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Our So-Called Illustrious Past

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Our So-Called Illustrious Past

Abstract

I went to London not to see the queen, but to find the Dutch baronet from whom we were all descended. I went as my father and forefathers and foremothers had done, to turn the crackling pages of a parish register and put my finger on our name. I went with an image of Gualter de Raedt, a young Dutchman in 1660, boarding a ship to accompany Charles the Second back to England, where monarchy would be restored. The fleet of thirteen ships sailed from Scheveningen on a flat gray sea as fifty thousand people stood on the beach to watch. Our man, our first identifiable forefather, our target of international inquiry, entered London with Charles on a Tuesday in May, the streets lined with observers, the horses plumed with French feathers, and was created (and here our family springs into being) Baronet the very next day.

Charles owed rather a lot of favors, having raised an army which he could not pay, an ill-disciplined hungry army of 2,500 men, and so when he triumphally entered London, with a detailed contract for his employment as king, called elegantly the Declaration of Breda, and having ordered such household necessities as a velvet bed, he felt the urgency of dispensing honors, in some cases instead of money, and so our man became Sir Gualter de Raedt, of the Hague. Sir Walter, the family bible-keepers called him, anglicizing his name, Sir Walter Rhet. We come down from Sir Walter Rhet, who was Dutch, wrote a family historian, who was (and this part is underlined) of the oldest and purest nobility that Europe can boast.

Thus my introduction to the fantasies of genealogists. [*excerpt*]

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Our So-Called Illustrious Past

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Thus my introduction to the fantasies of genealogists.

I sort of *felt* Dutch after learning of the Dutch baronet from whom we were all descended, sort of proud of being part-Netherlander rather than the more ordinary Irish or Scottish. And hadn't I *been* to Holland? Yes, the summer I was ten, we had stayed with friends in the Hague. It was the summer of the Munich Olympics; on television black-masked terrorists alternated with swimming races. My parents decided to divorce; I read *Lord of the Flies*; Mrs. Weingard made strawberry pancakes; the Dutch placed their dining rooms at the fronts of houses, facing the street, so passersby could see families eating together in the evenings; we rode the streetcar; wasn't Holland a *nice country*. The Dutch must love children; they tried to save Anne Frank; there were playgrounds built by philanthropists everywhere, their names on brass plaques. Why did that man build a whole

park, Dad? *I don't know, he must have loved children.* We stood on the beach at Scheveningen, my mother gone by then, gone home early; we ate French fries from a paper cone and examined a dead man-o-war, a blue poisonous gel on the sand. We stood on the sand where the fifty thousand stood watching the fleet depart for England.

I looked for our man in England because I didn't know *how* we knew we'd come down from the Dutch baronet. Someone had written it down, the same someone who had noted that although scrofula, a tuberculosis of the lymph glands, had infiltrated the Barnwell family, with whom the Rhett's had intermarried, "Our Barnwell blood is prior to this admixture and is free from these taints." Thank goodness, we were scrofula-free, and came down from the antique nobles, so the family eugenicists might relax. Scrofula could cause hereditary insanity. I looked for our man Gualter de Raedt in all of the purest British libraries, where interviews are required to obtain reader's cards and uniformed guards man every door and the cafeteria serves gooseberry crumble with custard sauce. English custard is a personal weakness; we lived in London for my kindergarten year. The children laughed every time I spoke and I clutched a teddy bear and learned to spell Mississippi with a desperate nationalist pride; custard soothed me every day at lunch. I was so grateful we had a big river to make America important.

I glided into the libraries and record offices, buoyant with academic credentials as I passed through electronic portals and metal turnstiles. Gualter de Raedt could be found in *Burke's Extinct Baronetry*, wrote the old bible-keeper, and there he was, comfortably nestled into type with all of the other baronets. Our baronet, our noble Hollander, who fathered a son who would emigrate to the colony of Carolina. But the entry didn't say all that, the entry said only that "of him no information can be obtained."

Had anyone searched for him? Had anyone tried to find out about this first father, whom he married, where he lived? I thought not. Hadn't the family genealogists instead branched off happily into records of the Moores and Yeamans, the Coffins and the Smiths, burbling into notebooks about beheaded patriots and sheriffs of Exeter and elaborate Barbadian plantations? Because a family comes down vertically, from past to present, but it also moves across, and sometimes the in-laws prove most illustrious. Genealogists at computers enter the names and dates of their own Borgesian Garden of the Forking Paths, creating intricate infinite branchings, branchings that delicately and relentlessly in the manner of Chinese landscape paintings intertwine with other trees with which we are connected, and we carry each other's imprints for shyness and crowded teeth, and there were few divorces (though many early deaths) in the old days unlike the 1970's; how comforting history can be.

A certain Leo of Canada, who responded to my Internet posting on the Benelux family history bulletin board—one of the uncountable nonspatial places where we searchers cross paths—Leo of Canada possessed the de Raedt family history back to the fifteenth century, two hundred years beyond what the rest of us Rhettts knew, and he might be persuaded to give me that history if I could prove that his Gualter de Raedt and my Gualter de Raedt were the same man. How could they *not* be, I typed to him. How many Gualter de Raedts of the Hague were made baronet on May 30, 1660? More than one? I felt snappish, I wanted those two hundred years, I wanted all the years, and when would I or any other genealogist be satisfied? Our unnamed family historian had described us as “an old family.” Isn’t every family old? We all come from someone. Was the idea, ultimately, to trace ourselves back to the beginning, to an Adam and Eve, to the mind of a god?

At the moment, for me, god was King Charles the Second, divinely appointed monarch who could cure Evil (and scrofula) by laying both his hands on a person, King Charles the Second who created de Raedt by causing his name to be entered in the record books. I would find every instance in which public intersected with private, in which history, for a moment, picked him up. History had picked us up before, even in my lifetime. My uncle talked with his mistress on the telephone, unfortunately from the offices of the Democratic Party in the Watergate Hotel. When the tapes were played, my aunt left him. Most of our shining moments, though, when the white light of the public slid into houses, had occurred in an earlier era, and so now, in 1999, I felt rather like an inhabitant of a village known mainly for its fifteenth-century fort.

In the libraries I checked online catalogues and microfilmed lists of the inhabitants of London and clothbound poll books, almanacs, electoral rolls. I checked the directories of surnames and the calendars of state papers, testamentary records and commissary courts, monumental inscriptions and the St. Catherine’s Hospital Index of Archives. Could such research ever be completed? There were boxes of crumbling parchment pages that no one had ever deciphered; one had to read unalphabetized lists of names in a clerk’s faded and crabbed cursive, spending foolish and inefficient hours. (All the poor dead clerks, despised for illegibility.) I knew why the others, on their week- or month-long vacations to England, had abandoned the search for de Raedt, our Dutch baronet. Elusive as a pearl he was, posing somewhere unfindable in high boots and a long sword and a serious Dutch expression.

In the manuscripts reading room of the British Library, ever so carefully using foam book supports and slips of paper for turning pages, I read an item from the Scattergood Collections, an ivory-bound book of the armorials of baronets created from 1611–1688. How I wished that one of the hand-

painted coats of arms belonged to me, that I might decode its symbols, a gold stag or wild boar, black pigeons or green stars. How I wished that my man had been Browne of Kiddington, Langham of Cotsbrooke, or Keate of the Hoo. There were Hyldeyard of Patrington, Shuckburgh of Shuckburgh, Hudson of Melton-Mowbray, Austen of Bexley, Hales of Bekeburne, and Dudley of Clopton, and my man was not among them, and I felt a great sadness and exclusion. Gualter de Raedt may have been a baronet, but he was not a proper one, with property and a coat of arms and a resumé under his name and a list of sons who had carried on. His baronetry had, in fact, of course, become extinct. Why couldn't we have come down from Wheeler of Westminster or Gresham of Limpsfield? A Dr. Seuss owl seemed to call plaintively from the creamy pages, *Keate of the Hoo, Keate of the Hoo*.

"You've got a real loser here," the Guildhall librarian said sourly. "You won't find him." What extremely protuberant ears the man had, picture him eating custard at the kindergarten table, snatching the American girl's pencil, a nasty little boy. Snobby, clubby Brits, didn't the ancestors have a lot of pluck to get out of here, sailing for the colonies in wooden ships the size of trailer homes. In the Guildhall manuscripts room, the man said smoothly, "So many of these genealogical references are fictitious. Genealogists have a rather low standard of accuracy." Rather low, oh didn't I know it! Hadn't I almost vomited trying to read, on microfilm, 43 unindexed handscrawled volumes of a Mrs. Smith's family history because there was, according to the Great Card Index at the Society of Genealogists, a lone reference to an Alice de Raan, daughter of Walter? Who had dared to scribble that note on a card catalogue card without a page reference? How could card catalogue cards be handwritten instead of typed? Were we children playing at school? And why didn't genealogists use citations, they acted as if the words came down on the stone tablets, the way they copied laboriously from each other's family bibles without asking questions. If a certain family historian had explained how she *knew* we were related to Gualter de Raedt, I wouldn't be trundling around London being patronized by male librarians, becoming lost in the Barbican's space-colony concrete walkways, eating potato chips to quell the nausea, concluding as I sat at a polished wooden table that genealogists were messy-minded and low and that I had *become* one. There sat the scholars around me, meticulously totting up the taxation criteria of 1750 or smiling contentedly over the original manuscript of *To the Lighthouse*. I shot them jealous glances.

There was not the slightest evidence that the Dutch baronet had remained in London and fathered a child; the slightest evidence, a will proved in the Archbishop of Canterbury's court a hundred years later, pointed back toward Holland. It looked as if de Raedt had sailed home, and it looked as if William Rhett, our first father in the North American colonies,

had sprung out of the city of London from unknown parents and simply scrapped his way toward being the chief customs officer of Charleston and owner of the mellifluously named property of Rhettburg. I admired that he had no advantage of noble parentage, and suddenly understood his awful behavior—he was not averse to mooning the governor, or seizing the royal shipment of tobacco for his wife to sell in the streets by the barrel—as a reaction against the clearly delineated hierarchies of England.

I found, in fact, that our man, our sacred forefather, was not a fancy baronet but a tailor. A christening record for William Rhett, born in October 1666, listed his parents as Robert and Katherine Rhett. Their parish church had stood just two blocks from the library where I sat hunched over the microfilmed church register. I rushed outside; I would find the remaining pinnacled tower from the St. Alban Wood Street church, destroyed by the Great Fire in September of 1666. I would find the very place where Robert and Katherine Rhett brought their son William a month after the fire. Their home had burned down, and they returned just for the christening, before they vanished into an unknown (perhaps Essex, where William Rhett would be married at the age of twenty-six). I found the place: a plain church tower rose eight stories and stood alone, strangely, on a traffic island on Wood Street. Marooned, the tower had no identifying plaque, and gave no indication of its former structure or the surrounding graveyard, or its substrata of bone-dust. Cars flowed around the odd island, and hovering high over the surrounding space were the steel girders and cranes of half-built constructions. Here, below the concrete, on an underlayer of earth, walked the humble tailor, not a dues-paying member of the respected Merchant Tailors Guild, not a crafter of the frilled cuffs of royal nightshirts, but an ordinary man, holding his wife's arm as they navigate around heaps of smoldering wood. He has buried a wife in the churchyard only a year before, with an infant, after she died in childbirth. Katherine, the new wife and mother, carries the bundled William. (There is always a bundle in the picture, held high, held close, held tenderly, a bundle which promises our present existence.) They stand in the church ruins, by the stone altar. The priest will christen the baby, the clerk will record his name, the particular volume of the register will survive the Blitz and be microfilmed, and I will deposit a coin for a copy and put my finger on our name.

William Rhett, brought here to be christened, would grow up somewhere in England to appear in the record books as a young sea captain being sued by his business partners. As captain of the frigate *Providence*, he sailed a circuit from Carolina to Barbados to London to Gambia, trading rice, rum, bullets, woolen cloth, butter, bacon, and ivory. Court clerks wrote out the cargo lists on parchment and there I could see plainly that William Rhett had earned his money as a slave trader. In the year 1696, for example, he

had carpenters “fitt the said Shipp for carrying Negroes” in London, and then on the West coast of Africa, where the Gambia River meets the Atlantic, he bought, from a variety of merchants, including other sea captains, 132 men, 28 women, and 30 children. Twenty-five of these people died before he could sell them in Charleston.

The family history depicted William Rhett’s first arrival in South Carolina in 1694 with his wife Sarah and infant daughter Christiana, on their own ship. I had pictured them entering the Charleston harbor, standing near the prow, a bundled baby in arms, expectant as they finally reached their new home. Now I couldn’t see that picture. Maybe Sarah held the bundle, maybe not. William Rhett was sweaty in the July heat, occupied with docking and with unloading the people who lived imprisoned under the wooden deck where he stood, people whose family histories could not be traced now.

And what of Gualter de Raedt, my phonetic and phony ancestor, whose seal ring is even today worn by certain Rhetts in South Carolina? He sailed home, to an innocence of green low-lying fields . . .