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ACROSS THE ISLAND

Coghlan's Body Story Is Colorful 'Nonsense'

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MORE THAN a dozen people mailed me a story in recent months which said that Charles Coghlan, a native of Prince Edward Island who became a famous actor, was buried in Galveston, Texas and that his coffin had been carried out to sea by a huge storm around 1898, and that it finally came home to Prince Edward Island.

The story – it was carried in the Argosy magazine, as a reprint from "Strange World" – said Coghlan was born on P.E.I. in 1841, that he became an actor against the strong opposition of his parents, and later in life a gypsy fortune teller told him he would die at the height of his fame in an American southern city, but that he would have no rest until he returned to the place of his birth, Prince Edward Island.

Coghlan did die in 1898, the story recalls, while he was playing Hamlet in Galveston, Texas and was buried there.

"Two years later, the great hurricane that swept over that hapless city washed away the sandy cemetery where Coghlan had been buried. Although his family offered a sizeable reward, his coffin could not be found.

Colorful Old Story Is Fantastic

"IN OCTOBER 1898" the story from Argosy continues, "eight years and one month after the Galveston hurricane, some fishermen on Prince Edward Island found a huge box, covered with moss and barnacles, floating in the shallows. It contained the coffin and body of Charles Coghlan, including the silver plate which identified him. He had come home at last to the little Island three thousand miles from where he was buried, just as the Gypsy fortune teller had predicted so many years before.

"Charles Coghlan – brought home by the sea – was finally buried in the cemetery beside the church where he had been baptized sixty-seven years before – one of the strangest true stories on record", the story concludes.

The man who wrote the story for "Strange World" had termed it "one of the strangest stories I ever dealt with" and said it "is also one of the best documented."

I can't put my hand on the clipping now, but one reader of this column sent me a paper a year or more ago, that told me the strange Coghlan story – about the casket coming home – was in one of Ripley's "Believe it or Not" sketches.

I heard the story first more than 30 years ago, not long after I started to work for the Patriot, in the fall of 1932. It was the late Art Gaudet, then business manager of the paper, who told it to me. I had forgotten it until some of my friends sent me the Argosy bit. But last week I spent an interesting afternoon in the Souris and Fortune areas digging into the old yarn.

My friend Dr. A. A. (Gus) MacDonald told me he remembered Charles Coghlan. He also knew Gertrude Coghlan, the actor's daughter. The doctor's uncle, Father Donald MacDonald, had called to see Coghlan at times.

But It's Wrong, 'Pure Nonsense'

DR. GUS would be practicing medicine in 1908 when the Coghlan coffin was said to have drifted ashore near Fortune, and he told me "the story is wrong – pure nonsense". "The people of Fortune will tell you that," the friendly doctor added. Dr. Gus is fine, incidentally. He's in his 92nd year and is just as fond of fun as he ever was.

Miss Beatrice Johnston called it "a fairy tale" as she directed me to Harry Burke, who owns the Fortune Bridge farm which Coghlan owned when he spent his summers on the Island many years ago.

Mr. Burke was only a youngster but he knew Coghlan well. "He had a span of horses for his wagon and he wanted me to be his coachman", Mr. Burke told me. He'd be a boy at the time.

The only thing that's true about the unusual story, so far as I could learn, is the part about the cemetery being washed away at Galveston.

Coghlan was not born on Prince Edward Island. He was born in Ireland, Mr. Burke told me. He was one of the first of the actors to come to Fortune – there was an actor's colony there at one time. He wasn't baptized on the Island, and his body did not come back to P.E.I.

The last year Coghlan was on the Island, he got into debt. He borrowed \$800 from Matthew and MacLean, Souris on a mortgage. When he died, Mrs. Coghlan was unable to pay the money, so Mr. Burke bought the farm. Mr. Burke was cutting sets in a part of the house that serves now as an extension to their home when I visited him. But it was a bedroom of the old house when Coghlan lived there back in the latter years of the last century.

Coghlan Wrote Play In This Room

WHEN I asked him if this was the place in which Charles Coghlan lived, Mr. Burke told me "He wrote 'The Lion and the Mouse' in this very room". That part of the house would be about 150 years old, the Burkes estimated. Gertrude Coghlan also played in "The Lion and the Mouse". The play was a success, Mr. Burke recalls.

C. P. Flockton was another actor who came to Fortune in the years that are gone. He brought a group of actors to Fortune once, and put on a play, I was told. Many of them came back afterwards, they liked the place. Mrs. Burke told me "when we were married – that was more than 50 years ago – the place was full of those actor people."

Incidentally Flockton's ashes are buried at Fortune Bridge. A sandstone monument is capped by a sun dial on a round, polished granite base. The stone was erected to Flockton's memory by Mrs. Leslie Carter and David Belasco, members of the acting fraternity at the time.

Flockton owned Abell's Cape at one time, I was told and the ashes were brought back and buried there according to a wish he expressed before he died. I am just a bit puzzled, though, by the inscription on the old sun dial in which Mrs. Carter and Mr.

Belasco referred to Flockton as a friend and “faithful servant”. This part of the story is passed on as I received it. My real purpose in writing this column was to explode the myth that Coghlan’s body came floating back from Texas, all 3,000 miles, as the old story related.

Started In P.E.I. Magazine?

I ASKED Mr. Burke “how in the world would such a fantastic story ever get started in the first place?” He told me that it was first printed many years ago in the Prince Edward Island magazine. Wherever it started, the fantastic tale certainly went a long way.

Abell’s Cape was purchased later by H. P. Duchemin, a Charlottetown man who went to Cape Breton where he became a newspaper publisher. It’s still owned by the Duchemin family.

My thanks to the many people who sent me the copy of the Argosy story. I have lost many of the names, so it would be unfair to mention any of them now.