

Introduction to the Nugent Saga

If you are a Nugent, or a direct descendant of a Nugent, you have every reason to be proud of your heritage. You may be totally unaware of your distant family roots, and will probably be pleasantly surprised to learn the truth. More than a thousand years ago, in a small province of northern France, about 140 km. South-West of Paris, a relatively insignificant, minor but noble family rose to princely power. This metamorphosis did not take place overnight. By judicious marriages, associations and orientations, both religious and administrative, and by military prowess, the various branches of the family left an indelible mark. Through more than 200 years of upheaval in a country where the different power factions battled with each other, the "De Nogent" family emerged. When you examine their early history, you will immediately understand the significance of the concept "Being in the right place at the right time".

Eventually, the family was to become so powerful that it became an inherent enemy to the crowns of England and France. Its status and influence was then undermined in order to enhance the power of the throne. Kathleen Thompson, in her book "Power and Border Lordship in Medieval France", designates this situation as "the harnessing of localized power to royal purposes". After the invasion of England by William the Conqueror, a branch of the family took root in England, and some time later, moved on to Ireland. We can trace the family down through more than a thousand years of history, and across several countries. Originally called "De Nogent", because this was where they hailed from in France, the family name eventually evolved to "Nugent", in Ireland in the 15th Century !

Initially controlling their domains in France by means of armed forces, the family continually maintained its influence by applying more acceptable means within the growing democracies. Throughout the centuries, descendants of the Nugent family have been found in all spheres, from Artists to Poets, from Judges to Princes, from Doctors to Members of Parliament, from distinguished soldiers to Prime Ministers. The family branches in France, England and Ireland gained and lost power, land and status, as throughout the troubled centuries, they fought for, and against, the Kings of England and France.

Unfortunately for us, little information was committed to writing in the early days of the 10th century, at the time that the De Nogent family appeared on the historical scene. The early years of the family are shrouded in uncertainty, as few written traces of their existence are available to this day. Before the 12th Century, many of the nobles were illiterate, and any records were kept by the clergy, in Latin, the written language of that time. The early De Nogent family was certainly not of sufficient importance to merit any clerical records. Such records as have been recovered from this period are extremely valuable to the genealogist. The reason for the availability of such information is clear, as only the clergy could register these events in written form. They can show a notarial or commital act, such as a donation to the Church, or the foundation of a monastery. Such records can be likened to switching on a light at various moments of history, and noting the identities of those present. We look to the secondary figures present at such moments, hovering in the shadows of those primarily concerned, when a chance reference becomes of major importance to us in our quest. Early records concerning the "De Nogent" family only show the presence of our ancestors as witnesses to certain events, but not as

important participants. Most valuable to us then, are the dates of any such acts, and the names of those present. With so little information, we must try and piece together the lives of the early members of the family. We will find no birth or death dates of these secondary figures, at most may we glean from the acts, names of fathers or sons. The scribes of this time could not comprehend the importance, of each word of such acts, sometimes a brilliant flash of information for us, many centuries later. It is in such notorial acts that we see for the first time, the names of our forebears, present as witnesses to important events. Even with such valuable information as available in these records, the origins of many minor noble families is hard to place, in the 9th and 10th centuries, a troubled period where the future of kings and countries were being decided, as if by the throw of a dice. In these times, one of the first problems to haunt the genealogist was the inability to specify correct names, and to associate these names to precise dates. From there, we must try to evaluate the immediate relations, fathers and sons, of the persons mentioned. Finally, we must try to position each person of our family in a historical position, with birth, marriage and death dates, so that we can correctly build a family tree. A formidable task, indeed !

If we look at naming conventions and social conditions of the time, our task appears doomed from the start. The same forenames were often passed down from fathers to sons, or from mothers to daughters. Family names were not often forthcoming, as only important families would have such appendages, defining more often than not, the places from whence they came. Generations could be as little as 15 years, as death in child labour, illness, murder, crusades, etc. accounted for many, before their time. Boys became men at the age of 15 or 16, and were sacrificed on the altar of family feuds, social disruption and war. Lifetimes of 40 years were above average, and anybody who lasted until 60 was an exception. Conflicting birth and death dates exist for the same person, assuming, of course, that he was important enough to even figure in historical references of the day. As a result, dates of birth and death are very often marked "ABT" (about) by our historians, if they are suggested at all. Many people had several names, and several titles throughout their lives. It is not uncommon to find references of a woman who was married first to one member of a family, and later, to another member, due to an untimely death, and the imperious necessity to maintain the lands and titles within the same family. Many marriages were consanguine, and were usually "arranged" at a very early age (even as early as 5 and 6 years old), for reasons of land, power, treaties of peace between warring families, etc. Many of the young women died in child labour, and were "replaced" within a very short period. A woman whose husband died (naturally or not), could be married off to someone she did not even know, as soon as the acceptable period of mourning had been accomplished. A noble could have several marriages, and many illegitimate children. Marriages where the husband (of noble blood) was a mere boy, and the wife already a woman (sometimes a widow with children), were common. It is not surprising, then, that the establishment of family trees during this period were clouded with uncertainty. In such a male-dominant society, at this period, the names of the wives were doubtful or even unknown. Unless a person was of royal blood, much crucial information is simply absent. In the case of the De Nogent family, association with royal blood began in 1103, when Rotrou II (known now as "The Great") married Mathilda FitzHenry, the daughter of Henry I, King of England. From this moment on, it becomes easier to follow the descendants of the family.

In the light of these restrictions, we may consider ourselves fortunate to be able to reconstruct the early descendancy of our family. Others were not so lucky. In this troubled environment, there are often question marks hanging over parts of the family

tree which cannot be resolved. Throughout the centuries, genealogists of renown have stumbled and faltered over certain "hypotheses" concerning ours and other families. In a future chapter, we will present the different segments of the early family tree, and discuss the merits of each. The outcome, however, is sure. The De Nogent family, even through moments where certain names and dates are clouded with uncertainty, have spanned more than a thousand years of history, and often contributed to its making. However, although we can now trace the blood line of the family as far back as Charlemagne, King of the Franks, and probably even further, the object of this book is limited to presenting the De Nogent family, as it emerged from the shadows of the 10th century.

This is the story of a dynasty in the making. A minor noble family, through several marriages, frequent armed conquests and judicious "arrangements", expanded into the extremely powerful "House of Rotrou". We herald the birth of this powerful dynasty which controlled the county of Perche for several generations, gradually associating Alençon, Mortagne, Nogent, Gallardon, Bellême, Domfront, and Châteaudun into a power group almost as important as that controlled by the Kings of France. Thus the family becomes important enough to marry into royalty, become "cousins" of kings, and follow these kings into several centuries of the history of England, Ireland and France.

As with many local potentates in France over this troubled period, the family, its wealth, and its power was eventually reduced to nothing by successive English and French Kings, as they painfully united their countries. In 1226, when the family produced no male heir, the land and titles were forfeited to the French crown. Greedy English kings confiscated the lands of the French family in England, even when they were attributed by previous far-seeing forebears. The English descendants of the family finally moved on to Ireland, where, over the next centuries, they left their mark in a country practically reduced to the level of slavery by successive Kings and Queens of England. Nugents were thrown into prison and even hanged, some were attainted because of their acts against the Crown, some lost their entire fortune, and then regained it as they were "forgiven", but they subsisted through more than 800 years of troubled times in Ireland. In an attempt to escape the hardships imposed upon the Irish, some emmigrated to Canada in the early 17th century. Some Nugents came to live in England, became Lords, Members of Parliament, and Judges, trying to keep a watchful eye on their possessions in Ireland. Many Irish were forced to flee to the United States during the potato famines of the 19th century. Others went to Australia and New Zealand, in search of new hope and a new life. Descendants of the Nugent family are to be found all over the world.

The Nugent family thus has a proud heritage, and can be followed though more than a thousand years of success and failure, power and poverty, fame and misfortune.

This is just a part of their story.

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