



A Slice of History

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As a newly elected Councillor in Coquitlam, I was looking forward to my December 2011 inauguration ceremony, to which I had invited several relatives and friends. The event promised to be a memorable one and, in the end, it was certainly all that, but not completely for the reasons I had anticipated.

My newly elected and re-elected Council colleagues and I assembled at City Hall in the late afternoon for formal individual and group portraits. That done, we sat down for a meal, during which we chatted and exchanged campaign anecdotes. The talk turned to family. Thinking of my father and three of my brothers who would be at the inauguration, I trotted out one of my favourites: the story of how the Red Hand came to be the family crest for O'Neills around the world. It's a bloody tale from ancient Irish times, featuring rival kings and some quick but

ruthless thinking by an O'Neill ancestor that saw him chopping off his own hand and throwing it across a body of water to win a race and claim a crown. And thus, the Red Hand of O'Neill became a part of Irish folklore, if not history.

After dinner, we pinned on our white-rose corsages (for the women) or boutonnieres (for the men); in my case, I asked a manager for help in doing it. That done, we assembled for a formal procession into council chambers. The bagpiper-led march went off without a hitch, as did all other aspects of the ceremony, including our oath-taking, the mayor's speech, and the short addresses from individual Council members, during which I made note of my 83-year-old father's importance as my own personal safety net.

After all this was done, and as we were rising from our seats to proceed out of council chambers, I picked up the pen given to me after I signed my oath and, with my right hand, put it into the left inside pocket of my suit jacket, brushing my boutonniere in the process. With the bagpiper once again in the lead, we then made our way out of the chamber and into the lobby for a reception.

I then noticed that my right hand was feeling a little wet. Thinking someone had spilled some water or I had stood too close to a just-watered plant, I thought nothing of it and, without looking down, simply brushed my hand against my jacket to dry it off. This happened a second time, and I had the same response.

But when the hand felt wet a third time, I lifted it up to see what was going on and, to my shock, discovered that it was covered with blood flowing from an inch-long scratch across the top of my right pinkie finger. The blood was all over my hand, the cuff of my shirt and the side of my (thankfully dark-blue) suit jacket.

Ever at the ready, my father took only seconds to produce a bandage from his pocket and patch me up. But then came a mystery: how had I cut myself? I retraced the steps of our final procession to see if I could spot a place where I might have brushed my hand against a sharp object of some sort, but found nothing.

Finally, a friend suggested I examine my boutonniere. Sure enough, I discovered that the sharp end of the pin, affixing it to my jacket, was pointing to the exact place that my right hand had been when I put the keepsake pen in my pocket.

The mystery solved, I could only smile at the coincidence—or was it a jest of the gods?—that saw me begin the evening, with the telling of a tale about a bloody hand becoming integral to an ancestor's becoming a leader in Ireland, and ending it with a real-life incident in which my own bloody hand had become a memorable part of my becoming a leader myself many centuries later and half a world away.

- *Councillor Terry O'Neill*

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