

## Langton Portraits

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When I was very young, I noticed on the walls of my grandfather's room in my mother's home in San Francisco, California, oil portraits of a man and woman in very different attire than I had observed the people around me to wear. When I questioned my mother about this, she explained that the people in the portraits were my grandfather's ancestors who had lived in Kilkenny, Ireland, a long time before. I later learned that they were Michael Langton of Danville and his half-sister, Jane Langton of High Street, Kilkenny.

I found that the above portraits were recorded in the Langton Register and were executed by the Irish painter, John Comerford, a native of Kilkenny, who practiced his art in Dublin, and died there in the year 1832. A letter in the back of the Register, written by Mr. Michael Banim, the noted Kilkenny litterateur of the last century, recorded the transfer of these portraits to my grandfather's eldest brother, Father Edmund Madden. He was at the time chaplain at the estate of Colonel J. C. Vaughan, the father of Cardinal Herbert Vaughan of Westminster. I have in my possession a number of letters written to my grandfather from "Courtfield" at Ross-on-Wye in Herefordshire, by his brother, Father Madden.

John Comerford did portraits of two other members of the family — James Comerford and his wife, Anne Langton, a sister of Michael and Jane. This couple, with their family, occupied the old Langton house over the Butterslip on the High Street, Kilkenny, and were my mother's great-great grandparents. Their portraits like the other two, were bequeathed to Father Madden by his grand uncle, Michael Comerford of King Street, Kilkenny, whose eldest sister, Jane, had married Edmund Madden of High Street, in 1781. In reading through reprints of back numbers of the *Kilkenny Journal*, I found that John Comerford had been a guest of the Comerfords of High Street on several occasions — in

1794 when he did the portraits, in 1797 and in 1808. It seems likely to me that he was related to his host.

The late Miss Bertha Buggy, had in her possession, three miniatures very probably executed by John Comerford. Two are of Louis Doly and his wife, Mary Madden. Louis was born in Paris in 1746 and later came to live in Kilkenny. The third miniature is a water colour sketch of Jane Langton which is so much like my portrait of her that I am obliged to conclude that the painter used this medium to capture the likenesses of his subjects while he was a guest in Kilkenny. Later he painted the portraits in his Dublin studio and had them framed by "Daniel Egan, late of C. Callahan's, Clare St., carver and gilder, 26 Lower Ormond Quay, Dublin". Miss Buggy was the daughter of the late Dr. Kyran Buggy and Katie Kenealy, both of whom were descendants of Louis and Mary Doly.

In the summer of 1970, my brother, Monsignor Robert Hayburn, and I, visited our Madden cousins who live in Sydney, Australia. They had inherited the portraits of Mr. and Mrs. Comerford from their grandfather, James Madden, my grandfather's next older brother, but unfortunately lost interest in them. They were therefore relegated to the basement where they gradually deteriorated over the years. In 1906 my mother visited her mother's sister, Mary Agnes Foley, a Carlow lady who married James Madden in 1859, and saw these portraits in perfect condition on the walls of her library in Kogarah near Sydney. That was the year of the great fire and earthquake of San Francisco, which completely destroyed her home and adjacent family property. Hence when these canvases, which had been cut from their frames, were given to me in 1970, I had mixed emotions. I was shocked at the sad state of the paintings, and yet delighted to have the opportunity to bring them back to America where I could have them restored.

This recent acquisition opened up a new line of research, the investigation of my Comerford ancestry. Irish relatives have substantiated the family tradition that James Comerford descended from the Comerfords, Lords of Ballybur Castle, near Cuffesgrange. When John G. A. Prim wrote his scholarly paper

“Memorials of the Family of Langton of Kilkenny,” for the Kilkenny Archaeological Society in 1864, the natives around Ballybur believed that James’ son, Michael, was the lineal representative of the Ballybur family. Prim also recorded the fact that William Comerford, James’ father, came to live at the old home over the Butterslip and took with him an oaken chest of title deeds. On sunny days he would take them out of their receptacle and unfold them to the warm air to ensure their preservation. After William’s death and that of his son, these documents came into the possession of his grandson, Michael. However, the latter’s mother preempted the chest for what she considered a better purpose, and had the deeds emptied into a corner of the garret of the old house. Some were used to singe turkeys, and others were so damaged by dampness and mice that their owner threw those that remained into the fire, putting aside a few of the pendant seals. Only one survived which he gave as a curiosity to his nephew, Mr. Jeremiah Scully of Freshford. It proved to be the great Irish seal of Charles I, which probably had been appended to a patent passed under the Commission for the Remedy of Defective Title.

Old William Comerford would have turned in his grave had he known the fate of the documents which he hoped might one day bring about the restoration of his ancestral possessions. What tales he could have told his grandchildren, had they been willing to listen; tales of confiscation under Oliver Cromwell and later in the Jacobite Wars, when Ballybur Castle was lost to the family, regained, and lost again.

We in America are, I believe, more interested in tracing our family trees than are the native-born Irish. The reason is that we have been transplanted to a new land and hunger to know more about our background.

I am thankful that of my mother’s five children, I was the one singled out to bear the name of Langton. Because of her decision, I have had a number of pleasant associations with the land of my forefathers and its people.