



The Naming of Mickey Free

by

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ON 27 JANUARY 1861, a small, unidentified band of Apache raiders struck at John Ward's farm in the Sonoita Valley and succeeded in making off with twenty head of cattle and his twelve-year-old stepson, Felix. It was a misdirected — and, ultimately, unsuccessful — attempt to recover this boy that led the military into the confrontation at Apache Pass between Lieutenant George N. Bascom and the Apache chief, Cochise.¹ Years later, first John Ward and then the boy's natural mother, Jesusa Martínez, went to their respective graves still believing

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Felix to be either dead or lost beyond recovery.² It was Santiago Ward, their eldest son and a small baby at the time of the raid, who learned over twenty years after the event that his long-lost relative had been brought up amongst the White Mountain Apaches and was at that time employed as an interpreter on the San Carlos reservation. He went there and, despite some initial difficulty, found his half-brother, no longer called Felix. As Santiago said: "They called him Mickey Free. I do not know why."³

Writers who have taken some interest in this celebrated member of the Apache Scouts have been equally uncertain over the origin of the new name. There has been but one attempt at a full-length biography wherein it is suggested that "Mickey" was a corruption of a difficult Apache word, whilst "Free" was shortened from Freeman.⁴ The consensus of most other theorists has been that the first name developed from an Irish appearance and that the other alluded to Mickey's unfettered freedom to roam as he pleased. Some authority for this version appeared to have been found when around 1950 C. M. Palmer, Jr., interviewed the son of Archie McIntosh, a contemporary and associate of Mickey Free. Judge Donald McIntosh assured the interviewer:

Why, yes, I can tell you how he got it. My own father was one of those who named him. Mickey's . . . stepfather, John Ward, was an Irishman. An Irishman is forever and aye, a 'Mick.' Hence, the little stepson . . . became 'Mickey.' He was pretty free to come and go in those days and the Free may have been tacked on for that reason.⁵

For all of the judge's assurance, his explanation seemed still a little too facile and the present writer continued to look for a more convincing answer.

The first clue came from the 16 January 1892 issue of the *Army and Navy Journal*, where a correspondent, with probable access to Department of Arizona orders, observed:

It brings back the memory of our youthful days, when Harry Lorrequer's delightful military romances entranced our thoughts and occupied our

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leisure hours, to learn that Private Mickey Free has been appointed 1st sergeant of the detachment of Indian Scouts at Fort Apache.

Harry Lorrequer, of course, was the pen name employed by Dr. Charles Lever, a one-time Dubliner living in Brussels, for his first venture as a novelist. *The Confessions of Harry Lorrequer* was published serially in the *Dublin University Magazine* and its first-person reminiscences of a peace-time soldier were so popular that a surprised Lever was encouraged to "write the story of an Irish Dragoon, and call him Charles O'Malley." By 1840, when *Charles O'Malley, The Irish Dragoon* was first being serialized, its author considered giving up his indifferent practice in Brussels. Indeed, with one light-hearted tale behind him and another in production, he soon announced gladly: "I have thrown physic to the dogs."⁶

In the second novel, again written under the "Lorrequer" pen name, Lever introduced a robust, dashing, young soldier in active service during the Peninsular Wars of 1809-1814, carried him along through countless adventures and misadventures, contrived to intrude him finally into the Battle of Waterloo (18 June 1815), and provided him throughout with a whimsical, cunning, witty, and loveable rogue of a manservant to alternately amuse and exasperate him.

This humbly placed but irrepressible descendant of Irish princes, who was to become a favorite of succeeding generations of delighted readers, was called Mickey Free. A sympathetic but fairly thorough critic of Lever's works was enthusiastic about him:

But of all the characters in Mr. Lever's earlier romances, that which affords most evidence of this higher kind of humour, is undoubtedly Mickey Free. . . . The whole character of Mickey Free is indeed inimitable. We have no hesitation in affirming it to be the most perfect type of Irish humour that has ever been given the world. . . . Mickey Free is the Irish Sam Weller. He has, in fact, this advantage over Sam Weller, that he is the more thoroughly national and comprehensive type of the two. It is impossible but what this, which is in many respects the most felicitous of all Mr. Lever's creations, should live for ever as a distinct embodiment of national character.⁷

The writer went on to assert that all subsequent characterizations of the Irish peasant were copies from Lever rather than from life.

In contrast, certain nationalistic countrymen of the novelist accused him of "malicious libels" of the Irish character. This largely unjustified charge might better have been directed toward the inappropriate caricatures drawn by H. K. Browne as illustrations for Lever's stories — exaggerations which provoked the author himself to complain several times.⁸

It is characteristic of Lever that Mickey Free, almost certainly the most memorable figure in his most popular novel, was originally intended to have little part in the story. In prefacing a new edition of *O'Malley* in 1857, under his own name, Lever explained how the tale took root and grew:

Mickey Free came first. I had no type for him — or rather I had a thousand. He is about as droll, as light-hearted, and as light-principled as nineteen out of every twenty taken at hazard from his class. He is not an exaggeration, simply because nothing can exaggerate the versatile drollery of a people who, with the raciest turn for humour, combine the sharp-witted flippancy of a polished Frenchman . . . once launched upon the world, I gave myself no further trouble about him, but left him literally to shift for himself . . . the public took to him, and so I gave him to them freely.⁹

A more mature and sober tone entered Lever's writing after 1845, possibly because he was plagued by chronic illness and financial difficulties until his death at Trieste, where he held a consular post, on 1 June 1872. His historical romances such as *The O'Donoghue* (1845) may have more value as literature but his popularity with the reading public rested upon the great good humour and the fundamental entertainment they found in his first creations, of which *O'Malley* was the most widely read.

By their very nature, the military romances which Charles Lever dashed off appealed especially to young men with martial fancies or aspirations. In the United States during the 1840s and 1850s there were undoubtedly many of these who

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would serve during the Indian wars of the following decades. One may even find allusions to Lever's characters amongst the writings of such men as Captain John G. Bourke.¹⁰ Even that most celebrated of all frontier officers, George Armstrong Custer, is said to have demonstrated a preference for Lever's stories and a particular fondness for Mickey Free at times when he might well have been studying more sober works.

Seen in this light, the new name given to John Ward's abducted stepson may be assigned a more natural origin in Lever's most famous fictional character. Captain John G. Bourke adds credibility to the idea. Returning from the Hopi villages in August, 1881, he stopped over, with his artist friend Peter Moran, at Fort Apache. The visit evoked memories of his first service under General George Crook and the campaigning of 1872-73. In his diary he reminisced:

After surrendering at our military posts, the more eligible of the young bucks were selected by General Crook for enlistment in a Corps of Scouts. . . . The white soldiers rarely failed to give an 'American' name to each individual: many of these I remember distinctly and though no meaning attaches to them when written in my notebooks, they struck everybody as being full of significance and perfectly appropriate at the time they were bestowed. We had 'Cut-Mouth Mose,' 'Moses Henderson,' 'Mickey Free,' 'Cockeye,' 'Nosey,' 'Big Foot,' 'Humpty,' 'Dandy Jim,' 'Buckshot,' 'Daniel Webster,' 'Sunday,' and many others.¹²

The "perfect appropriateness" of Mickey Free as the sobriquet for a red-haired, roguish, decidedly Irish-looking young fellow presenting himself for enlistment as an Apache Scout would have been clear to men belonging to a generation by whom Lever's character was as fondly recalled as Tonto or Flash Gordon can be today. The ultimate suitability of the nickname can best be seen in retrospect, since several features of the colourful — and not always virtuous — Arizonan readily conjure up Charles Lever's original model. There is, finally, some further irony in the probability that, being illiterate, the one-eyed scout and interpreter himself may well have been unaware of his fictional namesake.

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NOTES

- ¹*The Arizonan* (Tubac), 9 February 1861; *Missouri Republican* (St. Louis), 11 February 1861; Benjamin H. Sacks, "New Evidence on the Bascom Affair," *Arizona And The West*, Vol. 4 (Autumn, 1962), pp. 261-278.
- ²John Ward died at his Potrero Ranch, near Tubac, in October, 1867. Jesusa Martinez died later at Magdalena, Sonora. A study of Mickey Free's background and early life is to be found in Allan Radbourne, "Salvador Or Martinez? The Parentage and Origins of Mickey Free," *The English Westerners' Brand Book*, Vol. 14 (January, 1972).
- ³"Santiago Ward (Reminiscences as told to Mrs. Geo. F. Kitt, March 12, 1934)," *Arizona Historical Review*, Vol. 6 (October, 1935), pp. 85-86 (original typescript in the Arizona Historical Society Library, Tucson). The elderly Santiago was a couple of years out when recollecting that the reunion was in 1881; it evidently took place in the period following the return from the Sierra Madre of General Crook's 1883 expedition. This is confirmed by Quartermaster Reports from San Carlos (Record Group 92, National Archives & Records Service), which record Santiago's employment as a packer there from 9 December 1883.
- ⁴A. Kinney Griffith, *Mickey Free - Manhunter* (Caldwell, Idaho: The Caxton Printers Ltd., 1969), pp. 24, 34.
- ⁵C. M. Palmer, Jr., biographical sketch of Mickey Free, ca. 1950, typescript in the Arizona Historical Society, Tucson, pp. 4-5.
- ⁶Lionel Stevenson, *Dr. Quicksilver: The Life of Charles Lever* (London: Chapman & Hall Ltd., 1939), p. 78.
- ⁷"The Works of Charles Lever," *Blackwood's Magazine*, Vol. 7 (April, 1862), p. 10.
- ⁸Hablot K. Browne, fresh from illustrating *The Pickwick Papers* for Charles Dickens when he worked upon Lever's stories, is remembered by his pen name, "Phiz."
- ⁹Charles Lever, *Charles O'Malley, The Irish Dragoon* (London: Chapman & Hall Ltd., 1857), p. iv.
- ¹⁰John G. Bourke, *Mackenzie's Last Fight With The Cheyenne* (Bellevue, Nebraska: The Old Army Press, 1970), p. 3.
- ¹¹Frederick Whittaker, *A Complete Life of General George A. Custer* (New York: Sheldon & Company, 1876), p. 8; Marguerite Merington, *The Custer Story* (New York: The Devin-Adair Company, 1950), p. 7. That other celebrated officer of the 7th Cavalry, Myles W. Keogh, is said to have been yet another keen follower of O'Malley's adventures.
- ¹²John G. Bourke, "Diary" (U.S. Military Academy Library, West Point, 120 unpublished manuscript volumes), Vol. 46 - reminiscences prior to entry for 29 August 1881; Mickey Free's Indian Scout service for 1872-73 is recorded in the "Register of Enlistments of Indian Scouts, U.S. Army," Volume 150, entries F-62, F-68, F-90 (Record Group 94, National Archives & Records Service, Washington).
- ¹³It is worthy of note that Felix Ward was not the only one to inherit the name of Lever's character: At Hangtown, California, on 26 October 1855, another and more villainous Mickey Free was the special guest of the town's vigilance committee, who condemned him to a suspended sentence of the fatal kind for numerous crimes of murder and robbery.

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