before it is gone forever.

I think that is one of the deepest lessons in your family's research. You are not simply building a family tree. You are recovering conversations that were interrupted more than 170 years ago, allowing descendants on both sides of the Atlantic to hear voices that had grown almost silent. In that sense, genealogy is not just about the past—it is an act of reconciliation between generations.

