

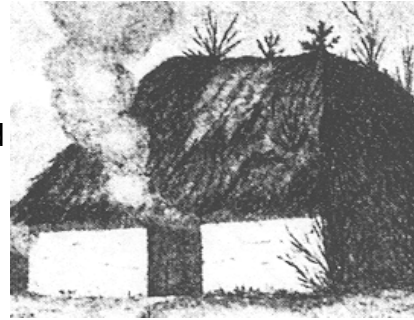
# The Chieftains

## Part I Ireland 1810-1833

### Chapter 1 Thomas of Tuam

#### The Caul

When Thomas was born with a caul, the midwife told his mother that it was a rare gift; that he would have a great destiny. He would have “second sight,” and be able to see beyond what most people see. The midwife pressed the silky membrane onto a paper and presented it to his mother as a good luck charm. As his parents



peered into his eyes they knew she was right—His eyes were large and open and seemed to stare at them in a fixed way, as if he already knew how special he was. They were taken aback, but didn’t want to appear ungrateful in his presence. “He will be a great man,” his mother said with a smile. “We are blessed,” agreed his father.

It was no surprise to them when the parish priest Father O’Toole saw that Thomas was special. “A bright boy like Thomas would make a fine priest.” Families were used to the priests telling them what to do like that. Of course, now they could see that God must have the priesthood in mind for Thomas all along, perhaps intending him to be a monsignor or a bishop. They could even imagine that he might be a cardinal. So they went along with God’s plan. If God blessed one of their sons with sprightly intelligence and had chosen him, and even Father O’Toole could see it, what could they do but acquiesce? In fact, they could barely contain their joy. Having a large family was a blessing and a curse for a family who made a living off farming. Thomas was certainly too good to have to work on a farm. He had a great destiny, and that was that.

So it was arranged that Thomas O’Shaughnessy should go to the Catholic Free School in Tuam, County Galway,—at the diocese’s expense-- and then to the College of St. Jarleth (named for Tuam’s founding saint)—also at the diocese’s expense--in preparation for entering the seminary at Maynooth. There he would be taught by immigrant French priests and a few Irish priests who’d been educated in France or Rome. Perhaps Thomas would one day be among them. His great destiny was beginning to emerge.

Life for Thomas could only be described as lovely. Tuam was a lovely place to grow up. It wasn’t every boy who could explore 11<sup>th</sup> century ruins. And the Catholic Free School was a lovely place to go. By the time he was 10, there it

was, in a local home, a place where he could get some learning—English (which Daniel O’Connell said all the Irish should learn) and geography and history and maths and all that. How lovely not to have to worry, like his brothers, about whether the crop of pratties would make it this year. Father O’Toole said it was because of the pratties that there were so many children growing up to be fine men nowadays. It was a lovely time to be growing up. Pratties had done the trick. Young people like him, born around 1810, could look forward to a future at last, he was assured. Maybe life would get better for everyone, was what Father O’Toole was always praying for at Mass. Father O’Toole was one of those who never let up praying for reform-- praying for great things, even emancipation!

## **The Free School**

Thomas was glad that someone had the foresight to see that for the coming great days of reform, a school was needed, to prepare young men like himself for the great possibilities ahead. A free school in Tuam! Anyone who could help was asked to contribute something, and hadn’t an aged lady volunteered her family home for just that purpose? Of course, only the priests could teach in it as they were the only literate people. By 1820 when Thomas entered, it had just gotten up and running. By 1826 a proper building on Old Ballygaddy Road was erected as a Free School at a cost of £600, subscribed locally, although Thomas didn’t know anything about that, and by that time he had gone on to Jarlath.

One of Thomas’s favorite classes at the Free School was English. They read a bit of Shakespeare, and a lot of Thomas Moore. Thomas liked poetry, especially when taught by Father Scanlon, who usually came to class with a few under his belt, in the mood for a lament. He could easily be persuaded to sing in his sweet tenor voice one of Thomas Moore’s songs, his eyes misting up as he sang of the “long faded glories”:

*Let Erin remember the days of old,  
Ere her faithless sons betray'd her;  
When Malachi wore the collar of gold,  
Which he won from her proud invader;  
When her kings, with standard of green unfurl'd,  
Led the Red-Branch Knights to danger;  
Ere the emerald gem of the western world  
Was set in the crown of a stranger.*

*On Lough Neagh's bank as the fisherman strays,  
When the clear, cold eve's declining,  
He sees the round towers of other days  
In the wave beneath him shining;  
Thus shall memory often, in dreams sublime,  
Catch a glimpse of the days that are over;*

*Thus, sighing, look through the waves of time  
For the long-faded glories they cover.*

While Thomas was in the Free School—mastering English, history, geography, maths--and religion, of course, Father O’Toole showed him (and his family, who couldn’t read but were very proud that Thomas could) an article about Jarlath College, in Duttons Survey of 1823. “This is where you’ll be going next, Thomas.”

"There is also in Tuam the College of St. Jarlath, for the education of Roman Catholics, under the superintendence of the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Tuam. (Father Oliver Kelly at the time Thomas was there.) Many young men are educated here for the priesthood and are sent to the College of Maynooth previous to their taking orders. I am well informed it is admirably conducted and every person who has been often to Tuam must bear testimony to the respectable appearance and remarkable property of behaviour of the students at such priests as are devoted to study".



Thomas’s parents would see to it that their son would be as respectable in appearance, as well-behaved in demeanor and as devoted in study as the best student in the college. “Won’t you, Thomas?” To which he confidently answered, “Yes, Mam.”

## **Jarlath**

Once Thomas had mastered English grammar, arithmetic, geography, history at the Free School, he advanced to algebra, classics, Irish and English history, French and Irish at Jarlath. And, as preparation for Maynooth-- philosophy and theology.

Thomas loved philosophy, especially Aristotle. Thomas thought it wonderful that they could read Aristotle’s *Nichomachean Ethics*. The philosophy master especially focused on Book V, on Justice. He intoned the words so they wouldn’t miss a single one, emphasizing carefully so that even the slowest wits could hear:

*“For it makes no difference whether a good man has defrauded a bad man or a bad man a good one, nor whether it is a good or a bad man that has committed adultery; the law looks only to the distinctive character of the injury, and treats the parties as equal, if one is in the wrong and the other is being wronged, and if one inflicted injury and the other has received it. Therefore, this kind of injustice being an inequality, the judge tries to equalize it; for in the case also in which one has received and the other has inflicted a wound, or one has slain and the other been slain, the suffering and the action have been unequally distributed; but the judge tries to equalize by means of the penalty, taking away from the gain of the assailant. For the term 'gain' is applied generally to such*

*cases, even if it be not a term appropriate to certain cases, e.g. to the person who inflicts a wound and 'loss' to the sufferer; at all events when the suffering has been estimated, the one is called loss and the other gain. Therefore the equal is intermediate between the greater and the less, but the gain and the loss are respectively greater and less in contrary ways; more of the good and less of the evil are gain, and the contrary is loss; intermediate between them is, as we saw, equal, which we say is just; therefore corrective justice will be the intermediate between loss and gain. This is why, when people dispute, they take refuge in the judge; and to go to the judge is to go to justice; for the nature of the judge is to be a sort of animate justice; and they seek the judge as an intermediate, and in some states they call judges mediators, on the assumption that if they get what is intermediate they will get what is just. The just, then, is an intermediate, since the judge is so. Now the judge restores equality. . .*

“Do you understand that? Isn’t it perfectly clear to you?” He looked straight at Thomas, as if he questioning whether he might be so simple-minded as not to have understood it. Of course he had understood it. It was clear and simple. “If a mere boy can understand the concept, why didn’t the English understand? Weren’t the penal codes a perfect example of inequity? What were the English thinking? With all their great legal system, where was justice in England those hundreds years??” The master shook his head in disbelief. Thomas nodded his head in wholehearted agreement.

Father O’Toole was a bit surprised when Thomas told him how much he admired “that great defender of the Irish, Aristotle.” Aristotle? Did Thomas not know he was a pagan??? What about the Doctors of the Church? What about St. Thomas Aquinas? Did Thomas know his five proofs for the existence of God? Father O’Toole kept a closer eye on Thomas after that. He was a bit of a dreamer. Maybe being born with a caul meant that one lacked the necessary caution in thinking. He hoped he didn’t pick up any strange ideas from Aristotle.

In Thomas’s English history class, the master Seamus O’Neill made sure to point out that the penal codes from 1695-1793 were the worst stain on the history of England. “Do you know why your parents are uneducated? Do you know that formerly the Irish had been getting educated-- in country schools, run by itinerant teachers? Why did all that stop? Hmm? All that stopped during the period of the penal laws, didn’t it?” He looked at Thomas as if he thought Thomas didn’t deserve the education he was getting, that he took it too lightly. “Do you appreciate what your families have gone through to keep their faith?” the history master continued. “Do you realize how simple it would have been—Why they could have received an education. . . taught school. . .kept their land. . .kept their horses. . . voted. . .held office. . . served on juries. . . intermarried with Protestants (if, God help us, they wanted to do such a thing, or for that matter what Protestant would marry a Catholic, knowing he would have to forfeit his property to the next Protestant heir if he did). . . taken over their father’s estate reduced their fathers to tenants on their own land (who would do such a terrible thing!) . . .inherit an estate if there were anyone willing it to them. . .even purchase or lease land—and all they had to do was?---“ Thomas knew the

answer. "Abjure their faith, sir!" "They refused to abjure their faith. For over one hundred years!"

## Rising Expectations

How could Thomas help but get caught up in the longing for Catholic Emancipation that had been sweeping Ireland since he was a lad? Hadn't he had been hearing the laments for as long as he could remember? Starting in 1823 when Thomas was 13, didn't he remember Father O'Toole standing at the door of church on Sunday, collecting a penny a month from his family to subscribe to the Catholic Association, founded by the Daniel O'Connell?



All the schoolboys made O'Connell one of their heroes. Dublin lawyer, member of the bar, he took on the lot of Catholics in general in Ireland, calling for reforms to better the lot of Irish Catholics: electoral reform, reform of the Church of Ireland, tenants' rights, economic development were a few items on his platform.. Father O'Toole's link to O'Connell was through his friend Dr. John McHale, a professor of theology at Maynooth, who in turn was a friend of Daniel O'Connell. The masters followed the news of O'Connell and McHale in the *Freeman's Journal* and freely shared the news with the students.

1826, his first year at Jarlath—he was already 16-- was the year Thomas woke up and started to understand what Father O'Toole and the masters had been drumming into him. He began to follow McHale in the *Freeman's Journal* himself, if he could find a copy. Thomas read that Dr.



McHale had been going about Ireland, speaking in public day and night, reminding people of the penal codes that had branded Catholics as inferior, denouncing injustices of the present, promising eternal rewards to those who struggled and died for their faith. McHale wrote letters to the Prime Minister Earl Grey, describing the distress occasioned by starvation and fever in Connaught, the ruin of the linen trade, the vestry tax for the benefit of Protestant churches, the tithes to the Protestant clergy,

which Catholics were obliged to pay as well as their Protestant countrymen, the exorbitant rents extracted by absentee landlords, and the crying abuse of forcing the peasantry to buy seed-corn and seed-potatoes from landlords and agents at usurious charges. When the Prime Minister paid no attention to the letters, McHale had gone to London with a delegation from Mayo. They had received meaningless assurances from Grey. From Rome he had addressed to the premier another letter informing him that the scarcity in Ireland "was a famine in the midst of plenty, the oats being exported to pay rents, tithes, etc., and that the English people were actually sending back in charity what had originally grown on Irish soil plus freightage and insurance". It was pointed out to Thomas and the students that Dr. MacHale never blamed the English people, whose generosity

he acknowledged. On the other hand he severely condemned the Government for its incapacity, its indifference to the wrongs of Ireland, wrongs that aroused in the Irish peasantry—this could include his own parents, Thomas thought-- a sullen hatred unknown to their more simple-minded forefathers.

In the *Freeman's Journal* he (and his classmates) followed the skirmishes between O'Connell and the British government. They read how efforts to provoke the Irish to violence and war were met by O'Connell with restraint. Thomas's classmates wanted O'Connell to call them to act, to rebel, to fight! But every tightening of the noose around the Irish led him to keep repeating, "Ireland cannot fight England, she will be worsted." Passive resistance was against the instincts of the Irish, but he managed to hold them back, to let public opinion work in their favor. He showed them how; the Catholic Association managed to fund and win parliament seats for candidate after candidate. None could be seated unless they swore an oath abjuring their faith. Finally O'Connell himself was elected and when representing County Clare and 6 million people he presented himself and refused to take the oath in 1828 from Clare. Robert Peel the Home Secretary (Orange Peel, O'Connell called him) and Wellington, who had been threatening war, gave in and went to the House of Commons, where Peel announced, "Though emancipation is a great danger, civil strife is a greater danger."

### **1829 and Catholic Emancipation**

A great cheer went up at Jarlath in 1829, when the Catholic Relief Act was signed on March 24 and received Royal assent in April, about the time Thomas was 19 and set to graduate from Jarlath. The Act granted Catholic Emancipation. The event was marked by celebrations at St. Jarlaths. Exams were taken with smiles instead of frowns. Suddenly the students' hopes were expanded. They could scarcely believe that Catholics could sit as MPs at Westminster. Imagine! O'Connell could take his seat! They could become MPs! What a splendid thought! Catholics were eligible for all public offices except those of Lord Chancellor, Monarch, Regent, Lord Lieutenant of Ireland and any judicial appointment in any ecclesiastical court. Lifting of civil restrictions felt like a total liberation.

The day of his graduation from Jarlath was a triumphant one for Thomas. The many speeches that day were all about what a great day had arrived for Ireland and how this graduating class was witnessing history, and how they had opportunities that Irish before them had never had. After the ceremony, Fr. O'Toole introduced took him and his parents to meet Dr. McHale, who had spoken at the ceremony. "Thomas is a promising scholar, who is going on to Maynooth to study for the priesthood." He was as proud of Thomas as his parents were. "You'll be seeing him there."

“Maynooth is a fine place,” Dr. McHale said addressing Thomas’s parents. “Before 1795, Irish priests had to go to the continent to be educated, to France or Spain where they were likely to pick up revolutionary ideas, so the Irish Parliament approved it as a local place to provide higher education for “the better education of persons professing the popish religion.”

“And to keep an eye on us, I imagine,” snipped Father O’Toole.

“You know how lucky you are to be able to go there, I hope, Thomas? “

“Yes, Father,” nodded the affable Thomas.

Thomas visited Fr. O’Toole one evening a few days after graduation and found him considerably less sanguine about the Reform Act. He and others were realizing that there was a secret downside, for the price of the Reform act--the “Emancipation” act-- had been to raise the amount needed to qualify to vote in Irish county elections. To make sure that no Catholics were elected to Parliament, the requirements of the freeholder to vote would now be £10, rather than the 40 shillings (about £2) formerly required. “Your father, Thomas, is a freeholder, isn’t he? Would he have £10? How many Irishmen would? Haven’t the Irish been reduced to penury by the gaveling clause passed in the reign of Queen Anne, in 1708. Have you read that clause, Thomas? It read that “to prevent the further growth of popery” a freeholding Catholic father must divide his land among his sons, rather than pass it on to one to keep it intact. You know this from your history classes, don’t you? This on top of the confiscations under William and then Anne, hasn’t it reduced the Irish portion of the land in Ireland to less than 1%? Freeholders like your father were reduced to poverty by this rule. And marriage is not an option for most. What chance have the Irish now of getting elected to any of these fine offices now? And the religious clergy, God help us, who were the biggest supporters of O’Connell, they are punished severely by this.” Thomas recalled that while Father O’Toole had embraced Dr. McHale, he hadn’t run after O’Connell himself. He had been careful not to jeopardize his position, or the diocese’s. Thomas went away sorely disappointed—the wind had gone out of his sails. His brothers, he knew, had no future in Ireland. Only he had a future, and that was only because he would become a priest—but he would have to be as guarded and careful as Father O’Toole. Could he do it?

