

Thomas Francis Meagher and the Political Identity of the Irish Brigade: 1861- 1863

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Abstract

The Irish came to America in the early portion of the 19th century, tired, and hungry. They came with little political voice, and moreover, were despised by political parties within the urban Northeast. By the start of the Civil War the Irish, specifically the Irish- Catholic population had become rooted within the political structure of the nation. This thesis will argue that as a political force in the north, the Irish played an important role in the war both as a military unit, and more importantly, as a political one. At the forefront of this unit stood Thomas Francis Meagher, a famous Irish orator and politician. By the start of the War, Meagher was appointed commanding officer of the Irish Brigade. His appointment was purposeful, as Meagher himself embodied the political image of the Irish. Specifically, he represented the masses who held clout in the political arena of the north- an arena that was important to the political calculations of the war. By 1863, the idea of the Irish Brigade, along with many of its soldiers had died. The brigade disbanded and was left to literal tatters, leaving the Irish community both on the battlefield and in Northeast disillusioned and separated from the new vision of the War. This thesis will examine the rise and fall of Thomas Francis Meagher and the Irish Brigade as a political unit, and will add a meaningful contribution to the literature in terms of why the Irish Brigade became such a potent political unit, and moreover, by 1863 why it became such a political liability.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	4
Chapter 1: Why are the Irish Democrats?.....	8
Chapter 2: The Early American Political career of Thomas Francis Meagher.....	16
Chapter 3: T.F Meagher: Brigadier General- Irish Brigade.....	24
Chapter 4: Peter Welsh and William Corby- The Common Man and the Catholic Priest.....	28
Conclusion: The Resignation of T.F Meagher and the “Death” of the Irish Brigade.....	34
Bibliography.....	38

Introduction

The Irish represented two specific communities. In one regard, they represented their country, Ireland, but in another, they represented the communities to which they emigrated too. For many Irish in the North, this was a neighborhood in a Northeast city, such as the infamous Five Points. Regardless of where, or what the Irish were coming from, their heritage did not change, and for many it remained relevant. These community dynamics clashed on several occasions during the Civil War. One battle in particular that showcased Irish- American identity was the battle of Fredericksburg. The infamous battle yielded nearly 12,000 Union, and 3,000 Confederate casualties, amongst these were the Irish- Americans, both Unionists and Confederates.

On December 11, 1862, in anticipation of a meeting between the two forces, Robert Lee entrenched his men alongside a ridge. In order to secure the lines, Lee had his men dig trenches atop a daunting hill, which became known as Marye's Heights. Line after line of Union soldiers made the charge up the steep slopes, just to be cut down by Lee's artillery and rifles. After witnessing several Union comrades' charge to their death, Thomas Meagher's Irish Brigade was given orders to make the charge. They mustered their ranks, raised the Union colors, and began to march.

Accompanying the American flag on their infamous march was the one remaining Irish flag given to the Brigade. The flag was decorated "...with a gold harp, white clouds and sunburst on a green background¹." Due to the flags deteriorating condition, Meagher ordered each soldier

¹ Jones, Terry. "The Fighting Irish Brigade - NYTimes.com." Opinion - Opinionator - NYTimes.com. <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/12/11/the-fighting-irish-brigade/> (accessed March 7, 2014).

to place a “sprig of evergreen” in their blue Union cap.² The flag, and sprig represented the greater community- Ireland.

As Meagher’s men marched, stepping over their dead comrades, the 24th Georgia looked on with conscious awareness of what lay ahead. The 24th recognized them immediately, shouting “Here comes that damned green flag again.”³ The Irish Brigade was coming directly for its fellow ‘sons of erin.’ Still six-hundred feet away, the Irish Brigade began to charge, shouting the famous Irish battle cry, “Faugh-a-Bellagh”, or “clear the way.”⁴ As the Brigade quickly approached, the 24th Georgia infantry opened fire, slaying row after row of Meagher’s men. Despite the sight of their fallen comrades the Brigade continued to charge. Their actions were so notable that it invoked a response from General Robert E. Lee, commander of the Confederate Army, when he famously said, “never were men so brave.”⁵ Without regard for their own lives’ the Brigade continued into the wall of fire. By the end of the battle Meagher’s Brigade had been decimated, with more than five-hundred men dead.⁶ Following the New York City draft riots in June of 1863, and ideological upheavals in the Irish- American community the Irish Brigade was disbanded, and Thomas Francis Meagher- despite attempts to recruit more Irishmen to the unit, resigned command. Nearly three years later when Lee surrendered at Appomattox Courthouse, the infamous Irish Brigade had been left to tatters.

Irish- Americans, regardless of sectional loyalties, shared a common community- Ireland. Many of them were products of famine, poverty, and political oppression. They came to America

² Ibid

³ Tucker, Phillip Thomas. *Irish Confederates: The Civil War's Forgotten Soldiers*. Abilene, Tex.: McWhiney Foundation Press, McMurry University :, 2006.

⁴ Jones, Terry. "The Fighting Irish Brigade - NYTimes.com." Opinion - Opinionator - NYTimes.com. <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/12/11/the-fighting-irish-brigade/> (accessed March 22, 2013).

⁵ Tucker, Phillip Thomas. *Irish Confederates: The Civil War's Forgotten Soldiers*. Abilene, Tex.: McWhiney Foundation Press, McMurry University :, 2006.

⁶ Ibid.

in order to escape hunger, and social persecution. America gave them an opportunity to further their heritage whether it be in the North or the South. When sectional differences began to divide the United States, the Irish communities leveraged their interests, and identified across the national conflict.

This paper will be concentrating on those from the North. Examining communities in the North and South, would lend to a significantly better understanding of Irish communal identity across the conflict, the sources simply do not support the endeavor. Therefore, the focus of this paper will be largely on the Irish in the Union, specifically Thomas Francis Meagher and the Irish Brigade. Central to my argument will be the speeches, letters and memoirs, of Thomas Francis Meagher, Peter Welsh, and Chaplain William Corby. Examining the diaries of each individual lends to a significantly better understanding of the Irish- American community as it remained on the battlefield.

Thomas Francis Meagher was largely considered to be one of the most active voices of the Irish- American community, particularly in New York. Having been exiled by the British government, Meagher came to the United States already as a famous orator, and revolutionary. Following a number of speaking tours, and law and journalism endeavors, Meagher found his place in the northern Irish community as a symbol for Irish success in America. Idolized by much of the community, Meagher quickly became the face for Irish-America recruitment for the war effort, eventually earning himself the role of the commanding officer. This thesis will utilize his diaries, and correspondence as well as his role in the Irish- American community to demonstrate that in many ways, Meagher became the voice for the Irish Brigade, as well as the Irish American community up until 1863, making himself as well as the Irish Brigade a political asset, and later a liability.

There has been a significant amount of work done, with regards to both the Irish Brigade, and the Irish- American community of the mid 19th century. Works written by Thomas McGee, Kerby Miller, Jay Dolan, and Tyler Anbinder, Thomas Brown, and David Roediger, have all made significant contributions to the field of Irish- American community before, during and after the Civil War. Other significant contributions in the military history of the Irish Brigade have been achieved by Susannah Ural, Christian Samito, and Daniel Callaghan. However, amongst the plethora of Irish- American studies during the Civil War, there has been little to no attempt to reconcile the Irish- American community outside of the physical battlefield with the Irish Brigade itself. This remains a shortcoming within the field of Irish- American studies for two reasons. One, it does not fully explain why the Thomas Francis Meagher came to be the commanding officer of the Irish Brigade, and secondly it inherently fails to articulate how his appointment remained politically significant. Furthermore, there has been little effort in merging the ideologies of the common foot soldier, with that of the leadership of the Irish Brigade.

This thesis will argue that when examining the social and political atmosphere surrounding the Irish- American community in the North, particularly in New York City before and during the Civil War, and the rise of Thomas Francis Meagher to Brigadier General as commanding officer of the Irish Brigade, it becomes apparent that the Irish- American community, as reflected by the Irish Brigade became an important vehicle for Irish- American identity and in many ways remained to be a political asset. But by the end of the war, they had become a liability.

Chapter 1

Why are the Irish Democrats?

“I might as well have been born in Boston... I brought nothing with me from Ireland...nothing tangible to make me what I am”⁷- Patrick Ford

The Irish immigrated to America without a political or social identity. They came in droves, tired and hungry. In order to establish why Irish- Americans in the north became a political voice during the Civil War, it’s imperative to understand how they gained a political voice, specifically within the Democratic Party.

The Irish came to America in masses during the early to middle part of the 19th century. The largest and most significant wave of immigration occurred between “the onset of the Famine in 1846 and the death of Parnell in 1891.”⁸ During this period, over three million Irish immigrated to the United States, of which, some of the highest years occurring prior to the Civil War. In the years between 1820 and 1840, approximately 700,000 Irishmen emigrated to the U.S, although this immigration remains important to establishing Irish identity within the U.S the more massive and transformative migration occurred as a result of the Great Famine.⁹

⁷ Brown, Thomas N.. *Irish-American nationalism, 1870-1890*. [1st ed. Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1966. 16

⁸ *Ibid.* 17

⁹ *Ibid.* 18

Catholicism as a part of the Irish Political Identity

As the Irish began to consolidate their political voice with the Democratic Party, there Catholicism became a political issue. In 1800, there were approximately 35,000 Catholics living in the U.S, most of which were located in Maryland; by 1840 that number increased to 663,000 the majority of whom were Irish, and spread throughout the cities on the east coast, with particular focus on Boston and New York.¹⁰

While the growth and spread of Catholicism increasingly tied together the Irish community in terms of heritage, and culture, it also played a part in catalyzing the growth of the Nativist movement. Taking political form as the American Republican party in the 1840's, its platform became rooted in the ideology of "anti-immigrant and anti-Catholic," and "supported both amendments to naturalization laws to prolong the citizenship process and the use of King James Bible in America's public schools."¹¹ Following the breakout of the Mexican- American war, and a strong showing of Irish-American soldiers, the Irish- Catholic press "defended the patriotism of Irish Catholics, contrasting it with war critics, and nativists reluctant to volunteer." This remained significant because, it "promoted and celebrated their communities loyalty to the United States...during a time of war," which by and large set a precedent and used rhetoric that Thomas Meagher would utilize at the outbreak of the Civil War.¹²

¹⁰ Dolan, Jay P.. *The Irish Americans: a history*. New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2008.55

¹¹ Hearne, John M.. *Thomas Francis Meagher: the making of an Irish American*. Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2006. 12-13.

¹² Ibid. 15

The rapid emergence of Catholicism within the context of the Irish political voice effectively framed the Irish as a distinct ethnic group within mid-19th century society. Towards the end of the 1850's the Nativist movement effectively died out. Although, it would remain weak within the American political system, the Irish- Catholic population still remained conscious of the potential for its re-emergence. This ultimately had an effect on how the Irish- Catholic population would process, and perceive their role in the Civil War. By the start of the war, the Catholic population had grown to 3.1 million, and by the end of the war nearly 200,000 Catholics had enlisted, demonstrating a significant turnout, relative to their national demographic.

The Famine and the Growth of an Irish- American Identity

The Famine lasting, from 1847 to 1851, produced massive deaths, and catalyzed an enormous migration to the U.S. The significance within the U.S, and Irish- American relationship to such was “that it very suddenly deluged the urban areas of the American East with great number of indigent Irish Catholics. This massive surge was preceded by over two decades of tension and nativist religious rancor.”¹³ Notably, in 1851, “more than 221,000 entered” the United States. During this immigration the Irish brought with them nearly nothing except for an experience with famine, and political and social persecution. Of those who had immigrated during the Famine, most “preferred the bright lights of the city and needed the employment that it afforded,”¹⁴ as well as the support of the earlier Irish community.

¹³ Levine, Edward M.. *The Irish and Irish politicians; a study of cultural and social alienation*, . Notre Dame [Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1966. 54

¹⁴ Brown, Thomas N.. *Irish-American Nationalism, 1870-1890*. [1st ed. Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1966. 18

Closely associated “to the Irish love of politics was their strong sense of Irish nationalism.” This came as a consequence of famine, social and political persecution, and ultimately “was transplanted to America.”¹⁵ This was a commonality shared by many of the Irish emigrating to the northeast and was rooted in their political persecution under British rule. As they continued to emigrate their voice as a community became increasingly tied to their want, and need for political power.

This political voice stemmed from two significant changes within the northern Irish communities in the north, the transplantation and growth of Catholicism and the mass immigration following the potato famine. These developments focused themselves within the urban areas of the North, particularly New York. These movements which would give the Irish political clout rooted themselves in the neighborhoods such as Five Points.

Five Points became the epicenter of much of the Irish voice that developed in the 1830’s. The infamous neighborhood would come to epitomize the Irish- American community of the north. Many of the Five Pointers, as they have been referred to by historians such as Tyler Anbinder, became some of the first Irish- Americans in New York to involve themselves in, and “experience the new style of mass politics.”¹⁶ By the election of 1834, the majority of the political, and social positions in Five Points, were held by Irish- Catholics.¹⁷ As they gained political and social clout within the sphere of New York City, Five Pointers became some of the first Irish- Catholic New Yorkers to enter the larger political arena. Five Points followed typical Irish- Catholic political tendencies in that the majority of the residents, voted Democrat. From

¹⁵ Ibid. 19

¹⁶ Anbinder, Tyler. *Five Points: the 19th-century New York City Neighborhood that Invented Tap Dance, Stole Elections, and Became the World's Most Notorious Slum*. New York: Free Press, 2001. 144

¹⁷ Ibid. 145

the late 1830's until the Civil War, the neighborhood became dominated by Democratic factions. In fact, "In the twenty years before the Civil War, Whigs and their Republican successors won only a single Sixth Ward political contest, and that only because the Democrats in that year split their votes among three different candidates."¹⁸

This style of mass politics lent the Irish, given their concentration in the urban areas of the Northeast, a significant amount of political and social clout which appealed to the Democratic Party in the years prior to the Civil War. Their rise as a constituency partly resulted from their physical mass, as a part of society, but also remained relevant to the rise in nativism within the political atmosphere of the U.S. Despite attempts by Daniel O'Connell to relate opposition to American slavery to the Irish cause, by the 1840's the Irish had aligned themselves with the Democratic Party, who remained anti-black.¹⁹ The Democratic Party provided the Irish with a political outlet for which they could leverage their communal interests across society; freed slaves might impede a job market, which already offered limited opportunities

The Famine, and the Establishment of the Irish American in the Political Arena

This movement into the cities during the late 1840's, and urban areas of the northeast, catalyzed a political movement characterized by nativism. The fear stemmed from a perceived invasion of the Irish-Catholic's into the political and social hierarchy of "native" Americans. This fear manifested itself in the emergence of the Know-Nothing party in 1854.²⁰ The surge

¹⁸ Ibid. 148

¹⁹ Dolan, Jay P.. *The Irish Americans: A History*. New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2008. 53

²⁰ Levine, Edward M.. *The Irish and Irish Politicians; a Study of Cultural and Social Alienation*,. Notre Dame [Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1966. 63

accounted for the Irish participation in urban politics, as well as for their arrival as a major force in the Democratic Party.²¹

The “Great Famine” caused two fundamental changes in the way that the Irish would be perceived in the U.S, both by their own community and those outside of it. The famine catalyzed a level of immigration to the United States that was unprecedented to this point. The sheer volume of Irish immigrating forced the rapid formation of communities within east coast cities. A number of stereotypes emerged as a consequence. The first stereotype that emerged tied itself closely to the nativism movement in that it depicted the Irish as being exclusively Catholic. Within the tradition of 19th century nativism, Catholicism reflected that of foreign cultures, and identities, as it remained most common in the U.S to be born Protestant. Following the late 1840’s Catholicism “became most identified with the Irish.”²² The second stereotype related to citizenship caused the Irish in the north who earlier in the 19th century would have been perceived as American citizens, to now be looked at as a second class citizen of “an inferior race incompatible with the American nationality.”²³

This perception in the United States can also be attributed to the Nativist movement. Although, “Anti- Catholic prejudice had run through the United States since the colonial days,” it was not until the Irish immigration to the United States in the 19th century when the prejudice became exacerbated.²⁴ The Irish population had grown to nearly 4,000,000 by 1850, and

²¹ Ibid. 54

²² Levine, Edward M.. *The Irish and Irish Politicians; a Study of Cultural and Social Alienation.* 63

²³ Ibid

²⁴Samito, Christian G.. *Becoming American under fire: Irish Americans, African Americans, and the Politics of Citizenship During the Civil War Era.* Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2009. 17

appeared as if it would continue to grow.²⁵ This inherently strengthened the growing nativist movement, further alienating the Irish from the political sphere. The movement in particular manifested itself within the “debate over Catholic schools, practices, and a growing Catholic demographic presence,” particularly in urban areas, such as New York City.²⁶ As Irish immigration continued to swell through the 1850’s, “Irish populations made up more than 16 percent of Boston and New York City’s populations.”²⁷ The flow of Irish into the urban areas coupled with their already strong tradition of mass politics, made them an ideal political resource; they were heavily “courted by the Democratic Party.”²⁸

With almost no black vote, the Democratic Party needed to establish a new “white” presence within its voting bloc. They ultimately sought this vote out through the Irish- Catholic community in the urban areas of the North, particularly New York City.²⁹ The Irish- Catholic populations in the North became particularly drawn to the Democratic Party following the rise of nativism, and the Famine based immigration, both of which “strengthened Gaelic culture” within the urban Irish communities.³⁰ Furthermore, the Irish were drawn to certain political ideologies espoused by the Democratic Party. In particular, the Democratic Parties “emphasis on natural rights within a government ‘made by the white men, for the benefit of white man’ appealed to Irish Catholics in large part because it cut off questions about their qualifications for

²⁵ McGee, Thomas D. *A History of the Irish Settlers in North America, From the Earliest Period to the Census of 1850*. Baltimore: Genealogical Pub. Co., 1974. 163

²⁶ Samito, Christian G.. *Becoming American under fire: Irish Americans, African Americans, and the Politics of Citizenship During the Civil War Era*. 15

²⁷ Ibid. 16

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Roediger, David R.. *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*. London: Verso, 1991. 140

³⁰ Dolan, Jay P.. *The Irish Americans: A History*. 63

citizenship.”³¹ This worked well within the interests of the Irish- Catholic majority because it gave them legitimacy in terms of citizenship.³²

Because of this ideological link between both the Irish and the Democratic Party, the Irish- Catholics, joined the Democratic Party. This has been attributed to the strength of the ties within the Irish- Catholic community. In fact, most Irish found it impossible to establish and live their lives separate from the communities rooted in the cities where “they would find themselves tagged as Irish and judged according to the prevailing prejudices.” This is not to say that prominent Irish did not speak in opposition to the sentiments of the larger community, but if they did, “they would be made to feel the pull of the Irish- American community.”³³

³² Roediger, David R.. *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*. 144

³³ Brown, Thomas N.. *Irish-American Nationalism, 1870-1890*. 24

Chapter 2

The Early American Political career of Thomas Francis Meagher

Thomas Francis Meagher immigrated to America in 1852 as an exile from Ireland. Having been politically active in the revolutionary Young Irelanders, Meagher already had been exposed to political discourse, and quickly found a foothold in the Irish American communities.³⁴ Upon arriving in New York, Meagher started up his own paper, the *Irish New*, with which he began to draw support for Catholic emancipation

With the nativist movement taking hold in NYC, Meagher, along with other Irish politicians began to become increasingly concerned with establishing a political power in America. Soon allied with the Democratic Party, Meagher utilized nationalism to promote his political career, and draw support from the Irish communities. Irish- American politicians, such as Meagher, became aware of the growing political opposition to the Irish in America, and became concerned with liberating the Irish from Nativism. Later tied this to efforts to free Ireland from British rule.³⁵ Active Irish- American politicians, especially Meagher, attempted to reconcile the interests of Ireland and America. This rhetoric became increasingly important as the nation approached war.

Thomas Francis Meagher soon became a cornerstone figure within Irish-American nationalism. His reasons for fighting were highly publicized before and during the War.

³⁴ Hearne, John M.. *Thomas Francis Meagher: The Making of an Irish American*. Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2006. 134

³⁵ Miller, Kerby A.. *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985. 337

Meagher was infamous before coming to America as a participant and leader of the “...failed Irish uprising of 1848 and his subsequent escape to the United States from British imprisonment.”³⁶ This shaped his view of the United States, as he thought of it as a vessel of freedom, safe from British control. Following “stints as a lawyer, and a newspaper editor... Meagher joined the Union Army, ultimately rising to the rank of brigadier general.”³⁷

Meagher saw his service in terms of both supporting the Union and the Irish community. He clarifies this when he wrote to his wife, “Duty and patriotism prompt me to (support the Union). The Republic that gave us an asylum and an honorable career, -that is the mainstay of human freedom, the world over- is threatened with disruption.”³⁸ He furthered the notion of the Irish cause within the support of the Union when he explains, “...and next to the liberty of Ireland, was the noblest in which an Irish-man can encounter death. Hence this invocation to my countrymen to rise, arm, and strike for the Stars and Stripes.”³⁹ Dual loyalties to both Ireland and the Union, remained to be common amongst those who eventually volunteered to serve in the Union army. As Susannah Ural suggests, “These ties first called them to war and helped them and their communities explain and comprehend the decision to volunteer.”⁴⁰

Thomas Francis Meagher began his American political career, after the death of his first wife, in 1854, upon which he refocused his efforts on his political career. Although his marriage

³⁶ Ural, Susannah J.. *Civil War Citizens: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity in America's Bloodiest Conflict*. New York: New York University Press, 2010. 105

³⁷ Wylie, Paul R.. *The Irish General: Thomas Francis Meagher*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2007. Print.

³⁸ Ural, Susannah J.. *Civil War Citizens: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity in America's Bloodiest Conflict*. New York: New York University Press, 2010. 103

³⁹ Colonel Meagher's Oration on the War: The Irish Brigade for the American Union—The Irish Soldier—His History, Duty and Obligations (News) *The New York Herald* (New York, NY) Monday, October 07, 1861; pg. 8; col D

⁴⁰ Ural, Susannah J.. *Civil War Citizens: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity in America's Bloodiest Conflict*. New York: New York University Press, 2010. 101

to Elizabeth Townsend was not explicitly a political move, the marriage did help to promote his political career. His father-in-law Peter Townsend, who had ties to Tammany Hall, although displeased with the marriage, provided Meagher with connections to Judge Charles Patrick Daly—a Tammany Hall politician, whom encouraged him to continue with his law degree.⁴¹

Following his appointment to the New York bar, Meagher created his own Irish political paper in April of 1856, which was closely identified with the Democratic Party. Although Meagher claimed that the paper echoed the voice of the Irish-Catholic contingency in New York, it mainly functioned as a voice for the New York Democratic Party.⁴² Following the election of Democrat James Buchanan, Meagher began to lobby for a political position within the Democratic Party. As a part of his scheme for appointment, Meagher defended Daniel Sickles, a Tammany Hall congressman from New York.

Daniel Sickles, had been charged with the murder of his wife's lover, who happened to be the son of Francis Scott Key. As a favor to the Democratic Party, Meagher was able to successfully gain Sickles' acquittal on an account of temporary insanity.⁴³ Although, it appeared to Meagher that the case would give him clout within party politics, it ultimately failed to bolster his career, both in law, and politics. Failing to gain political clout through the trial, Meagher departed for Costa Rica, during which he attempted to “explore financial business opportunities.”⁴⁴

⁴¹ Hearne, John M.. *Thomas Francis Meagher: The Making of an Irish American*. Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2006. 137

⁴² Ibid. 144

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

The Sickles trial- a failure in Meagher's eye's, still remains significant his career for a number of reasons. First, and foremost, it established a connection that would promote his rise to the commanding officer of the Irish Brigade. First, it established him as an appendage of the Democratic machine in NY. Secondly it established a trend in Meagher's political career; he was willing to do favors for political parties, if they would further his political career. Both of these tendencies become important to why he took the position of commanding officer for the Irish Brigade, and moreover why he became politically appealing as such.

Upon his return from Costa Rica to New York City in January of 1861, Meagher re-entered a volatile political climate, one that was soon to be entrenched in a Civil War. The political strife in the U.S had a significant impact upon the New York Irish community. In April alone, over 500 Irishmen enlisted in the 69th New York militia- commanded by "the well known Fenian Colonel Michael Corcoran."⁴⁵ Shortly following his enlistment in the 69th New York, Meagher delivered one of his most influential speeches- 'The Irish Soldier. His History and Present Duty to the American Republic,' one that began to set him up as a political representative of the Irish Brigade. Within the speech he made two important statements that depicted him as the ideal symbol for the Irish- American community within the north.

Drawing on the forging of Irish and American nationalism he claimed that it was his duty to not only America but also Ireland. This was a fairly common sentiment in the Irish American communities at the start of the War, as they saw the south as threatening the existence of their own freedoms.⁴⁶ In his speech, he laid out many of the reasons for why he decided to fight, as

⁴⁵ Ibid. 145

⁴⁶ Ural, Susannah J.. *Civil War Citizens: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity in America's Bloodiest Conflict*. New York: New York University Press, 2010.

well as the reasons for the Irish community to not only support Lincoln, but the War itself. The first, and most important message conveyed was that he remained a Democrat, and a Unionist. He maintained that although he had not voted for Lincoln, he was still legitimately elected to the office of the President of the United States, therefore making the secession illegal.⁴⁷ He made this explicit as he stated:

In a word, we find that there is not one substantial reason or pretext for this revolution...How unnatural this war! How infamous! How horrible! But who began it? Does not South Carolina stand this day in the presence of all that blood which is rising up from the fields and woods of Virginia?⁴⁸

His remarks regarding the unprovoked actions of the South stand as a testament to his position regarding the Union. Despite his Democratic roots, he saw the Union as a legitimate government, who had provided opportunity for the Irish who had immigrated to America, and had established a communal identity. He noted his appreciation for the opportunity provided to him - and his fellow Irish- Americans in the latter part of his speech:

Hence it is that I have appeared in arms for the National Government; and hence it is that I have already and do invoke my countrymen to take up arms in the same righteous cause...I will not remind them that when driven from their own land, when their huts were pulled down or burned above their heads... Irishmen came here and had a new life infused into them, a fertile soil beneath their feet... I will not remind my countrymen of the sympathy and substantial aid

⁴⁷ Hearne, John M.. *Thomas Francis Meagher: The Making of an Irish American*. 146

⁴⁸ Lyons, W. F.. *Brigadier-General Thomas Francis Meagher: His Political and Military Career; with Selections from his Speeches and Writings*.. New York: D. & J. Sadlier & Co., 1870. 97

which the people of America have given them... this is the only country where the Irish people can reconstruct themselves and become a power.⁴⁹

Evident in his eloquent address, Meagher constructed two important motives for Irish-Americans in the North, with regards to enlisting in the war effort. First he reminded them of their origins, and political strife in Ireland, but more importantly he developed the notion that, while they came to America with very little, Irishmen were given opportunity through the politics of the Union to become American, and develop a new identity as both Irish and American. He takes this ideology a step further as he laid out, the terms for which the Irish could further their Irish heritage, and their American citizenship through fighting for the Union, and moreover paying a debt to a country which had, as he saw it, given them increased freedom and opportunity. He made this Irish- American duty basic to the final minutes of his speech as he noted:

Then up, Irishmen! Up! Take the sword in hand! Down to the banks of the Potomac! Let those who can, do so; and I believe I speak consistently with the views of your esteemed Chief Magistrate, when I say that every facility will be accorded those Irishmen who wish to enlist under the banner of the State; and I have no doubt that, somehow or other-indeed with every facility- the Irishmen regimented together, carrying the green flag with the Stars and Stripes and the State arms, will one day find themselves in the Irish Brigade... therefore wishes that, should he fall, it may be into the arms of one of his own faith and blood...that he died in a way worthy, not only of the cause in which he fell, but of the country that gave him birth.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Ibid. 103

⁵⁰ Ibid. 118

Meagher made it explicit that he expected Irishmen, particularly those who had been driven from Ireland, to volunteer, and re-establish the Irish community on the battlefield, while simultaneously furthering their Irish heritage. Moreover, Meagher “placed this culture within an American context and emphasized an American allegiance alongside support for Irish nationalism.⁵¹

The significance of the speech remained not so much in the rhetoric, but in the community that he persuaded to accept a singular identity, that is the Irish- Americans of the North. As we will see in Peter Welsh, these sentiments were reflected by soldiers within the Irish Brigade, during the early part of the war, as they too, saw themselves as representatives of the larger northern Irish- American community.

This remains to be one of the main reasons that Meagher appealed to Lincoln as a political general. Originally, Meagher acted as a recruiting officer for the brigade as he envisioned a unit that could identify as being explicitly Irish. His vision, although rooted in patriotic principles, such as duty, and obligation to their adopted country, appealed to Lincoln because the Irish community by that time was rooted within the Democratic Party, a party which of course opposed Lincoln. Furthermore, the Irish- Catholic community in the North, remained hesitant to fully support Lincoln as the president of the U.S. Meagher, having established himself as both an orator, politician and leader of the Irish- Catholic community both in America and Ireland represented the ideal leader of the brigade⁵². Meagher, as the visible leader of such a unit

⁵¹ Samito, Christian G.. *Becoming American Under Fire: Irish Americans, African Americans, and the Politics of Citizenship During the Civil War Era*. 52

⁵² Ural, Susannah J.. *Civil War Citizens: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity in America's Bloodiest Conflict*. 103

would act as a political asset in that he naturally reconciled the notions of Union cause and support with a community that identified as Democrat.

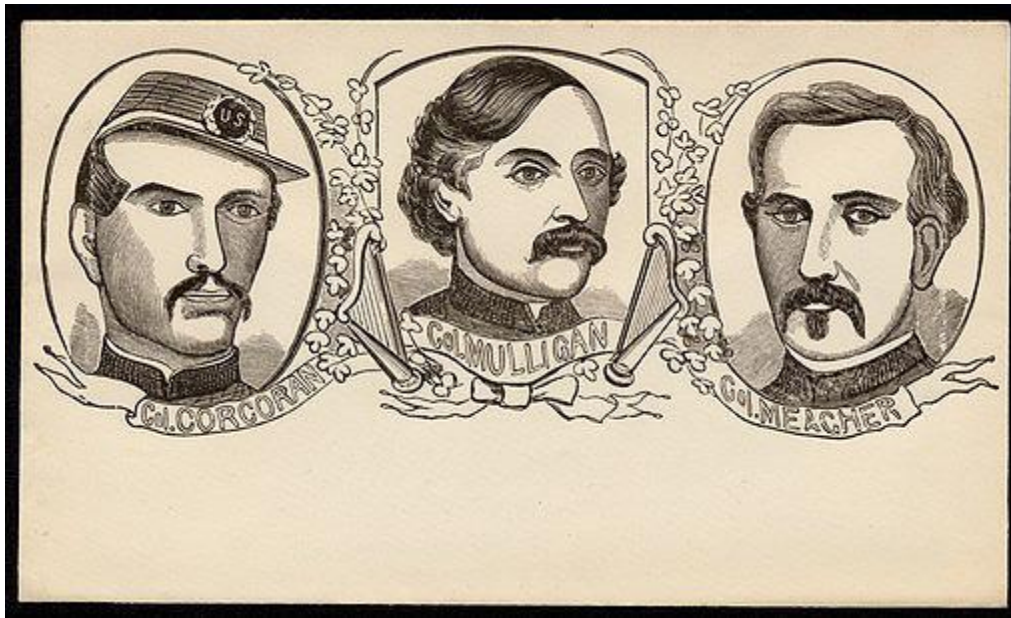
Chapter 3

T.F Meagher: Brigadier General- Irish Brigade

Although Meagher had no credible military experience, his ability to sway the minds and the heart of his audience through orating, and his political connections to Tammany Hall, coupled with his ethnic and social roots in the New York Irish community gave him an adequate background as a political ally at the start of the Civil War. Meagher's variety of political and social connections, made him the "leading figure in New York's Irish Catholic community."⁵³ As many Democrats during the War supported the Southern cause, and since Meagher identified as such, he found himself publicly reconciling the two ideologies; that of the being an Irish Democrat and supporting the Union cause. He articulated his reconciliation within the context of Irish duty and patriotism to both, America- too which he often called Ireland's adopted country, and that of Ireland.

Lincoln's decision to appoint Meagher as commanding officer of the Irish Brigade was a political decision that remained, during the earlier portion of the war to be well calculated. This remains evident for a number of reasons; some of which remained relevant to his political and social connections within New York, but more so to do with his social clout amongst the Irish-American community. Given the tendency of the urban Irish- American communities to follow the ideologies of the Democratic Party, this established Meagher as a political ally in the Union Army.

⁵³ Ural, Susannah J.. *Civil War Citizens: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity in America's Bloodiest Conflict*. 103



(Col. Meagher, Pictured as Commanding Officer of the 69th New York)

Following his service in the 69th at Bull Run, Meagher received a recommendation from Archbishop John Hughes of New York for his promotion to General. Despite being well-connected especially with William Seward, Hughes's recommendation did not weigh heavily enough until Meagher returned to recruit for the Irish Brigade in New York and Boston. Following the recruitment efforts, Meagher "convinced three thousand Irishmen to enlist."⁵⁴ All of Meagher's recruitment was conducted under the belief that James Shields would be appointed to the command. However when Shields declined the command, "several officers of the Irish Brigade," and politicians like "Preston King, and Frank Blair Jr., urged his appointment."⁵⁵

In the Lincoln papers in the library of Congress, there remains an example of the letters written on behalf of Meagher. In the letter on record entitled 'Reasons why Colonel Thomas Francis Meagher should be appointed Brigadier General of the Irish Brigade, the anonymous

⁵⁴ Work, David. *Lincoln's Political Generals*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009. 23

⁵⁵ Ibid

author, who presumably was well connected given the direct correspondence with Lincoln, and educated given the penmanship, lobbied for Meagher's appointment. In doing so he listed several reasons:

First: When the Proclamation calling for 75,000 men to serve for three months was issued by your Excellency, Thomas Francis Meagher at once responded to that call, raised a military Company in the City of New York...⁵⁶

This remained to be Meagher's largest contribution to the Union cause, as he enabled, and catalyzed support for the War within the Irish urban communities who "hesitated to fully support President Lincoln."⁵⁷ By and large, Meagher's recommendations reflected the nature of his political and social clout.

Second: At this time a large majority of Irishmen who from previous political associations, still sympathized with the South, hesitated as to what course they should pursue. Stimulated by the example of Thomas Francis Meagher, they... clung to the flag of their adopted country, formed Companies and regiments of Irishmen and in a short time, many thousands of them in New York... where Irishmen had by an intolerant bigotry been insultingly deprived of arms, they forgot the previous insult, clung to the national Cause and Government with a fidelity never excelled⁵⁸

Meagher's supporters utilized the notion that he had recruited, and in some ways persuaded Irishmen within New York City and Boston to enlist in the Irish Brigade despite having sympathies with the Southern cause. This depicted Thomas Francis Meagher as a

⁵⁶ The Abraham Lincoln Papers at the Library of Congress. Series 1. General Correspondence. 1833-1916. Thomas F. Meagher, January 1862

⁵⁷ Ural, Susannah J.. *Civil War Citizens: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity in America's Bloodiest Conflict*. New York: New York University Press, 2010. 103

⁵⁸ The Abraham Lincoln Papers at the Library of Congress. Series 1. General Correspondence

political asset as he had not only recruited Irish- Americans to the Irish Brigade, but he had also organized the unit under a common ideology. The final reason that holds significance within the letter, established Meagher as the natural leader, and ultimate figurehead of the brigade:

Sixth: He has by his personal influence, his brilliant- eloquence, his increasing exertions raised this brigade, to a great- extent- at his Own expense. It is emphatically his brigade. His name never can be separated from it. He conceived it, he brought it forth and nursed it with tender care There is no living man so capable of preserving, guiding and directing it. ⁵⁹

The writer, echoed a notion that was shared by many of the officers of the newly formed brigade, as well as other prominent congressman and senators. Although the writer remains anonymous, his correspondence to Lincoln in early 1862 still suggests that other prominent figures recognized that Meagher would be the ideal General for the Irish Brigade, and these reasons were outside the scope of military expertise.

Although these sentiments were reflected in large part by Meagher, at the beginning of the war, by 1863 they would be completely transformed, as the War changed course, and meaning; effectively catalyzing the 1863 New York draft riots.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

Chapter 4

Peter Welsh and William Corby- The Common Man and the Catholic Priest

Although, Thomas Francis Meagher remained to be the most significant figure within the Irish- American community within the context of the Civil War, understanding why the Irish Brigade became politically, and socially important would remain incomplete without developing the culture of the Brigade itself. James McPherson's *For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War* maintains that soldiers' motivations for fighting were firmly "rooted in the homes and communities from which they sprang."⁶⁰ The letters, and diaries of soldiers shed light on their values, communities, and most importantly give definition to their communal identity. However, for the Irish this becomes problematic because "foreign born soldiers are substantially underrepresented."⁶¹ McPherson condensed a number of diaries, letters, memoirs, and documents in order to convey the reasons for why men joined the war effort. This paper, on the other hand, utilizes the letters, and memoirs of Peter Welsh and Chaplain William Corby to identify the community of the Irish Brigade, as well as to establish that Meagher's sentiments were in fact echoed by the common foot soldier within the Irish unit.

The letters and diaries of Peter Welsh and Chaplain William Corby lend significant contribution to these notions. Both individuals demonstrate a strong understanding, and consciousness of the community on and off the battlefield. Peter Welsh represents the experience of the common foot soldier in the Irish Brigade. In his correspondence to his wife, he articulated both why he joined the Northern cause, and also the community of the Irish Brigade. Similarly

⁶⁰ McPherson, James M.. *For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.5

⁶¹ Ibid.

Chaplain William Corby served in the Irish Brigade as a Catholic priest. His role as such, represented the Catholic identity of the soldiers, an identity that became synonymous with being Irish. Their accounts remain significant to the political, and social clout of the Brigade as they re-affirm the identity of both the Irish Brigade as it reflected the Irish- American community of the North.

Peter Welsh represented a typical run-of-the- mill soldier within the Irish Brigade. He enlisted in the 28th Massachusetts on 3 September 1862, which officially joined the Irish Brigade on November 30 of that year.⁶² Similarly to other Irish in the Brigade, Welsh viewed the unit as a place where the Irish- American community could prosper, and supported the notion that Irish- Americans in the brigade often reflected the ideals of the larger community as well as its leaders. That said, it is important to note that while Welsh was a foot soldier, who would hold little significance in the large political voice of the Irish community, he did indeed reflect the sentiments of Meagher. There were certainly other Irish who did not. His ideas of service within this context however do signify that Meagher's political and social proclamations, and reasons for Irish service did resonate within the ranks.

Peter Welsh offers a well-developed explanation of his community, why he fought, and his relationship to America.⁶³ The community Welsh represented were the first generation Irish immigrants within the Union. Although Welsh supported the authority of the President, the Irish community as a whole was hesitant to back the President. For one, they thought there were far

⁶² Welsh, Peter, and Lawrence Frederick Kohl. *Irish green and Union blue the Civil War letters of Peter Welsh, color sergeant, 28th Regiment, Massachusetts Volunteers*. New York: Fordham University Press, 1986. 3

⁶³ Welsh, Peter, and Lawrence Frederick Kohl. *Irish Green and Union Blue the Civil War Letters of Peter Welsh, Color Sergeant, 28th Regiment, Massachusetts Volunteers*. New York: Fordham University Press, 1986. Print. 3

too many Irish being killed in what they saw to be Lincoln's war, and secondly some saw parallels between the position of the Irish in the North and the Anglo-Irish relationship.⁶⁴

This presented a unique set of circumstances for Welsh, namely because he remained a proponent of the Union cause. Although Welsh may have differed from the larger Irish community in this one regard, he still shared a similar Irish identity. The Irish Brigade had a Catholic Priest, carried an Irish flag, and celebrated St. Patrick's Day. Welsh embodied the notion of being Irish and American as he carried the Irish flag for the brigade.⁶⁵ He defended his identity fervently in Irish- American terms. This was demonstrated when he wrote to his father-in-law:

In this country it is very different Here we have a free government just laws and a Constitution which gauarentees equal rights and privileges to all. Here thousands of the sons and daughters of Irland have come to seek refuge from tyranny and persecution at home. And thousands still continue to come. Here they have an open field for industry And those who possess the abilitys can raise themselves to positions of honor and emolument. Here Irishmen and their decendents have a claim a stake in the nation and an interest in its prosperity. Irishmen... have rushed by thousands to the call of their adopted country in the present unfortunate struggle... They had a vital interest in the preservation of our national existence the perpetuation of our institutions and the free and untrammled exicution of our laws... We have the same national political and social interests at stake not only for our-selves but for coming generations and the oppressed of every nation for America was a comon asylum for all.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Ibid. 6

⁶⁵ Ibid. 83

⁶⁶ Ibid. 100- 101. Spelling as in the original.

It was in this sense that he was similar to Meagher. They both fought the war for the Union, and their Irish community. Furthermore, they saw the Union army as a place where Irish heritage could be furthered, through the fighting of the war. But more importantly, they were both able to reconcile, and articulate the Northern cause in Irish- American terms.

Chaplain William Corby represented the Catholic facet of the Irish- American community in the North. Although the “Roman Catholic Church took no official stand on the war,”⁶⁷ Corby felt that he had a duty to join the Army of the Potomac. For three years, Corby volunteered with the 88th New York- a company in the Irish Brigade. His presence within the Irish Brigade, as well as his memoirs remain significant because they confirm the presence of Catholicism within the Irish unit, as an extension of the Irish- American community.

Chaplain William Corby’s mere presence in the Irish Brigade remained relevant and significant as a part of the larger Irish- American community. As a part of the recruiting scheme for the Irish Brigade, those who volunteered, were promised at the minimum one priest per regiment. This recruiting angle, as invoked by Meagher, catered directly to the Irish- American community as Catholicism had become such a significant part of their identity and as a consequence, “at no time during the war was the Irish Brigade without the services of at least one priest.”⁶⁸ Furthermore the notion of the presence of a priest in terms of recruiting, suggests that the recruiting scheme focused on extending the Irish- American community onto the battlefield. It remained clear, that “there is no doubt that the combination of Catholicism and Irishness was

⁶⁷Corby, William, and Lawrence Frederick Kohl. *Memoirs of Chaplain Life Three Years with the Irish Brigade in the Army of the Potomac*. New York: Fordham University Press, 1992. xxvi

⁶⁸ Callaghan, Daniel M.. *Thomas Francis Meagher and the Irish Brigade in the Civil War*. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co., 2006. 56

prominent, not only in the perception of, but also in the public face of the Brigade.”⁶⁹ This supported the idea that Meagher wanted an Irish presence within the theatre of war, and he explicitly wanted that unit represent the community of the Irish-Catholic as it remained off the battlefield. In addition to keeping “up the Christian fervor of their men by celebrating mass and hearing confessions,”⁷⁰ the priests also functioned as a medium of communication between the typical Irish soldier, and their families. Chaplain Corby often acted in this role as he stated:

Frequently, also, some good soldier, who had not the time or the facilities for writing, requested the priest to do so for him... Hundreds of such letters passed home-ward, and in time the dear ones would write to the chaplains of the brigade, asking for more information⁷¹

Potentially the most important role that the priest played in the Irish Brigade was that of the typical military Chaplain. This also remained obvious to Corby as he noted:

The Catholic soldier is glad to find a priest in the army, or even to see one on the distance, and it always gives him new courage. It is an inestimable privilege for him to make his confession, receive Holy Communion, and attend Mass, especially when it may be for the last time. Soldiers thus prepared go into battle full of courage and confidence. I had the occasion to go down to the landing where the hospital was located, several miles from camp. Here I met a cavalry soldier who had no seen a priest since he entered the army... He made preparations at once, dropping down on his knees on the ground... From that moment he seemed to have new life and courage.⁷²

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Corby, William, and Lawrence Frederick Kohl. *Memoirs of Chaplain Life Three Years with the Irish Brigade in the Army of the Potomac*. New York: Fordham University Press, 1992. 57

⁷¹ Ibid

⁷² Ibid. 43

Peter Welsh and Chaplain William Corby remained significant to the community of the Irish Brigade, as they both reflect the intentions and the sentiments that were disseminated by the leading figures, and officers of the Brigade, namely Thomas Meagher. This remains significant in constructing the Irish unit as a political body because, it proves that one, Meagher's speeches and words did not fall on closed ears, and two, the presence of Catholic Chaplains substantiates the notion that the Brigade would function as a place for the Irish-American to further their heritage.

Chapter 5

The Resignation of T.F Meagher and the “Death” of the Irish Brigade

By the end of 1863 the idea that became the Irish Brigade had effectively died. Although there were still Irishmen left to fight, and fill the ranks of the unit, their losses at Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville had nearly cut the ranks in half, leaving the Irish unit with very few officers, and even less manpower.

Following the battle of Fredericksburg, Meagher would never be the same. Just prior to the battle, the ranks only accounted for one third of the original number recruited by Meagher. Immediately following the battle, “Meagher reported that less than 300 men could be accounted for. Although this figure would rise to over 500 as stragglers and wounded men returned, the Brigade was really no more than a small sized regiment, and in serious danger of being disbanded.”⁷³ With the old Irish battle flags torn to the point of being unserviceable, Meagher ordered new flags from the War Department. Upon their arrival, after the battle, Meagher in a melodramatic fashion requested that the flags be returned to New York, until he was allowed to return and recruit the Irish unit back to strength.⁷⁴ In addition to the lackluster numbers and beaten flags, Meagher’s reputation had taken a hit during the battle, as there were numerous accounts of him retreating to the rear midway through the charge. As the charges began to mount, Meagher filed a report, in which he had a surgeon note that his left knee had been suffering from a “Furunculous Abscess.”⁷⁵

⁷³ Callaghan, Daniel M.. *Thomas Francis Meagher and the Irish Brigade in the Civil War*. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co., 2006. 132

⁷⁴ Ibid. 136

⁷⁵ Ibid. 134

Meagher's questionable retreat, coupled with the depleted numbers of his explicitly Irish unit, left the War Department questioning whether Meagher should return to New York to revamp the ranks of the Brigade.

After numerous requests, all of which were either ignored, denied, or deferred, Meagher returned from leave and rejoined the Irish Brigade in time for the battle of Chancellorsville.⁷⁶ The battle of Chancellorsville would be the last time that Meagher would be associated with the title commanding officer of the Irish Brigade.⁷⁷ Following the battle the Irish Brigade had been reduced to just 400 men and on May 19, 1863, Meagher's resignation from the Brigade was accepted by Lincoln and delivered to him in a once sentence reply stating, "Your resignation has been accepted by the President of the United States, to take effect this day."⁷⁸ Following his resignation, Meagher on June 16, 1863, wrote to the War Department requesting an assignment as a recruiter in New York City to which again he was referred to the Governor of New York.⁷⁹ Although, the record does not show evidence of a denial from the Governor, Meagher would never return to New York on recruiting duty. Following the battle of Fredericksburg, Meagher's public appeal much like the number of the Irish Brigade itself, had been significantly depleted⁸⁰.

Although the war was changing its course with the release of the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863, and the draft riots taking hold in New York, the War Department still considered Meagher's support to be a political asset. However, his presence as

⁷⁶ Ibid. 136

⁷⁷ Ibid. 148

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Abraham Lincoln Papers at the Library of Congress. Transcribed and Annotated by the Lincoln Studies Center, Knox College. Galesburg, Illinois. Thomas F. Meagher to Abraham Lincoln, Tuesday, June 16, 1863 (Telegram offering to raise Irish troops)

⁸⁰ Callaghan, Daniel M.. *Thomas Francis Meagher and the Irish Brigade in the Civil War*. 137

a recruiter and a commanding officer of the Irish Brigade was considered to be a political liability. Therefore, Meagher still remained within the political calculations of the War Department as they believed that “he was too significant as a symbol of Irish commitment to the Union to allow him to quit.”⁸¹ Not until February 24, 1865, did Thomas Francis Meagher resign from the Union army. Long before his resignation, the Irish Brigade had collapsed as a vehicle for Irish- American identity. During his tenure as both a recruiter for the Irish Brigade, and as the commanding officer, Thomas Francis Meagher became the cornerstone figure for the Irish unit, and through his speeches, he gave it significant political and social clout. By 1863, the unit effectively disbanded and was largely considered to be a political liability.

James McPherson’s *For Cause and Comrade: Why Men Fought in the Civil War*, outlines the reasons for why the typical “white” soldier fought during the war. Although thorough, his account fails to explain why the Irish soldier fought. This gap in the research has been attributed to the lack of literacy within units such as the Irish Brigade. As a consequence, it has not been until recently that historians such as Susannah Ural, Daniel Callaghan, Christian Samito and David Work have done serious scholarship with regards to the Irish- American community during the war. Although well regarded, they still fail to emphasize the social context and explain how it feeds into the political framework of the Irish unit.

This paper makes a contribution to the literature by establishing the formation of the Irish community in the North, and explaining through the speeches of Thomas Meagher, the letters of Peter Welsh, and the memoirs of Chaplain William Corby how the community manifested itself within the Irish Brigade. More specifically, it argues that because of a strong communal

⁸¹ Work, David. *Lincoln's Political Generals*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009. 120

identity, the Irish Brigade as formed and commanded by Thomas Francis Meagher, became a political asset within the Union army and by early 1863 a political liability.

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