



The Red Hand of O'Neill

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Touched by the Red Hand of O'Neill



The O'Neill coat of arms brandishes a single human right hand, palm forward, severed from the arm at the wrist.

A deep red color [gules] gives the appendage an unworldly appearance, but any traces of blood near the wound or in drops splattered from veins ripped apart are nowhere to be seen.

The fish is a symbol of Christ, and the water's azure blue represents loyalty and truth.

The lions are emblems of deathless courage.

The Legend of the Red Hand

**THE STRANGEST VICTORY
IN ALL HISTORY!**
HEREMON O'NEILL
RACING A RIVAL CHIEFTAIN
FOR POSSESSION OF IRELAND
BECAME THE FIRST MAN TO
TOUCH ITS SOIL
**BY CUTTING OFF HIS OWN
HAND AND HURLING
IT ASHORE!**
HIS SACRIFICE MADE HEREMON
THE FIRST KING OF ULSTER!
1015 B.C.

Not surprisingly, there are countless versions of the red-hand tale in the oral traditions of Ireland. The best-known yarn has a Viking longboat war party closing on the shores of Ulster. Their leader promises the first man to touch land full possession of the territory. On board is an Irish mercenary, a turncoat of a man called O'Neill who, with a sword blow, severs his hand and throws it ashore. Ulster is now his property and the mutilated hand becomes the family symbol and icon for a regional creation myth immersed in violence and territorial rights.

The **Red Hand** of O'Neill makes for an interesting tale, but is there any truth to it?

- The early legend of the cutting off of the left hand and throwing it ashore does not seem to be historically accurate, and the same story appears in other places as well.
- The most prominent version of the myth recounts that two Mileasan chiefs wished to settle a land dispute with a boating contest. The first man to touch the shore with his right hand would be the winner and rightful king. The chief, who was about to lose, cut off his right hand and threw it to the shore before his opponent could touch it.
- The significance of the **red hand** on the O'Neill family coat of arms is often debated, and there are many interpretations as to what the legend and the red hand itself signify. The **red hand** badge of O'Neill, nonetheless, was probably grounded on a theme in ancient Irish culture.

The O'Neill-Ulster Connection

- For centuries the O'Neills ruled Ulster, one of the four major regions of Ireland.
- The O'Neills of Ulster, the northern branch of the family in Ireland, held the title "Earls of Tyrone" and created a coat of arms from which the Red Hand of Ulster is taken.
- Consequently, the image of the red hand that dominates the O'Neill coat of arms also denotes the Irish province of Ulster in heraldry.
- An early heraldic use in Ireland of the open right red hand can be seen in the seal of Aodh Ó Néill, King of the Irish of Ulster, 1344-1364. [*at right*]
- King Aedh "the Stout" O'Neill of Ulster first used the crest during his reign in the mid-1300s. Subsequent generations and kings made their own modifications resulting in the current coat of arms.



*The Seal of Aodh Reamhar Ó
Néill of Tír Eoghain*

Meaning of O'Neill

- This surname, with variant spellings Oneile, Onele and Oneal results from the dropping of the raised apostrophe from the Gaelic Irish surname O' Neil.
- The name O'Neill comes from two separate Gaelic words. Firstly 'Ua Niall' which means 'Descendent of Niall' and also 'Neill' which means 'champion'. The 'Neill' part of the surname was added in the 10th century by the grandson of King Nial Gluin Dubh. Nial Gluin Dubh had been killed defending his land from Norsemen
- The O'Neills were known by the nickname "Creagh" which comes from the Gaelic word "craobh" meaning branch, because they were known to camouflage themselves to resemble the forest when fighting the Norsemen. Another story tells of three O'Neill brothers who were given laurel branches as a result of their victory over the Vikings and added the nickname "Creagh" to their names.

The O'Neill Legacy

- The O'Neill family traces its history back to 360 A.D. to the legendary warrior king of Ireland, Niall Noigiallach (Niall of the Nine Hostages), who is said to have been responsible for bringing St. Patrick to Ireland. He was known as 'Niall of nine hostages' because he had a tried and trusted strategy of kidnapping people from other kingdoms and refusing to release them. He took hostages from all the provinces in Ireland as well as England, Scotland and France.
- King Niall was extremely fertile and it is thought that as many as one in 12 Irish people are descended from him. Today that is around three million people across the world.
- He often crossed the Irish Sea and is said to be responsible for creating a Gaelic kingdom in Wales. As well as the Irish, it is likely that Scots with surnames MacNeil and MacLachlan are also descended from Niall.
- Niall's nephew, Dathi, rather than one of his own sons, succeeded him as King.
- The Ui Neill dynasty split into two sections, the Northern Ui Neill and the Southern Ui Neill, around 400 A.D. Ulster was home to the northern O'Neill, and the southern O'Neill clan occupied County Meath.

Hugh O'Neill

The Great Hugh O'Neill (1550-1616) was the second Earl of Tyrone and was inaugurated as "The O'Neill" in 1595. He defended his lands for six years from the English but left his northern strong-hold to attack them with fellow Irish leader Red Hugh O'Donnell and Spanish allies at the Battle of Kinsale on December 24, 1601. The Irish forces were defeated, and Hugh O'Neill and Red Hugh O'Donnell were forced to leave Ireland in what is now known as the "Flight of the Earls" in 1607. The departure of those two Irish chieftains for Europe effectively ended the Gaelic order in Ireland. After the defeat at Kinsale, many O'Neills fled to Spain and Portugal, although O'Neills continued to distinguish themselves in the fight for Ireland's independence.



Hugh O'Neill, Earl of Tyrone

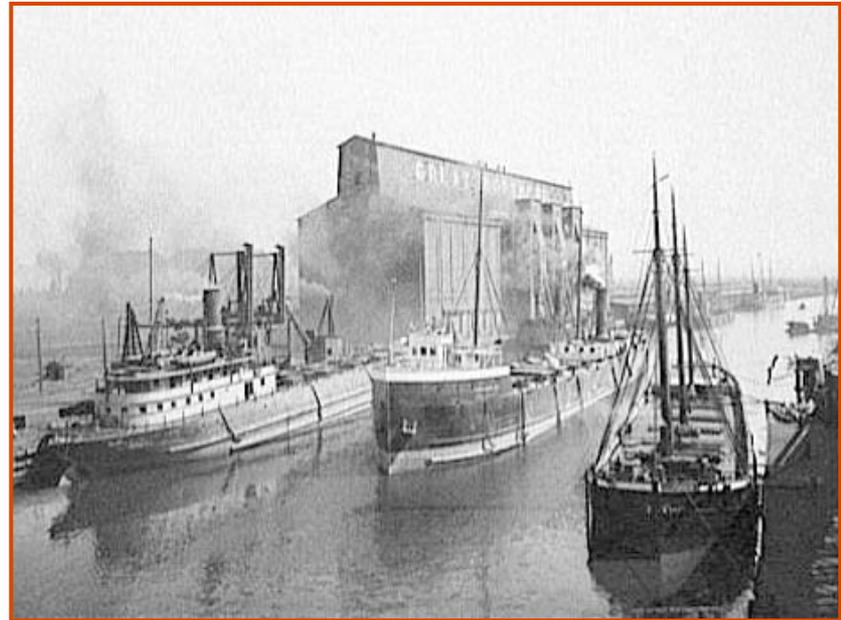


The Irish Diaspora

- Hugh O'Neill's escape from Ireland was a portent for what was to come. Many Irish left Ireland to avoid arrest and political oppression; others left in search of jobs and better opportunities.
- Irish emigration reached its peak during the Great Hunger of the 1840s and in the years following.
- Like many of their countrymen, some O'Neills left Ireland for Canada, which, as part of the British Empire, had no immigration restrictions on countries under British rule.
- Once in Canada, some O'Neills crossed into the United States through such border cities as Buffalo, New York, where entry proved easier than in Boston and New York City.

Buffalo Irish

While it is estimated that there may have been as few as 400 Irish-born in Buffalo in the early 1830's, within 20 years, the population had grown to over ten thousand. They settled primarily in the First Ward, a low-lying area near the waterfront, which was lined with grain elevators, warehouses and factories. While originally home to families of numerous ethnicities, by 1880, 70% of the First Ward's population was Irish.



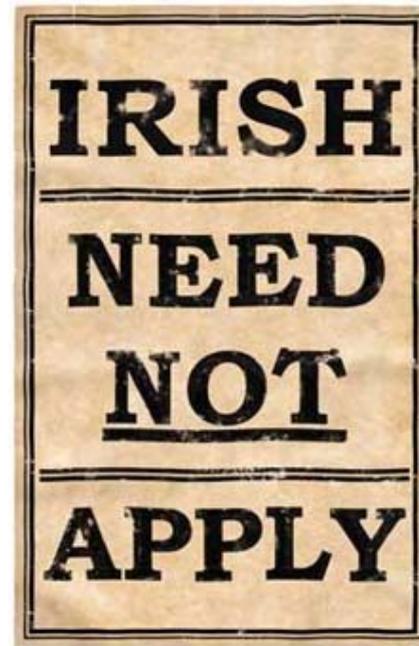
Because of the First Ward's proximity to the numerous grain elevators that lined the Buffalo River, the city's "grain-scoopers" were predominantly Irish. Scooping was seasonal work, dependent upon the traffic of shipping on the Great Lakes and Erie canal. During the winter Irish laborers often took work on the railroads or as workers in other capacities such as digging canals and warehouse slips and repairing Buffalo's sea walls. Indeed, by 1900, the railroads were employing a significant number of Buffalo's Irish, as were the foundries, mills and factories. But "scooping" was a job that became almost exclusively associated with the Irish.

Growing Up Irish

My father's parents immigrated from Ontario, Canada to Buffalo, New York; both his maternal and paternal grandparents had immigrated to Canada from Ireland. My father grew up in the First Ward, an Irish neighborhood adjacent to the docks and grain mills where most of the Irish worked as scoopers. Rather than hearing tales of the **Red Hand** as a child, I learned about the prejudices that the Irish faced in America.



'The usual Irish way of doing things.'
Cartoon by Thomas Nast from 'Harper's Weekly,'
September 1871



Signs like this were common in Buffalo well into the 20th Century.

Inspired by the Red Hand

Although different versions of the **red hand** legend contain variants peculiar to particular regions and their customs, all renderings of the tale focus on individual triumph through cunning use of the imagination and painful sacrifice that extends human reach beyond physical limits.

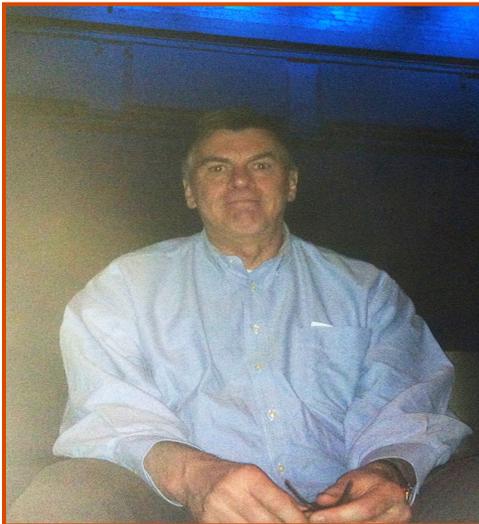
The central image in the O'Neill coat of arms is a single human right hand, palm forward, severed from the body that had sustained it and had depended on it to do the countless tasks that a hand does to keep a body alive and functioning.

The hand, severed at the wrist but otherwise unharmed, exudes strength and independence. The open palm may be a friendly gesture of welcome, yet it also might be a warning signal, a sign of power.



Why Red Hand Writing?

- As an **O'Neill**, I am ancestrally linked to the ancient kings and warriors and storytellers of Ulster. As an **O'Neill** who writes, I have a duty to understand and benefit from the rich tradition of wisdom, bravery, and ingenuity that my family predecessors held sacred.
- Imagine what wonders the **Red Hand of O'Neill** might have revealed if that hand could have written.
- **Red Hand Writing** embodies a challenge and an ideal. It also makes a great play on words.

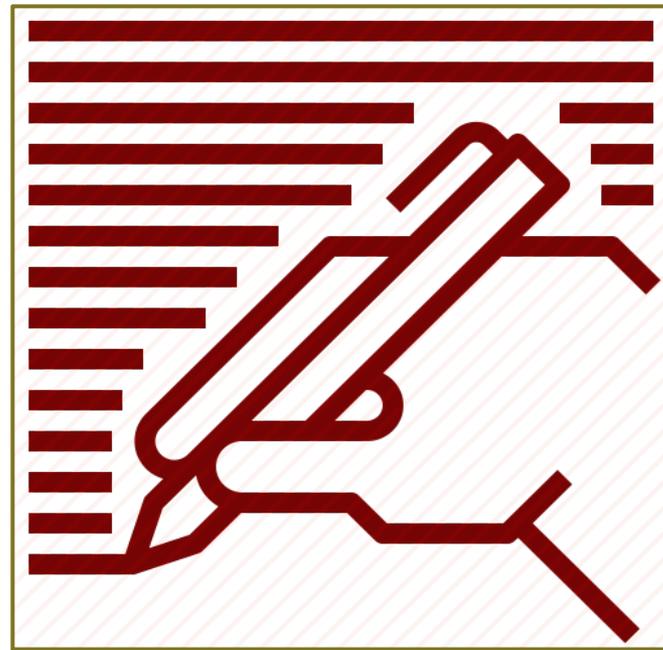


[l] On stage at the Abbey Theatre, Dublin; [c] With a portrait of Eugene O'Neill at the Circle in the Square, New York City; [r] Outside The Irish Repertory Theatre, New York City.

From the Red Hand of O'Neill
to redhandwriting.com



Fáilte!



Welcome!

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With my nephew, Brian O'Neill, at Saint Patrick's Day Parade, Buffalo, NY, 2015. My brother, Mark O'Neill, was the Grand Marshall.