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The Irish in the Civil War: Three Leading Irish-American Heroes

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The Irish in the Civil War

By Dennis Keating

This is the 2nd installment of a series. Next month: Patrick Cleburne and the rest of the story.

Three Leading Irish-American Heroes

Thomas Francis Meagher

Thomas Francis Meagher was born in 1823 near Waterford, Ireland. His mother died when he was three and half years old. He also lost an older brother and two sisters in infancy. After schooling in England, the Catholic Meagher dedicated to Irish nationalism returned to Ireland in 1843. He became a lawyer in Dublin and, in contrast to Daniel O'Connell's home rule movement, joined the group that became known as Young Irelanders, which promoted independence from England. In 1846, Meagher gave a speech supporting violence if necessary, earning him the nickname "Meagher of the Sword." In 1848, in the midst of the Great Potato Famine, Meagher was tried for his views under the Treason Felony Act, but was acquitted by a jury. However, later that year (a year of failed revolutions throughout Europe) he was re-arrested and convicted along with three associates of fomenting an abortive rebellion. Sentenced to death, following public protests, Meagher and the others were instead sentenced to life in the Tasmania penal colony in Australia. After three years there in exile, he escaped to New York City by way of Brazil. Meagher was greeted as a hero by Irish-Americans.



Thomas Francis Meagher

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Meagher became a well-known Irish-American, a lecturer and publisher of the *Irish News*. President Franklin Pierce invited him to his home and then to his inauguration in 1853. As a lawyer, he was recruited to the defense of New York City Congressman Dan Sickles (and future general in the Army of the Potomac) for the murder of U.S. Attorney Phillip Barton Key (grandson of Francis Scott Key), killed when Sickles discovered his affair with his wife. Sickles was acquitted on the basis of the first successful use of the temporary insanity defense. As war loomed, Meagher was sympathetic to the South. However, after the attack on Fort Sumter, Meagher supported the Union cause. He joined the 69th New York Militia regiment, en route to the defense of Washington, D.C.

In the 69th's baptism under fire at First Bull Run, Meagher was accused by some of cowardice and drunkenness after he was toppled from his horse. This accusation was fueled by the pro-Southern correspondent of the *London Times*. With the capture of the regiment's commander, Meagher succeeded him. When the regiment returned to New York City, Meagher started to recruit an Irish Brigade. With the prospect of Meagher being able to recruit Irish immigrants, President Lincoln made him a brigadier general and he was appointed commander of the Irish Brigade. He led it through McClellan's Peninsula campaign and then returned to New York City to recruit replacements to make up for its losses. He returned in time to join the reinstated McClellan to face Lee's first invasion of the North. On September 17, 1862, Meagher led the Irish Brigade in its heroic attempt to dislodge the Confederates from the Sunken Road. In the midst of the fighting, Meagher fell from his horse. Later, some charged that this was because he was drunk, a story repeated by Whitelaw Reid of the *Cincinnati Gazette*. However, he was lauded for his bravery by others, including his corps commander Edwin Sumner. Nevertheless, the charge followed him later.

At Fredericksburg, Meagher struggled on foot with his men against Longstreet's Confederates on Marye's Heights. However, he was again accused by some of failing to lead his troops in their valiant but hopeless charges. He soon returned to New York City as an invalid on medical leave. When he returned to the brigade in February 1863, only 600 of the 2,250 men were left of the original three New

York City regiments that made up the brigade. After the battle of Chancellorsville, a discouraged Meagher resigned. He left still having the support of the officers and men of the brigade. His subsequent efforts to recruit the Irish, including new immigrants, were crippled by the New York City draft riots of July 1863, which Meagher condemned and blamed on the Copperheads (Peace Democrats).

In the election of 1864, Meagher supported Lincoln against McClellan, along with New York City's influential Catholic Archbishop John Hughes. It was not until the spring of 1864 that Meagher rejoined the Army of the Potomac, but without a command. After a drinking bout in August, he returned to New York City. In September, he was sent west to Nashville, but not given any responsibility until November, when he was told to organize convalescents into a provisional division. It was to proceed east to be shipped to the Carolinas to join Sherman. However, it met with mishaps and delays, for which Meagher was blamed by Army Chief of Staff Henry Halleck and Commander-in-Chief Grant. Combined with renewed charges of drunkenness, Meagher was relieved of his command on February 20, 1865. Again without a command, Meagher spent St. Patrick's Day, 1865 with the remnant of the Irish Brigade near Petersburg.

After the war, Meagher headed west. He became the territorial secretary (acting governor) of Montana. Amidst political disputes, conflicts with General Sherman (his nemesis after First Bull Run) over Indian policy, and financial problems, he drank heavily. On July 1, 1867, the forty-four year old Meagher died when he fell overboard from a docked steamboat on the Missouri River and drowned. The most likely cause was drunkenness, although the circumstances remain mysterious. This was an ignominious end for the dedicated Irish nationalist and Irish-American patriot. Nevertheless, he was remembered by his admirers. Statues in his memory were erected in Butte, Montana in 1905 (mostly paid for by Irish miners) and later in his birthplace of Waterford, Ireland.

Phil Sheridan

Phil Sheridan was a short, colorful, and combative Union commander, only behind Grant and Sherman in its pantheon of heroes. He fought in many of the key battles of the war. He also fought with many of his fellow officers. This began with his suspension for a year from West Point for attacking William Terrill, who would be killed at the battle of Perryville. He returned to graduate with his fellow Ohioans and close friends - Joshua Sill (killed at Stones River) and George Crook. Fellow Ohioan James Birdseye McPherson (killed at Atlanta) was first in his class. During the Civil War, Sheridan would not only clash with Crook, but also William Hazen, William Averill, Gouverneur Warren, and George Meade, among others.



Phil Sheridan

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Sheridan, according to his mother, was either born in 1831 in Ireland, en route to America, Canada, or Albany, New York. His farmer parents emigrated from County Cavan, Northern Ireland to Somerset, Ohio (where Sheridan assumed he was born). His father was a laborer on roads and canals, then a contractor, who went bankrupt. After graduating from West Point, Sheridan served in the frontier army in the Southwest and Northwest, fighting against various Indian tribes.

At the outbreak of the Civil War, he was posted to St. Louis, where he served under Henry Halleck, first as an auditor and then as a quartermaster. He, of course, lobbied for combat duty and was

finally named colonel of the Second Michigan Cavalry in 1862, missing Shiloh but participating in Halleck's plodding advance on Corinth. As a result of his skirmishing with rebel cavalry, Sheridan was appointed brigadier general commanding an infantry brigade. He had named his horse "Rienzi" after a cavalry skirmish in this Mississippi town. Rienzi would later become as almost as famous as Sheridan.

Sheridan's first major battle experience came at Perryville, where Buell's army stopped the Confederate invasion of Kentucky. Sheridan advanced in disobedience of orders, but his aggressive action gained attention. He next served under another Ohioan, William Rosecrans, who replaced Buell and eventually moved out of Nashville against Bragg's army at Murfreesboro.

Sheridan gained renown at the resulting battle of Stones River (December 31, 1862 - January 2, 1863). Amidst the rout of McCook's corps on the right of Rosecrans' army on the morning of the first day, Sheridan's division stood firm and retreated resolutely. He is credited, along with Hazen, of preventing the Confederates, including Cleburne's division, from destroying the Army of the Cumberland. In doing so, Sheridan lost 1,600 casualties (40 percent) and had three brigade commanders (including his classmate Sill) killed. For his stalwart defense, Sheridan was appointed major general.

At Chickamauga, Sheridan was again in the midst of a Confederate breakthrough against Rosecrans' army. This time, it was Longstreet's assault through the gap created on September 20. Sheridan managed to save most of his troops and ended that bloody day helping to cover the retreat to Chattanooga of the left wing rallied by Thomas on Snodgrass Hill. It was there on November 25, after Pat Cleburne beat back Sherman's attacks on Tunnel Hill, that the Army of the Cumberland charged Missionary Ridge. Instead of stopping at its base, they chased the retreating rebels up the ridge, causing Grant to demand from Thomas who ordered this. Thomas replied that he did not. Sheridan led his division atop Rienzi. Sheridan swore that he would take the rebel guns that fired at him when he toasted them before his ascent. At the top, astride one of the captured Confederate guns, Sheridan directed his troops to pursue the fleeing Confederates. Fighting on into the darkness, Sheridan was the only commander to actively pursue Bragg's defeated army. At the same time, he and Hazen disputed who was entitled to claim some of the captured guns. In this battle, Sheridan lost over 1,300 men, half of the casualties of Thomas's army that memorable day. Sheridan caught the attention of U.S. Grant, now in command of all Union armies in the west. First, he headed under Sherman and Gordon Granger to the relief of Burnside in Knoxville.

Soon, he was ordered to Washington, where Grant named him Commander of the Cavalry Corps of the Army of the Potomac. It was in the East in 1864-1865 that Sheridan would embellish his reputation, although not without more controversy. With Grant's approval and over Meade's objections, Sheridan changed the role of the cavalry corps to one primarily of attack. In May 1864, he took his three divisions south to Richmond to fight the legendary Jeb Stuart. Two days later, in a desperate defense of the Confederate capital, Stuart was killed at Yellow Tavern. Returning to the Army of the Potomac's Overland campaign, Sheridan's troopers fought at Haw's Shop and Cold Harbor before they were sent by Grant in June to sever the Central Virginia Railroad all the way to Charlottesville. This led to the battle of Trevilian Station, where Wade Hampton, Stuart's successor, blocked Sheridan's path. Returning from this expedition, Sheridan was given a new assignment.

Grant sent Sheridan to the Shenandoah Valley to deal with Jubal Early, whose small army had threatened Washington, D.C. David Hunter's forces were augmented by Horatio Wright's

Sixth Corps from the Army of the Potomac, William Emory's Nineteenth Corps from Louisiana, and George Crook's Army of West Virginia. Sheridan also had cavalry under Alfred Torbert. With this reinforced Army of the Shenandoah, Sheridan confronted the greatly outnumbered Early and defeated him at the battles of Winchester and Fisher's Hill in September. In their aftermath, he and his friend and West Point classmate Crook argued over who should get credit for Crook's flanking movements that defeated Early. Crook would soon have other concerns when John Gordon's troops crushed his encamped corps in a surprise attack in the fog on the morning of October 19 at Cedar Creek. With Sheridan away at Winchester for a military planning meeting, his army



Sheridan's horse, Rienzi, stuffed and on display at the US 1st Army Museum



Sheridan's Ride, chromolithograph, by Thure de Thulstrup

reeled (except for the Sixth Corps) in defeat. Undaunted when informed of the battle, Sheridan made his famous ride on Rienzi to his dispirited troops. He rallied the army, promising them that they would retake their camps this day. That they did in a sweeping counterattack that devastated Early's temporarily victorious army and helped Lincoln to re-election that fall. Sheridan's ride was memorialized in the poem "Sheridan's Ride" and Sheridan renamed Rienzi "Winchester." Sheridan's army, while harassed by Mosby's guerillas, then burnt much of the Valley in accordance with Grant's orders and he and his cavalry finished off the remnants of Early's army at

Waynesboro as Sheridan made his way back to Grant's army besieging Lee at Petersburg.

Sheridan would play a pivotal role in ending the siege and forcing Lee to surrender the Army of Northern Virginia in April 1865. In late March, Grant sent Sheridan in command of his cavalry (including those commanded by the flamboyant George Armstrong Custer, Wesley Merritt, and George Crook, recently released from captivity after his kidnapping that winter). Along with Sheridan were the Second and Fifth Corps, commanded respectively by Andrew Humphreys and Warren (a hero of Gettysburg) to cut the Southside and Danville railroads and possibly go on to link up with Sherman advancing against Joe Johnston in North Carolina, thereby preventing Lee's army from joining Johnston. This led to Sheridan's decisive victory over Pickett's troops at Five Forks on April 1, where 5,000 Confederates surrendered. Pickett's defeat, combined with his previous failed attack at Fort Stedman, forced Lee's evacuation of Richmond as Grant mounted an all-out attack on Petersburg. In the midst of his victory over Pickett, Sheridan dismissed Warren for dereliction as commander of the Fifth Corps for his unit's initial confusion in direction in making its flank attack. Sheridan dismissed Warren's plea for reconsideration by saying: "Reconsider, hell! I don't reconsider my decisions."

With that, Sheridan headed for Lee's retreating army. On April 6, Sheridan's troops destroyed Ewell's corps at Saylor's Creek, capturing him, six other generals (including Lee's son), and 10,000 exhausted soldiers. With Custer in the lead, Sheridan finally blocked the path of Lee's rapidly disintegrating army at Appomattox Court House, where Lee surrendered on April 9. After the surrender ceremony, Sheridan bought the desk upon which Grant signed the surrender

document, giving it to Custer the next day.

Grant then ordered Sheridan to take command of Union forces west of the Mississippi to force the surrender of Kirby Smith's army. Sheridan failed to win a respite to participate in the grand review of the Union armies in Washington in late May. Sheridan spent 1865-1867 in the trans-Mississippi, first in Texas to offset any threat from the Emperor Maximilian and former Confederates in Mexico, and then dealing with the difficult Reconstruction issues in Texas and Louisiana. Once again embroiled in disputes with fellow officers, he dismissed generals Edward R.S. Canby, Gordon Granger, and Horatio Wright. He also contravened the policies of President Andrew Johnson and Congress, leading to his re-assignment by Johnson and Grant to head the Department of the Missouri in the western plains, replacing Winfield Scott Hancock.

Once again, over the next sixteen years, Sheridan would be embroiled in numerous controversies as the army was assigned the duty of protecting settlers and dealing with hostile Indian tribes that resisted white encroachment on their ancestral lands. While Sheridan denied ever saying that the only good Indian was a dead Indian (more a sentiment attributed to Sherman), nevertheless, under his leadership the tribes were eventually defeated and restricted to reservations (with Nelson Miles and Ranald Mackenzie earning the most credit after Crook's and Custer's defeats in Montana in 1876). In 1875, Sheridan had married, but his honeymoon was cut short by concern over Sioux resistance to ceding the Black Hills, where gold had been discovered by Custer the previous year. In 1883, Sheridan took President Chester Arthur (successor to the assassinated James Garfield) on an expedition to the Yellowstone National Park, established in 1872 with support from Sheridan, who protected it against miners and developers.



Portrait of Chester A. Arthur

In 1884, Sheridan succeeded Sherman as commander of the U.S. Army. In August 1885, along with Sherman, he accompanied the vast procession in New York City for the funeral of his patron, Ulysses S. Grant. The following year, he parted ways with his old classmate and fellow Civil War general George Crook, who resigned in protest against criticism of his treatment of Geronimo in Arizona, whom he had persuaded to surrender. Sheridan died in 1888 of heart disease at age fifty-seven, having lived just long enough to write his memoirs and be appointed to the same four-star rank as Grant and Sherman before him. His coffin was accompanied by his battle flag from the battle of Cedar Creek. He was buried in Arlington Cemetery close to Robert E. Lee's former home. Sheridan's statue in Washington, D.C. was dedicated in 1908.

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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