

Raymond Chandler - the Waterford connection

Raymond T. Chandler, the celebrated crime fiction writer, had early and influential connections with Waterford. The 'T' stood for Thornton, his mother's maiden name. Florence Thornton was from a local Quaker family as was his father.

Florence's father, Isaac, and brother Ernest ran a legal firm with offices in Cathedral Square. To-day the business is represented in Kenny, Stephenson & Chapman. Waterford Civic Trust marked the site of the Thornton practice with familiar blue plaques highlighting the Chandler connection. The family home was The Grange, John's Hill, where young Raymond spent some years and came for summer holidays when at Dulwich College, London.

Was Chandler's best known fictional character, the private detective Philip Marlowe, shaped or based on any of the people he knew and met here? Probably not. Ian Fleming, of James Bond fame, interviewed Chandler for the BBC in 1958 suggesting Marlowe might have been based on Raymond himself but the author replied: "If it seemed so it was not intended."

That interview is the only known recording of Chandler's voice and took place just a year before his death. Chandler had reviewed Fleming's 'Diamonds are Forever' for The Sunday Times and, while there was some mutual admiration in the interview, Raymond said that Fleming went downhill later with Casino Royale. However, the suave Fleming took the opinion in good part. Did Bond reflect some of Marlowe? More likely the Marlowe style passed on to Inspector Morse.

Drunken father

Chandler was born in Chicago. Florence, one of five sisters, had gone to the US to stay with an older married sister, Grace, and, while in Omaha, Nebraska, met a railway engineer, Maurice Chandler, who worked on the prairie rail lines. Maurice's family had originated from the same Waterford Quaker community. Similar roots may have been an attraction but the wild west caused them both to lapse. They married in an Episcopalian church in Laramie, Wyoming, in the summer of 1887 and Raymond was born on 23rd July, 1888. Maurice's primary occupation was drinking and the vagrant nature of the railroad job put paid to the marriage. Chandler wrote of his father that 'whenever he was found he was drunk, if he was ever found'.

After the break up, Florence and son retreated to Waterford to her bachelor brother, Ernest. Ernest Isaac Thornton, known to his staff as 'Thorny' (attested by my late mother, an employee) greeted sister and nephew in much the same mode. Apparently, the family was not impressed with an impetuous marriage to a no-good railroad engineer.

Young Raymond, fresh from the feverish pioneering spirit in America, was struck by a different, more claustrophobic atmosphere, in Waterford. Since the early death of Florence's father in 1894, the head of the family had been Chandler's 'arrogant and stupid grandmother', guided by his Uncle Ernest. Like most males in the Thornton family, Florence's father had until his death helped run the family law firm. It was a rarefied Anglo-Irish world of servants and quasi-gentility, quite removed from late-nineteenth-century Nebraska and a world preoccupied with both religious and social snobbery:

Uncle Ernest

In Chandler's own words: "My grandmother was the daughter of an Irish solicitor. Her son, very wealthy later on, was also a solicitor and had a housekeeper named Mrs Groome who sneered at him behind his back because he wasn't a barrister. The Church, the Navy, the Army, the Bar. There was nothing else. Outside Waterford, in a big house with gardens, lived a Miss Paul who occasionally, very occasionally, invited Mrs Groome to tea on account of her father had been a Canon."

Chandler described chilling domestic interludes in John's Hill. "Sometimes, when the dinner did not suit him, he (Uncle Ernest) would order it removed and we would sit in stony silence for three quarters of an hour while the frantic Mrs Groome browbeat

the domestics below stairs and, finally, another meal was delivered to the master, probably much worse than the one he had refused; but I can still feel the silence.”

Stuffy arrogance

The experience of ‘affable chancers’ in America, now replaced by the self-conscious Thorntons, induced in Chandler an early suspicion of middle-class respectability. This stuffy arrogance seemed to be personified by his wealthy uncle, Ernest.

Unable to face the prospect of staying in Waterford, Florence took her son to London where Uncle Ernest had them temporarily installed in a house at Upper Norwood, South London, which Ernest had rented for his mother and an unmarried sister Ethel. There they lived in ‘genteel poverty’. It was agreed that the boy would go to a local church school and spend his summers in Waterford.

Ernest’s guardianship was purely financial and apparently often grudging. He spent most of his time mixing with London’s wealthy Anglo-Irish set and commuted seasonally between his interests (and residences) in Ireland and England. Nonetheless, he was a crucial benefactor for Chandler and, most importantly, agreed with Florence that he would pay for her son’s education and that, at age twelve, the boy would go to Dulwich College.

Sad Childhood

Chandler was marked by the coldness of the family’s reaction to the plight of his mother and himself and attributed some of it to Ernest’s ‘own impurity’. He noted that the rather amusing development in his uncle’s case was that he took unto himself a Jewish mistress in London, raised her son, who was illegitimate, had two illegitimate children himself and then married her. But he never took her to Ireland. “I could write a book about these people but I am too much of an Irishman myself ever to tell the truth about them”, he said.

It would rile Chandler later when journalists presumed his Irishness denoted Catholicism. “I grew up with a terrible contempt for Catholics”, he explained in 1945, “and I still have trouble with it now.”

Soon after Chandler started at Dulwich, his mother and aunt moved nearer the school at 77 Alleyn Park, a detached house next to the college grounds large enough to have previously housed the junior school. It was bought for them by Ernest, using the forced guardianship of his sisters, mother and nephew as an opportunity to invest in the fading grandeur of South London. Dulwich marked the end of Raymond’s traumatic childhood.