

Inheritance  
An Essay

By Maya Muir

Many people hunger for more information about their family history: where their ancestors came from and why they left, who they were. In conversation with them I always shut my mouth and back away. I grew up saturated with family history; it was a complicated burden that I wanted only to escape. That escape directed the trajectory of my life for years, and only began to resolve after I became a mother myself.

If pressed, the simplest way I've found to express where I came from is to say that I'm a double Mayflower. Both sides of my family claim descendants who arrived in what became Plymouth, in 1620; they're always referred to in the family as Elder William Bradford and Elder William Brewster. The stories about the Pilgrims are public; we have no private stories about them handed down, and no objects from them have survived.

But for those who lived a century later, that's not the case. From my father's family I have a two-inch high miniature painted on ivory of one William Muir, who emigrated from Ayrshire, Scotland, in 1774, in time to volunteer in the revolutionary army. The miniature shows him to have brown curly hair, a high forehead and a long nose; he looks like a minor character in a Jane Austen novel. 'When mustered out, Washington is said to have given him his horse, so that it is assumed that William Muir may have been a dispatch bearer or a bodyguard for Washington.' I find this in a ledger, hand-written in 1938 by my paternal great uncle, that I keep in a tin box under my desk. Connecticut lawyer Oliver Wadsworth, another ancestor of my father's, signed the Declaration of Independence.

My mother sleeps in a mahogany four-poster bed that belonged to Michael Jackson, who, with his five sons, fought in the American Revolution; next to it stands a ladder-back chair said to have been sat in by Washington. The house I grew up in was an extremely modest small brick box in the Philadelphia suburbs, but it was filled with portraits and miniatures. Portraiture must have been a common way of asserting status in a still raw country, or maybe it was just an attempt to assure that you would be remembered. Our house held thirty-two, if I remember right, from

both sides of the family. My great-grandmother had eight children, my grandmother 3 before she died young, and I am an only child. Family possessions became concentrated over the generations. Besides, my parents were hospitable to portraiture; if other cousins wanted to shed, they were happy to give them refuge so the images multiplied.

Facing me as I ate breakfast every morning as a child were life-sized portraits of Alexander and Mary Fullerton. When I go to my still-vigorous ninety-three year old mother to be reminded about them, her face lights up. "That's a good story!" she says, delighted, putting down her teacup to fetch a small green volume of family lore her father compiled. She reads me the story of Mary Fullerton, who lived in Philadelphia under British occupation. American prisoners of war were held in a prison there, but the corrupt governor kept the money for feeding the prisoners for himself. Mary and her sister, knowing of this, 'plied their needles to raise funds for food for them.' When, after the American army retook Philadelphia, so many released prisoners came to thank the two sisters, my mother reads, they spent as much on tea and cake as they had to feed them in jail. I ask my mother about Alexander, the man Mary married, but she shrugs. "We don't know anything about him." The anonymous Alexander is pleasant-looking, fortyish; Mary a formidable lady with a faint mustache, an enormous white bonnet and a gimlet eye whom I try to like for her gumption. But I find it hard; for too many years her gaze seemed to judge me harshly.

My mother's favorite ancestor is Michael Jackson of the four-poster bed, who was a farmer in Newton, Massachusetts. Because he'd fought in the French and

Indian War, he was an experienced soldier and led a regiment of men from Newton to fight in the battle of Concord and Lexington. With his five sons he continued to fight through the battle of West Point and the winter at Valley Forge. And, although he never confessed to having been part of what became known as the Boston Tea Party, the story goes that he was absent from the house that night, and after he returned, his wife Ruth had to dump tea leaves out of his shoes.

The stories begin in the new country, but my great uncle (named, surprise, William Muir) produced the ledger mentioned above, which must represent years of obsessive work, in pages and pages of a complex cross-referenced system I've never been able to figure out, which traces the family back 42 generations. Each time I open the ledger I remind myself that the farther back one goes, the fewer people there were. Maybe the job got easier as he penetrated deeper into history? Charlemagne shows up under a heading "33<sup>rd</sup> grandparents," and the ledger traces four generations further back than he to Edmund, first king of England. Alfred the Great shows up in line 261. Yet no sources are listed; there's no way to know how William produced this or to what degree it is true.

These are the stories I grew up with. This sense of family was reinforced by names. Among my first cousins, John and James alternated as favorite names down through the generations with a few Michaels thrown in, which made identifying which person you actually meant complicated. Worse still, for girls the name of choice was Mary. I was named Mary, as were my mother, paternal grandmother, first cousin and third cousin on my father's side. We were all named after someone

who'd preceded us. The result was a plethora of nicknames: Jolly, Polly, Mare and Maya.

A sense of status and worth came along with this legacy, yet in my immediate family, money was scarce. My father was in business but never should have been. My mother made our clothes and grew vegetables to feed us where she would have preferred to grow flowers. One winter when I was in middle school she told me that, to be able to buy Christmas presents, she was going to sell several letters from the Marquis de Lafayette to our ancestor Daniel Wadsworth. (Wadsworth had become acquainted with Lafayette, when Wadsworth was Commissary General for the French after they landed in Rhode Island.) Because I was interested in receiving a present, I consented, but I asked her to save me one letter. I have it still. Dated Versailles, Feb. 9 1785, it spreads in spidery brown ink across one page, and mingles geopolitics ('Great preparations are making for a war between the Emperor and the Dutch. . .') and the personal ('My respects to your lady and family and to all our friends. . .')

All this seemed perfectly normal to me as a child, as it was all I'd known. My unease was born when I sensed that my father was using it to distinguish us, "our kind of people," from others. He was proud of being from "an old family." I first objected to this on the grounds that it was inherited glory, nothing we had done ourselves, so why did this make us special? I didn't buy it, and I didn't feel *special*. By my teens I realized how logically ridiculous the concept was: all families are equally old. None would exist without unbroken roots going back to our first common

ancestor. The only difference was documentation. The sense of being better than, of inherited privilege, made no sense to me.

Yet the privilege was real in at least one way, but not one I appreciated. In third grade my parents decided I should go to the local girls' prep school. They couldn't afford it, but because my mother had gone there (and I tested acceptably) I was given a scholarship. Certainly a privilege, but I arrived as an outsider to a group of girls who'd already been together for four or five years. For the first six months I was alternately ignored and teased—what I've recently come to recognize as bullying. I withdrew, became shy and hesitant, and stayed socially isolated for six years, yearning to go back to public school. And in real ways I *didn't* belong. We had no money for the skating club, Cricket Club membership, or expansive vacations which otherwise defined my schoolmates. I was grateful we had to wear uniforms so my homemade clothes weren't obvious. It was my first experience of class difference, and it was confusing because there I was, partaking of privilege, but every day feeling or being made to feel that I didn't belong.

Some of my cousins cared more about our heritage, some less, but all took it for granted. Oddly, though I knew none of my cousins well, I knew many slightly thanks to that same maternal great grandmother who had eight children. She also had money. Instead of parceling a significant inheritance between her offspring, she decided to build a vacation home big enough for future generations to gather together in the summers and continue to know each other. In 1910 they bought land and a few small offshore islands in Nova Scotia at the bottom of the Bay of Fundy. One of the eight siblings sketched the design for a club house, and it was built: a

lovely long shingled building with sixteen bedrooms and two dormitories, along with a library, pool room, boat house and play house for children above a sloping lawn that looks down to a rocky promontory and a view of the islands.

As a child, my mother went every summer with her father, who adored the place, but as I was growing up we couldn't afford to go often; also my father found it overwhelming. We went only twice. I loved the land, the building, and sailing when a cousin could be persuaded to take me out, but I found the cousins not only overwhelming but a mixed bag: some were friendly and nice, but I felt little in common with them, though I knew we had this mysterious bond called family. Most seemed to me then to have the same sense of entitlement that my schoolmates had. Really, I felt, any old collection of people might have been more interesting or pleasant.

I was a contrarian on my way to being a rebel. The sense of unearned privilege in my family and schoolmates offended me. I identified with outsiders and the marginalized; they developed a glamor for me that the officially glamorous never had. I wanted to escape Philadelphia and my conflicted self. When it came time to pick a college, my main criteria was to get as far away as I could. In the school library I found a catalogue for a college in distant Oregon, called Reed. Perfect, I thought; there I can shed my family and reinvent myself.

So, like my ancestors, I fled West for a new beginning, knowing almost nothing about what I was getting into. I worked hard at forgetting my larger family and its history. I'd confess to having attended a private school, nothing else. It's easy in one's teens and twenties to operate as if you're newly hatched; you live in the

present tense, and I did, with a vengeance. After a year I left Reed. With friends I founded a clinic on Portland's Skid Row; I worked with farmworkers, Indians, tried to unionize hospital workers . . . For years I was the official black sheep of the family—or so I assumed.

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I thought as little about family as I could for close to twenty years. Then I found myself living in Brooklyn, married to a man who wanted a child. The imperative hadn't been strong with me, but I came around to the idea easily, and then enthusiastically. The idea of family no longer scared me; I'd redefined myself and even my notion of what a family was. We lived with two long-time friends, Nancy and Liz, and their toddler daughter Jessie. We supported each other, ate together, helped raise Jessie. We were committed to each other. *We* were a family.

I tried to get pregnant. It didn't happen. We determined the problem wasn't my husband, it was me. We started keeping track of my cycles, making love on schedule. No dice. I began with hormone shots. I was in graduate school, taking breaks from class to go into the NYU bathroom to shoot myself up.

In the spring, we were briefly victorious. For a few weeks I was pregnant. Then one night the implanted egg-and-sperm combo burst through the wall of my right fallopian tube, causing heavy bleeding. They admitted me to the hospital, and the next morning operated to mop up the blood and repair the tube. The tube, however, was a wreck, repair impossible.

But I had a second tube, right? I went to the hospital again to have dye shot into it to see if it was viable. It wasn't; the test revealed massive scarring in the left tube. Yet I had no medical history that could explain this. Ninety seven percent of cases like this, they told me, are caused by pelvic inflammatory disease, which I'd never had. I fit in the mystery three percent of "other." We tried another operation to repair the tube, but it proved impossible.

My husband began to suggest we think of adoption, but I resisted. Suddenly it mattered to me that my DNA entwine with that of my husband's to alchemically produce some mix of his Russian Jew and my Scotch and English. When I thought of family, now I remembered where I'd come from, too, and I felt ready, indeed eager, to reenter—on my own terms. And my husband, bless his heart, was OK with being the first Jew in this clan of ultimate WASPS.

So we decided to try in vitro fertilization, which, if there is any correlation between effort + discomfort and result, should have secured us a nice maturing embryo. I woke at 3:00 a.m. to take a subway to a train to Westchester to have an obnoxiously up-beat doc scrape eggs out of my ovaries, and then took the train back to Manhattan in time for class. It was a miserable winter.

After three tries and failures, I had to face the fact that I wasn't going to bear a child. It felt ironic: I was not being allowed to fit into my family's idea of family. No non-WASP had married into our family before, and no one had ever adopted a child. I'd have to continue in my role of rebel, challenger. OK, then.

Adoption, however, was hardly a piece of cake. In the late '80s, adoption attorneys recommended placing ads in newspapers in the Bible belt, where unwed

pregnant women were likely to be looking for homes for the results of unwanted pregnancies. Feeling distinctly weird, we wrote an ad and placed it in newspapers in Iowa, Texas and Louisiana. We acquired a new “baby” phone, and committed to staying at home to answer calls for as long as it took.

The first call was from a man who eventually revealed that he was masturbating. One woman liked us so much she invited us to Iowa to meet her. We flew out, but after the visit, she cut off contact without a word. We worked for a while with a second woman in Louisiana, paying her medical expenses for months, but when I flew down to take her to a doctor, she never showed up.

All in all, we had 52 calls that year, mostly from disoriented and desperate teenage girls who didn’t know what to do. I began to feel like a counselor to them. Finally, eleven months after we began, a woman called from a small town outside New Orleans. Her daughter had come to her pregnant; Glynis was calling on her daughter’s behalf. Glynis was responsible, coherent; I liked her and she accepted us. But after so many months and disappointments, we were skeptical, unable to invest much hope.

On September 24<sup>th</sup>, 1989, seven weeks before her daughter’s due date, Glynis called to say her daughter was en route to the hospital, sure her water had broken. She called back four hours later to say that her daughter had given birth to a baby boy.

We’d been lackadaisically considering names, but within minutes of this announcement, I knew what he should be called: Simon. The familial habit of tying a family together with names asserted itself. One of the five brothers who fought in

the Revolution was named Simon. Simon Wiesenthal could be the antecedent within my husband's tradition. And two of the baby's birth-grandparents were Nicaraguan and Guatemalan; Simón Bolívar could join the mix to represent them.

I was on a plane the next morning, in Gretna by afternoon. The baby was fine, but it would be a week before I was allowed to see him, as Louisiana law allows a birth mother a week to change her mind before adoption proceedings can begin. I spent that week stalking around New Orleans, as explosive as a hand grenade.

Finally I was allowed in. At four pounds, seven ounces, he was the tiniest baby and most defenseless creature I'd ever held. He was extraordinarily wrinkled. All he wanted to do was sleep. I loved him instantly and completely, and that has never stopped. He is our son.

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Several years later, someone in the family pointed out that Simon was legally ineligible to be a member of the family club in Nova Scotia. The bylaws, registered with the Canadian regional parliament, stated that only blood descendants of the founder could be members. This also brought to light one ironic fact: my grandfather, who so loved the place, had bought an extra parcel of the mainland contiguous with the Club property, and eight additional offshore islands. Tiny, mosquito-ridden knobs of rock, but islands, nonetheless. This property was now owned jointly by my mother and her two siblings; on their death my six first cousins and I would own it, but I would own one third, more than anyone else. And when we all die, Simon will own one third and no one else will own anywhere near as much. In other words, Simon will be the largest landowner in the family. This will bring

him no benefit at all, but will make the rest of the family eager to have him keep paying taxes.

There was reluctance on the part of some cousins to remind the Provincial government that we existed, as there was fear that the Canadians weren't thrilled about U.S. citizens owning Canadian land. They didn't want to go to court to make the change. I found myself writing passionate letters to the collective family, now numbering something like 300 souls. *A family is the people we love, I said. It's the children we raise and the people we take care of. This is my child. If you want me, you have to accept him as well.*

It took several years, but a cousin finally championed us and did the legal footwork. By order of the Provincial parliament the bylaws were changed, and Simon became a legal member of the family. More years have passed, and now the clan includes a Taiwanese, an Indian, an Iranian, and two adopted Russian boys, all, Simon included, fully embraced. Families change and adapt. I like my natal family better; I've found more people I appreciate, and I can see that either they never thought me as much a black sheep as I suspected, or they've forgiven me.

As for me, I hold to both definitions of family, and my heritage has slowly ceased being a burden I carry. It is now only a small part of who I have become. I listen to my mother's stories more carefully as she ages and try to absorb them, acknowledging the darker aspects: Michael Jackson's participation in the French and Indian War is probably not a pretty story; his son Ebenezer went to Georgia after the Revolution, where he became a plantation and slave owner for some years. I can see how these men and women were acting as individualists, seizing opportunities

and reinventing themselves, at the same time that several made contributions to saving and building our democratic republic, a few of those acts, like signing the Declaration of Independence, which were important.

I'm curious now how Simon will react to his combined inheritance. Will he ever search for his birth parents? Our bond is strong; nothing will ever break it, but I think he'd find it valuable to explore what his DNA has given him. I wonder what he carries from his father and from me, what from his birth parents, and what will ultimately be his definition of family.

We moved back to Portland because it felt like a better place to raise a child, freer from preconceptions, an easier place for him to define who he wants to be. He didn't grow up being stared at by Mary Fullerton over breakfast. He's unlikely to wrestle with having had a slave owner as an ancestor, or wonder about those who signed the Declaration of Independence. I haven't saturated him with the family stories, and they are no burden to him. I did this on purpose, but I wonder, now, if something isn't lost. Will he ever want to sleep in the four-poster bed when it is his, or will it end up in a garage sale? What stories will he tell?