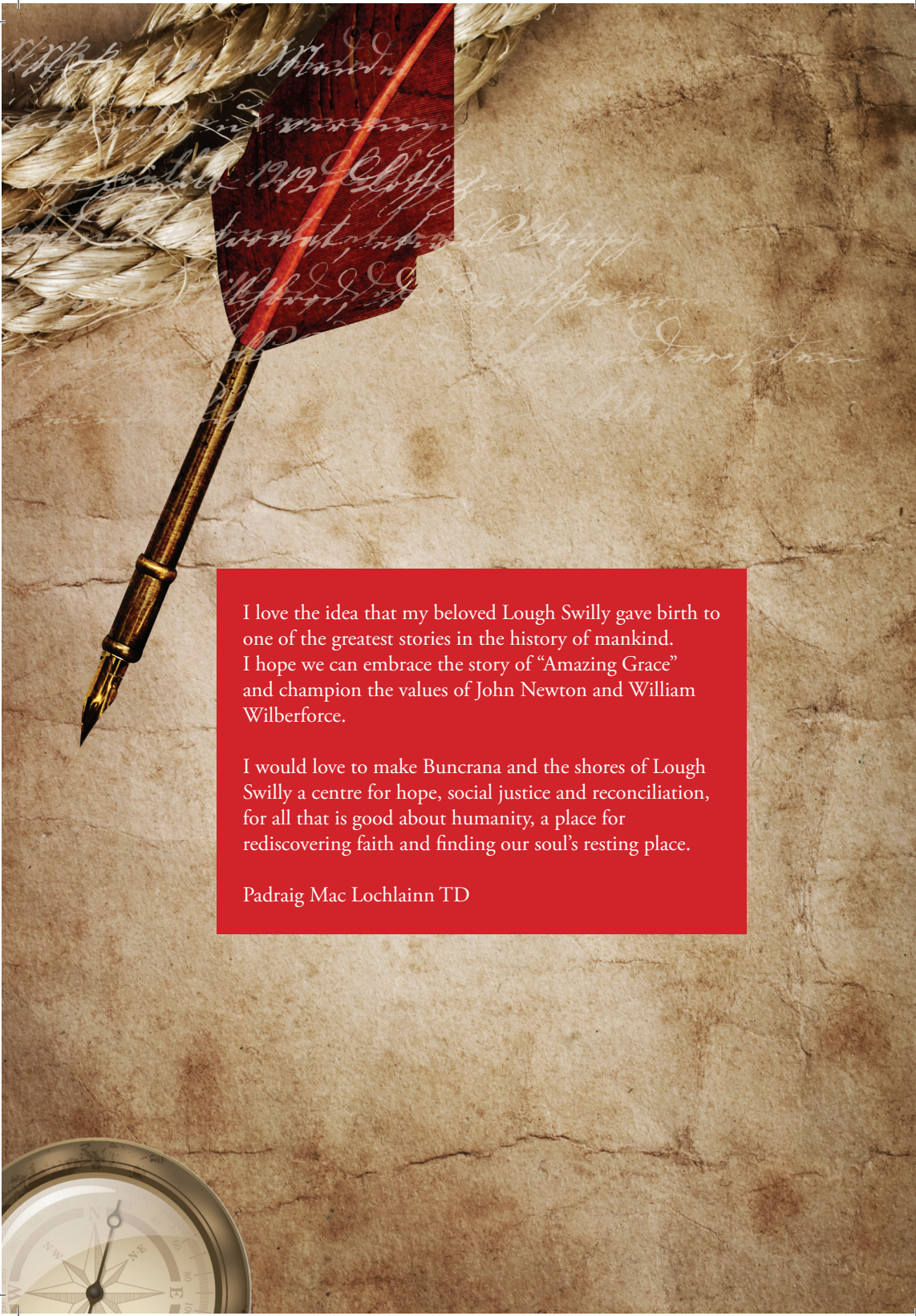


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AMAZING GRACE & LOUGH SWILLY

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I love the idea that my beloved Lough Swilly gave birth to one of the greatest stories in the history of mankind. I hope we can embrace the story of “Amazing Grace” and champion the values of John Newton and William Wilberforce.

I would love to make Bunrana and the shores of Lough Swilly a centre for hope, social justice and reconciliation, for all that is good about humanity, a place for rediscovering faith and finding our soul’s resting place.

Padraig Mac Lochlainn TD





The hymn is known and loved all over the world. It topped the charts 200 years after it was written and holds the record for the most recorded song.

The remarkable story of “Amazing Grace” began with a foul-mouthed sailor - John Newton. Caught in a violent storm in the Atlantic Ocean, he was close to death when he found safe haven in Lough Swilly.

This miraculous rescue was the turning point in Newton’s life and the start of his spiritual journey. He became a clergy-man, a prolific hymn writer and played a vital role as mentor to William Wilberforce in the historic battle against slavery.

A HALF-STARVED “WRETCH”

John Newton went to sea at the age of 11. Press-ganged into the navy, he was flogged for deserting and even contemplated suicide. Later he transferred to a slave ship off the coast of Sierre Leone.

When his ship sailed for the Americas, Newton stayed in Africa. He soon regretted the decision when he fell foul of his master’s mistress. Treated like a slave and half-starved, he survived because African slaves risked punishment to share their food with him.

Eventually, Newton was offered passage back to England on a cargo ship “The Greyhound”. Onboard, he became increasingly blasphemous, openly mocking anyone who had a Christian faith.

The sea voyage was long and dangerous. Sailing via Newfoundland, the crew stopped to fish for cod off the sand banks, little realizing this was to save their lives.

On the Atlantic crossing, Newton carelessly picked up a Christian book he found in his cabin and started reading. Suddenly, “an involuntary suggestion arose in my mind - What if these things should be true?” Horrified at the thought, he shut the book.





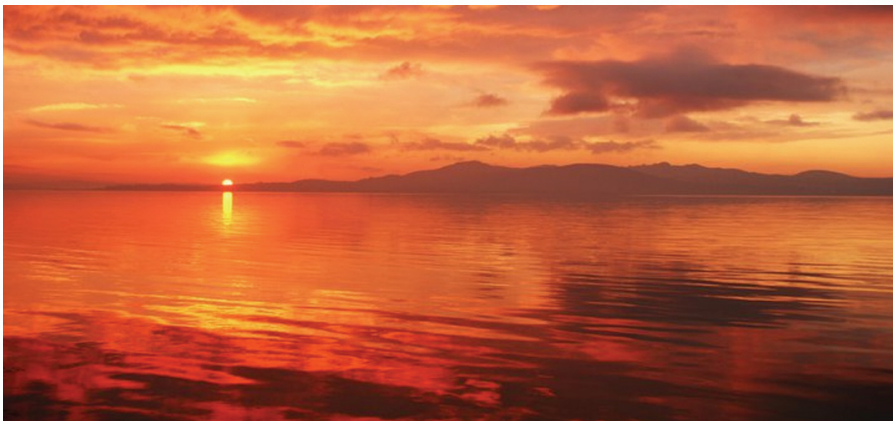
ATLANTIC STORM

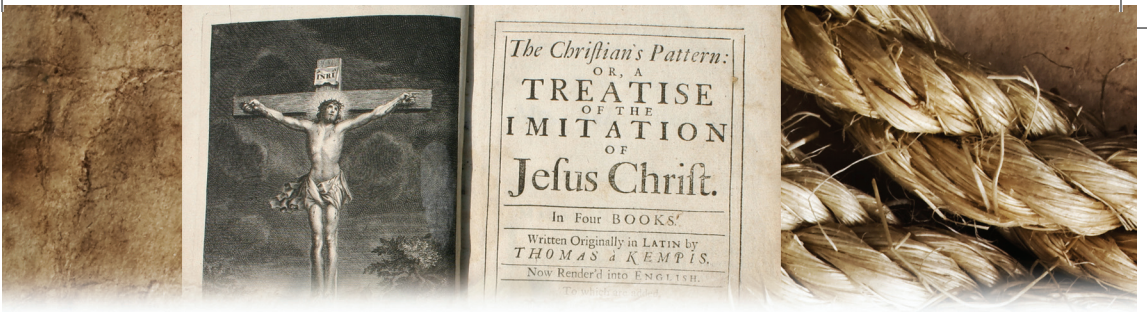
The next day (March 10 1748) the ship was caught in a violent storm. One man was instantly swept overboard and the lower decks began to fill with water.

“The sea had torn away the upper timbers... and made the ship a mere wreck in a few minutes. It was astonishing, and almost miraculous, that any of us survived. We expended most of our clothing and bedding to stop the leaks.”

After hours pumping water from the floundering ship, Newton cried, *“If this will not do, the Lord have mercy upon us!”* He was instantly struck with his own words asking, *“What mercy can there be for me?”*

“I expected that every time the vessel descended in the sea, she would rise no more; I dreaded death now... I thought if the Christian religion were true, I could not be forgiven. There never was, nor could be such a sinner as myself.”





For weeks, the ship was at the mercy of the ocean. Most of their food had been destroyed in the storm. Half a salted cod (from Newfoundland) was all they had to feed 12 people each day.

Throughout this time, Newton was avidly reading the New Testament desperate to find out if the God he had rejected for so long was real.

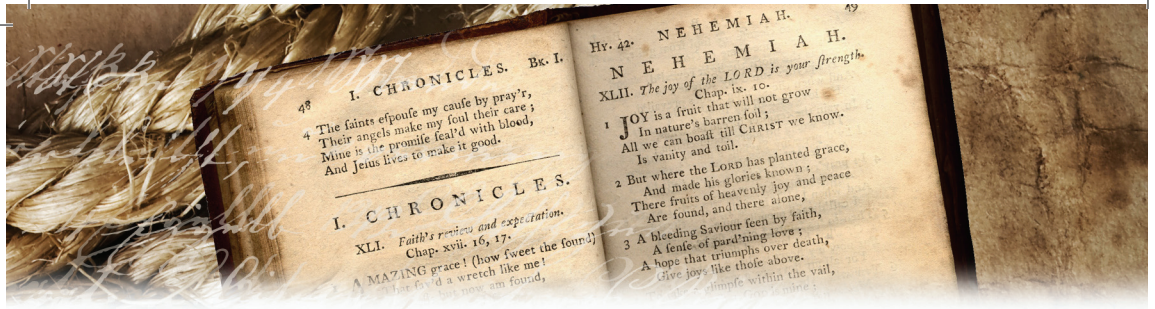
SAFE IN IRELAND

When all hope was lost, the wind suddenly changed direction.

“We saw the island of Tory and the next day anchored in Lough Swilly in Ireland. This was the 8th day of April. When we came into this port, our very last victuals was boiling in the pot; and before we had been there two hours, the wind began to blow with great violence.”

“If we had continued at sea that night in our shattered condition, we must have gone to the bottom. About this time I began to know that there is a God that hears and answers prayer.”





Literally saved from death, John Newton stepped ashore in Inishowen a changed man. He had come to realize that God's grace could save even a "wretch" like him.

While the ship was repaired, Newton visited the neighbouring city of Derry where he attended prayers at St Columb's cathedral twice a day. He even

went shooting with the mayor, narrowly escaping injury when his gun misfired.

Back in England, Newton was appointed as the captain of a slave ship. Despite his newfound faith, he was blinded by his culture, which accepted slavery as normal. Later he explained,

"I should have been overwhelmed with distress and terror, if I had known, or even suspected, that I was acting wrongly."

But as he grew in his faith, he became increasingly unhappy with what he was doing. Eventually he left his slave ship and went to work as a tide surveyor in Liverpool before finally becoming a clergyman in 1764.

It was while he was serving as a curate in Olney parish church that John Newton wrote the words to the hymn "Amazing Grace" to illustrate his New Year's Day sermon in 1773.

DISGRACEFUL!

Finally offered his own church in London, Newton became an influential preacher. He mentored the young politician William Wilberforce, whose own Christian faith inspired the epic battle against the Trans Atlantic Slave Trade.





In 1788 Newton published “Thoughts on the African Slave Trade”. His ‘confession’ publicly acknowledged his change of heart regarding slavery and recorded his own eyewitness accounts about the evil effects of the trade. He described this “*unhappy and disgraceful*” trade as the “*stain of our national character*”. The abolitionists sent copies to every Member of Parliament.



When the bill to abolish the slave trade was defeated in 1796, William Wilberforce was devastated. He fell seriously ill and considered retiring from public life. Seeking counsel, he wrote to his mentor.

Newton wrote back urging Wilberforce to stand strong,

“One may not be able to calculate all of the advantages that may result from your service in public life. Though you have not, as yet, fully succeeded in your persevering endeavours to abolish the slave trade, since you took it in hand the condition of the slaves has undoubtedly been improved.”

“[God] is always near. He knows our wants, our dangers, our feelings, and our fears. By looking to him we are made strong out of weakness.”

Newton’s letter gave Wilberforce the strength he needed. He remained in politics and continued the fight. Eleven years later, the Trans Atlantic Slave Trade was legally abolished in the spring of 1807.

Shortly before he died that same year, Newton declared,

“My memory is nearly gone; but I remember two things: that I am a great sinner, and that Christ is a great Saviour”.





www.amazinggrace.ie

 Amazing Grace Country

Text: Ruth Garvey-Williams

Historical images: Courtesy of The John Newton Project
and Wilberforce House Museum.

Other photographs:

Andrew Garvey-Williams, Adam Porter, Donal Kearney

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