

Her Exiled Children in America: Irish American Identity and the Civil War

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Abstract

Irish Americans fought for both the Union and the Confederacy during the American Civil War of 1861-1865. This article explores the motivating factors behind Irish American decisions during the Civil War Era. Drawing on the work of Susannah Ural, this article argues that the varying economic, social and political factors influencing Irish Americans were interdependent, forming a unique set of interests which reflected the dual identity of the Irish in America. The article argues that this set of distinctly Irish American interests was able to be manipulated in support of the antagonistic Union and Confederate causes, and that the experiences of Irish Americans, North and South, were largely parallel throughout the Civil War Era. The article explores the various decisions taken by Irish Americans in both the Union and the Confederacy throughout the conflict, and demonstrates that the particular interests produced by the duality of Irish American identity provided the ultimate context for decision-making throughout the period. Finally, it argues that, rather than creating a 'melting pot' in which Irish migrants were assimilated into a cohesive American national identity, the Civil War in fact acted as a catalyst for the consolidation of a distinctly Irish American collective identity.

This paper has been peer reviewed.

*Our purpose high,
To win or die,
For Éire of the Streams,
Is still the hope
That buoys us up
And haunts the soldier's dreams.
But though we may not live to see
The shamrock hills, grá geal mo chroí,
The great Republic rears
A countless host, of Gaelic blood,
Who'll stand where once their fathers stood,
The Irish Volunteers.¹*

Historians have debated the motivations of Irish Americans for their actions during the American Civil War, suggesting various combinations of economic, social and political factors which may have influenced their decisions. Drawing on the work of Susannah Ural, this article will argue that these factors were interdependent, woven into a complex tapestry which was framed, always, by the dual identity of the Irish in America. This unique identity produced a distinct set of interests, which reflected the multiple loyalties of Irish America. Interestingly, this set of interests was able to be manipulated in support of the antagonistic Union and Confederate causes, and the experiences of Irish Americans, North and South, were largely parallel

¹ Richard Oulahan [1861], "Camp Song of the Sixty-Ninth," *Irish in the American Civil War*, accessed 20 December 2015, <http://www.irishamericancivilwar.com/2015/11/15/four-years-of-the-irish-at-war-in-poetry-song/>.

throughout the Civil War Era. Similar concerns motivated Irish Americans to enlist in both armies; each influential Irish American leader in the North had his counterpart in the South; and war weariness grew on both sides from 1862, and found expression in similar actions. Throughout, the particular interests produced by the duality of Irish American identity provided the ultimate context for decision-making. While some have argued that the Civil War constituted a ‘melting pot,’ within which Irish Americans were assimilated into an American national identity, it seems more plausible that this experience consolidated the collective identity of this group as distinctly *Irish American*.

Neither Ural’s work, nor this article, claims that the experience of dual identity during the Civil War was an exclusively Irish phenomenon. Ural’s edited volume *Civil War Citizens: Race, Ethnicity and Identity in America’s Bloodiest Conflict* explores the Civil War experiences of Irish, German, Jewish and African American men and women, and argues that these groups are tied together by their shared loyalties to America and their homelands, and by the common desire to obtain full citizenship rights in America.² Each group experienced these phenomena in a unique way, however, and this article will focus on the Irish experience. The author acknowledges that there was, in fact, no singular ‘Irish

² Susannah Ural, “Introduction,” in *Civil War Citizens: Race, Ethnicity and Identity in America’s Bloodiest Conflict*, ed. Susannah Ural (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 3.

experience’ of the Civil War, and that the decisions of each individual were influenced by complex patterns of subjectivity and circumstance; however, a broad picture of the general trends of Irish rhetoric and behaviour may be drawn from the available sources.

Robert Cook has written that:

National identity, like an individual’s social identity, can be seen as a process – an evolving and complex construct built on a variety of overlapping, normally complementary, identities rooted in historical memory, institutional allegiances, a sense of place, ideological attachments, and, in many cases, a perception of group commonality defined in racial or ethnic terms.³

National identity among Irish Americans was indeed complex, and the Civil War marked a significant point in its evolution. Migration from Ireland to America had once been dominated by the relatively wealthy Anglo-Irish of the Protestant Ascendancy; however, from 1845, it turned to a rapid influx of poor rural Catholics whose world had been devastated by *an Gorta Mór* – the Great Hunger. Approximately 1.5 million such Irishmen⁴ arrived in America between 1845 and 1855.⁵ These, along with those Irishmen who had been banished from their homeland for rebelling against English rule, viewed

³ Robert Cook, *Civil War America: Making a Nation 1848-1877* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 10.

⁴ The term ‘Irishmen’ is used throughout this article to refer collectively to men and women of Irish nationality. The term ‘Irish men’ will be used when the author intends to refer specifically to males of Irish nationality.

⁵ Walter A. McDougall, *Throes of Democracy: The American Civil War Era 1829-1877* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2009), 111.

themselves not as emigrants, but as exiles.⁶ Thus, while loyal to the land, which had been their refuge, many remained fiercely devoted to the sorrowful homeland that they had been reluctant to leave behind. The allegiances of the Irish in America, then, were shared, and the Civil War was perhaps the first time these allegiances would be tested. Irish Americans were to be faced with many decisions, and the choices they made would not only reflect their identity, but would also have a hand in shaping it.

The majority of Irish migrants lived and worked in Northern cities, and roughly 144,000 of them served in the Union Army during the Civil War.⁷ Although this number is significant, James McPherson has noted that: ‘the Irish were the most under-represented group [in the Union Army] in proportion to the population...’⁸ Many Irish Americans served in non-ethnic units, but several notable Irish units were formed under the leadership of figures such as Michael Corcoran, James Mulligan and Thomas Francis Meagher.⁹ These units fought valiantly in most of the war’s major battles, including

⁶ *Ibid*, 112.

⁷ Susannah Ural Bruce, “Remember Your Country and Keep Up Its Credit”: Irish Volunteers and the Union Army, 1861-1865,” *The Journal of Military History* 69, vol 2 (2005): 332.

⁸ James McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 606.

⁹ Susannah Ural, “Ye Sons of Green Erin Assemble”: Northern Irish American Catholics and the Union War Effort, 1861–1865,” in Susannah Ural (ed.), *Civil War Citizens: Race, Ethnicity and Identity in America’s Bloodiest Conflict* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 100.

Fredericksburg, Antietam and Gettysburg.¹⁰ Considerably fewer Irish Americans took up residence in the South; however, an economic downturn in the North in 1857-58 had increased the southward migration of workers.¹¹ By the outbreak of the Civil War, Irish workers had begun to dominate the white working class in many Southern port cities, including Savannah, Mobile, Richmond, New Orleans and Charleston.¹² Around 20,000 Irish Americans fought for the Confederate Army, which David Gleeson deems a: ‘sizeable recruitment, considering that only about 85,000 Irish immigrants lived in the eleven states that became the Confederacy.’¹³ Eight Confederate states raised Irish units to match those in the North.¹⁴

Historians have explored several aspects of the Irish American experience of the Civil War. Scholars have examined the motivating factors that influenced Irish American decisions during the war, with a particular focus on enlistment. Many commentators suggest that two separate sets of interests prompted Irish Americans to enlist – those ‘American’ interests, which also motivated native-born Americans, and the more ‘distinctly ethnic’ concerns, which were more particular to the

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 100-101.

¹¹ Dee Dee Joyce, “Charleston's Irish Labourers and Their Move into the Confederacy,” *Irish Studies Review* 18, vol 2 (2010): 188.

¹² *Ibid*, 186-187.

¹³ David Gleeson, “‘To live and die [for] Dixie’: Irish civilians and the Confederate States of America,” *Irish Studies Review* 18, vol 2 (2010): 140.

¹⁴ Joyce, “Charleston's Irish Labourers,” 185-186.

Irish.¹⁵ Historians have also debated what is known as the ‘melting pot image.’ Many twentieth century scholars, such as Ella Lonn¹⁶ and William Burton,¹⁷ claimed that the war ‘Americanised’ the Irish (and other migrant/outside groups), allowing them to become truly assimilated into the American nation. This thesis has increasingly come into question in recent years. Christian Keller contends that:

This melting pot image of war as a cauldron in which the ethnically eclectic American populace nicely merged together was influenced by the idealism of the post-World War II period and the civil rights movement, founded more on hopeful altruisms than solid research.¹⁸

Indeed, one of Burton’s reviewers has accused him of being influenced by a contemporary political agenda, using the ‘melting pot image’ to promote assimilation rather than embrace cultural pluralism.¹⁹

Susannah Ural is one key historian who has challenged the ‘melting pot image’; she has also suggested an alternative to

¹⁵ Christian Keller, “Flying Dutchmen and Drunken Irishmen: The Myths and Realities of Ethnic Civil War Soldiers,” *The Journal of Military History* 73, vol 1(2009): 127-128.

¹⁶ See Ella Lonn, *Foreigners in the Confederacy*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1940) and Ella Lonn, *Foreigners in the Union Army and Navy* (Baton Ridge: Louisiana State University Press, 1952).

¹⁷ See William Burton, *Melting Pot Soldiers: The Union’s Ethnic Regiments* (Ames: Iowa State University, 1988).

¹⁸ Keller, “Flying Dutchmen and Drunken Irishmen,” 140.

¹⁹ Bradley H. Baltensperger, “Review,” *The International Migration Review*, 24, vol 2 (1990):388.

the model of motivation, which relies on two separate sets of interests. In her 2005 article, “Remember Your Country and Keep Up Its Credit,”²⁰ and her 2010 book chapter, “Ye Sons of Green Erin Assemble,”²¹ Ural explores the actions and motivations of Irish Americans in the Union states. She argues that these were influenced at all times, and above all, by the duality of Irish American identity and interests. Ural’s thesis can be summarised:

Where the Union cause supported their interests in Ireland *and* America, Irish Americans volunteered for the war and their families supported them. After the Emancipation Proclamation, the federal draft, and a staggering rise in Irish-American casualties, they began to question, and in some cases, abandon, the Union war effort because it no longer protected their interests in *both* countries.²²

Ural’s model, this article will argue, applies equally to Irish Americans in the Confederacy, where the dual identity of this group also ran strong.²³ North and South, Irish Americans pursued a set of interests, which were – as they themselves were – *simultaneously* Irish and American, interweaving concerns in both countries, according to the emerging pattern of what it meant to be Irish American.

²⁰ Ural Bruce, “Remember Your Country and Keep Up Its Credit.”

²¹ Ural, “Ye Sons of Green Erin Assemble.”

²² Ural Bruce, “Remember Your Country and Keep Up Its Credit”, 331. My emphasis.

²³ Joyce, “Charleston's Irish Labourers,” 189.

Irish American Identity and Enlistment

Similar economic, social and political factors motivated Irish Americans to enlist in both the Union and the Confederate forces, and these were all forged in the duality of Irish American identity. The unique identity and collective interests of Irish America were channelled by proponents of both the Union and the Confederate causes throughout the war. This is illustrated by the emergence of parallel Northern and Southern leaders who reflected two major pillars of Irish American identity – Roman Catholicism and Irish nationalism. These leaders, with near-identical credentials, sought to rally Irish American support behind their opposing causes. They emphasised Irish indebtedness to America and the need to preserve it as a refuge for their fellow countrymen; they highlighted nativist hostility, either to encourage Irish men to fight to earn acceptance as citizens, or to discourage them from supporting a Union of nativist oppressors; they spoke out against abolitionism; they appealed to Irish nationalism; and they reminded Irishmen of the economic benefits of enlistment.

Many Irish Americans felt indebted to America as the true republic, which had: ‘provided a refuge from Old World despotism, prejudice and poverty.’²⁴ While some Irish Americans saw this romantic notion embodied in the ideals of the Union, and others in those of the Confederacy, all wanted to preserve the American haven for future generations of Irishmen

²⁴ Cook, *Civil War America*, 193.

escaping oppression. The poem *Pat Rooney and his Little Ones* was published in the *Irish-American* on 24 May 1862, and tells the story of an Irish evictee's journey to America and his decision to enlist to fight for the Union. The stanzas following Rooney's arrival in America demonstrate his sense of loyalty to the land that gave him refuge:

Tw'as then he avowed,
With heart full and proud,
With deep voice and loud,
For himself and his little ones.
That, come evil or good,
On the land or the flood,
With their hearts' dearest blood,
Would himself and his little ones.

Prove constant and true,
To the Red, White and Blue,
Yes, die for it, too,
Would himself and his little ones,
For Columbia smiled
Upon him as her child,
And of grief soon beguiled,
Both himself and his little ones.

And soon comes his chance,
He heads the advance,
With bold tread and glance,
For himself and his little ones,
In Columbia's fight,
Upon Donelson's height,

In defence of the right,
For himself and his little ones.²⁵

Irish Confederates felt the same sense of loyalty, but saw the freedom of the true republic to be reflected in the Confederate government and also saw Ireland's struggle for freedom paralleled in the secessionist cause. In his war diary, Irish American Confederate soldier, John E. Dooley, recalls the people cheering as his company paraded through the town of Frederick:

But there were many in Frederick bold enough to cheer as we passed, feeling that we were the last representatives of free government, and that when we fell the right of self government or the rights of States and peoples to govern themselves would fall with us; and despotism more galling than any tyranny in Europe would be forced upon the land by a party of brutal men, uneducated, unrefined, unprincipled, inhuman, criminal, and perjured.²⁶

In contrast, General Thomas Francis Meagher, leader of the Union's Irish Brigade, was eager to debunk the notion that the South's cause was a mirror of Ireland's. In an 1863 letter to the editor of the *Dublin Citizen*, he wrote:

²⁵ Anonymous, "Pat Rooney and his Little Ones," *Irish in the American Civil War*, accessed 20 December 2015, <http://www.irishamericancivilwar.com/2015/11/15/four-years-of-the-irish-at-war-in-poetry-song/>. This poem was printed in the *Irish-American*, 24th May 1862, after being 'taken from the pages of the Philadelphia *Sunday Transcript*.'

²⁶ John E. Dooley, *John Dooley, Confederate Soldier: His War Journal* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 1945), 28.

But you, who were here for so long a time, and had studied and familiarized yourself so thoroughly with the political questions and parties of the Republic, know well how to discriminate between the unjustified and treacherous revolt of the South and the revolutions which, in Europe, aim to shake off, not sworn alliances and sacred compacts, but mastership and domination, the grasp of the strong, the assumption of the arrogant, all the violence, wrongs and burthens heaped upon the weaker by the more powerful... Not independence, but domination, was the inspiration and purpose of the rebellion of the Slave Lords, the kings and princes of the cotton-fields and rice-swamps. To achieve this ascendancy, the disruption of the American Union was essential.²⁷

It is clear, then, that Irish Americans on both sides of the conflict were loyal to their own idea of the American republic, and, believing their opponents to be threatening to destroy that republic, were willing to fight in order to preserve it as a beacon of freedom for future generations.

Somewhat ironically, the less idyllic aspects of the American ‘haven’ may have provided a further motivation for enlistment. Irish Catholic migrants often faced discrimination in America, which was all too reminiscent of that which they had known under British rule in Ireland. David Emmons goes so far as to state that: ‘The American response to Irish Catholics was

²⁷ Thomas Francis Meagher, *Letters on our National Struggle*, (New York: Loyal Publication Society, 1863), 2. Letter from Thomas Francis Meagher to the editor of the *Dublin Citizen*, 26 September 1863.

almost a mirror image of what had occurred in [British-ruled Ireland].²⁸ Growing from concerns about competitive labour and the impact of immigrant franchise, what began as anti-Irish sentiment soon hardened into the organised discrimination of the nativist movement and the ‘Know Nothing’ political party.²⁹ Nativism was overtly opposed to immigration, migrant rights and the Roman Catholic Church, making the movement a very real threat to Irish Americans.³⁰ Nativists employed intimidation techniques in an attempt to prevent immigrants from exercising their voting rights, and they were responsible for several violent ethnic riots in the antebellum period.³¹ The relatively small Irish population in the South posed little threat to power holders there, meaning that discrimination in the future Confederate states was far less pervasive. The popular stereotype, forged in the North, of the Irish as: ‘lazy, violent, drunk, filthy and responsible for their own demise’ was nonetheless still present among southern native whites,³² and nativist race riots did occur in some southern cities throughout the 1850s.³³ The growing forces of nativism drove Irish Americans into the open arms of the Democratic Party, whose advocacy of states’ rights, limited government and religious tolerance resonated well with the

²⁸ David Emmons, *Beyond the American Pale: The Irish in the West, 1845-1910* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2010), 6.

²⁹ E. Moore Quinn, “‘I Have Been Trying Very Hard to Be Powerful “Nice” ...’: The Correspondence of Sister M. De Sales (Brennan) during the American Civil War,” *Irish Studies Review* 18, vol 2 (2010): 216.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 216.

³¹ Paul Gilje, *Rioting in America* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996), 67.

³² Joyce, “Charleston's Irish Labourers,” 187.

³³ McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 141.

needs and anxieties of Irish America.³⁴ Despite the support of the Democrats, however, the fears of Irish Americans, and other migrant groups, grew as the Know Nothings became increasingly politically relevant from the time of the 1854 congressional elections.³⁵

Considering the struggles faced by Irish Americans whose ‘poverty, religion and social alienation’ made them ‘triple outsiders’ in antebellum America,³⁶ many historians have suggested that they were motivated to enlist by a belief that proving their worth in war would ‘hasten their assimilation into American life.’³⁷ This is the view reflected in Brendan Graham’s novel *The Element of Fire* (2001), in which an Irish migrant family struggles with issues of identity, loyalty and citizenship in the Civil War Era. As Ellen Lavelle contemplates what the dawning conflict will mean for her family, she reflects upon the words of her son:

Patrick’s words came back to her: ‘If we can’t live as Americans then we will die as Americans.’ That was the way it would be. The Irish would die their way into the esteem of American hearts. Irish blood on the prairies and cotton fields of America would, she knew, let the ‘niggers turned inside out’ at last be white!³⁸

³⁴ Cook, *Civil War America*, 34-35.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 80.

³⁶ McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 32.

³⁷ Cook, *Civil War America*, 193.

³⁸ Brendan Graham, *The Element of Fire* (London: Harper Collins, 2001), 343.

Ural proposes, however, that: ‘The idea that the service of Irish Americans proved their loyalty developed largely after the conflict ended, when they faced continued prejudice in the late-nineteenth-century United States.’³⁹ She cites, as evidence, extracts from the *Boston Pilot*, an Irish American newspaper. In July 1861, the *Pilot* warned Irish Americans: ‘Let no Irishman think that because... he has lost an arm, an eye, or a leg, that he will be treated decently henceforth.’⁴⁰ After the war, in July 1865, the same paper exclaimed: ‘When the next generation records... this heroic age, they can say with proud consciousness “we too are Americans, and our fathers bled and died to establish this beloved country.”’⁴¹ Rather than believing that service in the war would produce better treatment from nativists, it is likely that Irish Americans feared that refusal to enlist would produce even harsher treatment. Ural quotes Union soldier Christopher Byrne as explaining that: ‘the country got into such a wild state of excitement that a young man would be looked on as a traitor if he did not go.’⁴² The Confederate John Dooley expressed similar sentiments. Reflecting upon his first experience in battle, he wrote: ‘If I could only stay out of that fight with honor how gladly would I have done so!’⁴³

³⁹ Ural Bruce, “Remember Your Country and Keep Up Its Credit,” 333.

⁴⁰ *Boston Pilot*, July 27, 1861.

⁴¹ *Boston Pilot*, July 15, 1865.

⁴² Christopher Byrne in Ural, “Ye Sons of Green Erin Assemble,” 99. Letter from Christopher Byrne, Vernon Center, Minnesota to P. Byrne, County Monaghan, Ireland, March 31 1863.

⁴³ Dooley, *John Dooley, Confederate Soldier*, 18.

Nativist discrimination had the further impact of making ‘strange political bedfellows’ of Irish Americans and the institution of slavery.⁴⁴ Many Americans in the North viewed Roman Catholicism in the same light as chattel slavery, arguing that both were repressive institutions, and that neither deserved a place within American republicanism.⁴⁵ Prominent northern figures oft affirmed this position in their rhetoric. Anson Burlingame once declared: ‘Slavery... denies the right of a man to his body. Priestcraft... denies... the right of a man to his soul.’⁴⁶ Theodore Parker asserted in 1857 that reform must address two charges: ‘the *despotic Church* of the Irish and the *despotic state* of the slaveholder.’⁴⁷ Thus, Catholicism and slavery were conflated by their opponents, and Irish Catholics became natural enemies of the abolition movement, which had grown from the same evangelical Protestant soil that had produced both Irish unionism and American nativism.⁴⁸

Roman Catholic leaders, both North and South, spoke out against abolition. Tyrone-born Archbishop John Hughes of New York was highly influential in shaping Irish American opinion in the Union states.⁴⁹ Hughes viewed the Union as ‘an indestructible whole,’ and, although he preferred political methods of conflict resolution, he did encourage his flock to

⁴⁴ Emmons, *Beyond the American Pale*, 69.

⁴⁵ McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 137.

⁴⁶ Anson Burlingame in Emmons, *Beyond the American Pale*, 52.

⁴⁷ Theodore Parker in Emmons, *Beyond the American Pale*, 52. Emphasis in original.

⁴⁸ McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 137.

⁴⁹ Ural, “Ye Sons of Green Erin Assemble,” 115.

enlist in order to ‘bring the war to a speedy conclusion.’⁵⁰ Hughes, however, is also well known for expressing anti-abolitionist views, and was partially responsible for consolidating these views in the popular Irish American mind. Hughes’ anti-abolitionism was reasonably moderate, however, and should not be equated with a belief in slavery.⁵¹ He once stated that he: ‘never had been and never could be an advocate of slavery.’⁵² He feared, however, that sudden abolition would have negative social and economic consequences, particularly for Irish workers, and believed that the institution of slavery would and should be allowed to naturally diminish as society progressed.⁵³ In contrast, many Southern Catholic leaders used their positions to justify the institution of slavery.⁵⁴ One southern bishop of French origin actually developed a special catechism for use in the Confederacy, adding to the original text:

Q. Is it forbidden to hold slaves?

A. No, both the Old and New Testament bear witness to the lawfulness of that institution.⁵⁵

⁵⁰ Mary Kelly, “A ‘Sentinel(s) of our Liberties’: Archbishop John Hughes and Irish-American Intellectual Negotiation in the Civil War Era,” *Irish Studies Review* 18, vol 2 (2010): 163-164.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 158.

⁵² *Ibid*, 158.

⁵³ *Ibid*, 161.

⁵⁴ Joyce, “Charleston’s Irish Labourers,” 190.

⁵⁵ Augustin Verot, *A General Catechism on the Basis Adopted by the Plenary Council of Baltimore for the Use of Catholics in the Confederate States of America* (Augusta: Singer, 1862), 20.

The South's answer to Archbishop Hughes was Cork-born Bishop Patrick Lynch of Charleston. Lynch actively encouraged enlistment in the Confederate Army, and also pressed Southern Catholic Sisters to serve as nurses.⁵⁶ Lynch offered *Te Deums* in celebration of Confederate victories, petitioned the Vatican to recognise the Confederate States, and wrote explicitly racial defences of slavery.⁵⁷

The hostility between the Roman Catholic Church and the abolition movement, then, provides a possible explanation for enthusiastic Irish enlistment in the Confederate forces, and also for the hesitancy of many Irish Americans to fight for the Union, especially after the issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation. As Tim Verhoeven has explained, Catholics' opposition to abolition confirmed in the minds of the nativists the: 'tripartite alliance between the church, the Democratic Party, and the South', which 'was thus understood by its opponents as a formidable grouping intent on extending slavery, whether in physical, intellectual, or moral terms, as far and as wide as possible.'⁵⁸ This added further fuel to the fire of nativist suspicion of the Irish, contributing to the cycle of self-perpetuating hostility between the two groups.

Irish nationalist concerns were explicitly appealed to by both Union and Confederate recruiters, and were certainly a

⁵⁶ Moore Quinn, "I Have Been Trying Very Hard," 213.

⁵⁷ Gleeson, "To live and die [for] Dixie," 142.

⁵⁸ Tim Verhoeven, *Transatlantic Anti-Catholicism: France and the United States in the Nineteenth Century* (Basingstoke: Pelgrave Macmillan, 2010), 67.

motivating factor behind Irish American enlistment. Irish nationalism was alive and active in the years leading up to the Civil War, with James Stephens and John O'Mahony having founded the Fenian Brotherhood in 1859.⁵⁹ At the outbreak of hostilities, Irish nationalists in the South could easily draw parallels between the Irish struggle for freedom from the Union of Great Britain, and the Confederate struggle for freedom from the Union of States; and they named their Mobilian Irish Company in honour of the rebel Robert Emmet, who had fought in 1803 in opposition to the Act of Union.⁶⁰ For their part, Irish nationalists in the North were encouraged to ignore the apparent parallels between the Irish and Southern struggles, and were assured by recruiters that: 'a Confederate triumph... would play into the hands of the pro-southern British establishment.'⁶¹

Both North and South, Irish Americans looked to leading nationalist figures for guidance on how to respond to the dawning conflict. Waterford-born Thomas Francis Meagher, aforementioned leader of the Union's Irish Brigade, was an Irish nationalist hero of high renown, having been one of the leaders of the ill-fated Young Irelander Rebellion of 1848. After being exiled to Van Diemen's Land for his efforts, Meagher had

⁵⁹ McDougall, *Throes of Democracy*, 115.

⁶⁰ David Gleeson, "Irish Rebels, Southern Rebels: The Irish Confederates," in *Civil War Citizens: Race, Ethnicity and Identity in America's Bloodiest Conflict*, ed. Susannah Ural (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 135.

⁶¹ Cook, *Civil War America*, 194.

escaped to the United States in the early 1850s.⁶² On the eve of Southern secession, Meagher experienced and articulated a conflict of conscience, which must have been common amongst Irish nationalists in the North – conflict due to the tension between opposition to enforced federal control and devotion to the United States as a beacon of refuge and liberty.⁶³ Having reconciled this conflict in his own mind, Meagher shared his views in recruiting his peers to fight for the Union:

The Republic that gave us an asylum and an honourable career... is threatened with disruption. It is the duty of every liberty-loving citizen to prevent such a calamity at all hazards. Above all it is the duty of us Irish citizens, who aspire to establish a similar form of government in our native land. It is not only our duty to America, but also to Ireland.⁶⁴

Meagher's Southern counterpart was Derry-born John Mitchel, who was also esteemed as an 1848 veteran, and who had also been exiled to Van Diemen's Land and escaped to America.⁶⁵ Mitchel's three sons fought for the Confederacy, while the man himself chose to fight in classic Irish style – with his pen.⁶⁶ Writing for the *Richmond Enquirer* and later the *Richmond Examiner*, Mitchel articulated the obvious links between the causes of Irish and Confederate independence. He

⁶² Thomas Craughwell, "Remembering Ireland and Fighting for the Union," *The American Spectator* 44, vol 6 (2011): 28.

⁶³ Ural, "Ye Sons of Green Erin Assemble," 103.

⁶⁴ Thomas Francis Meagher, *Memoirs of Gen. Thomas Francis Meagher*, ed. Michael Cavanagh (Massachusetts: Messinger Press, 1892), 369.

⁶⁵ Gleeson, "To live and die [for] Dixie," 143.

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 144.

further argued that the British forces of industrialisation and laissez-faire capitalism would lead to ruin in the United States, just as they had led to catastrophe in Ireland.⁶⁷

The views of leaders such as Meagher and Mitchel shaped the opinions and responses of those who looked up to them. Our own Irish Confederate, John Dooley, recalls a confrontation with a fellow Irishman who had chosen to fight for the Union. As an illustration of the Confederate Irish understanding of the nature of their cause, it is worth quoting at length:

A Yanko-Irish soldier told me he was from Lowell, Mass., and that he had been a soldier under John Mitchel in [the Young Irelander Rebellion of] '48. Having heard that John M's three sons were in the Confederate army he wished to hear something about them. He seemed much pleased when he learned that I could give him so much information about the Mitchels. And then Cronin (a wonderful comrade) and I began questioning him and asking him how it was possible for him who had in '48 fought or intended to fight for the same cause for which we were contending, how could he consistently turn his back on his principles and for the pitiful hire of a few dollars do all in his power to crush a brave people asserting their right to self government; and now that he was engaged in the cause of tyranny, fighting against honesty, Justice and right, and moreover against those very gallant young men he was seeking to hear of, what, was asked, would Mr. Mitchel think of him?

The poor fellow's eyes filled with tears. He said he didn't know how it was at all, but they got him to enlist and if he got

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 143.

back to Lowell he didn't think they'd 'get him again.' He then went off and returned with two good blankets and a fly-tend which he insisted on our taking from him; and then hastily bidding us goodbye was gone and we never met him afterwards.

Perhaps we were too severe towards him; but when we see the Irishman supporting so foul a tyranny as ever blackened the pages of any history, our indignation cannot but be moved, even though we know that he is the dupe of men who, leading him by the brilliancy of their talents, and trampling under foot their former principles of right and justice, rush madly in the paths of ignoble fame but to cover themselves and their dupes with ignominy and Shame.⁶⁸

Meanwhile, a Union soldier of Meagher's Irish Brigade wrote to his wife:

This is the first test of a modern free government in the act of sustaining itself against internal enemys... if it fail all tyrants will succeed. The old cry will be sent forth from the aristocrats of europe that such is the common lot of all republics [sic]. Irishmen and their descendants have... a stake in [this] nation... America is Irlands refuge Irlands last hope... destroy this republic and her hopes are blasted [sic].⁶⁹

Irish separatists on both sides of the Mason-Dixon Line anticipated the value of combat experience in preparing them for a future national rising in Ireland, and those who enlisted identified themselves with the fabled 'Wild Geese' of the

⁶⁸ Dooley, *John Dooley, Confederate Soldier*, 115-116.

⁶⁹ Cited in James McPherson, *For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 113.

sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, who fled Ireland to serve in foreign armies while awaiting the opportunity to return and fight for Irish freedom.⁷⁰ From their writings, songs and symbolism, one gets the sense that many Irish American Civil War soldiers believed themselves to be fighting simultaneously for both nations, their causes being as one. The war song of the Irish Brigade ends each verse with the refrain:

Up! up! with our colors, the proudest e'er seen—
The red, white and blue, and the Emerald Green.⁷¹

The epitaph on the Charleston grave of John Mitchel poignantly reads: 'I could not fight for Ireland, so I chose to fight for the South.'⁷²

The only motivating factor behind Irish American enlistment that was not overtly linked to their dual identity was that of economic need, which they shared with many of their native-born comrades. It could be argued, however, that the division of labour which so ill-favoured the Irish, particularly in the North, meant that Irish Americans were especially susceptible to economic incentives. By the outbreak of the Civil War, the North was well and truly on its way to becoming a modern capitalist society. The increasing dominance of wage

⁷⁰ Ural, "Ye Sons of Green Erin Assemble," 104.

⁷¹ Thomas J. MacEvily [1861], "War Song of the Irish Brigade," *Irish in the American Civil War*, accessed 20 December 2015, <http://www.irishamericancivilwar.com/2015/11/15/four-years-of-the-irish-at-war-in-poetry-song/>.

⁷² Dooley, *John Dooley, Confederate Soldier*, xv.

labour and the emergence of a distinct working class and bourgeoisie testify to this transformation.⁷³ As Cook points out, a ‘major fault line’ separated the predominantly native born middle class from the ethnically diverse class of impoverished unskilled workers.⁷⁴ Irish Americans belonged primarily to the latter group. In the representative town of Kingston, New York, Cook relays: ‘as many as 90 per cent of the town’s adult Irish males were probably wage earners, the vast majority of them poorly paid unskilled workers.’⁷⁵ The situation was not much different in the Confederate States, where the unskilled white workforce in many cities was dominated by Irish migrants.⁷⁶ Military service, for either Union or Confederacy, was simply more economically rewarding than the typical labour of the Irish in America.⁷⁷

Irish American Identity and Growing Disenchantment

Distinctly Irish American interests drove Irish men in both the Union and the Confederacy to enlist to fight for what they perceived as the beacon of their own freedom and of Ireland’s. As the war progressed, however, it increasingly failed to serve the interests of Irish America and enthusiasm for the war dwindled among this community – in both its Northern and Southern manifestations – from 1862. Some of the causes of

⁷³ Cook, *Civil War America*, 27.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 28.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 28.

⁷⁶ Joyce, “Charleston’s Irish Labourers,” 186-187.

⁷⁷ Cook, *Civil War America*, 193.

growing war-weariness among Irish Americans were common to soldiers and citizens of all backgrounds. John Dooley, for example, noted in his diary that the grim realities of war stood in bleak contrast to the ideals of patriotic heroism, which had inspired many to enlist:

We all know, and some of our dear friends and comrades have known it, alas, too well, that ‘dulce et decorum est pro patria mori’, but the drilling and cleaning up the camp and keeping our muskets bright and clean, - ah, that is another thing! And then to be almost eaten alive by vermin that in myriad troops swarm through the camp and defy the boldest and the most hardened, - ah, these trials are not altogether so sweet as patriotism’s first glow in the breast would have us imagine.⁷⁸

The Irish American reaction to this reality, however, was coloured by the duality of their interests and loyalties. The latter half of 1862 saw a devastating rise in Irish American casualties, with heavy losses on both sides at Antietam in September and Fredericksburg in December.⁷⁹ Far from training a legion of formidable warriors for Éire, the war was exterminating a generation of her sons. Furthermore, it would seem that Irish soldiers were gaining little recognition for their enormous sacrifices. Although Northern newspapers had initially praised the fighting skill of the Irish Brigade, nativists did not hesitate to grasp at any opportunity to accuse the Irish of shirking their

⁷⁸ Dooley, *John Dooley, Confederate Soldier*, 60.

⁷⁹ Ural, “Ye Sons of Green Erin Assemble,” 115-116.

share of the war effort.⁸⁰ If there had been any Irish hopes of earning nativist approval in the war, these were growing increasingly dim by 1863.

The dawning of 1863 saw a definite shift in Union war aims as the Emancipation Proclamation came into effect. In addition to preserving the Union, soldiers in blue were now fighting a war to free the slaves of the South. It is well known that Irish Americans overwhelmingly opposed abolition. Many earlier commentators have attributed this position to blind prejudice. Florence Gibson wrote: ‘All evidence available on the period indicates that the Irishman detested the Negro.’⁸¹ More recent scholarship, however, recognises the complexity of relations between Irish Americans and African Americans in the Civil War Era. Although racial ideas undoubtedly played a part in determining Irish attitudes toward African Americans, Irish Americans’ opposition to abolition was primarily linked to economic concerns – namely, a fear of: ‘new labor competition from free blacks in an already difficult market’.⁸² Democratic newspapers warned that Emancipation would allow free blacks to migrate from the South and snatch jobs away from struggling Irish workers.⁸³ The obvious discrepancy between Irish American interests and Union war aims, combined with the calamitous loss of Irish life, turned Archbishop Hughes against

⁸⁰ *Ibid*, 107.

⁸¹ Florence Gibson, *The Attitudes of the New York Irish toward State and National Affairs, 1848-1892* (New York: AMS Press, 1951), 142.

⁸² Ural, “Ye Sons of Green Erin Assemble,” 114.

⁸³ McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 609.

the war. He stated: ‘[W]e Catholics, and a vast majority of our troops in the field, have not the slightest idea of carrying on a war that costs so much in blood and treasure just to gratify a clique of abolitionists.’⁸⁴ Interestingly, few Irish Americans noticed the parallels between the oppression of African Americans under the slave system, and the oppression of the Catholic Irish by the British regime. In this they differed from the great Irish leader and rights advocate, Daniel O’Connell, who, in condemning the institution of slavery, explicitly drew parallels between the Irish and Negro struggles. Such was O’Connell’s support for abolition that William Lloyd Garrison chose to name his journal *The Liberator* in honour of O’Connell, who is known to the Irish by that title.⁸⁵ Irish Americans’ breaking with O’Connell on this issue further demonstrates that the interests they sought to preserve were distinctly *Irish American*; they were evidently not afraid to depart from Irish tradition when their new circumstances in America so necessitated.

Of further concern to Irish Americans, at this stage, was the increasing impact of the war on those at home in Ireland. Not only was their ‘haven’ of potential refuge being ravaged by conflict, but the remittances from kinsmen in America, which were so vital to sustaining so many families, were becoming increasingly scarce. Furthermore, those in Ireland who had lost sons or husbands in the war were rarely entitled to financial

⁸⁴ Archbishop Hughes in McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 507.

⁸⁵ McDougall, *Throes of Democracy*, 115.

compensation.⁸⁶ Joseph Herson has expressed the belief that: ‘Economically, Irish peasants were among the worst victims of the war.’⁸⁷ It would seem that public opinion in Ireland did not much favour the war – or at least not the Union cause – by 1863. In a letter to the editor of the *Dublin Irishman*, Meagher praised him for: ‘standing foremost amongst those few intelligent, grateful, and upright men, who in Ireland recognized the justice and grandeur of the National cause, and the military proceedings it became necessary to resort to in its defence.’⁸⁸ Meagher went on to lament:

That the conduct of others, who thought and acted otherwise, was a source [sic] of the deepest mortification, you will easily comprehend. The sentiments and disposition of the Irish public – so far as speeches and newspapers can be taken to interpret them truthfully – in regard to that cause, and the action of our Government, were not such as the loyal citizens of this Republic had reason to expect.⁸⁹

The lack of support from Ireland for the Union cause, Meagher argued, worked against Irish interests by adding fuel to the fire of the nativists: ‘who revive with every incident or event which directly, or by implication, serves as a foundation for

⁸⁶ Joseph Herson, *Celts, Catholics & Copperheads: Ireland Views the American Civil War* (Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1968), 8.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁸⁸ Thomas Francis Meagher, *Letters on our National Struggle* (New York: Loyal Publication Society, 1863), 7. Letter from Thomas Francis Meagher to the editor of the *Dublin Irishman*, 5 September 1863.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

their charges of disaffection against [the Irish].⁹⁰ The dwindling support from Ireland, and the nativism it helped to enflame, likely contributed to the discouragement of Irish American troops.

In the North, the introduction of the Enrollment Act in March 1863 proved the final straw for many Irish Americans. In addition to targeting the poor (who could not avail of the 300 dollar buy-out provision), this legislation seemed to particularly target unnaturalised migrants, giving them sixty-five days to leave the country before they became eligible for the federal draft.⁹¹ The *Pilot* viewed the legislation as a violation of the social contract so celebrated by American republicanism:

It is going too far to *require* an alien – a recent emigrant – to go to battle. We refuse aliens the right of voting, the right of holding office, and if they wanted passports for foreign travel, not one could they get... What *right* then have we to be *severe* with aliens for not enlisting?⁹²

Irish American outrage at this measure was expressed in: ‘three days of the worst rioting ever seen in the United States.’⁹³ In July 1863, masses of predominantly Irish working men and women took to the streets in the notorious ‘New York City Draft Riots,’ targeting any symbol of Republican power. Cook describes the events:

⁹⁰ *Ibid*, 8.

⁹¹ Ural Bruce, "Remember Your Country and Keep Up Its Credit," 352.

⁹² *Boston Pilot*, September 13, 1862. Emphasis in original.

⁹³ Cook, *Civil War America*, 210.

[T]he mob attacked policemen and soldiers, vandalised the property of the rich, sought in vain to destroy the hated *Times* and *Tribune* buildings on Newspaper Row, and, most disturbingly of all, embarked on the indiscriminate lynching of blacks.⁹⁴

Military intervention and cannons were required to quell the violence in which over one hundred people (mostly rioters) were killed, many more were wounded, and property damage ran into the millions.⁹⁵ Republican papers dismissed any claim that the rioting was linked to the draft, preferring simply to categorise the Irish as savages and plunderers.⁹⁶ It is clear, however, that the mob's anger was sparked by the measure which required them to sacrifice themselves for a cause that did not serve their interests. One rioter wrote to the *Times* that the draft: 'has made us nobodies, vagabonds, and cast-outs of society, for whom nobody cares when we must go to war and be shot down.' He questioned: 'Why don't they let the nigger kill the slave-driving race and take possession of the South as it belongs to them?'⁹⁷ Iver Bernstein has written extensively on the Draft Riots, presenting the view that issues of class were at the heart of the upheaval.⁹⁸ The rioters – of whom many were Irish and most were poor – perceived that they were being exploited by Republican industrialists, sold into a war in which they no

⁹⁴ *Ibid*, 210.

⁹⁵ Gilje, *Rioting in America*, 93.

⁹⁶ Ural, "Ye Sons of Green Erin Assemble," 122.

⁹⁷ *New York Times*, July 15, 1863.

⁹⁸ See Iver Bernstein, *The New York City Draft Riots Their Significance for American Society and Politics in the Age of the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

longer believed and which, if successful in its aim to free the slaves of the South, would only add to their hardship by introducing further competition into the labour market. In disputing Bernstein's interpretation, James McPherson argued that:

Contrary to Bernstein's view, these stresses may have run along the lines of race and ethnicity more than along those of class. The rioters were mostly Irish Catholic immigrants (and their children); they mainly attacked the members of New York's small black population. For a year, Democratic leaders had been telling their Irish-American constituents that the wicked Black Republicans were waging the war to free the slaves who would come North and take away the jobs of Irish workers. The use of black stevedores as scabs in a recent strike by Irish dockworkers made this charge seem plausible. The prospect of being drafted to fight to free the slaves made the Irish even more receptive to demagogic rhetoric.⁹⁹

Curiously, McPherson has presented essentially economic motivations in his attempt to argue that racial concerns were paramount over class concerns in inspiring the rioters. Racial issues did, of course, factor into the situation, and Bernstein acknowledges this:

The fantasy of the rioting Irish was that they could somehow become more American by using their whiteness as an emblem to distinguish them from slaves – an ironic dream

⁹⁹ James McPherson, *Drawn with the Sword: Reflections on the American Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 91-92.

because the Irish were very close to being slaves themselves and they knew it.¹⁰⁰

The fact remains, however, that a hierarchical understanding of race alone would not have been enough to induce the people to commit such horrific violence at this time. Had they not feared for their wages, their lives and their citizenship rights – had they not, in other words, been treated as second-class citizens – it is unlikely that so many Irish Americans would have been driven to such devastating behaviour.

Southern Irish Americans were also wearying of making sacrifices for a war that was not their own. Although the Confederate draft legislation provided exemptions for unnaturalised foreigners, the blockade imposed by the Union became increasingly stifling from 1862.¹⁰¹ This, coupled with the looming threat posed by the Union armies in close proximity, made surviving the war a struggle, not just for soldiers, but for their families at home as well.¹⁰² Some Irish American women expressed their discontent by participating in the Richmond Bread Riot of April 1863, in which stores in the Southern city were violently looted as women (and some men)

¹⁰⁰ Iver Bernstein, “July 13-16, 1863: The New York City Draft Riots,” *Civil War Times*, 42, vol 3 (2003):35.

¹⁰¹ Gleeson, “To live and die [for] Dixie,” 145.

¹⁰² *Ibid*, 145.

expressed their frustration at the inadequate provisions their families received from the Confederate government.¹⁰³

Irish Americans found other, less dramatic, ways of expressing their discontent also. Recruitment levels fell from 1862 in both Union and Confederacy, with leaders such as the Fenian Michael Corcoran encouraging Irishmen to preserve their lives for a future struggle in Ireland.¹⁰⁴ Desertions became more common on both sides, aided in the Confederacy by the exemption clause in draft legislation, which allowed unnaturalised Irishmen to leave service.¹⁰⁵ In the Union, Irish Brigades and militia companies disbanded or dwindled away.¹⁰⁶ Irish Americans in the Union states were able to express their discontent politically, largely supporting George McClellan as Democratic presidential candidate in 1864 in the hope that he would either secure an armistice or redirect the war to reflect its original aims.¹⁰⁷ In both Union and Confederacy, it became clear that Irish Americans no longer believed that the war served their interests; they withdrew their passive and active support, little by little, and welcomed the herald of peace in May 1865.

Susannah Ural asserts that this declining support, like the initial motivations for enlistment, resulted from the dual identity of Irish Americans. She writes that: ‘A sense of responsibility to

¹⁰³ *Ibid*, 146.

¹⁰⁴ Ural Bruce, "Remember Your Country and Keep Up Its Credit," 336.

¹⁰⁵ Gleeson, "To live and die [for] Dixie," 145.

¹⁰⁶ Cook, *Civil War America*, 208.

¹⁰⁷ Ural, "Ye Sons of Green Erin Assemble," 126.

their heritage and families in Ireland and America had... inspired Irish men to wear Union blue, and these same dual loyalties led to their eventual opposition to that cause.¹⁰⁸ The same argument can be extended to include those who wore Confederate grey. Irishmen in the South had embraced the Confederate cause when they believed it would further their interests, but had altered their response as the reality of war proved to work against them.¹⁰⁹

Many Americans, North and South, saw declining Irish support as a form of betrayal,¹¹⁰ but the Irish believed that they had done their duty to America. ‘To their honour,’ the *Pilot* proclaimed, ‘let it be said that they have freely and gloriously paid their debt.’¹¹¹ Many native-born Americans, particularly in the North, disagreed, and discrimination against the ever-growing community of Irish Americans continued for decades to come, compounded by the enduring association of the Irish with the Democrats, and thus with violence, treason and unseemly criticism of the martyred Republican hero Abraham Lincoln.¹¹² Nativism remained a significant influence in the political realm in the postbellum period, with its influence being particularly noticeable in the sphere of education. However, as Cook observes, some progress had, perhaps, been made:

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid*, 125.

¹⁰⁹ Gleeson, “Irish Rebels, Southern Rebels,” 147.

¹¹⁰ Ural, “Ye Sons of Green Erin Assemble,” 125.

¹¹¹ *Boston Pilot*, July 19, 1862.

¹¹² Ural, “Ye Sons of Green Erin Assemble,” 127.

While hostility toward the Irish in particular continued, there was no revival of the Know-Nothing phenomenon after the Civil War. Republican ethnocentrism, the immigrants' whiteness, their loyalty (in the main) toward the Union, and their voting strength all militated against the emergence of another separate party devoted primarily to nativism.¹¹³

In the South, Gleeson argues, post-war resentment of the Irish faded during Reconstruction, when southerners welcomed Irish support in their struggle against the Radical Republicans. 'Thus,' Gleeson writes, 'it was the Lost Cause as much as actual service in the Confederacy that sealed Irish integration into the post-Civil War South.'¹¹⁴ This is a very interesting contention, and one that is worthy of further exploration in the future.

Regardless of whether or not they were better treated after the Civil War, Irish Americans had clearly not become instantly assimilated into some homogeneous American identity by means of a magical 'melting pot' of combat. The Irish American experience of the Civil War had been unique and multifaceted. Irish Americans had followed their own course during the Civil War, according to their own particular interests – interests that were neither purely Irish nor purely American, but which were distinctly *Irish American*, the result of their dual identity and their experiences in both countries. To this bank of experiences, Irish Americans could now add that of the Civil War, which they had experienced in a particularly Irish American way. As such, the Irish American experience of the war served to

¹¹³ Cook, *Civil War America*, 305.

¹¹⁴ Gleeson, "Irish Rebels, Southern Rebels," 147.

consolidate a distinct Irish American collective identity, laying the foundation upon which this group would build itself into a powerful entity that would contribute richly to both American society and the Irish nationalist cause in years to come. The Union and Confederate Irish soldiers, and those who bore their legacy, earned a unique place within the American nation and eternal recognition in the revered *Proclamation of the Irish Republic*, which in 1916 heralded Ireland's striking for freedom, in which she was – and has consistently been – ‘supported by her exiled children in America.’

About the Author

Brodie Alyce Nugent is a student at Flinders University. Her primary research area is that of Irish Republicanism, particularly during the most recent Irish conflict of 1969-1998. As a member of the Irish diaspora, Brodie is also highly interested in how Irish people and their descendants have experienced and contributed to historical developments across the globe.