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From the Shannonside to rulers of Corsica

An exile's story: How a Sarsfield became queen of the Mediterranean island

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THE following story is about one of the daughters of the Wild Geese, who was exiled from Ireland in 1691, but went on to become the Queen of Corsica.

The Sarsfield brothers, Dominick and David were the sons of the 3rd Viscount of Kilmallock who had land in Cork and Limerick. According to Mainchín Seoighe in The Story of Kilmallock, the Sarfields had a home on Sarsfield Street, on the site of the Friars Gate Theatre today.

Dominick, being the eldest brother, inherited the family lands and title of 4th Viscount Sarsfield of Kilmallock. He was known simply as Lord Kilmallock.

In 1689, Dominick married his distant cousin Anne Sarsfield of Lucan, sister of the famous Patrick Sarsfield, whose statue stands in pride of place in the grounds of St John's Cathedral, Limerick.

The Sarfield brothers, unsurprisingly, fought alongside their famous in-law during the 1690s Sieges of Limerick. Following the defeat of the Jacobites and the signing of the Treaty of Limerick in 1691, the brothers lost their lands and titles. They and their families left Limerick for France under one of the conditions of the treaty, known as the Flight of the Wild Geese.

Corsica with Theodore as King only lasted seven months and he abandoned the country continuing his previous activities, hunting for fame and fortune

Three years later in Nantes, France, Catalina Sarsfield was born, the eldest of David Sarsfield's six daughters.

Both David and Dominick continued to serve as part of the Continental armies and both served to return James II to the British. Sadly, in 1701, Dominick was killed while leading the Royal Regiment of Dragoons into the battle of Chiari.

While David, moved with his young family, including Catalina, to Spain. He became governor of the Badajoz fortress. He was killed in 1710 at the Battle of Villaviciosa.

Now in her early teens Catalina was fatherless but well connected. She became a maid of honour to Queen Elisabetta of Spain who was only a few years her senior. While in the court she met a German adventurer Theodore von Neuhoff whose sister was also a maid of honour to



Theodor von Neuhoff, the future King of Corsica and husband of Catalina

Queen Elisabetta. Theodore was about the same age as Catalina and in 1718, the couple married.

It was not all roses for the newlyweds as Catalina had expensive tastes. She received an income of two crowns a day, which she spent on entertaining friends and expensive carriages. Theodore soon found that the commission he was receiving as a colonel in Spain was not enough to support his new bride. He also found Catalina to be stubborn and bad tempered.

This, perhaps, was one of the many reasons why in 1719, he took

some of Catalina's jewels to fund the journey but not her company as he returned to Paris, France.

In 1723, Catalina followed him to Paris, she found herself a position as a maid of honour in the court of Louise d'Orléans. Meanwhile, Theodore persuaded her to sell her pension from Queen Elisabetta, presumably to pay one of his debts.

Theodore continued travelled throughout Europe gathering debts in his wake, while Catalina remained in Paris with their daughter. While in Genoa he met some Corsican rebels in exile.

Theodore persuaded these rebels that he could free Corsica if they made him king.

In March 1736, Theodore landed in Corsica announcing his arrival.

"I'm here to help you, to help the kingdom with my ability and I dedicate myself to your interests. My promise is to do everything necessary to free Corsica from Genoese slavery - I will fulfil it carefully provided on your side you also do your duty to me, and I only want to ask one thing: if you choose me for King, allow me to grant liberty to all who will come from other countries to live in Corsica - in order to increase the population".

He was crowned King Theodore I within a few days.

Despite Theodore's previous antics in Spain, the Spanish King and Queen looked favourably on the new state.

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Eventually his mounting debts got the better of him and he was imprisoned in London.

On his release the King went to live with a tailor in Little Chapel Street, London where he died soon after. He is buried in St Anne's Soho, London. His memorial reads:

"Near this place is interred Theodore King of Corsica who died in this parish December 11, 1756, immediately after leaving the Kings Bench Prison by the benefit of the Act of Insolvency, in consequence of which he registered his Kingdom of Corsica for the use of his creditors.

The grave, great teacher, to a level brings

Heroes and beggars, galley-slaves and kings,

But Theodore this moral learn'd ere dead:

Fate poured its lessons on his living head,

Bestow'd a kingdom, and denied him bread."

There is little documentation as to what happened to Catalina after this except a dedication to her in a 1736 novel, which describes her as living in Paris with her daughter. Her daughter would later return to Spain where she was under the protection of Queen Elisabetta.

It is unlikely that Catalina ever set foot in Corsica, though nonetheless, a woman with very strong family ties to Limerick was at one time officially the Queen of Corsica.