ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

The Irish Brigade

By **Thomas J. Craughwell**

The embryo of the Irish Brigade was the 69th New York Infantry, a virtually all-Irish militia regiment. At the First Battle of Bull Run, as the Union troops fled the field, the men of the 69th retired in good order, and covered the less orderly retreat of the rest of their army. The courage and discipline of the 69th inspired one of their officers, Brigadier General Thomas Francis Meagher, to create an all-Irish brigade. Initially the brigade comprised the 69th, 63rd, and 88th New York regiments; later the 116th Pennsylvania and the 28th Massachusetts became part of the Irish Brigade. The brigade fought in every major battle of the Eastern Theater, from the Peninsula Campaign to Appomattox. During the four years of the war that men fought with the Irish Brigade; they suffered 4000 casualties, arguably the highest casualty rate of any Union brigade during the Civil War.

In the months leading up to the Civil War it was an open question whether the Irish would fight for the Union. The main issue was economic: the vast majority of Irish immigrants had come to America with no money, no education, and no job skills aside from tenant farming. In the cities, which were where most Irish settled, they took the lowest paying jobs and lived in the most squalid slums. The Irish were convinced that if the Union won the war, they would be competing for work with 4 million newly freed slaves. The Irish worked for pennies, but they knew that free blacks worked for less.

But economics was not the only issue. Most Americans had not been especially welcoming to the Irish. The Nativist or Know Nothing political movement had targeted immigrants, the Irish in particular and Catholics most of all, as a threat to native-born Protestant America. Many Americans in the first half of the 19th century took seriously the Nativists' assertions that there were dungeons under St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York, and that the Irish were the advance guard of a papal invasion that would sweep away the federal government and install the Inquisition.

The Know Nothings' paranoia struck a chord among American voters: in the 1840s and 1850s Nativist candidates were elected mayors of Boston, Philadelphia, New York, Baltimore, Chicago, New Orleans, and Washington, D.C. They dominated state politics in all the New England states, as well as in Pennsylvania, Indiana, and California. But they did not limit themselves to politics. In cities and towns from Bath, Maine, to

Galveston, Texas, Nativist mobs destroyed Catholic churches and institutions, and burned the homes of American Catholics.

Why should Irish Catholics fight in defense of such a country? That was the question many Irish American newspapers asked their readers. Many of these newspapers urged the Irish to sit out the war, but three Irishmen in New York changed all that.

Colonel Michael Corcoran commanded the 69th New York State Militia, a virtually all-Irish infantry regiment. Corcoran had been born in Ireland where for a time he had been a member of the Royal Irish Constabulary, the local police force. During the Potato Famine, constables guarded grain and livestock that Anglo-Irish landlords shipped to England and the Continent for sale. The fact that vast supplies of food were being shipped out of the country when hundreds of thousands were starving outraged Corcoran. He joined the Ribbonmen, the rural equivalent of a street gang. To bring the misery of the Famine to the landlords the Ribbonmen burned barns and crops in the field, crippled cattle, and destroyed farm equipment. An informer revealed to the authorities that Corcoran was a Ribbonman; fortunately, he was warned - perhaps by a friend in the Constabulary, we do not know the person's identity - and Corcoran was able to leave the country before the police could arrest him.

In 1849 he sailed to New York City where he joined the 69th. By 1860 he had risen to the rank of colonel and was commander of the 69th. That year Queen Victoria's son Edward, Prince of Wales, the future Edward VII, came to America, the first member of the Royal Family to visit the United States. The city fathers in New York planned a host of special events to welcome the prince, including a grand military parade. Corcoran sent his superiors a formal note saying he could not in good conscience lead his regiment in a parade intended to honor a man he considered to be a tyrant.

Corcoran was arrested for insubordination and informed that he would be tried by court martial by the chiefs of staff of the 4th Brigade of the New York State Militia.[1] < >[who is trying him? In 1860 there is no war and the 69th is a state militia outfit not in national service. Was it a New York state trial?] His superior officers [?] may have regarded Corcoran as insubordinate, but Irish immigrants across the country hailed him as a hero. While his trial was in progress, Fort Sumter was fired upon; Corcoran issued a statement calling upon all Irishmen in America to fight in defense of the Union. In light of his statement the charges against Corcoran were dismissed and he was reinstated as commander of the 69th. In response to Corcoran's call to arms, hundreds of Irishmen scrambled to join the 69th.

Another Irishman whose opinion mattered was the Archbishop of New York, John Hughes. He had been a tenant farmer in the old country; when he first came to the United States he found work as a ditch digger. He managed to find a better job, as a gardener at Mother Elizabeth Ann Seton's convent in Emmitsburg, Maryland. Hughes

[1] New York Times September 17, 1860

had some education, he could read and write, and he had picked up a smattering of Latin. One day he knocked on the convent door and asked Mother Seton to help gain admittance to Mount St. Mary's Seminary. Mother Seton agreed, and through her intercession Hughes began studying for the priesthood.

Hughes had no illusions about the hostility many native-born Americans felt for Irish Catholics, but he also believed that in America the Irish found freedom and opportunities unimaginable in Ireland. America was their home now, and they were obligated to defend it. When the war began, he ordered the American flag flown from every Catholic Church steeple in the archdiocese. Furthermore, he urged Irish Catholics to fight for their adopted country.

On April 23, 1861, eleven days after the first shot was fired on Fort Sumter, Colonel Corcoran led the 69th through the streets of Manhattan's Lower East Side to St. Patrick's Cathedral where Archbishop Hughes said Mass for them, blessed them, and encouraged them not to bring "a tarnish upon their name, their country, or their religion."[2]

Among the 69th's new recruits was Thomas Francis Meagher, whose fame among the Irish immigrants rivaled that of Colonel Corcoran. In 1848, at age nineteen, Meagher had tried to spark a rebellion that would drive the English from Ireland. It was a debacle. Meagher and his friends had no money, no weapons, no troops, and no military training. The uprising was limited to a single skirmish between a couple of dozen rebels who were holed up in the home of the Widow McCormack and the police of the town of Ballingarry. One rebel was killed and one wounded, but the revolution fizzled out in a few minutes because the rebels ran out of ammunition.

Meagher was arrested, tried, and found guilty of treason. He was sentenced to execution but that was commuted to exile for life in Tasmania. After three years in exile Meagher began to plot his escape. Meagher's father agreed to pay an American ship's captain £600 to smuggle his son out of Tasmania. In 1852 Meagher arrived in New York where the Irish community gave him a hero's welcome. He went on the lecture circuit and became one of the most famous Irishmen in America. In the course of his travels he became very fond of the plantation aristocracy of the South, but when the Civil War began, he remained loyal to the Union and enlisted in the 69th New York.

With the creation of the Irish Brigade, Meagher was named commander and brigadier general. The Irish would distinguish themselves at Antietam, where they were instrumental in driving the Confederates from the Sunken Road, but at a very high price: of the brigade's 1000 men, they lost 540. In December 1862, at the Battle of Fredericksburg, the Irish repeatedly charged the Confederates virtually unassailable position on Marye's Heights. The valor of the Irish Brigade deeply moved Confederate Brigadier General George Edward Pickett. After the battle, in a letter dated December 14,

[2] Richard Shaw & John Dagger, The *Unquiet Life and Times of Archbishop John Hughes of New York.* New York: Paulist Press, 1977, p. 340.

1862, he wrote to his fiancé: "Your soldier's heart almost stood still as he watched those sons of Erin fearlessly rush to their deaths. The brilliant assault on Marye's heights of their Irish Brigade was beyond description. We forgot they were fighting us and cheer after cheer at their fearlessness went up all along our lines." [3]

One of the most memorable events in the history of the Irish Brigade took place at Gettysburg. About noon on July 2, 1863, the second day of the battle, they received orders to prepare to join the fight. One of the brigade's Catholic chaplains, Father William Corby (who had come from a little college in Indiana called Notre Dame) knew there was not time to hear each man's confession individually, so Father Corby put on his violet stole, climbed up on a rock, and gave the Irish Brigade general absolution. Colonel St. Clair Augustine Mulholland of the 116th Pennsylvania was one of the men absolved that day. He would point out later that while granting general absolution to soldiers who were about to go into battle was commonplace in the Catholic countries of Europe, this was the first time it had ever occurred in the United States.

In 1864 the Irish Brigade faced extinction. After its casualties at Gettysburg the brigade had shrunk to about 330 men, and in 1864 their three-year enlistment would expire and they would be free to return home. To encourage veterans to re-enlist, local, state, and Federal governments offered bounties that could total between $700 and $1000, a fortune at a time when most laborers were happy to be paid a dollar a day.

To the relief of the officers of the Irish Brigade, almost all of the men of the 69th, 63rd, and 88th New York and the 28th Massachusetts re-enlisted. The men of 116th Pennsylvania had not been organized until 1862, so their enlistment would not run out until 1865.

But the Brigade was still short of men. To fill their ranks, recruiters turned to newly arrived Irish immigrants. For these Irishmen, the enlistment bounties were almost irresistible, and the opportunity to serve in Irish regiments made the recruits feel at ease. In The Irish Brigade in the Civil War, Joseph G. Bilby quotes one such recruit was Thomas McManus, who wrote to his family in Ireland, "The bounty [of $700] was very tempting and I enlisted the first day I came here."[4] By St. Patrick's Day, 1864, the Irish Brigade numbered about 2000 men. Sadly, the caliber of the new recruits did not match caliber of the Irishmen who enlisted in 1861. In fall 1864, about 800 recruits, all of them volunteers, draftees, or substitutes hired to take the place of other men, arrived at Petersburg. They were raw, with little training. On the evening of October thirty men from the 69th were assigned to picket duty opposite Fort Davis, one of the fortifications that defended Petersburg. In the middle of the night a Confederate raiding party took the Irish by surprise, capturing 168 men of the 69th and 246 men from a nearby regiment, the 111th New York. The surprise raid and the capture of so many men prompted an

[3] Victor Brooks, The Fredericksburg Campaign. Conshohoken, Pennsylvania: Combined Publishing, 2000, p. 158.
[4] Joseph Bilby, *The Irish Brigade in the Civil War: The 69th New York and Other Irish Regiments of the Army of the Potomac.* New York: Da Capo Press, 1998, p. 98.

investigation. To the chagrin of veterans of the Irish Brigade it was discovered that ten of their new recruits had deserted, gone over to the Rebels, and divulged the details of the placement of Union pickets outside Fort Davis.

During the final days of the war, the Irish Brigade, along with the rest of the Army of the Potomac, pursued General Lee and the remnants of his army to Appomattox. At Sailor's Creek they suffered another tragic loss: Major General Thomas Alfred Smyth, who had commanded the Irish at the Battle of the Wilderness, was mortally wounded. He died on April 9, the day Lee surrendered to Grant, one of the last generals to die during the Civil War. (CSA Gen. Robert Tyler died April 16, 1865.)

On May 22 the Irish Brigade marched in the great victory parade in Washington. On July 4 they marched in a victory and welcome home parade through New York City. General Meagher called upon the archdiocese to erect a cathedral and an Irish round tower in honor of the Brigade. The brigade never got its cathedral or its tower, but on July 2, 1888, the first monument to the Irish Brigade was dedicated at Gettysburg, near the Wheatfield. The sculptor, William Rudolf O'Donovan, was an Irish American who during the Civil War had fought for the Confederacy.

Throughout the war newspapers in the North and the South chronicled the exploits of the Irish Brigade. These tales of courage and sacrifice helped to diminish anti-Irish and anti-Catholic prejudice after the war, though not completely, of course, John F. Kennedy still had to address the Catholic question during the 1960 presidential campaign. Nonetheless, the Irish did begin to assimilate into American society through respectable occupations such as law enforcement, the construction trades, teaching, operating saloons and restaurants, and especially through Democratic political machines.

In 1861 the Irish knew that most of their Yankee neighbors despised them. So why did they fight? They fought because they recognized that there were opportunities in the United States that did not exist in Ireland. They could send their children to public or parochial schools. They could practice their Catholic faith freely. Once they became citizens they could vote. Families who set aside a little money could send their sons to a Catholic college such as Georgetown outside Washington, D.C., or Holy Cross in Worcester, Massachusetts. That the son of a tenant farmer would acquire a college education and enter one of the professions such as medicine or the law had been inconceivable in the old country. For all its failings, America promised freedom unknown in Europe and opportunities unimaginable in Ireland, and the men of Irish Brigade were willing to fight to defend those opportunities and preserve that freedom.

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