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The Irish in the Civil War

By Dennis Keating

This is the 1st of a series. Next month: Three Leading Irish-American Heroes

Introduction

On my mother's German side from Western Pennsylvania, I had a great-grandfather and two of his brothers who served in Pennsylvania volunteer regiments in the Civil War. Even though the Irish on my father's side had not yet arrived in the United States and Ohio during the Civil War, I have been interested more in the Irish-Americans who fought for the Union than the German-Americans.

In this article, I will discuss the role of the Irish in the Civil War focusing on some famous units, primarily on the Northern side but also some in the South. I will profile the three leading Irish-American military leaders of the war – Thomas Francis Meagher of the Irish Brigade, “Little” Phil Sheridan of the Union, and Patrick Cleburne of the Confederacy. While “Stonewall” Jackson was of Ulster Scots-Irish stock, I am not including him. Seven Union and six Confederate generals were Irish-born. And I will discuss the conflict between the Irish immigrants and the Negroes, which erupted in the New York City draft riots of July, 1863.

The Pre-War Irish

By the beginning of the Civil War, the United States had a considerable Irish population, mainly centered in the cities. In 1860, a quarter of New York City's population (204,000) was Irish-born, with 22 percent (57,000) Irish-born in Brooklyn, then an independent city. The two other leading cities with large numbers of Irish-born immigrants were Philadelphia (95,000 - 18%) and Boston (46,000 - 26%). The Midwestern cities with the largest number of Irish-born immigrants were: St. Louis (19%), Chicago (18%), Detroit (14%), and Cincinnati (12%). The Southern Irish-born population was estimated to be between 85,000-175,000 in 1861. The Irish were about 25 percent of the population of New Orleans (24,398) and Memphis (4,159).

The first Irish emigrant wave was the Ulster Protestant (Presbyterian) Irish who left Northern Ireland for the rural United States, motivated by economic and religious reasons. Around 250,000 arrived in the eighteenth century. The next wave was the Irish Catholics, numbering almost a million, who came to North America – mostly the United States – between the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815 and the beginning of the great potato famine in 1845. For them the reasons for emigrating were also to escape economic hardship and religious persecution. This rising Irish emigrant population triggered anti-Irish nativist reactions, including occasional violence in eastern cities and, in the 1840s, the birth of the Know Nothing party, dedicated to ridding the United States of papist-led Roman Catholics. It enjoyed its greatest electoral successes in the mid-1850s in New England. Some of this sentiment continued while approximately 1.5 million Irish, mostly Catholic, came to the United States in a single decade (1845-1855) to flee the famine. On the other hand, many Americans came to the aid of the Irish suffering under British policies and from Irish landowners clearing many of their desperate tenant farmers unable to pay rent or sustain themselves due to the disease that destroyed their potato crops.

Despite the discrimination and poverty endured by these Irish immigrants, they began to gain political power in those cities where their numbers were high. They mostly joined the Democratic party. As the abolitionist movement grew in the North, the Irish were not attracted to it for a number of reasons. Many distrusted its largely Protestant leadership and, with most Irish immigrants employed in low-paying, unskilled jobs, they feared competition from freed slaves in the same economic class.

In the election of 1860, the Irish-born voters in the North predictably supported the Democratic Party. However, after the South fired on Fort Sumter, many of these Irish Democrats volunteered to fight for the Union. It is estimated that about 145,000 Irish-Americans served in the Union's armed forces. Of this number, more than 8,000 were from Ohio. In addition to patriotism, many joined for the pay (and later bounties paid to recruits). Some



immigrants were recruited as they disembarked in New York City. Others saw this as an opportunity to prepare for a future opportunity to fight to liberate the Irish homeland from British rule. What they were not fighting for was to end slavery.

It was estimated that about 40,000 Irish-Americans fought for the Confederacy. On the Southern side, Irish-Americans, including their Catholic bishops and priests, sympathized with the defense of the South against Northern aggression, although they also generally supported the institution of slavery. They also identified with the Democratic Party, but experienced less discrimination than their Northern immigrant counterparts. Interestingly, “The Bonnie Blue Flag” was written by Irish-American minstrel Harry McCarthy, later a prisoner of war held at Johnson’s Island, Ohio. “Dixie” was written by Irish-American entertainer Daniel Decatur Emmett, born in Mount Vernon, Ohio. Leading Irish nationalist John Mitchel, the Young Ireland leader and escaped exile, moved to the South and became a noted defender of the Confederacy (breaking with his follower Meagher). Two of his sons who served in the Confederate army were killed (one at the Bloody Angle in Pickett’s Charge) and the third was badly wounded.

Irish-American Units and Battles

The most famous Irish-American unit in the Union armies was the Irish Brigade of the Army of the Potomac. More detail about its most famous commander – Thomas Francis Meagher – follows below. Its genesis was the 69th New York State Militia regiment, commanded by Irish exile Michael Corcoran, a Fenian (the Irish Republican Brotherhood founded in Dublin in 1858). Corcoran gained renown in October, 1860 when he refused to include the regi-



2nd Irish Color, 69th NSV

ment in a parade in New York City to honor the visiting Prince of Wales. For this, he was court-martialed and jailed. He was defended by fellow Irish exile and rebel Meagher, a captain in the regiment. After the attack on Fort Sumter, the 69th voted to answer Lincoln’s call for volunteers. The governor of New York then quashed Corcoran’s court-martial. Soon after, the 1,000 strong 69th left New York for Washington, D.C. amidst great fanfare, marching under their green silk regimental banner and the slogan “Remember Fontenoy” (the battle in which the exiled “Wild Geese” of the Irish Brigade of the French Army turned the tide against the British in 1745). The 69th was assigned to the brigade commanded by Ohioan William Tecumseh Sherman.

Its first battle experience came at First Bull Run. It twice assaulted Confederates holding Henry Hill, fighting fellow Irish-Americans, many of them dock workers, serving with the Louisiana Zouaves under Roberdeau Wheat from New Orleans. In the midst of the Federal retreat, Michael Corcoran was captured, as well as the regiment’s flags. It lost 192 men killed, wounded, and missing. Afterwards, Sherman criticized the 69th for their near mutinous behavior, partly resulting from their feeling that there was anti-Irish bias against them. This included disagreement over exactly when their 90-day enlistment ended. The 69th’s initial enlistment ended amidst acrimony.

Meagher returned to New York to recruit an Irish Brigade, of which he became commander, replacing Corcoran in December 1861. Tiffany and Company made a replacement flag featuring an Irish harp. Returning to the Army of the Potomac, the 69th was joined by two other largely Irish New York regiments – the 63rd and 88th. Father William Corby, a Holy Cross priest from Notre Dame University, became the chap-



Irish Brigade Chaplains, Fr. Corby, front row right

lain of the Irish Brigade. The brigade was assigned to Israel Richardson's division.

The Irish Brigade was next bloodied in George McClellan's Peninsula campaign. It fought in the battle of Fair Oaks on June 1-2, 1862 and then in several of the battles against Robert E. Lee's attacking Army of Northern Virginia. On July 1, it went up against the Confederate Irish-Americans of Roberdeau Wheat's Louisiana Tigers. Wheat had been killed a few days earlier at Gaines' Mill and the Tigers were disbanded soon after. The three regiments of the Irish Brigade suffered almost 500 killed, wounded, and missing out of about 4,000 during the Peninsula campaign. A few weeks later, it was reinforced by the 29th Massachusetts, a New England Yankee regiment. This did not sit well with the Irish or the Yankees. The all-Irish 28th Massachusetts replaced the 29th following the battle of Antietam. Meagher returned to New York to recruit replacements, which he found more difficult, even with the lure of bounties. In August, 1862, Corcoran was exchanged but did not return to command of the 69th. Instead, he recruited an Irish Legion unit.

The next test for Meagher's Irish Brigade was the slaughterhouse known as the battle of Antietam at Sharpsburg, Maryland on September 17, 1862. The Irish Brigade under Richardson launched an attack against the Confederates in the Sunken Road. Previously, the Irish-American 69th Pennsylvania of Howard's Philadelphia Brigade was decimated in the fighting in the West Woods. After absolution by Father Corby, the Irish Brigade charged the Sunken Road (Bloody Lane) defended by D.H. Hill's division. In the savage fighting that followed, the Irish Brigade suffered over 500 casualties but could not break through the Confederate defense. Many protested Lincoln's decision to again relieve McClellan of command of the Army of the Potomac for his failure to pursue Lee, replaced by Ambrose Burnside. Lincoln's issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation also did not sit well with many of the Irish-American volunteers in the army, as well as their civilian relatives. Lincoln's action exacerbated previous opposition to the draft passed by Congress in the summer of 1862. Many felt that it favored the rich, who could afford to buy their way out of the draft, versus poor immigrants who could not.

Burnside then led his army to Fredericksburg and another terrible battle which would reinforce the fighting reputation of the Irish Brigade. In addition to the 28th Massachusetts, the Irish Brigade now also included the 116th Pennsylvania from Philadelphia. Although the latter was not all-Irish, its commander and his second in command were both Irish-born, as were many of its soldiers. On December 13, 1862, the Irish Brigade marched through the town to join the assault on Longstreet's troops on Marye's Heights entrenched in another sunken road behind a stone wall. Before their assault, soldiers of the Irish Brigade put sprigs of green boxwood in their caps to make their Irish heritage known. Their valiant but futile charge gained the admiration of Longstreet's troops, which included the Irish-Americans of the Georgia brigade. After the death of its brigade commander Thomas Cobb, the Georgia defenders were led by Robert McMillan, colonel of the 24th Georgia and born in Antrim, Ireland. The Irish Brigade suffered 45 percent casualties, including 55 officers killed and wounded. Father Corby called it a "slaughter-pen." This disaster fueled Northern Irish-American disenchantment with the war. On January 16, 1863, St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City was the site of a requiem mass for the dead heroes of the Irish Brigade with Meagher attending.

Upon his return to the army in February, Meagher attempted to obtain home leaves for the New York regiments in the Irish Brigade shortly after he met with President Lincoln, but his request was denied by Secretary of War Edwin Stanton. A few months later, the Irish Brigade found itself caught up in the rout of General Joseph Hooker's right wing by Stonewall Jackson on May 2 at Chancellorsville. Frustrated by the brigade's losses and the denial of his requests for leaves, Meagher resigned from the army on May 8.

As the Army of the Potomac, now under the command of George Meade, marched to a momen-

tous rendezvous with Lee's army at Gettysburg, the battle-hardened Irish Brigade now numbered only 530 men, commanded by Colonel Patrick Kelly of the 88th New York. Small as it had become in numbers, the Irish Brigade still made a memorable contribution to the Union victory. The brigade was among others of Winfield Hancock's Second Corps ordered to support Dan Sickles' beleaguered Third Corps in the Wheatfield on the second day of the battle. Again first receiving absolute from Father Corby, it plunged into the maelstrom. Before it retreated back to Cemetery Ridge, the brigade lost 202 men.

Other Irish-Americans distinguished themselves at Gettysburg. Irish-born and West Point graduate Colonel Paddy O'Rourke led his 140th New York regiment in a desperate race to Little Round Top to stop a Confederate charge up its slopes. Leading his troops, O'Rourke fell dead, but his men and others of the Fifth Corps successfully defended Little Round Top, along with the more celebrated 20th Maine under Joshua Chamberlain. The next afternoon, it was the turn of the 69th Pennsylvania, still under Colonel Dennis O'Kane from County Kerry but reduced since Antietam to only 258 men. In the 2nd brigade of the 2nd division of Hancock's Second Corps, they awaited the approach of the Pickett-Pettigrew charge at the Angle. Despite O'Kane's wounding (and later death) and casualties of 50 percent, the 69th Pennsylvania played a critical role in defeating the Confederate attack at its high-water mark.

In December 1863, Michael Corcoran died in an accident in the company of Meagher and his loss was much lamented. The Irish Brigade, back to a strength of about 3,000 despite the re-assignment of the 28th Massachusetts and the 116th Pennsylvania, would participate in Grant's 1864 Overland Campaign, suffering losses of one-third of its men and officers, including two commanders killed in succession at Cold Harbor and Petersburg and their successor captured at Ream's Station. Nevertheless, the brigade survived as a re-organized unit and was commanded until the end of the war by Robert Nugent, an original member of the 69th New York. They were there for the final defeat and surrender of the Army of Northern Virginia at Appomattox Court House in April 1865. In his 1963 address to the Irish Parliament, President John F. Kennedy presented to the Irish people a battle flag of the Irish Brigade.

In the west, from Ohio, the most notable unit was the 10th Ohio, known as the "Bloody Tenth." It was comprised mainly of Irish immigrants from Cincinnati. It gained fame because of its first commander - William Lytle. He came from a distinguished family and was a prominent lawyer and Mexican war veteran. He was also nationally known as a poet, especially for "Antony and Cleopatra." Lytle was wounded in 1862 at the battles of Carnifex Ferry, West Virginia and Perryville. Promoted to command of a brigade in Sheridan's division of Rosecrans's Army of the Cumberland, Lytle's brigade stood in the way of Longstreet's breakthrough on September 20, 1863 at Chickamauga. He led them in a desperate charge to stem the tide and died from four wounds. His body, accompanied by an honor guard from the Bloody Tenth, was returned to Cincinnati for a public funeral.



These are, of course, only a few examples of the heroism of the many Irish-Americans who fought and died for the Union. Due largely to there being no similar large concentrations of Irish-Americans in Southern cities and the segregation of Southern units by state, there was no Confederate equivalent to the

Northern Irish Brigade. Instead, there were a number of smaller predominately Irish-American Confederate units, mostly at the battalion and company levels. Several of these served under Stonewall Jackson and Richard Taylor in Jackson's 1862 campaign in the Shenandoah Valley. Some were prominent in the defeat of Irish-born general James Shields at Port Republic.

At the regimental level, the 6th Louisiana "Tigers" from New Orleans was perhaps the best

known in the Army of Northern Virginia. It served with Jackson and Taylor in the 1862 Valley campaign and in Early's 1864 Valley campaign. It was devastated defending against Union attacks on the West Woods at Antietam, losing its Irish-born commander Henry Strong and eleven other officers. Its brigade of Louisianans under Harry Hays suffered 60 percent casualties. It fought in every major battle of Lee's army, a total of 25 major battles. At the surrender under John Gordon at Appomattox, the 6th Louisiana numbered only 52 out of a total of 1,146 during the war. Thirty had originally enlisted in 1861. Approximately 60 percent of this regiment were Irish born or of Irish ancestry. The 6th Louisiana lost 219 killed in battle and a total of 330 died (including one executed for desertion).

An outstanding family example of Lee's Irish-Americans was the Dooley family of Richmond. John Dooley emigrated from Limerick in 1832. From clerking to becoming a prosperous clothing manufacturer, Dooley helped to organize the Montgomery Guard militia. He served in the 1st Virginia regiment and later commanded the Richmond Ambulance Corps. His oldest son was wounded at Williamsburg in 1862 and then served in the Confederate Ordinance Department. His younger son, a captain in the Montgomery Guard in the 1st Virginia, was in the forefront of Pickett's Charge at Gettysburg, was shot through both thighs, but survived to serve 21 months as a prisoner at Johnson's Island. Of the 90 in the Montgomery Guard who began the war, only 11 were left at Appomattox.

In the Army of Tennessee, two regimental units are especially worth mentioning. The 5th Confederate Infantry was a combination of two largely Irish-American units from Memphis and served in Cleburne's division. After the destruction of Cleburne's command at Franklin, only 21 survived. At the surrender in North Carolina in April 1865, there were only 10 left. The 10th Tennessee, known as the "Sons of Erin," was led by the mayor of Nashville, killed at Raymond, Mississippi in the defense of Vicksburg. It too fought with Cleburne. Three of its officers were captured at Bentonville, leaving a single survivor at Johnston's surrender.

Two dramatic incidents also deserve mention. On June 26, 1863, after Grant's army besieging Vicksburg exploded a mine tunneled under the city's defenses, it was Irish-Americans in the 5th and 6th Missouri who rushed to fill the gap against their fellow Irish-Americans of the Federal 7th Missouri, mostly from St. Louis.

On September 8, 1863, a band of 43 Irish-American artillerymen defended the Sabine Pass on the Texas-Louisiana coast against a Federal expedition comprised of four gunboats and 5,000 troops on 22 transports. The vastly outnumbered Confederates were led by Dick Dowling, who emigrated from County Galway to Houston. Without the loss of a man, they disabled two of the gunboats. A third ran aground before the Federals gave up their attempt to invade East Texas.

Dennis Keating is Distinguished Professor, Levin College of Urban Affairs and Cleveland-Marshall College of Law at Cleveland State University. He is currently Vice President of the Roundtable and will become President next year. He has been a member since 2002.

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