

## Love's Legacy: Viscount Chateaubriand and the Irish Girl

**Daniel Fallon**

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*Love's Legacy is exciting as it untangles a modern family's complex connection to one of the nineteenth century's most prominent men.*

Daniel Fallon's literary memoir *Love's Legacy* documents his search for the truth about his family's treasured relics.

Fallon, a former university provost and professor emeritus of public policy, inherited two letters sent to an ancestor by François-René de Chateaubriand, a celebrated French diplomat and writer who was active in the first half of the nineteenth century. The letters were evidence of an often repeated family legend about how the ancestor, Mary Neale, helped Chateaubriand when he was down on his luck in London, suggesting that Chateaubriand repaid her generosity by funding the education of Neale's son.

The question that drives the book is whether the family's legend came through generations of tellings and retellings intact, without any forgetting, embellishing, or reimagining. Fallon engages in deep research, consulting public records, French academics, genealogists, and DNA testing, to uncover hard evidence that Chateaubriand supported both Neale and her son at various times, raising curiosity about the nature of Neale's relationship with Chateaubriand. This evidence leads to more questions, conclusions, and conjectures, requiring more research.

The introductory chapter is followed by a chapter outlining Chateaubriand's life. Subsequent chapters track the Fallon family's history backward in time from the United States to South America and England, Ireland, and France. Throughout, fascinating questions are raised about how people apply imagination to facts; whether a family's silence on certain topics is equivalent to evidence; and how the relationship between evidence and belief shapes family identities. The placement of some of these questions in the middle of less-significant details dilutes their power, though. The same is sometimes true of important factual discoveries and thematic observations, which are placed in the middle of long paragraphs.

Still, the writing is clear and direct, and its pace, which alternates between conveying curiosity and reveling in discoveries, makes it suspenseful. A series of revelations are shared in a back-and-forth manner, illustrating the shifts in Fallon's beliefs about his family, and showing how these beliefs were tested on various occasions by information he received from the many experts he consulted. "The work is never fully done," he writes, "because fresh lines of inquiry inevitably arise."

Glossy, full-color plates of artwork and documents are reproduced in the book's center pages, adding to the reading pleasure of visiting different time periods and countries. But while the production values of the book are excellent, its title and cover art suggest that the story is confined to romance. This is misleading and sells the book's best qualities short. The narrative action is, in fact, concerned with historical detective work, and the thematic focus is on philosophical questions about the nature of truth and the legacy of education.

*Love's Legacy* untangles a modern family's complex connection to one of the nineteenth century's most prominent

men as it considers the veracity of oral family history.

MICHELE SHARPE (August 23, 2021)

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