

THOMAS FRANCIS MEAGHER AND JOHN MITCHEL:  
TWO IRISHMEN, TWO IRISH-AMERICANS, ONE AMERICAN

by

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## PROLOGUE

When John Mitchel first met Thomas Francis Meagher in Dublin in the fall of 1845, he was not impressed: “To me, at first, he seemed merely a foppish young gentleman, with an accent decidedly English.”<sup>1</sup> But when he heard Meagher speak admirably of the recently deceased Irish nationalist Thomas Davis, Mitchel began to change his mind: “In speaking of Davis, his Lancastershire accent seemed to subside; and I could perceive, behind the factitious intonations of Cockaigne, the genuine roll of the melodious Munster tongue.”<sup>2</sup> Meagher was indeed a Munster native but had been schooled most recently in England. One morning, the two met at the offices of the *Nation*, the organ of the Young Ireland nationalist movement, and decided to take a long walk into the countryside.<sup>3</sup> It was the beginning of a lifelong friendship that would endure for more than two decades and be kindled on no less than three continents.

Mitchel and Meagher were both exiled from their native Ireland after the former was convicted of inciting revolution and the latter found guilty of carrying it out. Deposited by British authorities in Van Diemen’s Land (now Tasmania), they both escaped to the United States in the early 1850s and eventually became American citizens. The Civil War, however, found them on opposite sides.

Indeed, on the morning of December 13, 1862, as Meagher, a brigadier general in the Union Army and the commander of its famous Irish Brigade, stood in the streets of Fredericksburg, Virginia preparing his men to launch what would become one of the most heroic charges in American military history, Mitchel, then serving as the editor of

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Robert G. Athearn, *Thomas Francis Meagher: An Irish Revolutionary in America* (Boulder: University of Colorado Press, 1949), 3.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Thomas Keneally, *The Great Shame and the Triumph of the Irish in the English-Speaking World* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 100.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

the *Daily Richmond Enquirer*, was, unbeknownst to Meagher, sitting at a campfire having breakfast with two of his three Confederate soldier sons on Marye's Heights, overlooking Fredericksburg, about a mile-and-a-half from Meagher's troops.<sup>4</sup> Within hours, the Mitchel boys' Rebel comrades would open up on the charging Irish Brigade and reduce it to a fraction of its former size. As it turned out, the Confederate unit that inflicted the most damage on Meagher's brigade was General Thomas Cobb's Georgia Brigade, a heavily Irish outfit. This tragic irony was not lost on Cobb's Irish soldiers, one of whom reportedly lamented as Meagher's men began their heroic charge into the heavily fortified Confederate position, "Oh, God, what a pity! Here comes Meagher's fellows!"<sup>5</sup>

What had led to this bizarre and macabre scene in which Irish-American was killing Irish-American and in which Mitchel's sons were fighting Meagher's men? Surely, neither Meagher nor Mitchel could have foreseen such a frightful day coming when they first met in 1845. But then, they could not have foreseen the Great Potato Famine that would devastate their native land, starving hundreds of thousands of their countrymen and causing millions more to emigrate, many to America. They could not have foreseen that the Famine would exacerbate the incipient split between the political forces of Old Ireland and New Ireland that would ultimately lead Mitchel into advocating a rebellion in print and Meagher into organizing one in the countryside. Exiled in Van Diemen's Land, they could not, at first, have entertained serious thoughts of escape to the young American republic and, once miraculously there, could have not foreseen the adventures and misadventures that awaited them in the years following their arrival.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 373.

<sup>5</sup> Daniel M. Callaghan, *Thomas Francis Meagher and the Irish Brigade in the Civil War* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co., 2006), 127.

While an American civil war was a distinct possibility given the simmering sectional strife of the 1850s, certainly neither Mitchel nor Meagher could have imagined its scope, length, and devastation, of which Meagher would suffer vicariously through the deaths of his soldiers and Mitchel would suffer directly through the deaths of two of his own sons and the maiming of his third. Nor, in looking ahead from the Battle of Fredericksburg could Mitchel or Meagher have predicted with surety who would win the Civil War and when, much less what would become of their lives afterwards. Nor could they have anticipated their deaths, with Meagher drowning in a river in Montana and Mitchel dying in his boyhood home after triumphantly returning to Ireland and being elected to Parliament on his deathbed after promising as a final form of protest not to serve if so elected.

When Meagher died in 1867, he was the acting governor of the Montana Territory. He thus died in the service of his adopted country. Moreover, he did so proudly. Meagher's experiences in the States in the fifteen years preceding his death, including his service as the founder and first commander of one of the most heralded Union military units in the Civil War, had made him a proud American. A personally ambitious and talented man, he dreamed the American Dream and believed in the Land of Opportunity. Though he never reached the levels of fame and fortune that he desired before his untimely death, there is no doubt that he would have remained an American and continued to strive for his goals had he lived longer. Beyond any cause or principle, Meagher believed in himself and America was made for people like him.

Mitchel, on the other hand, would never become an American. Realizing in the 1850s that the Northern way of life, which he despised, represented the future of America

much more than did the Old South, he moved down South, defended slavery, and urged secession. After serving and sacrificing much for the Confederacy, his refusal to let that lost cause rest after Appomattox led to his arrest and imprisonment. Freed by political pressure exerted by Irish-American nationalists, he fittingly spent his last few years pining, longing, and fighting for an independent Ireland. Animated by that cause and motivated by a nearly pathological hatred of Great Britain that was the flip side of his love for Ireland, Mitchel lived not for himself but for the land of his birth. America had not changed him like it had Meagher. He had no home but Erin.

## CHAPTER ONE: *From the Old Sod to Young Ireland*

Though both John Mitchel and Thomas Francis Meagher were born in Ireland and were well educated, nearly all similarities in their early lives end there. They were born in vastly different parts of the Emerald Isle and raised in different religions by families of immensely different means. Moreover, Meagher was indisputably of “Irish” or “Gaelic” stock; his ancestors had inhabited Ireland for centuries.<sup>1</sup> Mitchel, on the other hand, most likely descended from Presbyterian Covenanters who had fled from Scotland.<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, Mitchel’s father, the Reverend John Mitchel, was a Presbyterian minister who was pastoring a small church near Dungiven, County Derry, in the province of Ulster, when Mitchel was born there on November 3, 1815. Mitchel would be the first of six surviving children born to the Reverend Mitchel and his devoutly Presbyterian wife, Mary Haslet Mitchel. In 1819, the Reverend Mitchel moved his family to the county seat of Derry where he co-pastored a church until 1823, when he was given his own pastorate in Newry in County Down. Mitchel would always consider Newry his home and the formative years he spent there were among his happiest.<sup>3</sup>

They were not the happiest years for his father as theological differences between “Old Light” and “New Light” Presbyterian ministers in northern Ireland came to a head during the 1820s. “New Light” ministers, such as Reverend Mitchel, believed strongly in the congregational form of church government as well as the right to interpret the Bible personally in accordance with one’s conscience. In contrast, the “Old Lights” sought to

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Cavanagh, *Memoirs of General Thomas Francis Meagher* (Worcester, Mass.: The Messenger Press, 1892), 9-12.

<sup>2</sup> Bryan P. McGovern, “John Mitchel: Irish Nationalist and Southern Secessionist in Mid-Nineteenth Century America” (Ph.D. diss., University of Missouri, 2003), 15, 188-189. As McGovern notes, Mitchel vociferously claimed, even against one of his sisters, that their family was actually Irish and that “Mitchel” was a shortened derivation of “McGillamichael” and “McMichael.”

<sup>3</sup> Aidan Hegarty, *John Mitchel: A Cause Too Many* (Belfast: Camalane Press, 2005), 15-16.



impose a form of doctrinal orthodoxy upon all Irish Presbyterian ministers by getting them to subscribe to the Westminster Confession, a statement of doctrines that included belief in the Holy Trinity. Many “New Lights,” including Mitchel’s father, not only did not believe in the Trinity but opposed, as a matter of principle, the Presbyterian Synod of Ulster’s efforts to force ministers to subscribe to *any* particular doctrine. Consequently, in 1829, the “New Lights,” now calling themselves “Remonstrants,” seceded from the Ulster Synod and formed their own Remonstrant Synod of Ulster.<sup>4</sup>

This schism was about more than theology, according to Professor Robert Mahony, who argues that “Old Light” leader Henry Cooke was intent on forming an alliance with the established Protestant Church of Ireland to oppose Irish Catholic leader Daniel O’Connell’s campaign for increased political rights for Catholics. By imposing Trinitarianism on all Presbyterians, Cooke would make his church a more appealing partner for Anglicans. “New Lights” who refused to cooperate with this scheme were denigrated as “papists,” an accusation that particularly galled the Reverend Mitchel who noted in a published sermon that he and his schismatic colleagues, by defending the right of believers to interpret the Scriptures as they see fit, were truly standing up for “the most consistently Protestant of beliefs,” while the “Old Lights” were actually exhibiting the “spirit of Popery” by imposing doctrines on believers through a “virtual claim of infallibility.”<sup>5</sup>

Though he disagreed with Catholics on theological matters, the Reverend Mitchel supported their quest for civil and political rights. Shortly after O’Connell succeeded in

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<sup>4</sup> Robert Mahony, “‘New Light’ Ulster Presbyterianism and the Nationalist Rhetoric of John Mitchel” in *Rebellion and Remembrance in Modern Ireland*, ed. Laurence M. Geary (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2001), 150-153.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 153-154.

getting Parliament to “emancipate” Catholics in 1829 so that they could stand for public office, an election was held in Newry between a Catholic and a member of the ruling Protestant Ascendancy. Though his congregation urged him to publicly back the Protestant candidate, the Reverend Mitchel refused as a matter of principle to do so, hoping to strike a blow for tolerance in the polity as he had tried to do in his church. After failing to oppose the Catholic candidate, Mitchel’s father was given the derogatory sobriquet of “Papist Mitchel.”<sup>6</sup>

As for Mitchel, while still a youth, he assisted his father in his principled and highly charged battle against the “Old Lights.” In the process, he may have developed his future gift for rhetorical argument and exposition as well as a fighting spirit. He certainly inherited his father’s religious tolerance and his belief in the sanctity of personal conscience. He also learned how to stand unwaveringly on principle even while fighting a losing battle; his father had bequeathed him an indomitable will.

Mitchel’s irrepressible spirit was further forged by a lifelong battle with asthma that began to afflict him early in his childhood. As *Schindler’s List* author Thomas Keneally has written, Mitchel “had the toughness and fixity of purpose that often characterizes those who habitually struggle for breath.”<sup>7</sup>

While Mitchel’s asthma would not have disqualified him from following his father into the ministry, as he had been groomed to do, his failure to receive “the call” did. As it turned out, Mitchel would never be a religious man. Late in life, he would refer to himself, only half-jokingly, as a “classical pagan.”<sup>8</sup> Irish scholar Patrick Maume

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<sup>6</sup> McGovern, *John Mitchel*, 28.

<sup>7</sup> Keneally, *The Great Shame*, 98.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Patrick Maume, introduction to *The Last Conquest of Ireland (Perhaps)*, by John Mitchel (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2005), ix.

has aptly described what Mitchel meant by that term: he was “not a worshipper of the Olympian Deities, but an adherent of a warrior ethos based on honour, shame and pride, rejecting both Christian humility . . . and hedonistic liberalism (seen as materialistic and degrading).”<sup>9</sup>

Mitchel received a thorough education in the classics, pagan and otherwise, attending classical schools as a youngster where he developed a lifelong friendship with a slightly older student, John Martin. In 1830, at the tender age of fifteen, Mitchel followed Martin to Trinity College in Dublin. While Martin studied medicine, Mitchel earned a bachelor of arts degree from Trinity in four years without ever being in residence. Instead, he continued to live with his family in Newry, traveling to Dublin only to take his required examinations.<sup>10</sup>

Following his graduation, Mitchel moved to Derry to work as a clerk in a bank owned by an uncle. But the job’s long hours did not suit Mitchel’s style. He soon wrote his father complaining that a career in banking “would not only require an utter sacrifice of all my habits and inclinations, but would preclude all sorts of reading . . . To have a certain moderate portion of the day set apart for some business would be very well, provided I had the rest to myself; but such unintermitting slavery is intolerable.”<sup>11</sup> With his father’s consent, Mitchel left Derry and the world of banking after a few weeks and returned to Newry.<sup>12</sup>

In the meantime, however, the tall, handsome young man had fallen in love with a woman from Belfast who was six years his senior. But when the young couple

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., ix-x.

<sup>10</sup> Hegarty, *John Mitchell*, 16-17.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in McGovern, *John Mitchel*, 22.

<sup>12</sup> Hegarty, *John Mitchel*, 18.

announced their secret engagement, both sets of parents vetoed the romance. Mitchel skulked around Newry until one day he decided to walk the forty miles to Belfast in hopes of seeing his love again; the journey nearly killed him and he was unable to see the woman anyway. Eventually, he recovered from his lost love and decided to enter the legal profession.<sup>13</sup>

No sooner had he begun a soliciter's apprenticeship with a Newry law firm then he fell in love again, this time with a girl who was only 16-years old, Jenny Verner. Ironically, given Mitchel's future career as a radical Irish nationalist, Jenny was the daughter of Captain James Verner, a British military officer and the niece of Sir William Verner, a Member of Parliament and a prominent Orangeman, that is, a militant, anti-Catholic Irish Protestant. Not surprisingly, Captain Verner thought his daughter could do better for herself than a minister's son and he planned to short-circuit her engagement to Mitchel by taking her to France. When Mitchel heard of this plan, he convinced Verner to elope with him to England. Captain Verner tracked them down near Liverpool and broke into their hotel room with a policeman. Back in Ireland, Mitchel was jailed for several days on a charge of abduction that was ultimately dropped. In the interim, Captain Verner had secreted his daughter in the countryside but Mitchel found out where she was and continued their courtship. Finally, Captain Verner surrendered and gave his daughter's hand to the persistent Mitchel on February 3, 1837.<sup>14</sup>

Over the next fifteen years, Jenny would bear Mitchel six children and over the next thirty-eight years she would follow him across the three continents and nine cities in which he would live, caring for his family while he fought for his beloved causes.

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<sup>13</sup> McGovern, *John Mitchel*, 23-24.

<sup>14</sup> Keneally, *The Great Shame*, 98.

Though Mitchel's family would ultimately suffer much due to his activism, their eagerness to follow and support him in all of his endeavors speaks volumes for the kind of husband and father that he must have been. Mitchel's first child was John, born in 1838, followed by James in 1840, Henrietta in 1842, William in 1844, Minnie in 1846, and, finally, Isabel in 1852.

On June 3, 1839, Mitchel's apprenticeship ended and he was sworn in as a barrister. He took a job with a small law firm in the rural town of Banbridge in County Down where he and his young family would remain for six years. No sooner had they settled in there than Mitchel's father passed away in 1840.<sup>15</sup> He would not live to see his son become one of the most famous and controversial men in Ireland.

Nor could Mitchel have seen that coming himself; he was not a particularly ambitious man. He did, however, have a strong sense of justice that became increasingly offended and ultimately led him into the public sphere. As a struggling, young barrister in the Orange stronghold of Banbridge, Mitchel frequently found himself representing poor Catholics who were repeatedly victimized by the discriminatory Ulster legal system. It was not lucrative work but it did gain him a reputation amongst Catholics as a Protestant advocate that they could trust.<sup>16</sup>

One such Catholic who appreciated Mitchel's work and befriended him was Charles Gavan Duffy, the editor of the *Belfast Vindicator*, a Catholic weekly. Duffy would later move to Dublin where he, along with Thomas Davis, a brilliant young Protestant lawyer-poet, and John Blake Dillon, a Catholic law student, started publishing the *Nation* in the fall of 1842, with Duffy serving as owner and publisher and Davis as

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<sup>15</sup> Hegarty, *John Mitchel*, 23.

<sup>16</sup> McGovern, *John Mitchel*, 28-29.

editor. The *Nation* would quickly become the most widely read and disseminated weekly in the country featuring news stories, editorials, poems, songs, and short stories, all of which either celebrated Irish culture or promoted Irish nationalism. The tone of the weekly, as set by its talented bevy of young writers and contributors, reflected the spirit of romantic nationalism that was sweeping across much of Europe at that time.<sup>17</sup>

The *Nation* also encouraged a nonsectarian brand of nationalism in which Catholic and Protestant Irish alike could take pride in their common culture and form a bond against British influence and control. As such, the *Nation* harkened back to the United Irishmen movement of the 1790s, led by the Protestant Theobald Wolfe Tone, which sought to unite the Irish across sectarian lines and establish an independent Irish republic. That movement climaxed with the Rebellion of 1798, which, though aided by French expeditionary forces, failed miserably in the end and ironically degenerated, in all too many instances, into sectarian clashes and massacres. In all, at least 30,000 Irishmen lost their lives during the rebellion.<sup>18</sup> Mitchel claimed that his father participated briefly in the uprising as a very young man, thus connecting Mitchel by blood with someone who had been “out in ’98,” as those who had been involved in the rebellion referred to themselves. He thus appreciated the nostalgic paeans and romantic tributes that the *Nation* habitually paid to the United Irishmen in its pages.<sup>19</sup>

One who was not so impressed with the lionization of the “heroes of ‘98” was Daniel O’Connell who had been dubbed “the Liberator” after securing political “emancipation” for Catholics. But O’Connell had accomplished that feat peaceably by

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<sup>17</sup> Hegarty, *John Mitchel*, 26-28.

<sup>18</sup> Alvin Jackson, *Ireland 1798-1998: Politics and War* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), 13-20.

<sup>19</sup> McGovern, *John Mitchel*, 17, 31 (n. 7); Hegarty, *John Mitchel*, 15. Hegarty contends that “there is no real evidence” that Mitchel’s father was a United Irishman.

organizing one of the first mass political movements in Western history and becoming “one of the great pioneers of popular democracy”<sup>20</sup> and “one of the greatest figures of his age”<sup>21</sup> in the process. In 1824, O’Connell reduced the membership fee for his pressure group, the Catholic Association, to one penny a month. Working closely with the country’s Catholic clergy, the modest fees were typically collected from Catholics as they left Mass on Sundays. Not only did the fees enable O’Connell to build a powerful political machine but they gave the masses a feeling of empowerment and a stake in the political process. The movement reached its peak in 1828 when O’Connell was elected to Parliament from County Clare amidst such an outpouring of nationalistic pride throughout Ireland that the Parliament and King George IV agreed to the Emancipation Act in 1829, perhaps fearing another rebellion if they did not yield to the popular wishes of the Irish public.<sup>22</sup>

But Britain’s fear that O’Connell’s mass political movement could turn violent underestimated both O’Connell’s control over the masses and his authentic commitment to non-violence and the rule of law. In truth, O’Connell had abhorred violence, particularly of the mob variety, ever since he witnessed firsthand the bloodthirstiness of the French Revolution while a young man studying in Paris. Indeed, O’Connell had opposed the 1798 rebellion and even enlisted in a local lawyer’s volunteer unit to head it off. In 1815, he was maneuvered by his political opponents into fighting a duel with a

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<sup>20</sup> Robert Kee, *The Green Flag: The Turbulent History of the Irish Nationalist Movement* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1972), 179.

<sup>21</sup> D. George Boyce, *Ireland 1828-1923: From Ascendancy to Democracy* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1992), 13.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 14-15.

noted duelist. But after O'Connell surprisingly won the duel by killing his opponent, he spent the rest of his life guiltily supporting the man's widow and children.<sup>23</sup>

O'Connell was not only a genuine constitutionalist but a sincere proponent of human rights and individual liberty. Hence, after taking his seat in Parliament, where he eventually became the leader of dozens of like-minded Irish nationalists elected in the wake of Emancipation, he did not hesitate to play a prominent role in debates about non-Irish issues and controversies such as slavery, which he strongly condemned, and civil rights for Jews in Britain, which he adamantly championed. A tall, burly man with an stentorian voice and a gift for eloquence, O'Connell still towered literally and figuratively over Ireland when the *Nation* began publishing in 1842.<sup>24</sup>

Initially, the *Nation* was quite supportive of O'Connell and his latest mass movement known as the Repeal Campaign. This effort was intended to bring pressure upon Parliament to repeal the Act of Union of 1800 by which the Irish Parliament had been dissolved and Britain and Ireland had become a United Kingdom. Using his old Catholic Association as a model, he launched a Loyal National Repeal Association financed by "Repeal Rent" of a penny a month collected, once again, for the most part, outside of Catholic churches. This "Repeal Rent," also known as the "O'Connell Tribute," allowed the Repeal Association to hire dozens of paid staffers and build an impressive headquarters in Dublin called Conciliation Hall. O'Connell's Repeal movement was given additional momentum by the support it initially received from the *Nation* and its writers, including, as of February, 1843, a new writer, John Mitchel.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Kee, *The Green Flag*, 180-184.

<sup>24</sup> Keneally, *The Great Shame*, 89.

<sup>25</sup> Hegarty, *John Mitchel*, 25-26.



Mitchel's law practice brought him frequently to Dublin where Duffy introduced him to Davis, whose contributions to the *Nation* Mitchel especially admired. At Davis's behest, Mitchel wrote a biography of Hugh O'Neill, the legendary Irish chieftain who fought British forces for control of Ireland in the late 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> Centuries, that was serialized in the *Nation*. In May of 1843, Mitchel officially joined the Repeal Association after having been nominated for membership by Duffy and seconded by O'Connell.<sup>26</sup> That same year, a young Thomas Francis Meagher also joined the Repeal Association in his native Waterford, a port city along Ireland's southern coast and the seat of County Waterford. But the path that Meagher took from his birth to his membership in the Repeal Association was markedly different than the one traveled by Mitchel.

Meagher was born on August 3, 1823, the first of three children born to a father who shared his name. Meagher's paternal grandfather had emigrated along with many other Irish Catholics to St. John's, Newfoundland, Canada in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century seeking to escape the oppressive Penal Laws that England had imposed upon Ireland that made it virtually impossible for Catholics to earn a decent livelihood there. Just as medieval Jews had overcome economic discrimination in Europe by specializing in merchant trades, so too did a number of Irish, including Meagher's grandfather, who built up an substantial trading and shipping business between St. John's and Waterford. Meagher's father inherited that business after having managed the Waterford end of it for many

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 29.

years. The business allowed him to join a fairly rare breed in early 19<sup>th</sup> Century Ireland, the Catholic gentry, and to live and raise his family in comfort.<sup>27</sup>

Wealth could not, however, assuage the sorrow felt by Meagher's father when his wife died shortly after giving birth to their third child. Meagher was three-years old when he lost his mother but her sister generously assumed the task of helping his father raise him and his siblings, showering them with love and affection. Even so, as Keneally writes, Meagher "retained for life the questing intensity of a child too early deprived of a mother."<sup>28</sup>

When Meagher turned eleven, his father sent him away for six years to a Jesuit boarding school named Clongowes Wood in County Kildare. There, in the school's library, the seeds of a great orator were sown as Meagher immersed himself in a tattered collection of speeches given by O'Connell and Richard Shiel, one of the Liberator's chief allies in the fight for Catholic Emancipation.<sup>29</sup> Meagher distinguished himself as a debater at Clongowes and after graduating from the school, wrote a history of the "Clongowes Debating Society" that was presented to O'Connell himself on a later visit to the school. After reading it, the Liberator reportedly opined: "The genius that could produce such a work is not destined to remain long in obscurity."<sup>30</sup> Of course, O'Connell was an old friend of the Meagher family and so his compliment may not have been entirely sincere. Even so, O'Connell's prediction would come true and O'Connell, for one, would live to regret it.

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<sup>27</sup> Gary R. Forney, *Thomas Francis Meagher: Irish Rebel, American Yankee, Montana Pioneer* (Philadelphia: Xlibris Corporation, 2003), 17-18.

<sup>28</sup> Keneally, *The Great Shame*, 72.

<sup>29</sup> Forney, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 18-19.

<sup>30</sup> Quoted in Cavanagh, *Memoirs of General Meagher*, 19.

Years later, Meagher would look back upon his years at Clongowes with an affection that was mitigated only by a regret that the Jesuits had failed to imbue their students with a proper dose of Irish nationalism. As Meagher noted, “It is an odd fiction which represents the Irish Jesuits as conspirators against the stability of the English empire in Ireland. With two or three exceptions they were not O’Connellites even.”<sup>31</sup> As Meagher further explained:

They talked to us about Mount Olympus and the Vale of Tempe; they birched us into a flippant acquaintance with the disreputable Gods and Goddesses of the golden and heroic ages; they entangled us in Euclid; . . . pitched us precipitously into England, amongst the impetuous Normans and stupid Saxons; gave us a look through an interminable telescope at what was doing in the New World; but, as far as Ireland was concerned, they left us like blind and crippled children, in the dark. . . .  
. . . Ireland was the last nation we were taught to think of, to respect, to love and remember.<sup>32</sup>

But if the Irish Jesuits left something to be desired when it came to Irish nationalism, Meagher was even more disappointed by their English Jesuit counterparts at Stonyhurst College in Lancashire, England, where he matriculated after graduating from Clongowes Woods. At Stonyhurst, the Jesuits made a concerted effort to transform his Irish brogue into a proper English accent. During a school production of *King Lear*, he lost his role as the Earl of Kent after the Jesuit director told him that his Irish brogue “will never do for Shakespeare”; as Meagher later recounted, “It wasn’t the first time the brogue entailed the forfeiture of title and estate. I felt I was a martyr to the peculiarities of my race.”<sup>33</sup> Relegated to a role as a messenger with one line, when the play was

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<sup>31</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>32</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 23-24.

<sup>33</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 30.

staged, Meagher delivered that line “with the most powerful brogue I could muster,” bringing the house down in the process.<sup>34</sup>

Meagher displayed his Irish pride in a more serious vein while at Stonyhurst when, as the first clarinetist in the school band, he resolutely refused to join his bandmates when there were called upon to perform at an 1840 ceremony celebrating the victory of the British at the Battle of Waterloo on its anniversary. Despite threats from the Jesuits, he refused to blow as much as one note in honor of the hated British and, in the end, the band was forced to work around his absence.<sup>35</sup> While standing his ground for Ireland against a handful of English Jesuits was certainly not equivalent to sticking his hand into the mouth of the British Lion itself, Meagher would reach that point soon enough.

While at Stonyhurst, Meagher excelled at rhetoric and bested some fifty competitors in winning a silver medal for English composition in 1842. Upon his graduation in 1843, he returned home to Waterford briefly before undertaking the “Grand Tour” of continental Europe, as was customary for young gentlemen at the time.<sup>36</sup>

While Meagher had been studying at Stonyhurst, his father had been elected the first Catholic mayor of Waterford in more than two centuries. Meagher was proud of his father and, in turn, his father was impressed with his son’s rhetorical talents. Those talents were deployed in May of 1843 when Meagher’s father asked him to compose a

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<sup>34</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>35</sup> Ahearn, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 2.

<sup>36</sup> Cavanagh, 34-35.

speech for him that he would give in honor of a visit to Waterford by the famed “Apostle of Temperance,” Father Theobald Mathew.<sup>37</sup>

If O’Connell was unquestionably the most popular man in Ireland at that time, Father Mathew, a humble Franciscan Capuchin friar, came in a strong second. Inspired in 1838 to mount a campaign against the vice of drunkenness that had long plagued the Irish people, Father Mathew encouraged the Irish to take a sworn “Pledge” to abstain totally and permanently from alcohol. Remarkably, over the next five years, an estimated three to six million Irish, more than half of the adult population, took the Pledge. Naturally, not all those who pledged abstinence actually abided by their commitment, but enough did to cause alcohol consumption to drop by approximately 60 percent in Ireland by the early 1840s. Meagher’s father was a committed teetotaler who felt that a successful abstinence campaign would dramatically reduce crime in his city.<sup>38</sup> But while Father Mathew administered the “Pledge” to many residents of Waterford on his visit, Meagher was not reported to have been one of them. Perhaps, in retrospect, he should have since his reputation later in life would be marred by persistent accusations of drunkenness.

Meagher’s father had long been a dedicated O’Connellite and his son eagerly adopted his enthusiasm for the Liberator upon returning to Ireland from his “Grand Tour” in 1843, which O’Connell had proclaimed, “The Year of Repeal.” During that year, the Repeal Association arranged over thirty mass gatherings held at historical landmarks on the island where O’Connell would address the crowds on his Repeal campaign. Though

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<sup>37</sup> Eugene Broderick, “From the Shadow of his Son: ‘Honest Thomas Meagher’ --- the Father of an Irish Patriot” in *Thomas Francis Meagher: The Making of an Irish American*, eds. John M. Hearne and Rory T. Cornish (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2006), 56.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 45-48.

crowd estimates vary, it appears that some of these meetings attracted well more than 100,000 participants, rather sizable crowds in a nation of eight million. The sheer size of the crowds caused the London *Times* to call them “monster meetings” and the name stuck. The meetings were staged to demonstrate to the British government the sheer level of popular support for O’Connell’s cause but also to show how peaceful such large crowds of Irish could be. With O’Connell insisting that Repeal should be won through “moral force” alone, the peacefulness of the crowds showed either how much they too believed in that principle or else how he was able to exert an astonishing level of control over them in order to keep them peaceful.<sup>39</sup>

As the monster meetings continued throughout 1843 giving momentum to the Repeal Campaign, the British analyzed the situation. If O’Connell really did have control over the masses, he could order them to turn violent and they would dutifully obey him. But if he sincerely believed in the efficacy of “moral force,” he would never issue such an order. The only way the British could be sure, of course, was to put O’Connell’s principles to the test. And so, on the afternoon before a planned monster meeting was to be held on October 8, 1843 at Clontarf, County Dublin, where the Irish King Brian Boru had famously defeated some Viking invaders and others in a 1014 battle, Prime Minister Robert Peel ordered the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland to outlaw attendance at the meeting and post notices to that effect. To underscore such notices, the British Army and Navy were mobilized in the area.<sup>40</sup>

Now O’Connell had a decision to make. He could hold the meeting in defiance of the British, in which case thousands of his followers could be killed should British forces

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<sup>39</sup> Keneally, *The Great Shame*, 91-94.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

break up the meeting by force, or he could simply ask his faithful supporters to abide by the law and go home. Fearing a massacre, O'Connell opted for the latter course of action; his popularity would never be the same.

On the very next day, seeking to strike while the fire was hot, authorities arrested O'Connell, Duffy, and several other Repeal activists, including O'Connell's favorite son and closest deputy, John, and charged them with sedition. Released on bail, an all-Protestant jury convicted them in February, 1844 and in May, O'Connell was sentenced to a year in prison while the others received nine-month sentences. O'Connell's imprisonment more closely resembled being on "house arrest" as he was detained in the governor's house at Dublin Prison, where he was allowed to bring in food, have visitors at will, and even hold parties in the garden.<sup>41</sup>

One of his most frequent visitors in prison was William Smith O'Brien, whose outrage at the injustice of O'Connell's conviction had caused him to join the Repeal Association. A wealthy landowner and a direct descendant of the legendary King Brian Boru, his Gaelic ancestors had converted to Protestantism to preserve their wealth and lands. O'Brien had long served as an articulate Tory Member of Parliament and had even opposed O'Connell's election in 1828. Over the years, though, he and O'Connell had come to respect each other. He was certainly an impressive addition to the Repeal movement, although some Repealers worried at first that he was "too much Smith and not enough O'Brien."<sup>42</sup> In time, he would show more "O'Brien" than any of them.

In September, 1844, the convictions of O'Connell and his compatriots were unexpectedly reversed by the House of Lords and they all resumed attending the

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 96; Kee, *The Green Flag*, 223.

<sup>42</sup> Terry Golway, *For the Cause of Liberty: A Thousand Years of Ireland's Heroes* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 2000), 107.

regularly scheduled meetings of the Repeal Association at Conciliation Hall. By this point, Mitchel was writing regularly for the *Nation* while maintaining his home and law practice in Newry while Meagher was living in Dublin where, ostensibly, he was a law student. In truth, he was caught up in the politically charged atmosphere of the day and spent most of his time on Repeal Association activities. Soon, both Mitchel and Meagher would become totally consumed with political matters and, in short order, those matters would consume them.



## **CHAPTER TWO: *Young Ireland and Old, Famine and Rebellion***

Following O'Connell's climb down at Clontarf and his subsequent conviction and abbreviated imprisonment, serious fissures developed in the Repeal Association that would eventually lead to a split in its membership. Mitchel and Meagher would play prominent roles in that split, which pitted them and other young activists, many associated with the *Nation*, against O'Connell and his loyal followers. The young upstarts came to be known as Young Ireland, perhaps because they seemed to resemble such continental European republican groups as Young Italy; by default, the O'Connellite forces came to be identified as Old Ireland.<sup>1</sup>

The Young Irelanders, who included such Protestants as Davis and Mitchel, were committed to a nonsectarian Irish nationalism; they became increasingly concerned that O'Connell, a devout Catholic, was not in tune with those sentiments. In May of 1845, Prime Minister Peel put forth the Queens Colleges Bill, a proposal to establish three non-denominational colleges in Ireland. Most Young Irelanders, nonsectarian intellectuals that they were, found the idea most appealing. Mitchel was a notable exception; he thought that the British had cleverly devised the proposal as a mechanism to divide Young Ireland from O'Connell.<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps Mitchel was right since, at an emotional meeting of the Repeal Association in Conciliation Hall on May 26, 1845, Young Ireland and Old Ireland butted heads over the proposal. O'Connell, following the lead of the Catholic hierarchy, denounced the proposed colleges as potentially harmful to the morals of young Catholics. Instead, O'Connell urged that two of the colleges be Catholic and one Protestant. After

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<sup>1</sup> Keneally, *The Great Shame*, 97.

<sup>2</sup> McGovern, *John Mitchel*, 38-39.

George Conway, an O’Connell ally, spoke against the bill, Davis rose in rebuttal and began by referring to Conway as “my *very* Catholic friend.” At that, the Liberator interrupted Davis asking him if it were a crime to be a Catholic since “the sneer with which you use the word would lead to the inference.”<sup>3</sup> A shaken Davis insisted he had meant no offense but O’Connell would later take the floor and thunder that, “There is no such party as that styled Young Ireland [although] there may be a few people who take that denomination on themselves. I am for Old Ireland. . . . I shall stand for Old Ireland; and I have some slight notion that Old Ireland shall stand by me.”<sup>4</sup> After Smith O’Brien asked O’Connell to retract his derogatory use of the term “Young Ireland,” O’Connell graciously complied, prompting Davis to rise again and thank the Liberator, only to break down in tears as he did so. O’Connell then embraced Davis and, holding his hand, said “Davis, I love you.”<sup>5</sup> O’Brien then remarked facetiously that he belonged to “Middle-Aged Ireland,” and the crying in the hall turned to laughter.<sup>6</sup> Young Ireland and Old Ireland were united again. Or so it seemed.

Oddly enough, the annexation of the Republic of Texas by the United States in 1845 served next to expose underlying differences between O’Connell and the Young Irish. Consistent with his longstanding opposition to slavery wherever it existed, O’Connell spoke out strongly against the admission of another slave state to the American Union. In 1842, O’Connell, Father Mathew, and 70,000 other Irish signed a declaration calling upon Irish-Americans to “put an end to slavery . . . by all peaceable

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<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Robert Sloan, *William Smith O’Brien and the Young Ireland Rebellion of 1848* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2000), 131.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Keneally, *The Great Shame*, 99.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>6</sup> Sloan, *William Smith O’Brien*, 132.

means in their power.”<sup>7</sup> A year later, O’Connell stopped accepting contributions to the Repeal Association from Irish-Americans who defended slavery, warning them that if they “dare countenance the system of slavery . . . we will recognize you as Irishmen no longer.”<sup>8</sup> O’Connell made his stand squarely on principle, declaring that “we do not want bloodstained money” and that “though this be a blow against Ireland, it is a blow in favor of human liberty, and I will strike that blow. Come freedom --- come oppression of Ireland --- my conscience shall be clear before God.”<sup>9</sup>

With the controversy over Texas causing O’Connell’s refusal to accept contributions from slavery-supporting Americans to resurface, the *Nation* weighed in against that position, editorializing in its August 9, 1845 edition that “Ireland cannot grow ungrateful for the care and zeal of America. . . . No man [in the Repeal Association] is pledged to anything save repeal . . . and the discussion of topics on which its members differ cannot serve the cause they have joined in adopting.”<sup>10</sup>

By mentioning “topics on which its members differ,” the *Nation* editorial implied that there were some Repealers who actually favored American slavery. As it turned out, Mitchel was one of them. However, Duffy, as the *Nation*’s publisher, refused to allow Mitchel to write any pro-slavery articles for that publication.<sup>11</sup> Plainly, Young Ireland supported Irish independence above all else and believed in maintaining a united front in favor of that objective, not caring if its members agreed on any other issue even when it involved, in O’Connell’s words, “human liberty.”

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<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Joseph M. Hernon, Jr., *Celts, Catholics & Copperheads: Ireland Views the American Civil War* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1968), 60.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in David T. Gleeson, *The Irish in the South, 1815-1877* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 131.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Hernon, *Celts, Catholics & Copperheads*, 61.

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>11</sup> McGovern, *John Mitchel*, 194.

In September, 1845, Young Ireland lost its leader, and the *Nation* its editor, when young Davis died suddenly of scarlet fever. Shortly afterwards, Duffy asked Mitchel if he would be willing to join the paper's staff on a fulltime basis to fill the void left by Davis. Mitchel agreed and Jenny and the children moved with him to Dublin.<sup>12</sup>

Mitchel's move coincided with bad news from the countryside: the potato crop had partially failed. The Great Irish Potato Famine had begun and Ireland would never be the same. Over the next few years, more than a million Irish would die from either starvation or the associated typhus epidemic and a million and a half others would leave the island in despair.<sup>13</sup> Irish nationalism would never be the same again either, thanks in no small part to Mitchel, whose articles in the *Nation* over the next couple of years would become increasingly and scathingly anti-British as the death toll from the Famine mounted. Eventually, Mitchel would propagate his "genocide" theory that the British manipulated the circumstances presented by the failure of the potato crop from 1845-1849 to deliberately starve or force into exile as many Irish as possible. Moreover, Mitchel was not the only Irish nationalist to veer towards radicalism as more peasants died with each passing year while Britain's responses to the crisis were ineffectual at best and counterproductive at worst.

The suffering precipitated by the Famine also made such issues as American slavery or non-denominational colleges seem irrelevant to Irish patriots of all stripes. By the summer of 1846, O'Connell's main concern seemed to be keeping his movement peaceful at all costs. Or at least that appeared to be his main concern as the *Liberator* called on Repealers to endorse two "Peace Resolutions" that he proposed, one calling for

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 41-42.

<sup>13</sup> Jackson, *Ireland*, 69.

“the amelioration of political institutions by peaceable and legal means alone” and the other declaring an abhorrence of “all attempts to improve and augment constitutional liberty by means of force, violence or bloodshed.”<sup>14</sup> Since no one in the Repeal Association was publicly or even privately contemplating the use of violence to achieve their objectives as of that point, the debate that O’Connell had thrust upon Repealers with his Peace Resolutions was a hypothetical one. As such, many Young Irelanders felt that the Liberator was using this debate to distract attention from his plan to maneuver his Repeal Party Members of Parliament into a coalition arrangement with the newly installed Whig prime minister, John Russell. O’Connell had spent the greater part of the 1830s in a governing coalition with the Whigs and appeared to be anxious to do so again. The Young Irelanders were convinced that the cause of Irish independence would suffer from neglect as a result.<sup>15</sup>

In a packed Conciliation Hall on July 28, 1846, the Association gathered, at O’Connell’s insistence, to debate his Peace Resolutions. With O’Connell in London, his son, John, presided. Initially, the members debated the differences between an “offensive” rebellion and a “defensive” one, since O’Connell had characterized the American Revolution, which every Irish nationalist endorsed, as defensive in nature. But later, Mitchel skillfully maneuvered the debate onto the real point of contention between Old and Young Ireland, namely, O’Connell’s perceived dalliance with the Whigs. Defending his father, John O’Connell argued that Repealers could accomplish more for Ireland as part of a majority government than in a powerless minority. In response, Mitchel asked: “Do you think that the men who have been begging one day at the gate of

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<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Keneally, *The Great Shame*, 117.

<sup>15</sup> Kee, *The Green Flag*, 251-254.

an English minister will come down here the next day to help you get rid of English ministers altogether? If some of the legal gentlemen now in this box accept [government positions] from Lord John Russell, will they be so eloquent afterwards in this Hall, denouncing English tyranny and English rapacity?"<sup>16</sup> Mitchel was clearly losing whatever faith he may have once had in a legal and constitutional route to Irish independence.

When Meagher's time to speak arrived, he eschewed addressing the real issue dividing Young and Old Ireland and instead treated the abstract ones raised by O'Connell's Peace Resolutions. He began by paying due deference to the Liberator, noting that "I am not ungrateful to the man who struck the fetters off my arms, whilst I was yet a child, and by whose influence, my father --- the first Catholic who did so for two hundred years --- sat, for the last two years, in the civic chair of an ancient city," but then declared that "the same God who gave to that great man the power to strike down an odious ascendancy in this country . . . gave to me a mind that is my own . . ." <sup>17</sup> In exercising that mind, Meagher had concluded that sometimes violent means must be used to overthrow a tyranny, as he explained in the speech's climax:

I do not abhor the use of arms in the vindication of national rights. There are times when arms alone will suffice, and when political ameliorations call for a drop of blood, and many thousand drops of blood. . . . The soldier is proof against an argument --- but he is not proof against a bullet. The man that will listen to reason --- let him be reasoned with, but it is the weaponed arm of the patriot that can alone prevail against battalioned despotism.

Then, my lord, I do not condemn the use of arms as immoral, nor do I perceive it profane to say, that the King of Heaven, the Lord of Hosts, the God of Battles bestows his benediction upon those who unsheath the sword in the hour of a nation's peril.

From that evening on which, in the valley of Bethulia, He nerved the arm of the Jewish girl to smite the drunken tyrant in his tent, down to this day,

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<sup>16</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 254.

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in Cavavagh, *Memoirs of General Meagher*, 63.

in which He has blessed the insurgent chivalry of the Belgian priest, His Almighty hand hath ever been stretched forth from His throne of Light, to consecrate the flag of freedom --- to bless the patriot's sword! Be it in the defense, or be it in the assertion of a people's liberty, I hail the sword as a sacred weapon; and if, my lord, it has sometimes taken the shape of the serpent and reddened the shroud of the oppressor with too deep a dye, like the anointed rod of the high priest, it has at other times, and as often, blossomed into celestial flowers to deck the freeman's brow.

Abhor the sword? Stigmatize the Sword? No, my lord, for in the passes of the Tyrol, it cut to pieces the banner of the Bavarian and, through those cragged passes, struck a path to fame for the peasant insurrectionist of Inspruck!

Abhor the sword? Stigmatize the Sword? No, my lord, for at its blow, a giant nation started from the waters of the Atlantic, and by its redeeming magic, and in the quivering of its crimson light, the crippled Colony sprang into the attitude of a proud Republic --- prosperous, limitless, and invincible!

Abhor the sword? Stigmatize the sword? No, my lord, for it swept the Dutch marauders out of the fine old towns of Belgium --- scourged them back to their own phlegmatic swamps --- and knocked their flag and sceptre, their laws and bayonets into the sluggish waters of the Scheldt.<sup>18</sup>

With Meagher's eloquence whipping the capacity crowd into a frenzy, John O'Connell had heard enough. He interrupted Meagher to declare that the young orator's "sentiments . . . were opposed to those of the founder of the Association, and therefore the Association must cease to exist, or Mr. Meagher must cease to be a member of it."<sup>19</sup> Smith O'Brien rose immediately to Meagher's defense, urging that he be allowed to finish his speech, but John O'Connell would have none of it. At that point, O'Brien, Meagher, Mitchel, Duffy, and several other Young Irelanders walked out of the Hall and, in effect, out of the Association, followed by a substantial portion of the gallery, while the Old Irelanders still inside chanted "O'Connell! O'Connell!"<sup>20</sup>

Young Ireland was now on its own with the distinguished Smith O'Brien as its leader. As for Meagher, his "Sword Speech" had made him a national celebrity and

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<sup>18</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>19</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>20</sup> Kee, *The Green Flag*, 255.

given him a lasting nickname, “Meagher of the Sword.” But O’Connell was unimpressed, referring to them as “the paltry Young Ireland party” who “while vapouring about physical force and vindication by the sword . . . would be afraid to look at a poker.”<sup>21</sup> Still, O’Connell, a longtime friend of Meagher’s father, would later write a personal letter to Meagher inviting him to rejoin the Association but Meagher respectfully declined. Indeed, on January 13, 1847, the Young Irelanders formed their own organization, the Irish Confederation, and became active in the political sphere, fielding and endorsing candidates for public offices, as well as organizing Confederate Clubs throughout the nation where young men in particular could gather to promote the nationalist cause.<sup>22</sup>

As the Irish Confederation was formed, the Famine was growing worse; the potato crop had totally failed in 1846 and the winter of 1846-1847 was devastating. With Whig policies to alleviate the massive suffering being less effective than the Tory efforts of the preceding year, O’Connell was embarrassed and heartbroken. Soon, his health broke and he decided to make a pilgrimage to Rome to see the Pope before he died. But first, he made one final appearance in the House of Commons in March of 1847, with Benjamin Disraeli noting that the Liberator of yore, a “great parliamentary personage” whose “clear and thrilling tones . . . had once startled, disturbed and controlled senates” was now reduced to “a feeble old man muttering from a table.”<sup>23</sup> Making one last plea for his starving homeland, O’Connell said: “Ireland is in your hands. If you do not save her, she cannot save herself. . . . one-fourth of her population will perish unless you come

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<sup>21</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 256.

<sup>22</sup> John M. Hearne, “Thomas Francis Meagher: Reluctant Revolutionary” in *Thomas Francis Meagher*, eds. Hearne, Jr. and Cornish, 77.

<sup>23</sup> Quoted in Kee, *The Green Flag*, 257.



to her relief.”<sup>24</sup> O’Connell then headed for Rome only to reach Eternity before the Eternal City, dying in Genoa on May 15, 1847. As he desired, his heart was exhumed and sent on to Rome while his body was shipped back to Ireland.<sup>25</sup>

When Smith O’Brien asked if he and a delegation of Young Irelanders could attend O’Connell’s funeral, they were told to stay away. Many Old Irelanders blamed their leader’s death on the Young Irelanders and fingered Meagher in particular for having committed, in Keneally’s phrase, “assassination by oratory.”<sup>26</sup> For the next several months, the Young Irelanders would be abused in the streets by bitter Old Irelanders. On one occasion, Meagher, Mitchel, and their friend, Richard O’Gorman, were accosted by a mob after leaving a Confederation meeting in Dublin and had to hide in a grocer’s shop to avoid a beating. On another occasion, when Meagher, Mitchel, and O’Brien tried to hold a meeting in Belfast, they were assaulted, not by Orangemen, as expected, but by local Old Irelanders.<sup>27</sup>

Surely, the death and misery caused by the ever-worsening Famine sickened O’Connell more than the break with Young Ireland. As the year that would be designated as “Black ‘47” rolled on and the death toll mounted, Mitchel was able to observe the Famine’s effects firsthand while on a Confederation campaign trip to County Galway, in hard-hit western Ireland. Returning to Dublin, he wrote perhaps his most famous *Nation* article, entitled, “June in the Famine Year,” in which he describes his impressions upon visiting a Famine-stricken village:

But what (may Heaven be about us this night!) --- what reeking  
breath of hell is this oppressing the air, heavier and more loathsome than

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<sup>24</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 258.

<sup>25</sup> Keneally, *The Great Shame*, 132.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Kee, *The Green Flag*, 258; Keneally, *The Great Shame*, 141.

the smell of death rising from the fresh carnage of the battlefield. Oh misery!

Had we forgotten that this was the Famine Year? And we are here in the midst of those thousand Golgothas that border our island with a ring of death from Cork Harbour all round to Lough Foyle. There is no need of inquiries here --- no need of words; the history of this little society is plain before us.

Yet we go forward, with sick hearts and swimming eyes to examine the Place of Skulls nearer. There is a horrible silence; grass grows before the doors; we fear to look into any door, though they are all open or off the hinges, for we fear to see yellow chapless skeletons grinning there; but our footfalls rouse two lean dogs that run from us with doleful howling, and we know by the felon-gleam in their wolfish eyes how they have lived after their masters died. We walk amidst the houses of the dead and out the other side of the cluster, yet there is not one where we dare to enter.<sup>28</sup>

Mitchel's eyewitness experience with the ravages of the Famine served to radicalize him even further. He abandoned any hope of a constitutional resolution to Ireland's problems and began to advocate more extreme measures such as rent strikes and guerilla warfare. This was too much for Duffy who began to censor Mitchel's *Nation* articles so extensively that, in December of 1847, Mitchel simply resigned from the paper that had made him a household name across the country.<sup>29</sup> When he later declared that, in the current Famine-driven crisis, "there is no opinion in Ireland worth a farthing that is not illegal," O'Gorman started to refer to Mitchel and his followers as "Infant Ireland."<sup>30</sup>

Smith O'Brien also began to look askance at Mitchel's views and, in an ironically similar fashion to the tack that O'Connell had taken with his "Peace Resolutions," he proposed a series of resolutions of his own calling upon members of the Confederation to limit themselves to constitutional means in their fight for Irish independence. At a meeting that lasted several days in early February, 1848, the Confederation debated

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<sup>28</sup> Quoted in Hegarty, *John Mitchel*, 41.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>30</sup> Quoted in Keneally, *The Great Shame*, 143.

O'Brien's resolutions and a counter amendment proposed by Mitchel that would emasculate the force of those resolutions. The Confederation voted down Mitchel's amendment, 317-188.<sup>31</sup> Meagher had been away doing some political organizing and had missed the vote but when he returned to Dublin on February 4, he gave a speech to the Confederation reluctantly siding with O'Brien's position: "I support this constitutional policy not from choice but from necessity. My strongest feelings are in favor of the policy advocated by Mr. Mitchel . . . [but] for a time at least, we must plod on in the old course, until we acquire strength and discipline and skill --- discipline to steady, skill to direct, strength to enforce the claim of a united nation."<sup>32</sup> Meagher also made it clear that he was no political radical: "So much for the war of classes. No; I am not for a democratic, but I am for a national movement --- not for a movement like that of Paris in 1793, but for a movement like that of Brussels in 1830."<sup>33</sup>

If "Meagher of the Sword" was starting to sound like a candidate for office, it may have been because he was one. He was running as a Confederation candidate in a special election for an open seat in Parliament from his home city of Waterford. As it turned out, his father had just been elected to Parliament from Waterford as a Repeal candidate and had already endorsed his son's Repeal opponent before he knew that his son was in the race. Still, even when he learned of his son's candidacy, he did not support him but remained loyal to the O'Connellite faction. Meagher understood and respected his father's position; despite political differences, the two of them would always remain cordial. In the end, Meagher's candidacy did nothing but split the

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<sup>31</sup> McGovern, *John Mitchel*, 118-119.

<sup>32</sup> Cavanagh, *Memoirs of General Meagher*, 87-88.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

nationalist vote allowing the third candidate, a Whig, to triumph in the late February election.<sup>34</sup>

Meanwhile, running for Parliament was the last thing Mitchel wanted to do. He wanted to foment a revolution and, with financial help from his old friend, John Martin, in February, 1848, he started a newspaper of his own to agitate towards that end. In honor of those who had been “out in ’98,” he called the paper, *The United Irishman* and, in one of its first editions, he asked readers to “pray for Meagher’s defeat”<sup>35</sup> in the Waterford parliamentary election. Mitchel meant nothing personal, of course, but wanted to wean his readers off of constitutional nationalism. It was time now, he felt, to take action, it was time to fight, a point made all too plainly in the very first edition of his weekly: “I hold it is a more hideous national calamity for ten men to be cast out to die of hunger, like dogs in ditches, than for ten thousand to be hewn to pieces, fighting like men and Christians in defence of their rights.”<sup>36</sup>

Realizing that such rhetoric would catch the eye of governmental authorities, he openly welcomed the attention. His rebellion would be an open one, unlike that of the United Irishmen:

Theirs was a secret conspiracy, ours is a public one. They had not learned the charm of open, honest resistance to oppression; and through their secret organisation you wrought their ruin. We defy you, and all the informers and detectives that British corruption ever bred. No espionage can tell you more than we will proclaim once a week upon the house-tops. If you desire to have a Castle detective employed about the *United Irishman* office in Trinity Street, I shall make no objection provided the man be sober and honest.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Hearne, “Reluctant Revolutionary,” 80-81.

<sup>35</sup> Quoted in McGovern, *John Mitchel*, 129.

<sup>36</sup> Quoted in Kee, *The GreenFlag*, 262.

<sup>37</sup> Quoted in Hegarty, *John Mitchel*, 61.

Mitchel repeatedly urged Irishmen to arm themselves in his weekly. He hailed the traditional weapon of Irish insurgents, the pike, as “the queen of weapons . . . the weapon of the brave,”<sup>38</sup> and stated, in biblical tones, “Let the man among you who has no gun sell his garment and buy one.”<sup>39</sup> Mitchel was particularly incensed that large quantities of food had been exported from Ireland during the Famine while the poor Irish starved; he was intent that Irishmen not allow that to happen again following the harvest of 1848: “That wealth must not leave [Ireland] another year --- not until every grain of it is fought for in every stage, from the tying of the sheaf to the loading of the ship.”<sup>40</sup> The *United Irishman* was a phenomenal success despite, or perhaps because of, its revolutionary tone.

When a revolution broke out in France in late February, 1848 that quickly and fairly peacefully established the Second French Republic, Irish nationalists of all persuasions took heart and became unduly optimistic about chances of a similar revolution taking place soon in their own country. Meagher himself got caught up the spirit during a March 15, 1848 speech in Dublin: “If the constitution opens to us no path to freedom --- if the Union will be maintained in spite of the will of the Irish people --- if the government of Ireland insists upon being a government of dragoons and bombadiers, of detectives and light infantry --- then up with the barricades and invoke the God of Battles!”<sup>41</sup> Within days, those words would get Meagher arrested for sedition. Arrested with him were Mitchel and Smith O’Brien, Mitchel for his articles in the *United Irishman* and O’Brien for some remarks he too made in a speech. After the three were released on

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<sup>38</sup> Quoted in Kee, *The Green Flag*, 262.

<sup>39</sup> Quoted in Hegarty, *John Mitchel*, 61.

<sup>40</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> Quoted in Cavanagh, *Memoirs of General Meagher*, 109.

bond, they addressed a huge crowd of their supporters who had gathered in the Dublin streets with Mitchel announcing, “They have indicted me for sedition but I tell them that I mean to commit high treason!”<sup>42</sup>

While out on bail, Meagher joined a Confederation delegation to Paris to congratulate the successful revolutionaries there and request a pledge of assistance from them should Ireland similarly raise the barricades. Though they left France without securing such a pledge, they did bring back with them a gift from some Frenchwomen, namely, a tri-color flag made out of green, orange, and white. At an April 13, 1848 welcome-home reception in Dublin, Meagher presented the flag to the Confederation, proclaiming that “the white in the centre signifies a lasting truce between the ‘Orange’ and the ‘Green,’ and I trust that beneath its folds the hands of the Irish Protestant and the Irish Catholic may be clasped in generous and heroic brotherhood.”<sup>43</sup> Mitchel later rose and remarked, “My friends, I hope to see that flag one day waving, as our national banner, over a forest of Irish pikes.”<sup>44</sup> In fact, the flag presented by Meagher, with slight modifications but the same understood symbolism, would become and remains today the national flag of the Republic of Ireland.

On April 9, 1848, with Meagher, Mitchel, and O’Brien awaiting their sedition trials, Parliament passed a “Treason-Felony Act,” which created a new hybrid category of crime that fell between sedition, which had relatively light penalties attached to it, and treason, which was punishable by death. Essentially, under the new law, sedition could be now be prosecuted as a serious felony but without the death sentence attached. With

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<sup>42</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>43</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 164.

<sup>44</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 164-165.

Parliament making the law retroactive, it seemed to have been expressly devised for one John Mitchel, who was arrested and re-indicted under the new law on May 13, 1848.<sup>45</sup>

Shortly thereafter, both O'Brien and Meagher escaped convictions following their sedition trials when their respective juries could not agree on a unanimous verdict.<sup>46</sup>

Mitchel would have no such luck. Indeed, by trying him before an all-Protestant jury in a heavily Catholic part of the country, the authorities took all luck out of the equation. On May 26, 1848, Mitchel was convicted of "felony-treason." The next day, in front of a packed courtroom, he was sentenced to fourteen years of exile, or "transportation." After the sentence was pronounced, Mitchel spoke from the "dock" as follows: "I do not regret anything I have done and I believe that the course which I have opened is only commenced. The Roman who saw his hand burning to ashes before the tyrant promised that three hundred should follow out his enterprises"; and then, looking and pointing at Meagher and some other Young Irelanders present, he said, "Can I not promise for one -- for two --- for three? --- aye, for hundreds?"<sup>47</sup> As Meagher and the others stretched out their hands towards Mitchel, the judges fled the bench and Mitchel was whisked away and onto a warship.

Mitchel was fully expecting that the local Dublin Confederate Clubs would rise up in arms upon his sentencing and either rescue him, start a revolution, or, hopefully, both. But O'Brien, Meagher, Duffy, and other Confederation leaders had determined beforehand, after considerable debate, that a rescue effort or uprising at that time in Dublin would ultimately and inevitably fail and thus urged restraint from the Clubs and asked Mitchel to do likewise. He would not. Still, the Clubs did not rise up or come to

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<sup>45</sup> Kineally, *The Great Shame*, p. 147.

<sup>46</sup> Sloan, *William Smith O'Brien*, 229.

<sup>47</sup> Quoted in Kee, *The Green Flag*, 268-269.

his rescue after his sentencing. Writing years later, Mitchel regretted what he thought was a lost opportunity to start an insurrection:

I believed that if the [citizens of the] City of Dublin permitted any Irishman to put be put on board a convict-ship under such circumstances, the British government would have little to fear from their resentment or their patriotism afterwards. Others of my Confederate comrades differed from me; restrained the Clubs; promised action in the harvest (a promise which they afterwards fulfilled to the best of their ability); bade me farewell mournfully enough; and in due course of time, some of them followed me on my circumnavigation of the globe.

Their decision was wrong; and, as I firmly believe, fatal. But that their motives were pure, and their courage unquestionable, I am bound to admit.<sup>48</sup>

As Mitchel notes, his “Confederate comrades” did take “action in the harvest,” or, more precisely, action just before the harvest, in the form of the “Young Ireland Rebellion of 1848.” In the weeks following Mitchel’s deportation, O’Brien, Meagher, and other Young Ireland leaders traveled around the country determining the strength of some of the local Confederate Clubs and gauging the desire for an uprising amongst the general populace at harvest time. In the process, they made nationalistic speeches, which again caused Meagher to be arrested for sedition; when the authorities came to arrest him at his father’s house on July 11, 1848, a large crowd gathered in the streets to prevent him from being transferred to Dublin for his arraignment but he called them off. After posting bond in Dublin, he delivered an incendiary address to a crowd of 50,000 on Slievenamon Mountain in County Tipperary at a monster meeting organized by the Confederation, intending to prepare the masses for concerted action at harvest time:

A scourge came from God that ought to have stirred you up into greater action. The potato was smitten; but your fields waved with golden grain. It was not for you. To your lips it was forbidden fruit. The ships came and bore it away, and when the price rose it came back, but not for the victims whose lips grew pale, and quivered, and opened no more. Did

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<sup>48</sup> John Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, with a critical introduction by Thomas Flanagan (Dublin: University Press of Ireland, 1982), liii-liv.



I say that they opened no more? Yes, they did open in Heaven, to accuse your rulers. Those lips, beautiful and fresh with the light of God supplicated his throne, and He has blessed our cause. The fact is plain, that this land, which is yours by nature, and by God's gift, is not yours by the law of the land. . . . Are ye content that the harvest of this land which you see, and to which your labor has imparted fruitfulness, should again be reaped for the stranger?<sup>49</sup>

Meagher then returned triumphantly to Waterford where a crowd of 20,000 cheered him. Then, on July 20, he put on a tri-color sash, grabbed a sword, and bade farewell to his father. As he later recalled: "I gave myself up to the gay illusion of a gallant fight, a triumphal entry, at the head of thousands, into Dublin, before long. . . . But, I recollect it well, my father was far otherwise. He seemed to me mournfully serious, and impressed with the saddest anticipation."<sup>50</sup>

Meagher's father knew better than his son what most likely awaited him. The Confederation's plans to wait for the harvest before acting were known to the Crown thanks to an informant who had infiltrated their inner circle. Perhaps Mitchel had been right about the virtue of an open rebellion. In any event, Parliament tried to beat the Young Irelanders to the punch by suspending habeas corpus in Ireland as of July 22. When the rebels learned of that, they knew it was just a matter of time before the authorities would locate, arrest, and detain them indefinitely. Yet the masses were not expecting a revolt until the harvest came in. As Meagher succinctly summarized their dilemma: "We have not gone far enough to succeed, and yet, too far to retreat."<sup>51</sup>

And so, the leaders split up across the countryside of southern Ireland, hoping to incite a revolt by peasants and villagers who were too mentally and physically weakened from the Famine to do so and who were frequently warned by their priests not to

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<sup>49</sup> Quoted in Cavanagh, *Memoirs of General Meagher*, 239.

<sup>50</sup> Quoted in Broderick, "From the Shadow of his Son," 58.

<sup>51</sup> Quoted in Keneally, *The Great Shame*, 154.

participate in a hopeless rebellion that would invite massive retribution upon their communities. On July 29, the aristocratic Smith O'Brien, with neither military experience nor bearing, rounded up a couple hundred followers who intercepted a Tipperary constabulary force near Balingarry. The constabularies holed up in a farmhouse belonging to a "Widow McCormack" with several of her young children inside while the rebel force congregated near her cabbage patch. As O'Brien tried to negotiate the surrender of the police force or at least have Mrs. McCormack's children released to her, shots rang out on both sides, killing a couple of rebels and wounding several others. After a standoff that lasted for hours, O'Brien and his forces retreated. The "Cabbage Patch Rebellion" was over. O'Brien was apprehended a week later and, after several weeks on the run, so too was Meagher.<sup>52</sup> Though the Young Ireland uprising had been both bathetic and pathetic, Keneally writes that "it would confirm O'Brien and Meagher as two of the most admired Irish figures of the nineteenth century and feed an Irish sense that it was always the irrepressible myth, not the potent battalion, which conquered in the end."<sup>53</sup>

Mitchel was in exile on a prison ship near Bermuda when he first heard of the rebellion, giving his first impressions of it in an October 24, 1848 journal entry:

What is this I hear? A poor extemporized abortion of an uprising in Tipperary, headed by Smith O'Brien. There appears to have been no money or provisions to keep a band of people together two days. . . . I cannot judge well of this affair here, but in so far as I can learn anything about it and understand it, O'Brien has been driven into doing the very thing that ought not to have been done. . . . An insurrection, indeed, has been too long deferred; yet, in the present condition of the island, no rising must *begin* in the country. Dublin streets for that.<sup>54</sup> (Emphasis in original.)

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<sup>52</sup> Kee, *The Green Flag*, 284-286.

<sup>53</sup> Keneally, *The Great Shame*, 156.

<sup>54</sup> Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, 72-73.

In a letter that he wrote to Duffy in 1850, Meagher explained why “Dublin streets” were not chosen for the uprising:

A desperate fight . . . in the streets of Dublin would have been stifled in a pool of blood. This . . . our . . . followers may not have deplored. But it is one thing to offer to the cause of liberty the tribute of your own life, and another to exact the lives of others. To justify the exaction there must be . . . belief that the outlay will be repaid by an equivalent result.<sup>55</sup>

As Meagher further explained in that letter:

I entertained no hope of success. I knew well the people were unprepared for a struggle; but at the same time, I felt convinced that the leading men of the confederation were bound to go out, and offer to the country the sword and banner of revolt, whatever the consequences might result to themselves from doing so.<sup>56</sup>

And yet, as noted above, when Meagher left his father’s house on July 20 he was under the “illusion” that after a “gallant fight” he would make a “triumphal entry, at the head of thousands, into Dublin.” His letter to Duffy appears to be a rather self-serving attempt to explain the inexplicable. In truth, Meagher, O’Brien, and the others simply did not know what they were doing. Meagher put it best on the eve of the uprising: they had not gone far enough to succeed but had gone too far to turn back.

Meagher, O’Brien, and two fellow conspirators, Terence MacManus and Patrick O’Donohoe, were all charged and convicted of high treason in fairly short order. On October 9, 1848, O’Brien was the first to be sentenced; it was ordered that he be drawn and quartered. When Meagher was sentenced on October 23, he had every reason to expect that he would receive the same death sentence. When given the opportunity to plead for mercy before he was sentenced, Meagher did anything but, addressing the hushed courtroom as follows:

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<sup>55</sup> Quoted in Hearne, “Reluctant Revolutionary,” 86.

<sup>56</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 87.

My lords, you may deem this language unbecoming in me, and perhaps it will seal my fate. But I am here to speak the truth whatever it may cost. I am here to regret nothing I have already done, to retract nothing I have already said. I am here to crave with no lying lip, the life I consecrate to the liberty of my country. . . . For that country I can do no more than bid her hope. To lift this island up --- to make her a benefactor to mankind, instead of being the meanest beggar in the world --- to restore her to her native powers and her ancient constitution --- this has been my ambition and this ambition has been my crime. Judged by the law of England, I know this crime entails the penalty of death; but the history of Ireland explains this crime, and justifies it. Judged by that history, I am no criminal. . . . I deserve no punishment. . . . Judged by that history, the treason of which I stand convicted loses all its guilt, is sanctified as a duty, will be ennobled as a sacrifice. . . . I now bid farewell to the country of my birth, my passion, and my death --- the country whose misfortunes have invoked my sympathies --- whose factions I have sought to still --- whose intellect I have prompted to a lofty aim --- whose freedom has been my fatal dream. I offer to that country, as a proof of the love I bear her, and the sincerity with which I thought, and spoke, and struggled for her freedom --- the life of a young heart, and with that life, all the hopes, the honors, the endearments of a happy and an honorable home. . . .

. . . Pronounce then, my lords, the sentence which the law directs; I am prepared to hear it. I trust I shall be able to meet its execution. I hope to be able, with a pure heart and perfect composure to appear before a higher tribunal --- a tribunal where a Judge of infinite goodness, as well as justice, will preside, and where, my lords, many --- many, of the judgments of this world will be reversed.<sup>57</sup>

Like O'Brien, Meagher was sentenced to be drawn and quartered. So too were MacManus and O'Donohoe. They were imprisoned together in Dublin for the next several months while their appeals ran their course. When they had, in June of 1849, Lord Clarendon, the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, announced that their death sentences would be commuted to "transportation for life." It appears that the authorities never intended to execute the Young Irelanders given an August 10, 1848 letter from Lord Clarendon to Prime Minister Russell concerning O'Brien, in which Clarendon writes that "it is clear in my mind that he ought not to be hanged but that this ought not to be said

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<sup>57</sup> Quoted in Cavanagh, *Memoirs of General Meagher*, 293-294.

until after he is found guilty.”<sup>58</sup> In any event, the British did not want to create any more Irish martyrs at that point.

While arrangements were made to transport the Young Irelanders, Meagher was interviewed in his cell one day concerning his political philosophy. According to the interviewer, Meagher looked favorably on the old Irish Gaelic monarchies as a system of government. Republics, on the other hand, would only work in the rare instance where a populace was both highly virtuous and highly intelligent. Still, “had the Irish people fought and been victorious, Meagher would have insisted upon a republic as a compensation for their blood” although “he did not desire to *import*, as he often said to me, any of the ‘raw modernisms’ of the Continental Revolutions.”<sup>59</sup> (Emphasis in original.)

Plainly, Meagher was rather conservative for a revolutionary. But then, as he noted during his speech in “the dock,” it was only the “history of Ireland” that had led him to commit treason. He was not a rebel at heart. Though his “treason” would assure him of everlasting fame and glory in Ireland, he would play no further role in the “history of Ireland,” nor, it appears in retrospect, did he particularly care to. Freed from Ireland’s “history,” he could be himself at last.

Mitchel, on the other hand, never freed himself from the “history of Ireland.” Nor did he care to. Though he too had earned permanent status as an Irish “hero,” he never stopped trying to influence the “history of Ireland.” That “history” gave his life meaning and purpose. Irish independence was *his* cause and he would never surrender, never give it a rest and never get over it. Mitchel would never feel at home outside of

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<sup>58</sup> Quoted in Christine Kinealy, *The Great Irish Famine: Impact, Ideology, and Rebellion* (New York; Palgrave, 2002) 208.

<sup>59</sup> Quoted in Keneally, *The Great Shame*, 190.

Ireland and would never feel at ease until Ireland was free. Thus, when he died, he was at home but his soul was not at peace. But that too was fitting. For centuries, Ireland has been a home for many but, if the cliché is true that there is no true peace without justice, it has rarely been at peace.

When Mitchel finally heard about Meagher's death sentence, he praised "the few brave words spoken by Meagher after conviction; brave and noble words,"<sup>60</sup> in his journal entry for November 21, 1848, and then wrote the following:

I have been sick, and unable to write. Why do I not open my mouth and curse the day I was born? Because --- because I have a hope that will not leave my soul in darkness --- a proud hope that Meager and I together will stand side by side on some better day --- that there is work for us yet to do --- that I am not destined to perish on the white rocks of Bermuda --- that the star of Thomas Meagher was never kindled to set in this Clonmel hurdle.<sup>61</sup>

Little did Mitchel know that he and Meagher would someday stand, not side by side, but on opposite sides of a civil war --- and in America of all places. In the United States, Meagher would forget about Young Ireland and become immersed in a young America. Mitchel saw too much of Great Britain in the Anglicized culture of the Northern states and would become enamored instead with the Old South, urging it to break free from the Union. When it tried to do so, Meagher led troops into battle to preserve the Union while Mitchel sacrificed his sons on some of those same battlefields to rend it asunder. Though Meagher and Mitchel would remain friends through it all, in America, they did nothing but grow farther apart.

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<sup>60</sup> Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, 74.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

### **CHAPTER THREE: Exile Down Under**

In July, 1849, Meagher, O'Brien, and several other convicted Young Irelanders were loaded on a ship and transported to Van Diemen's Land, a British penal colony near Australia. The convicts included Mitchel's old friend, John Martin, who had been sentenced to transportation for ten years for printing seditious articles in *The Irish Felon*, a paper he founded in Mitchel's honor after his conviction and exile.<sup>1</sup>

Upon arriving in Van Diemen's Land in October of 1849, the convicts were offered "tickets-of-leave," a form of parole by which they would not be imprisoned on the island but allowed to live and roam freely within the boundaries of specified districts. In exchange for this privilege, the convicts would have to give their promise as gentlemen not to try and escape while holding their "tickets of leave." O'Brien would make no such promise and so he was taken to prison while Meagher and the others took the government up on its offer.<sup>2</sup>

Each of the convicts was required to stay in a separate district so that they could not fraternize amongst themselves, a rule that they would honor regularly in the breach. While they were allowed to take on employment if they could find it, Meagher's father, who had paid for all his son's legal expenses during his trial, was generously financing him in exile as well. As such, Meagher spent his time reading, writing, exploring his district, and ingratiating himself with the locals.<sup>3</sup> In a letter to Duffy, who was still in Ireland after having amazingly avoided guilty verdicts in several separate trials for

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<sup>1</sup> Keneally, *The Great Shame*, 172.

<sup>2</sup> Elaine Sullivan, "O'Meagher in Australia," in *Thomas Francis Meagher*, eds. Hearne and Cornish, 106.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 109-110.

treason-felony,<sup>4</sup> Meagher wrote, in a remarkably detached fashion, about the late rebellion of 1848 that had cost him his freedom:

We played for a high stake --- the armed possession of our country against a foreign force --- the highest stake that could be played for; we lost the game by a wretched throw, and with a willing heart and ready hand we ought, like honourable men, to pay the forfeit, and say no more about it.<sup>5</sup>

Meagher knew that he was lucky to be alive and, even in exile, he tried to live life to the fullest. He leased some property on Lake Sorell, built a cottage, and, on Saint Patrick's Day, 1850, launched a sailboat he had purchased. He leased additional property on an island in the middle of the lake and hired a servant to grow crops on it.<sup>6</sup>

In April of 1850, Mitchel arrived on Van Diemen's Land after spending nearly two years aboard convict ships from the coast of Bermuda to the Cape of Good Hope in South Africa. The tropical climates of Bermuda and South Africa had wreaked havoc on his asthma and so he was allowed, for health reasons, to live in the same district with his friend, John Martin. Mitchel found the climate "Down Under" much more to his liking and he eventually invited Jenny to move there with her children. In June of 1851, they arrived and, by August of that year, the family was living and working on their own 200-hundred acre farm. The sixth and last of the Mitchel children, Isabel, was conceived and born on Van Diemen's Land and Mitchel particularly enjoyed teaching and playing with his three young sons while in exile there.<sup>7</sup>

Surprisingly, by that point, the handsome young Meagher had become a family man himself. In late 1850, while taking a walk in his home district, he came across a carriage that was stuck in the road. The carriage belonged to a Dr. Edward Hall, a

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<sup>4</sup> Keneally, *The Great Shame*, 187-188.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Ahearn, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 20-21.

<sup>6</sup> Sullivan, "O'Meagher in Australia," 111.

<sup>7</sup> Hegarty, *John Mitchel*, 81-83.



prominent physician in town who was also a pillar of the local Catholic community. With him at the time were his six children and their charming, 19-year old governess, Catherine Bennett. While successfully extricating Dr. Hall's carriage, Meagher took a liking to young Miss Bennett. After courting her for weeks at Dr. Hall's house, he proposed to her at Christmas and, on February 22, 1851, they were married at that same house by the local Catholic bishop and took up residence at his lakeside cottage.<sup>8</sup>

They were certainly an odd couple. While both of them were Irish, Meagher had been exiled to Van Diemen's Land from Ireland because he rebelled against British rule; his father-in-law, however, had been exiled there after he robbed a mail coach in Ireland as a young man. Having completed his sentence, he was given a hundred acres of land and made the most of his fresh start. When O'Brien, a scion of royalty, who had finally decided to take a "ticket-of-leave" after all, met Meagher's bride, he noted in his journal that, "She was in person and manner very pleasing but in a worldly point of view the connexion cannot be considered advantageous for him."<sup>9</sup> When Jenny Mitchel arrived on the island and met the young Mrs. Meagher, she wrote to a friend that, "You will have heard before this of Mr. Meagher's marriage to one of the beauties of this country. It is a pity on the whole (between ourselves), I fear his father will be very wroth with him."<sup>10</sup> It was one thing, apparently, for the son of a Member of Parliament to be convicted of high treason and sent into exile, quite another for that same son to marry beneath his station --- and to the daughter of a highwayman to boot.

In the fall of 1851, Mitchel visited the newlywed couple at their cottage and wrote in his journal about how Meagher took him for a ride on his boat which, interestingly

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<sup>8</sup> Sullivan, "O'Meagher in Australia," 112-113.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 113.

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Keneally, *The Great Shame*, 235.

enough, flew the American flag. On his way to visit Meagher, Mitchel picked up some campaign literature from a local political candidate while at a hotel. As he read it, he realized that Meagher's communication talents had not been resting idle: "An expression caught my eye that led me to look further --- the sharp pen of the hermit of the lake pointed every sentence: in every line I recognized the 'fine touch of his claw.'"<sup>11</sup>

But Meagher had been busy with other pursuits besides penning political platitudes. For one, he was helping to doctor his physically frail wife through her first pregnancy. At the same time, oddly enough, he was plotting to escape from the island. But Bennie, as Meagher called her, supported her husband and his dream of freedom in America. In fact, she promised to join him there after the birth of their child.<sup>12</sup>

Terence MacManus had been smuggled onto a boat shortly after attending Meagher's wedding and, in June, 1851, landed in San Francisco to a tumultuous welcome from that city's sizable Irish-American community.<sup>13</sup> Meagher envisioned a similarly triumphant arrival in the Land of the Free where, as he stated in a letter written to Duffy on December 27, 1851, "a useful and honorable career will be open to me, and where . . . I may find generous and creditable employment for whatever energies I possess through the goodness of God." He closed his letter to Duffy "with fervent hope that, with His aid and blessing, I shall have the delight of writing my next letter to you under the shadow and protection of the flag of Washington."<sup>14</sup>

Meagher devised an escape plan that was presumably fueled with his father's money and propelled by the many friendships he had made since his arrival in Van

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<sup>11</sup> Quoted in Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, 275.

<sup>12</sup> David Smith, "Thomas Francis Meagher in Love and War: A Narrative History," in *Thomas Francis Meagher*, eds. Hearne and Cornish, 200.

<sup>13</sup> Keneally, *The Great Shame*, 236-237, 242-243.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Cavanagh, *Memoirs of General Meagher*, 306.

Diemen's Land. But first there was the matter of his "ticket-of-leave," by which he had agreed, as a gentleman, not to attempt an escape from the island. Meagher resolved this dilemma by writing a letter to the local magistrate indicating that he was resigning his "ticket-of-leave" as of noon on January 4, 1852 and that he would not thereafter consider himself "bound by the obligation which that parole imposes." However, "should you conceive it your duty to take me into custody, I shall, as a matter of course, regard myself as wholly absolved from the restraint which my word of honor to your Government at present inflicts."<sup>15</sup> By the time the magistrate received Meagher's letter, it was already 11:00 a.m. and the Irish chief of police refused his order to arrest the Irish hero. Hence, it was not until after suppertime that a group of police finally rode out to Meagher's cottage to arrest him. Upon their arrival, they found Meagher and several of his friends on horseback. Meagher then challenged the police to arrest him, spurred his horse, and rode off into the bush with his friends. The police did not follow.<sup>16</sup>

At least that is one version of what happened that night. For the rest of his life, Meagher's friends and foes would debate whether he had surrendered his "ticket-of-leave" in an honorable fashion. Initially, Mitchel and, especially, Martin, raised serious questions about the gentlemanly propriety of Meagher's escape, and Mitchel even wrote to O'Brien asking whether the three of them should insist that Meagher, as a matter of principle, return and surrender himself to the authorities; when O'Brien vetoed that notion, Mitchel and Martin deferred to his authority.<sup>17</sup>

In any event, Meagher did escape from the island but not before he spent several nights in safehouses and a week on a deserted isle where he subsisted on shellfish

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<sup>15</sup> Quoted in Cavanagh, *Memoirs of General Meagher*, 307.

<sup>16</sup> Sullivan, "O'Meagher in Australia," 114-115.

<sup>17</sup> Keneally, *The Great Shame*, 242-244.

and bird's eggs.<sup>18</sup> Finally, he boarded a ship that took him to Brazil and then boarded another that dropped him off in New York City on May 26, 1852. Meanwhile, Bennie had given birth to Henry Emmett Fitzgerald Meagher on February 7, 1852, and began making plans to join her husband once word came of his safe arrival in America.<sup>19</sup>

Meanwhile, a group of prominent Irish-American nationalists known as the Irish Directory had decided to finance P.J. Smyth, a former Young Irelander now living in New York who had attended school with Meagher at Clongowes Wood, in an effort to help Mitchel and the remaining exiles in Van Diemen's Land escape. Posing as a New York newspaper reporter, and exhibiting a natural affinity for clandestine operations, Smyth concocted an elaborate scheme to get Mitchel off the island.<sup>20</sup> It began with the two of them walking into the magistrate's office in Mitchel's home district on June 12, 1853; with Smyth having bribed many of the local police beforehand, Mitchel confidently handed the magistrate a copy of a note he had sent to the lieutenant governor indicating that he was resigning his "ticket-of-leave" and then told him, "I came here to be taken into custody pursuant to that note." When the stunned magistrate failed to act immediately, Mitchel said, "Now, good morning, sir," while, according to Mitchel, Smyth was "playing with the handle of the revolver in his coat" while "I had a ponderous riding-whip in my hand, besides pistols in my breast-pocket." At that point, the

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<sup>18</sup> Ahearn, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 24-25. In the spring of 1859, Meagher published a serialized account of his escape in his *Irish News* paper entitled "Six Weeks in the South Pacific." Ahearn, not a sympathetic Meagher biographer, appeared to accept Meagher's account at face value but Keneally, who is most sympathetic to Meagher, writes that "no one would be surprised if Meagher's taste for high-coloured narrative caused him to gild events" in the newspaper series. Keneally, *The Great Shame*, 244.

<sup>19</sup> Smith, "Meagher in Love and War," 200.

<sup>20</sup> Keneally, *The Great Shame*, 257.

magistrate frantically instructed the constables present to arrest Mitchel but before they could, Mitchel and Smyth had jumped on their horses and galloped out of town.<sup>21</sup>

Mitchel spent the next six harrowing weeks hiding out in safehouses and donning various disguises including that of a Catholic priest before finally boarding a ship bound for Sydney on which Smyth had already placed Mitchel's family. From Sydney, they sailed to Tahiti where they got on an American ship headed for San Francisco. As Mitchel stepped on that ship, he "took off my hat in homage to the Stars and Stripes."<sup>22</sup> That gesture may have made sense for him at the time but it certainly would not later. Finally, on October 9, 1853, accompanied by Smyth, he stepped ashore in San Francisco. Now, Mitchel and Meagher were both in America where Mitchel's opinions and Meagher's inclinations, blown by the powerful winds of rapidly changing times, would lead them down different paths and ultimately land them on opposite sides of a civil war.

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<sup>21</sup> Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, 310-311.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 349.

#### **CHAPTER FOUR: *In America: Personal Ambition and Private Judgment***

While word had reached the United States in the spring of 1852 that Meagher had escaped Van Diemen's Land and was headed to America, no one knew for sure when or where he would arrive. Thus, when he simply strode unannounced into the New York law office of Richard O'Gorman on May 27, 1852, O'Gorman and his entire office were astonished. O'Gorman, the former Young Irelander, had established a successful law practice in New York and become a leader of that city's Irish-American community. Within hours, news of Meagher's arrival had spread throughout that community and, by evening, seven thousand Irish-Americans, accompanied by the heavily Irish 69<sup>th</sup> Regiment of the New York State Militia, had gathered outside O'Gorman's residence, where Meagher was dining, to serenade the famous Irish nationalist.<sup>1</sup>

The spontaneous gathering of seven thousand people by word-of-mouth alone was a testament to not only the spirit but also the sheer size of New York's Irish-American community. As of 1850, fully one-fourth of that city's population was Irish-born; when native-born Americans of Irish heritage were taken into account, the community was even larger. In the United States as a whole in 1850, out of a total population of twenty-four million, four million were either Irish-born or American-born Irish. Most of them lived in large Northeastern cities and Midwestern cities such as New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Chicago, Detroit, Cincinnati, and St. Louis although there were also significant Irish populations in Charleston and New Orleans, not to mention San Francisco.<sup>2</sup> It did not take long for the famous Irish orator Meagher to realize that he

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<sup>1</sup> Keneally, *The Great Shame*, 248.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 249; Rory T. Cornish, "An Irish Republican Abroad: Thomas Francis Meagher in the United States, 1852-1865," in *Thomas Francis Meagher*, eds. Hearne and Cornish, 141.

would have a nice built-in audience of Irish-Americans throughout much of the nation should he ever hit the lecture circuit.

But first Meagher was honored at a levee on May 29 attended by many of New York's leading political figures. That night, he went to Brooklyn to visit Mitchel's mother, sister, and brother who had recently moved there from Ireland. Soon, the governors of Maryland and Indiana and the mayors of such cities as Macon, Detroit, and Charleston were extending invitations to Meagher to be honored in person. Fordham College awarded him an honorary doctorate degree and a number of his admirers organized themselves into the Meagher Club of New York.<sup>3</sup> Before long, a Meagher Guard militia unit would form in Philadelphia and the "T.F. Meagher Polka" was composed and performed in public.<sup>4</sup> "Meagher Mania" was sweeping the country.

Tragically, Meagher's infant son would never live to hear about it. On June 8, 1852, the four-month old died of influenza in the land of his father's exile. In her grief, Bennie was comforted by gifts and condolences from Meagher's father and brother, Harry, back in Ireland. In fact, she decided to visit them first in Ireland before reuniting with her husband in America.<sup>5</sup>

Meagher did not learn about his son's demise until late in the summer. By that point, he had planned a fall lecture tour that would start in New York City before moving through Upper New York and then into the Midwest before heading back east and into New England. Public lectures were a very popular form of entertainment in mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century America and the best professional lecturers could gain considerable fame and fortune on the stage. Meagher lectured on the Young Ireland movement, naturally, as

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<sup>3</sup> Keneally, *The Great Shame*, 249-251.

<sup>4</sup> Ahearn, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 36-37.

<sup>5</sup> Keneally, *The Great Shame*, 251.

well as his exile in Van Diemen's Land. His debut tour went well: the crowds were quite large, the reviews mostly positive, and the money very decent.<sup>6</sup>

During the New England leg of that tour, President-elect Franklin Pierce invited Meagher to a private meeting at his New Hampshire home which, in turn, resulted in an invitation to Pierce's March 4, 1853 inauguration. Arriving in Washington a week early, Meagher first had another private meeting with Pierce before touring the Capitol and both Houses of Congress. On the Hill, he was escorted by Senator James Shields, the Irish-American hero from the Mexican-American War, who introduced him to such powerful men as William Seward, Sam Houston, and Stephen Douglas.<sup>7</sup>

Following the inauguration, Meagher embarked on a highly successful Southern tour before returning to more speaking engagements in New York. Since hitting the lecture circuit, Meagher had made a number of remarks that had irked the American Catholic press as well as Archbishop John Hughes of New York, a man whose nickname, "Dagger John," best explains the manner in which he exercised his episcopal authority. Hughes and most of the American hierarchy at the time were ultramontanists who supported both the spiritual authority and the temporal power of the Papacy. They were also striving, in the face of rampant anti-Catholicism and nativism, to keep American Catholics of all ethnic varieties united against their common enemies. Hence, Catholics were to obey their priests and bishops and refrain from criticizing them on either religious or secular matters. By expressing support for some of the nationalist movements in continental Europe that were then threatening the temporal power of the Church in various countries or by noting, as he did in a May, 1853 speech in New York, with

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<sup>6</sup> Ahearn, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 32-34.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.



respect to the failed Young Ireland rebellion, that “had the Catholic clergy, as a body, taken another course . . . had they lifted up the cross in front of the insurgent ranks, there would have been a different story written,”<sup>8</sup> Meagher was breaking some of the unwritten rules of his faith as it was practiced in America.

From all accounts, Meagher’s faith was always important to him and so it is not surprising that he eventually came to an accommodation with Archbishop Hughes that apparently required him to keep his criticisms of the clergy and hierarchy to himself. In an 1856 letter to Smith O’Brien, Meagher explained this controversy and its outcome:

As to my differences here with the Catholic Priests and the brainless ridiculous donkeys who bray and kick up a dust when poked with a crozier, and threaten obstreperously to knock out the brains of anyone (especially a Catholic) who differs from the reverend and most renowned gentlemen on secular matters, the whole affair is explained in a word. I spoke favouringly of Kossuth, and the European movements for liberty, and that was the whole of it. For this I was denounced from the pulpits, and through the bigoted Catholic press, and in highways and bye-ways. But I never replied to any of their scurrilities. The consequence is the storm has blown over --- and peace reigns between the Young Rebel and the Church.<sup>9</sup>

Meagher was also hoping that peace would continue to reign between the North and the South in America. Addressing seven hundred guests at a Boston banquet given in honor of his thirtieth birthday in August, 1853, Meagher noted that the sectional controversy was the “vital question, if not the supreme question of all”<sup>10</sup> facing the nation and felt himself qualified to weigh on it given that he had visited a total of twenty-five states in both regions during his lecture tours. He had concluded that America was and would remain one nation:

I have seen no difference between the North and South, between East and West. Differences of climate, differences of race, differences in the

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<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Keneally, *The Great Shame*, 259.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Ahearn, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 35-36.

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 41.

capabilities of the soil, in the pursuits of the people, in the laws, in social tastes --- marked and ineffaceable differences, in these conditions and accidents of life I have observed; but everywhere --- everywhere amongst the citizens of this marvelous republic --- amongst all who look up with loyalty to the unviolated and unviolable flag and love it as the symbol of this confraternity --- everywhere I have found that freedom of thought, freedom of speech, freedom of discussion are rights solemnly declared in the instruments under which these various States are moulded, admitted by the willing, guaranteed by the laws, and by the intuitive conservatism of the people made irrevocable.<sup>11</sup>

By not even directly mentioning slavery, the issue at the heart of the sectional controversy, Meagher deftly displayed a political touch and a moderate tone that was wholly unlike the rebellious “Meagher of the Sword” persona that had gained him fame in Ireland. A wiser man at thirty, he had no intentions of stirring up a rebellion in a nation where the “intuitive conservatism” of the people militated against it.

By this point, Bennie was finally living with Meagher in a Manhattan hotel. She had stopped first in Waterford, Ireland in June, 1853, where a crowd of twenty thousand serenaded her at her father-in-law’s house. In July, she and her father-in-law arrived in New York and her reunion with Meagher quickly led to her second pregnancy. But that did not stop Meagher from deciding in the fall to accept an offer by a steamship company of free passage to San Francisco where he planned to launch another lucrative speaking tour. Since his father, still a Member of Parliament and one of Waterford’s most prominent citizens, had to return to Ireland, it was decided that Bennie would go back with him and give birth to the child on Irish soil.<sup>12</sup> For the second time then, Meagher would be leaving his young wife while pregnant. As Jenny Mitchel remarked in a letter:

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<sup>11</sup> Quoted in Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Keneally, *The Great Shame*, 260, 274.

“Thus, the girl that had come half way around the world to join her husband had been able to stay with him only four short months.”<sup>13</sup>

Apparently, there were problems with the marriage. As Smith O’Brien’s wife, Lucy, summed it up in a letter to him: “It is said they do not suit. His fault, I am told.”<sup>14</sup> Keneally speculates that Meagher’s “Vandemonian marriage [was] adequate for a Lake Sorell solitude, but perhaps not for complex New York.”<sup>15</sup>

Before departing for California, Meagher had the pleasure of welcoming Mitchel to New York City on November 29, 1853. Mitchel had spent three weeks in California in October where he was toasted at a banquet thrown in his honor by Governor John Bigler before he proceeded with his family by steamship to New York where his younger brother, William, then a student at Columbia, and Meagher met them at the dock and accompanied them to Mitchel’s mother’s house in Brooklyn. Similar to Meagher’s arrival in New York the preceding year, Mitchel received the full hero’s welcome from the Irish-American community being, in his own words, “feted and glorified outrageously for two or three weeks.”<sup>16</sup>

Mitchel and his family moved into their own home in Brooklyn and he was soon publishing a newspaper again. He called this new publication *The Citizen* and its first edition came out on January 7, 1854, by which time Meagher was in California. Though Meagher had promised Mitchel that he would regularly contribute to the *Citizen*, he never really did. In fact, he would soon be judiciously distancing himself from it. The *Citizen*

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<sup>13</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 274.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 260.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 252.

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in McGovern, *John Mitchel*, 155.

would be Mitchel's paper and it would feature his writing --- uncensored, uninhibited, and unrestrained.

Mitchel had some ready-made material for the *Citizen* in the form of the journal that he had been keeping during his years in exile. Excerpted first in that paper and published later in 1854 in book form as *Jail Journal*, those writings would greatly influence the future course of Irish nationalism. *Jail Journal* would become Mitchel's best known and most self-revelatory work. While Mitchel did not intend to set forth a comprehensive political or personal philosophy in his journal entries, he leaves plenty of hints for readers as to what such philosophies would or would not contain.

For one thing, Mitchel adamantly rejected the "progressive" thought of his day. For example, while docked outside the British penal colony in Bermuda, he wrote the following in his February 3, 1849 entry:

What to do, then, with all our robbers, burglars, and forgers? Why hang them, *hang* them. You have no right to make the honest people support the rogues, and support them better than they, the honest people, can support themselves. You have no right to set a premium upon villainy, and put burglars and rick-burners on a permanent endowment. . . .  
. . . . In criminal jurisprudence, as well as in many another thing, the nineteenth century is sadly retrogressive . . . "Reformation of the offenders" is not the reasonable object of criminal punishment, nor any part of the reasonable object, and though it were so, your jail and hulk system would be the surest way to defeat that object and make the casual offender an irreclaimable scourge of mankind. Jails ought to be places of discomfort; the "sanitary condition" of miscreants ought not to be better cared for than the honest, industrious people --- and for "ventilation." I would ventilate the rascals in front of the county jails at the end of a rope.<sup>17</sup> (Emphasis in original.)

In a July 14, 1848 entry contemplating the morality of suicide, Mitchel attacked the progressive concept of "social duty":

Nobody is obliged to "benefit his species"; the notion of a man being able

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<sup>17</sup> Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, 124-125.

to benefit his species, or bound to do it, if able, is a mere modern humbug --- not more, as I calculate, than ninety or a hundred years old. Our duties to “society,” to “mankind,” and the like, begin and end with our personal engagements, express or implicit: if you violate none of these, you may go about your business without leave asked of mankind or society, *so far as they are concerned* you are clear. In that case you need not search for reasons to justify your retreat; one’s own whim is reason enough; if you are of a bilious habit, and melancholy temperament, and fancy that you are tired seeing the sun rise every day, I know no cause why you should not thrust a sharp instrument into your dyspeptic stomach and let your disagreeable soul rush forth into the air.<sup>18</sup> (Emphasis in original.)

Though believing that no one was *obliged* to benefit the species or even to refrain from killing oneself, Mitchel concluded that “the extent to which we purify and ennoble our own nature in life will [determine] the rank assigned each of us in the scale of God’s creatures at death,” and recommended that one should “love, hate, work, and play, not envying, not oppressing, nor brooking oppression --- above all, not lying (to yourself or others), and you will see good days before you die and after.”<sup>19</sup> With those sentiments, Mitchel was not far off the mark when he called himself a “classical pagan.”

Mitchel certainly did not respect or appreciate the religious considerations that caused so many Catholic priests to restrain their parishioners from participating in the Young Ireland uprising of 1848, as he revealed in an October 15, 1852 entry in which he summarized a visit that day from Smith O’Brien:

[O’Brien] attributed his failure, in great part, to the behaviour (what shall I call it? --- the cowardice, the treachery, or the mere priestliness) of the priests. . . He described to me old grey-haired men coming up to him with tears streaming down their faces, telling him they would follow him so gladly to the world’s end --- that they had been praying for that day --- and God knows it was not life they valued: but *there* was his reverence, and he said that if they shed blood they would lose their immortal souls; and what could they do? God help them, where could they turn? And on their knees they entreated him to forgive them for deserting him. So they slunk home to take care of their paltry old souls, and wait for the sheriff’s bailiff to hunt

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 50-51.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 52.

them into the poor-house.<sup>20</sup> (Emphasis in original.)

In an 18-page “Introductory” to *Jail Journal*, Mitchel discusses the rise and fall of the Young Ireland movement and, in the process, makes his notable claim that in the early Famine years of 1846, 1847, and 1848, “Ireland was exporting to England, food to the value of fifteen million pounds sterling, and had on her own soil at each harvest, good and ample provision for double her own population, notwithstanding the potato blight.”<sup>21</sup> Though Mitchel’s claim that Ireland had enough food during those years to feed “double her own population” was somewhat exaggerated, it would be taken as gospel truth by future generations of Irish nationalists on both sides of the Atlantic.

Many future Irish revolutionaries would also come to endorse Mitchel’s blistering condemnation of Daniel O’Connell and his “moral force” movement. In his “Jail Journal Introductory,” Mitchel describes O’Connell as “a man of giant proportions in body and mind” with “the power to make other men hate or love, laugh, or weep, at his good pleasure” and who “by virtue of being more intensely Irish, carrying to a more extravagant pitch all Irish strength and passion and weakness, than other Irishmen, led and swayed his people by a kind of divine, or else diabolic right.”<sup>22</sup> According to Mitchel:

He led them, as I believe, all wrong for forty years. He was a lawyer; and never could come to the point of denying and defying all British Law. He was a Catholic, sincere and devout; and would not see that the Church had ever been the enemy of Irish Freedom. He was an aristocrat, by position and by taste; and the name of a Republic was odious to him.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 267.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., xlix.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., xliv.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

Mitchel ridiculed O'Connell's methods of "mere *agitation*, [the] harmless exhibition of numerical force, . . . imposing demonstrations (which are fatal nonsense), and [the] half-unsheathing [of] a visionary sword, which friends and foes alike knew to be a phantom,"<sup>24</sup> (emphasis in original) and concluded that "forty years of 'moral and peaceful agitation'" had produced nothing but "high aspirations" that later "sunk to a mere craving for food."<sup>25</sup> As Mitchel summed up: "Not that the Irish are a stupid race, or naturally absurd, but the magician bewitched them to their destruction."<sup>26</sup> When Mitchel wrote, "Better that men should perish by the bayonets of the enemy than by their laws,"<sup>27</sup> he became the progenitor of the "physical force" wing of Irish nationalism that rejected "moral force" movements as ineffective and ultimately counter-productive.

If Irish-Americans who supported the "moral force" brand of Irish nationalism were offended by the excerpts from *Jail Journal* that the *Citizen* published, they would soon have plenty of company. Beginning with the January 14, 1854 edition of his paper, Mitchel eagerly tackled the issue that Meagher had studiously avoided mentioning at his 30<sup>th</sup> birthday gala a few months earlier --- and one that Duffy had prevented Mitchel from addressing in the *Nation* --- slavery.

Strictly speaking, Mitchel did not raise the slavery issue on his own in that very early edition of the *Citizen*. In late 1853, James Haughton, a Quaker merchant in Dublin and a longtime Irish anti-slavery activist, wrote a letter addressed to both Mitchel and Meagher challenging them to join the American abolitionist movement now that they were both living in the States. "Is liberty less the right of the black man than of the white

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., xlix.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., xlvi.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., l.

man? . . . Be consistent then, and while you are in a land of slave-drivers sanction not their denial of civil and social rights to the colored people by your silence, or you will become a participator in these wrongs.”<sup>28</sup> Haughton had been a persistent critic of those Irish nationalists who railed about the British keeping the Irish in “slavery” and yet seemed to condone the slavery of blacks in America.<sup>29</sup> Haughton had also been an ally of Daniel O’Connell, which did not earn him points with Mitchel.

Mitchel chose to respond to Haughton’s challenge in the pages of the *Citizen*. Since Haughton contended that any Irish nationalist who did not support abolition was a hypocrite, Mitchel argued that Haughton was hypocritical himself for having been consumed with the issue of American slavery while people in his own country were starving during the Famine: “Six or seven years ago while the doomed white slaves of his country were in the very crisis of their agony, we will remember that this worthy gentleman was seized with a paroxysm of violent sympathy with the fat negroes of America.”<sup>30</sup> As Mitchel put it further, the starving Irish “labored under two disqualifications for the sympathy of so benevolent a man --- they were white and at his own door. His heart was in Africa; his tenderness was all dark in its complexion; tele-

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<sup>28</sup> Quoted in McGovern, *John Mitchel*, 202.

<sup>29</sup> Though not known as an Irish nationalist, Father Mathew also drew Haughton’s ire while conducting a temperance crusade in America from 1849 to 1851. While administering the Pledge to an estimated six hundred thousand Americans on both sides of the Mason-Dixon Line, the “Apostle of Temperance” tried to steer clear of the slavery issue by arguing that his only goal was to free men from the “slavery of intemperance.” But William Lloyd Garrison then revealed that Father Mathew, along with seventy thousand other Irish had signed the 1842 letter asking Irish-Americans to support abolition. This revelation cost Father Mathew supporters on both sides of the issue and almost prevented him from being the first foreigner since Lafayette to be honored by being allowed to sit within the bar of the United States Senate. Haughton would claim that Father Mathew’s later poor health was a punishment by God for failing to remain faithful to the abolitionist cause. Herson, *Celts, Catholics & Copperheads*, 63-64. Also see John F. Quinn, “Father Mathew’s Disciples: American Catholic Support for Temperance, 1840-1920,” *Church History* 65 (December 1996): 624, 625-627.

<sup>30</sup> Quoted in McGovern, *John Mitchel*, 203.



scopic in its view.”<sup>31</sup> Moreover, Mitchel contended, his obsession with slavery “became a weariness --- shall we say a bore? --- and people began to abhor the very name of negro” but now Haughton was “saying the very same things that were then so tedious to us.”<sup>32</sup> Then, as if to shut Haughton up once and for all, Mitchel concluded his response as follows:

Now let us try and satisfy our pertinacious friend, if possible, by a little plain English --- We are not abolitionists; no more abolitionists than Moses, or Socrates, or Jesus Christ. We deny that it is a crime, or a wrong, or even a peccadillo, to hold slaves, to buy slaves, to sell slaves, to keep slaves to their work, by flogging or other needful coercion. ‘By your silence,’ says Mr. Haughton, ‘you will become a participant in their wrongs.’ But we will not be silent, when occasion calls for speech; and as far as being a participant in the wrongs, we for our part, wish we had a good plantation well-stocked with healthy negroes in Alabama. There now --- is Mr. Haughton content?<sup>33</sup>

Meagher, for his part, appears to have been unaware of Haughton’s challenge until he landed in New Orleans on March 23, 1854, on the way back from his California tour. But unlike Mitchel, Meagher refused to take Haughton’s bait. On the following day, he penned a cleverly evasive answer to Haughton in which he first asserted that neither Haughton, nor the general public had any “right or title whatsoever to require from him an expression of opinion respecting the question of African slavery in America.”<sup>34</sup> Next, Meagher noted that it would be three more years before he could become a citizen and that he would “postpone till then his declaration of opinion regarding African slavery in America, and every other question affecting the joint compact and constitution of the several States.”<sup>35</sup> Meagher had used Haughton’s

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<sup>31</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 203-204.

<sup>34</sup> Quoted in Cavanagh, *Memoirs of General Meagher*, 343.

<sup>35</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*

challenge to buy himself three years of time before he would have to take a stand on the most divisive issue of the day.

Mitchel, on the other hand, was already in for a dime on that issue and would soon throw in a dollar. His unbridled defense of slavery in responding to Haughton's challenge quickly produced spirited rebukes from some of America's leading abolitionists, including the Reverend Henry Ward Beecher, who engaged in a bitter exchange of several public letters with Mitchel. When Beecher asked him to square the principles for which he was persecuted in Ireland with his pro-slavery position, Mitchel responded as follows in the January 28, 1854 *Citizen*:

Now your reverence is a slave, a slave to certain words and phases, which have got the mastery over your poor mind, and thus over your body too. You are as one possessed by them. They make you cry out, and gesticulate violently, and toil and sweat and revile passers-by. Who will emancipate you, unhappy congregational pastor! You call these noisy spirits that possess you *principles*; and you ask me where is my "principle." . . . In seeking to throw off the domination of England, I was actuated by no other principle than intolerance of insolent and ignorant oppression: my principle was simply that Irishmen were fitted for a higher destiny and sphere, and that they all ought to feel British dominion as intolerable as I did. My principle was, that even if all other Irishmen chose to submit to that mean tyranny, I for my part would choose rather to die. You see I am but narrow-minded.<sup>36</sup>

While Mitchel believed that "Irishmen were fitted for a higher destiny and sphere," he could not say the same for blacks. Slavery in America was as good as it would get for them and was actually an improvement over the kind of lives they led in Africa. As Mitchel argued in that same January 28 issue, American slavery gave blacks "men for masters instead of brutes; it takes them to rational labor in cultivating the ground instead of basking all greasy in the sun, or rearing 'skull-obelisks to the King of

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<sup>36</sup> Quoted in Thomas Flanagan, introduction to Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, xiii.

the Congo and his Hundred Women.”<sup>37</sup> Writing in the February 18, 1854 *Citizen*, Mitchel flatly denied that there was “any analogy between negro-slavery and Irish denationalization”<sup>38</sup> and called upon the Irish to oppose abolition:

He would be a bad Irishman who voted for principles which jeopardized the present freedom of a nation of white men, for the vague forlorn hope of elevating blacks to a level which it is at least problematical whether God and Nature intended them.<sup>39</sup>

Like some of his contemporaries, historians have wondered how such a staunch advocate for liberation of the oppressed peasants of Ireland could become such an outspoken apologist for the enslavement of blacks in America. The answer is actually a simple one and evidenced by his own words: John Mitchel was a racist. He honestly believed that blacks were inferior to whites and thus patronizingly endorsed a “humane” form of slavery, as purportedly practiced then in the South. Moreover, Mitchel’s racist views and pro-slavery sentiments pre-dated his arrival in America; had Duffy not censored his work in the *Nation*, they would have become better known in Ireland. America did not change him, he remained who he was. Historians who find his advocacy of freedom for the Irish but slavery for the blacks inconsistent only do so because they find racism itself inexplicable and logically indefensible. But Mitchel did not see things that way.

Nor was Mitchel one to keep his thoughts to himself or to sugarcoat his opinions just to placate friend or foe. That too had not changed since his days as Ireland’s most outspoken radical. A proud man, Mitchel would not yield in his views and he even delighted in the negative reaction that his pro-slavery position rapidly generated amongst

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<sup>37</sup> Quoted in McGovern, *John Mitchel*, 198.

<sup>38</sup> Quote in *Ibid.*, 201.

<sup>39</sup> Quoted in Hegarty, *John Mitchel*, 89.

the Northern press. In the February 18, 1854 *Citizen*, Mitchel noted that “the immortal hero of two months ago reads now that he is an ‘imposter’ (*Hartford Republican*), that he is a ‘suicide’ (*New York Tribune*), and a ‘hideous hag’ (*Independent*). The *Vermont Tribune* heads an article, ‘John Mitchel, the Hypocrite,’ and ‘half hopes he was drunk when he penned the loathsome paragraph.’”<sup>40</sup>

The “loathsome paragraph” referred to by the *Vermont Tribune* was at the end of his response to Haughton, in which he wished for a “good plantation, well-stocked with healthy negroes in Alabama.” That remark, as Mitchel would admit years later, “swept off ten thousand readers [of the *Citizen*] at one blow.”<sup>41</sup> But at the time, Mitchel was quick to defend it. When Archbishop Hughes took offense at the remark, Mitchel fired back some daggers of his own at “Dagger John.” Noting that the Archdiocese of New York charged five dollars for each burial in its cemetery, Mitchel wrote in the August, 19, 1854 *Citizen* that he was “almost tempted, instead of a well-stocked plantation in Alabama, to wish for a well-peopled grave-yard on Long Island.”<sup>42</sup>

By that point, Mitchel and Hughes had been publicly feuding for months. It began with Mitchel endorsing Italian nationalists in their quest to conquer the Papal States; as Mitchel wrote in the February 11, 1854 *Citizen*: “There is no occasion why the Bishop of Rome should also be the Prince of Rome. And perhaps he would be more a Bishop if he were less a Prince.”<sup>43</sup> Mitchel and Hughes would further clash over Irish independence, with the Irish-born archbishop favoring only legal, “moral force” efforts towards that end. When Hughes accordingly instructed his flock to reject “physical

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<sup>40</sup> Quoted in McGovern, *John Mitchel*, 210.

<sup>41</sup> Quoted in Hegarty, *John Mitchel*, 95.

<sup>42</sup> Quoted in Michael Toomey, “‘Saving the South With All My Might’: John Mitchel, Champion of Southern Nationalism,” in *Thomas Francis Meagher*, eds. Hearne and Cornish, 126.

<sup>43</sup> Quoted in Keneally, *The Great Shame*, 271.

force” Irish nationalism, Mitchel took umbrage: “I mean to say then, Bishop, that your Grace, and the whole hierarchy of your Church, and the priesthood of it, too, so far as the hierarchy can control it, is an enemy of Irishmen.”<sup>44</sup> Incensed at the archbishop’s efforts to influence Catholics on political matters, Mitchel accused him of having “far more of the Orangeman in you than I have --- that is a narrow ferocious sectarian spirit; but if there be any class of persons whom I abhor more than the Orangemen, worse than the Know-Nothings . . . it is the Inquisitors.”<sup>45</sup> The Know-Nothings were a growing political movement at the time that embraced nativism and anti-Catholicism. According to Mitchel, he had never heard of “so foolish, so filthy, so imbecile a movement as this of the Know-Nothings.”<sup>46</sup>

Mitchel was nothing if not an equal-opportunity offender. In just a few short months with the *Citizen*, he had earned the enmity of the abolitionists, the Catholic Church, and the Know-Nothings. Not surprisingly then, the paper’s circulation fell dramatically from its early peak of 50,000 weekly purchasers. His feud with the aptly named “Dagger John” had been the most costly as Catholic readers deserted the paper in droves. As Mitchel later admitted, it was an “unfortunate controversy” given that “most of the readers of that paper, those indeed, to whom it was mainly addressed, were just the flock of this very prelate, and of the rest of the Catholic clergy.”<sup>47</sup> And so, a year after starting the *Citizen*, Mitchel left it in February, 1855 and started making plans to move down South where his pro-slavery writings had been duly noted and hailed.

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<sup>44</sup> Quoted in McGovern, *John Mitchel*, 176.

<sup>45</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 176-177.

<sup>46</sup> Quoted in Toomey, ““Saving the South With All My Might,”” 126.

<sup>47</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*

Indeed, in the spring of 1854, the mayor of Richmond had invited him to deliver a talk in his fair city. Mitchel's speech went over so well that he was invited to give the commencement address at the University of Virginia in June. Sarcastically entitling his address, "The Nineteenth Century Wise and Happy," Mitchel excoriated the supposed "progress" of the times that had led to industrialization and the attendant ills of class exploitation, urban poverty, and wage slavery. In contrast, he praised the South for maintaining its agrarian society in the face of so-called "progress." He also condemned the modern tendency to devalue passion:

When we read of ancient times, in those ages by us impudently called "dark," does it not continually strike us, as the proper difference of those times compared with the present, that men and women acted more upon genuine feeling? --- that instead of puny sentimentalism, they had vehement passion, wherein words meant things, and the fiery thought forever strove to grow into strenuous act?<sup>48</sup>

Soon, Mitchel would be living in a place where "vehement passion" and "fiery thought" would "grow into strenuous act" resulting in the Civil War. And Mitchel's passions too would be caught up in that affair. But his prime passion remained the liberation of Ireland and, even while editing the *Citizen* in 1854, he took the time to travel to Washington, D.C. to meet with a Baron Stockl, the Russian ambassador, to see if Irish patriots could be armed to the extent necessary for them to open a second front against Britain in the Crimean War. Although those talks went nowhere, Mitchel continued to follow the Crimean War closely, having long believed and argued that the best time for an Irish rebellion would be when Britain is at war. Sixty years later, he would be proved right. But, back in 1854, Jenny Mitchel noted in a letter that her husband was perplexed

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<sup>48</sup> Quoted in Flanagan, introduction to Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, xxix.

as to why Meagher was not showing more interest in the opportunities presented to Ireland by Britain's war with Russia.<sup>49</sup>

Perhaps it was because Meagher had other matters on his mind in 1854. He was, after all, having a bad year. Not long after returning to New York from his California tour and yet another Southern tour in the spring, Meagher received news that Bennie had given birth in Ireland to a healthy baby boy, Thomas Francis Meagher II. But the frail Bennie had died shortly thereafter, on May 9, of typhus; she was only 22-years old.<sup>50</sup> Remarkably, the same spinster aunt who had raised Meagher stepped forward to help raise his infant son, and Meagher and his father agreed to let the boy grow up in Ireland.<sup>51</sup>

Reeling from sorrow, guilt, or both that summer over his young wife's demise, Meagher was not in the mood to have his honor challenged and James McMaster of the ultramontanist *Freeman's Journal* would pay a price for doing so. When McMaster accused Meagher of surrendering his "ticket-of-leave" in Van Diemen's Land in an ungentlemanly manner, Meagher went to his office on July 18 and demanded a retraction. Failing to get one, he waited with a couple of his buddies in a saloon near McMaster's house until he saw the journalist walking home. At that point, Meagher sprang upon McMasters and started to beat him with a riding whip. McMasters defended himself with a loaded cane but Meagher wrestled it away from him. McMasters then tried to escape and, as Meagher chased him, he pulled out a pistol and fired a shot at Meagher from close range. According to the *New York Times*, "The ball grazed Mr. Meagher's

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<sup>49</sup> Keneally, *The Great Shame*, 270-271, 275.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 274-275.

<sup>51</sup> Cavanagh, *Memoirs of General Meagher*, 14.

forehead, the powder covering the upper part of his face, and wounding both eyes.”<sup>52</sup>

Before McMasters could get off a second shot, a “young lad from Jersey City” seized his gun and Meagher resumed pounding McMasters until the police arrived and took them into custody; each man had to pay \$500.00 to be released.<sup>53</sup>

Of course, Meagher would have willingly paid a lot more than \$500.00 to have avoided the bad publicity resulting from his attack on McMasters but, in November of 1854, he got some good publicity for a change. Riding on a passenger train that collided with a gravel train near Detroit, Meagher worked feverishly in the wreckage to save as many passengers as he could although the collision was so severe that forty-seven of them died. Coincidentally, the famous ultramontanist writer Orestes Brownson also happened to be on the passenger train; he worked shoulder to shoulder with Meagher in the relief effort and later praised him for his heroism.<sup>54</sup>

By early 1855, Meagher was praising the charms of a beautiful young lady named Elizabeth Townsend who had been smitten by him while attending one of his lectures. As Meagher described her in a letter, she was “in the bloom and pride, and the genial glorious dawn of womanhood --- stationed in the highest social rank, in a community the wealthiest in the world --- the oldest unmarried daughter of a family, affluent in its circumstances, and long descendent residence in this country . . .”<sup>55</sup> For once, Meagher was not engaging in hyperbole. Libby Townsend, as she was known, was the oldest daughter of Peter Townsend III, whose grandfather had taken the Revolutionary Association Oath in 1775 and whose company, the Sterling Ironworks,

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<sup>52</sup> Quoted in Smith, “Meagher in Love and War,” 205.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 205-206.

<sup>54</sup> Ahearn, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 48.

<sup>55</sup> Quoted in Keneally, *The Great Shame*, 278-279.



manufactured armaments for the Revolutionaries and built a huge chain boom stretching across the Hudson River at West Point that kept the British from ascending up that river. Libby came from the bluest of Yankee blue blood and her Episcopalian family was not keen on her marrying an Irish Catholic immigrant with no apparent occupation who wandered the country giving lectures.<sup>56</sup> Meagher anticipated her family's objections in a January 2, 1855 love letter to Libby:

I should have to meet no slight contradictions and rebuke. For, I have no fortune --- at least, nothing that I know of. I never asked my father a single question on the subject. I have fought my own way through the world, and will fight it to the end. I am . . . a homeless exile --- dependant on my own good name and labour for a fortune. I am not yet an American citizen, and have not, therefore, a recognized standing in this country. I am here alone.<sup>57</sup>

Naturally, Meagher neglected to mention in that letter that his father had supported him in his Vandemonian exile and that, upon his arrival in America, the *New York Times* estimated that his father's fortune was worth 750,000 British pounds or, in early 21<sup>st</sup> Century American money, approximately \$40,000,000.00.<sup>58</sup> But just in case Peter Townsend III had missed that article, Meagher decided that he better get a profession in a hurry.

Once again, as in Ireland, he chose the law. But this time he followed through on his studies. Given a crash course in American law by the esteemed Judge Robert Emmet, nephew of the famous Irish nationalist martyr of the same name who led a failed uprising in 1803, Meagher was admitted to the State Bar of New York in accordance with a

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<sup>56</sup> Smith, "Meagher in Love and War," 206-207.

<sup>57</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 207.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 201, 220 (n 33).

September 4, 1855 special order of the New York Supreme Court, which was needed because Meagher was not yet a citizen.<sup>59</sup>

With a law license in hand, Meagher next obtained a marriage license. Libby's father had finally consented to the union and the couple was married on November 14, 1855, in a small ceremony held at the personal residence of Archbishop Hughes. Since Libby was still an Episcopalian at that time, a major society wedding at St. Patrick's Cathedral was not allowed. Eventually, she would convert to her husband's religion and become a most devout Catholic. Though *New York Times* publisher Henry J. Raymond claimed in his paper after the wedding that Peter Townsend III had so disapproved of her union with the "distinguished Hibernian" that he had disinherited her, the fact is that the newlywed couple immediately moved into Townsend's mansion on Fifth Avenue. Raymond, who moonlighted as the lieutenant governor of New York, was not enamored with Meagher and now that feeling would become mutual.<sup>60</sup>

As the Meaghers settled in on Fifth Avenue, the Mitchels were trying to make a go of it in the Smokey Mountains of Tennessee. Upon leaving the *Citizen* in early 1855, Mitchel knew that he needed another job to support his family but he also wanted to set them up in a self-sufficient environment should he have to leave them on a moment's notice to return to Ireland in case of a rebellion there. As he wrote in a March, 1855 letter to a friend as he contemplated moving to Tennessee: "I will be within 2 days journey of Phila[delphia] & if I am satisfied that a decisive moment is really approaching I will be on the Seacoast instantly."<sup>61</sup> Mitchel thus decided to start a family farm in the country. Leaving his oldest son, John, in New York to study engineering, Mitchel and

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<sup>59</sup> Keneally, *The Great Shame*, 284.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 284; Ahearn, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 50.

<sup>61</sup> Quoted in McGovern, *John Mitchel*, 246.

the rest of his family headed to East Tennessee where, sight unseen and impulsive as ever, he had decided to move after reading a book about the region.<sup>62</sup>

East Tennessee was one of the most atypical regions in the Old South. Mitchel would not find a lot of large plantations “well stocked with healthy negroes” in that mountainous area; in fact, slaves made up only seven percent of the population there.<sup>63</sup> But he would find an abnormally large number of Know-Nothings for a Southern state, some of whom, upon hearing that a famous Irishman was moving to town, immediately assumed that he was a Catholic cooperating with the Jesuits in a conspiracy to destroy the liberties of all Protestant Tennesseans. Mayor William Swan, a former Tennessee attorney general, however, was not a Know-Nothing; he welcomed Mitchel to town and the two became fast friends. Mitchel soon purchased a 132-acre farm in remote Tucaleechee Cove, about thirty-five miles from Knoxville, and moved his family there.<sup>64</sup> When warned about the strange ways of the mountain people he would encounter in that isolated area, Mitchel stated that he “intended to become a barbarian myself, and bring up my family in that line of life.”<sup>65</sup>

But after a few months, the “barbarian” lifestyle had not proved profitable and Mitchel wound up making a lecture tour of Boston and New York to raise some money. Returning to his log-cabin in the spring of 1856, Mitchel realized that neither he nor his family were well suited for an isolated life in the mountains and they soon moved to Knoxville proper.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 220-221.

<sup>63</sup> Toomey, ““Saving the South With All My Might,”” 132.

<sup>64</sup> McGovern, *John Mitchel*, 221-223.

<sup>65</sup> Quoted in Toomey, ““Saving the South With All My Might,”” 129.

<sup>66</sup> McGovern, *John Mitchel*, 224-228.

Back in New York, Meagher's legal career got off to such a slow start that he decided to busy himself by starting a weekly newspaper called the *Irish News*. Upon learning of this venture in April, 1856, the *New York Herald* commented: "With the warnings he has before him --- especially the pregnant example of John Mitchel who ran through an unexampled popularity in six months, all for the want of a little common sense --- Mr. Meagher ought not to fail."<sup>67</sup> Though Meagher originally intended the *Irish News* to focus on protecting the rights and improving the lives of New York's Irish masses, he soon began to address matters of a more general political interest. Not surprisingly, he aligned his editorial slant with that of the national Democratic Party, the party of allegiance for the overwhelming majority of Irish-Americans. He also promoted the controversial practice of American "filibustering," armed campaigns by ambitious American adventurers to secure Central American lands for themselves and, by so doing, to promote American interests in the region.<sup>68</sup> As Meagher saw it, either America or Great Britain would ultimately control the right-of-way between the Atlantic and the Pacific and he, for one, did not want Americans to "consent to pay the toll, struck by the Parliament whose Stamp-Act she cut to pieces and flung in the face of old King George."<sup>69</sup>

In September of 1856, Meagher toured the South again and printed his impressions of that region for his readers in the October 18 *Irish News*:

The general impression of the South in the minds of the Northern people, is a sort of mingling up of bowie-knives, revolvers, slave-drivers with broad-brimmed hats and long whips, shrieking negroes, blood and murder, and all that. I was very agreeably disappointed when I came to mix with the people. I could see none of the horrors that I had been taught

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<sup>67</sup> Quoted in Keneally, *The Great Shame*, 296.

<sup>68</sup> Ahearn, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 51-54.

<sup>69</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 52.

to believe existed among them. . . . I found a people sober, intelligent, high-minded, patriotic, and kind-hearted. One thing I missed, to-wit --- the squalid misery of the laboring classes of the North. I saw no poverty.<sup>70</sup>

Meagher went on to praise Southerners for having “no penchant for *isms*; and let me tell you, they manage to get along wonderfully well without them.”<sup>71</sup> (Emphasis in original.) As Meagher further described:

There are no cadaverous, sapless, man-forsaken females, turning politics into a burlesque, philosophy into farce, and religion into reproach. There are no long-haired fanatics preaching a millennium of free-love. There are no hiss committees, no convent-burners, no addle-pated ranters, no Know-Nothings. There are no “ministers of the gospel” --- save the mark! --- sermonizing from the text --- “Go ye into the world and shoot at every creature,” turning the church into the play-house, and making rowdyism of religion.<sup>72</sup>

What there was, of course, in the South but not in the North, was slavery. And even though Meagher would not take his oath of citizenship until May of 1857, he decided to end his silence on that explosive topic now:

But it may be urged, “slavery is there.” Well, sir, what of it? You are not responsible for it. You have no business with it. Look around you, and you will see slavery everywhere --- aye, under your very nose!! Slavery ten times worse than any involuntary physical servitude. “Still, slavery is bad.” Granted. But how are you going to remedy it? Are you an American, and would you ask your fellow countryman to do the work of a slave? Are you a foreigner, and would you ask a European to do it? No, sir; you know better. Just mind your own affairs, then, and let slavery alone. Slavery, like every other social institution, has its dark side; and it would be well, perhaps, if we could get rid of it. But we can’t, in our time, and should therefore confine our efforts to alleviating the evils that accompany it.<sup>73</sup>

Meagher’s favorable impression of the South and his live-and-let-live attitude towards slavery there was actually on all fours with the thinking of most New York

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<sup>70</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>71</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*

<sup>72</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 55-56.

Democrats, of which he considered himself one even though he could not yet vote. As the presidential election of 1856 approached pitting Democrat James Buchanan against Republican John C. Fremont and the American (“Know-Nothing”) Party nominee, Millard Fillmore, the *Irish News* tooted the horn loudly for Buchanan: “The Irish vote is sound for Buchanan. . . . To the Democratic Party they remain absolutely true, for they are true to the Constitution which that party strictly interprets and in all its provisions uncompromisingly sustains.”<sup>74</sup> Besides that, the Catholic voter should support Buchanan in order to “defeat . . . the rude bigotry which threatens him”<sup>75</sup> from the Know-Nothings. As Meagher biographer Robert G. Athearn explains, Meagher “was a part of that strange union between the Irish political machine of New York and the plantation aristocracy of the South.”<sup>76</sup>

Back then, the Democratic Party was perceived as the conservative party and so it is not surprising that Meagher, in a December 1, 1856 speech in Boston to the Democratic Party of Massachusetts, declared:

A Revolutionist under a Monarchy, I am a Conservative under a Republic.  
This sentiment I boldly utter on behalf of thousands of Irish immigrants,  
invested with and aspiring to the sovereignty of American citizenship.<sup>77</sup>

As Athearn notes, for the rest of his life Meagher would be continually “asserting and reasserting that although he had been a revolutionary in Ireland he was a conservative in America.”<sup>78</sup> Interestingly, Meagher may have stolen this pet phrase of his from Mitchel. In the July 15, 1854 edition of the *Citizen*, Mitchel had proclaimed:

In Ireland the whole governmental and social system needed to be cut up by

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<sup>74</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>75</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 170.

<sup>77</sup> Quoted in Keneally, *The Great Shame*, 293.

<sup>78</sup> Athearn, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 169.

the roots in order that some justice might begin to be done there. Therefore I was a radical. Here, where there are institutions worth conserving, I am a Conservative. Yes, in America, you must call me a conservative and be assured that there is nothing I shall be more solicitous to conserve than the absolute civil right of every man to be heretic, infidel, Catholic, Jew or Mormon at his good pleasure.<sup>79</sup>

When Mitchel mentioned “institutions worth conserving” at that point, he was obviously referring to religious liberty and, one might infer, freedom of speech as well.

But in its August 8, 1857 edition, Meagher’s *Irish News* quoted Mitchel as follows:

Not only does America content me, the South especially delights me. . . .  
The South and her institutions are established, strong, impregnable.  
Amongst civilized communities, none are at this moment so secure as the Southern States of America.<sup>80</sup>

When Mitchel expressed admiration for “the South and her institutions,” he plainly meant to include that institution most peculiar to the South --- slavery. Mitchel believed in that institution so strongly that he would eventually support the secession of the Southern states in order to preserve it. Thus, in 1857, Mitchel, while still acknowledging that America as a whole “does . . . content me,” was already referring, in first-letter capitals, to the “Southern States of America,” as if it were a separate nation. While Meagher, as much as he admired many aspects of the South, considered that region only one part of a strong, united nation, Mitchel thought the South was superior to the North; as he wrote to a friend: “I prefer the South in every sense. I do really believe its state of society to be more just, more sound, than that of the North; and whatever measures the South calls for and truly needs to secure and establish itself, I advocate.”<sup>81</sup> Mitchel was becoming, at best, a Southern American; Meagher was becoming an American.

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<sup>79</sup> Quoted in McGovern, *John Mitchel*, 171.

<sup>80</sup> Quoted in Athearn, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 55.

<sup>81</sup> Quoted in McGovern, *John Mitchel*, 207.

Still, Meagher remained conscious that he was also an *Irish-American* and, when his old nemesis, Lieutenant Governor Henry J. Raymond made slyly derogatory remarks about Irish servant girls in his *New York Times*, Meagher accused him of “editorial poltroonery” in the November 22, 1856 *Irish News*. Six days later, Raymond responded with a personal attack on Meagher, noting that he “wields adjectives and epithets as ferociously as he wielded his pike at that famous Irish battle --- we forget the name of it -- where he delivered his country from the Saxon tyrant, and bound his victorious brow with wreaths which not even his flight from Australia has availed to wither.”<sup>82</sup> Turning up the sarcastic heat, Raymond wondered whether Meagher should be the one to complain about the “irresponsibility” of the *New York Times* when “he could, at [his] discretion, fight without breaking the law, or run away without breaking his parole.”<sup>83</sup> Incensed that Raymond had revived the old controversy about his escape from Van Diemen’s Land, Meagher demanded an apology so vociferously that Raymond’s paper wound up publishing one retraction on December 4 and, when Meagher deemed it insufficient, another one on December 6. Clearly, Raymond did not want, like McMasters before him, to be cowhided by Meagher “without breaking the law.”<sup>84</sup>

His honor restored again, Meagher embarked on an intense effort to secure a position with the incoming Buchanan administration. It began with a letter he wrote to President-elect Buchanan on January 28, 1857:

I am in rather sad want of a position, with some emolument attached to it. . . . For, with all that I can do (and I labour incessantly, Heaven knows!) I find it impossible to realize a respectable competence. . . . The thought that I have been blessed with a noble American wife, worthy of the brightest fortune I could win for her, and qualified by nature and study, by

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<sup>82</sup> Quoted in Ahearn, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 57.

<sup>83</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 56-57.



heart, intellect and person, to adorn the very highest eminence it could ever be my lot to reach; --- this thought renders my present condition infinitely painful to me. . . . If then, you should not consider it incompatible with the national interests, I would solicit from you a representative position abroad --- a Consulship, for instance, in South or Central America.<sup>85</sup>

On February 24, Buchanan wrote on the margin of Meagher's letter, "Answ. *cautiously*."<sup>86</sup> (Emphasis in original.) In the end, the answer was "no," which was not surprising given that Meagher was audaciously requesting a diplomatic position even though he was not even a citizen yet. But Buchanan must have been impressed with the campaign that Meagher waged to get an appointment, which included letters sent on his behalf from former New York governor Horatio Seymour, historian George Bancroft, Illinois Senator Stephen A. Douglas and many other notables.<sup>87</sup>

Meagher's quest for a presidential appointment showed such naked ambition on his part that he saw the need to defend himself in a March 6, 1857 letter to Smith O'Brien, who had been pardoned by the British in 1854. The Young Irelanders used to excoriate O'Connellites for taking government positions while simultaneously favoring the dismantling of that government through Repeal. But that was in Ireland, Meagher explained: "My disinclination to 'place-hunting' no longer exists. . . . The same feelings which induced me to regard such gifts with contempt and enmity in Ireland, operate in the contrary direction here. I would rejoice and feel proud in serving the American Republic."<sup>88</sup>

Shortly after Meagher began campaigning for a government position, he took on his first high-profile case as an attorney. On January 28, 1857, Colonel Joseph W.

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<sup>85</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>86</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 62-66.

<sup>88</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 63.

Fabens, a close ally of William Walker, a filibuster who had temporarily taken over Nicaragua, and Henry Bolton, a clerk in Walker's New York "colonization" office, were arrested by federal authorities on suspicion of violating the Neutrality Act of 1818. Meagher was hired to head up their legal defense and, in a series of dramatic hearings held in a Commissioner's Court in February, 1857, he produced written evidence that President Pierce's secretary and that secretary's brother had accepted a deed to land in Nicaragua from Fabens. Furthermore, in a statement that Meagher gave to the press after the government refused to drop its case against his clients, Fabens directly implicated President Pierce in the land transfer scheme. By March, though the commissioner had sent the government's case to a grand jury for possible indictments, the government quietly gave up on the prosecution and Meagher's clients were off the legal hook. Plainly, the government did not want to go forward with a trial that may have embarrassed Pierce or that could compromise American foreign policy objectives. Meagher had done well for his clients; he skillfully handled the documentary evidence given to him by Fabens and displayed a powerful courtroom presence.<sup>89</sup>

Meagher's successful defense of William Walker's associates led Walker to hire Meagher himself when he was arrested in New York in late 1857 for violating the Neutrality Act. By then, Walker had been deposed as the "president" of Nicaragua. Meagher accompanied Walker down to Washington for the trial but, in the face of strong congressional support for Walker's activities, all charges against him were dropped.<sup>90</sup>

Once again, Meagher had successfully defended a filibuster but the positive publicity he garnered as a result did little to bring business into his law firm. Of course,

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<sup>89</sup> Keneally, *The Great Shame*, 297-298.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 305.

prospective clients may rightly have wondered whether he was primarily a lawyer or more of a newspaper editor or lecturer, given that he practiced all three occupations at once. By early 1858, Meagher was simply restless.

Mitchel had gone through a restless spell too after moving his family back to Knoxville in 1856, where he soon built a house that he christened “Nowhere Else.” His farmland eventually sold at a slight loss and, in the winter of 1856-1857, he went back out on the lecture circuit to raise some money, this time to the Midwest. He then went to New York for a few weeks to visit his mother before returning to Tennessee via Washington, D.C. There, he became acquainted with several prominent Southern senators and congressmen.<sup>91</sup>

Back in Tennessee, Mitchel would soon meet several leading voices of Southern nationalism at a July, 1857 Chattanooga conference held to celebrate the establishment of what would become the University of the South. He would meet even more such dignitaries at the annual Southern Commercial Convention held in Knoxville in August. The more familiar Mitchel became with the Southern ruling elite, the more impressed he was with them and their cause. In October, he agreed to become the editor of a new publication financed by his Knoxville friend, William Swan, entitled *The Southern Citizen*, which actively promoted not just the preservation of slavery in the South but also the reopening of the slave trade with Africa, which had been abolished by Congress in 1808.<sup>92</sup>

In advocating the revival of the slave trade, Mitchel was pushing a position that even many Southern nationalists thought too extreme. Not only were Northerners

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<sup>91</sup> McGovern, *John Mitchel*, 228-230.

<sup>92</sup> Toomey, ““Saving the South With All My Might,”” 131-132.

uniformly aghast at the idea, but many Southerners worried that a re-opened slave trade would bring too many blacks into the South and large and influential planters were concerned that the value of their human chattel would seriously decrease. Actually, Mitchel did want the price of slaves to go down so that more white Southerners could buy them; by so doing, they would gain a real stake in Southern society and be all the more willing to fight to preserve it.<sup>93</sup>

In supporting the slave trade, Mitchel was also being consistent. He honestly believed that blacks were better off as slaves in the South than in their native Africa, making the importation of slaves from Africa a humane enterprise. As Mitchel saw it, opponents of this idea were inconsistent and even hypocritical. If slavery was a good thing, as Southerners contended, why not have more of it? If slavery was bad, then why were so many non-abolitionist Northerners content to let it survive in the South but adamantly opposed to its expansion by a renewed slave trade or otherwise? As Mitchel wrote in the *Southern Citizen*: “The law says I may buy a negro from a Christian planter but not from a pagan chief. I may take a field hand from hoeing tobacco, but not from picking caterpillars. In short, I may have a negro at fourteen hundred dollars, but not at fifty.”<sup>94</sup>

Though the *Southern Citizen* would gain subscribers throughout the South and even the North, it was none too fondly received in Mitchel’s own East Tennessee, a Know-Nothing stronghold where support for slavery was also rather tepid. In the fall of 1857, John H. Fleming, the editor of the *Knoxville Register*, attacked Mitchel repeatedly in the pages of that Know-Nothing organ for both his pro-slave trade and anti-nativist

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<sup>93</sup> McGovern, *John Mitchel*, 251.

<sup>94</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 252.

opinions. Fleming wrote that Mitchel's viewpoints were starting to grate "upon the ears of American born citizens who very naturally think themselves entirely competent to take care of their own institutions without the intervention of this boasted Irish influence."<sup>95</sup> Mitchel did not care to be insulted in this manner and a chance encounter with Fleming one day at Knoxville's finest hotel quickly turned violent. Mitchel struck Fleming so viciously with his walking cane that it splintered, at which point Fleming pulled a gun on Mitchel and was only prevented from firing it by the sudden arrival of the police. That very day, the two writers squared off again at the hotel, with each man armed and accompanied by an entourage but cooler heads kept the two apart. There was a challenge to a duel but Fleming would later claim that Mitchel backed out of it.<sup>96</sup>

Besides having enemies in Knoxville, Mitchel's uncringing advocacy for slavery and the slave trade began to unnerve some of his old Irish friends as well, including Father John Kenyon, a radical nationalist priest who had been active at the highest levels of the old Confederation during the 1848 rebellion. When Mitchel apprised him of his plans for the *Southern Citizen*, Kenyon wrote back that "actively to promote the system [of slavery] for its own sake would be something monstrous," but Mitchel contended that "all my behaviour from November '45 to this November '57 seems to myself to be consistent, to be of one piece."<sup>97</sup> In a letter to another old friend in Ireland, Mitchel made clear his position:

I consider Negro slavery the best state of existence for the negro, and the best for his master; and if negro slavery in itself is good, then the taking of negroes out of their brutal slavery in Africa and promoting them to a humane and reasonable slavery here is also good. . . . All I want to impress upon you is that I honestly mean all that I say. You must not deny me this

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<sup>95</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 234.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 233-234, 241 (n 109); Toomey, "Saving the South With All My Might," 133.

<sup>97</sup> Quoted in Keneally, *The Great Shame*, 302.

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If sincerity is truly the last refuge of error, Mitchel's defensiveness with some of his friends respecting slavery may indicate that he was having some second thoughts on the issue. But innate racism is difficult to overcome. So too is pride. Meagher was a proud man too but his pride was the type associated with ambition and the pursuit of personal glory. Mitchel, on the other hand, was not interested in personal aggrandizement so much as he was in furthering causes that *he* believed in. Meagher wanted to be somebody. Mitchel wanted to be right. And he had to be right because *he* was *sincere*; *he* was *passionate*. Even on those rare occasions when he admitted that he had been wrong about something, he could take solace in the fact that he had at least been sincere and passionate in his original mistaken judgment. Honesty was the virtue he valued the most.

And Mitchel was not incapable of being honest with himself at times. In a self-revelatory letter to Father Kenyon, written in November, 1857, Mitchel stated:

Whatever it was that made me act and write as I did in Ireland, I have found that there was perhaps less of love in it than of hate --- less of affection to my country than of scornful impatience at the thought that I had the misfortune, I and my children, to be born in a country which suffered itself to be oppressed and humiliated by another, less devotion to truth and justice than raging wrath against cant and insolence.<sup>99</sup>

In the passage above, Mitchel seems to suggest that he loathed the Irish as well as loved them. To the extent that he loathed them then he also loathed himself since he was, as he always insisted, an Irishman. But the coin of the realm of Irish nationalism has always had two sides to it. On one side is "Love of Ireland; on the other, "Hatred of Great Britain." If Mitchel ever got tired or disgusted with the "Love of Ireland" side, he

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<sup>98</sup> Quoted in Hegarty, *John Mitchel*, 94.

<sup>99</sup> Quoted in Maume, introduction to Mitchel, *The Last Conquest*, xviii.

could always turn it over and focus on hating the British. Even if the Irish were not the greatest people on earth, and even if Gaelic culture was not superior to all others, he was still *right* about the British government: it was evil, it was oppressive, and it must be driven out of Ireland. Mitchel could never be wrong about that.

Proud man that he was, Mitchel thought that he could support two causes at once and do so seamlessly, effortlessly, and effectively, not to mention sincerely and passionately, of course. Even though Irish independence was his prime cause, he never felt that his support of Southern nationalism was an inconsistent pursuit. After all, Mitchel's private judgment had led him to hold both positions; if he was right about one, he had to be right about the other. Nor did he ever pause to wonder if his intense commitment to the South and the institution of slavery was detrimental to the cause of Irish independence. Under Mitchel's rules, sincerity and passion trumped prudence and caution.

Others begged to differ. His old friend, John Martin, who had been pardoned in 1854 and who had moved to France before returning to Ireland in 1858, thought that Mitchel's outspoken advocacy of slavery did not help the Irish cause:

I had seen how Mitchel excited the rage and grief of many thousands of his political friends against him by the course he took on the question of negro slavery. . . . I lost the confident hope I rested in him. I saw the power for writing and organizing the Irish patriots was gone.<sup>100</sup>

Instead, as Martin well knew, Mitchel was busy organizing the Southern patriots. In the March 18, 1858 edition of the *Southern Citizen*, Mitchel printed a letter that he had written to Martin back on January 29, 1856, in which he told Martin that he favored the "establishment of a potent Southern Confederation, based on slavery" and claimed that if

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<sup>100</sup> Quoted in Hegarty, *John Mitchel*, 90.

the United States Congress did not repeal the ban on the overseas slave trade that “the Congress of the Southern States”<sup>101</sup> would do so. In that same March 18, 1858 edition, Mitchel equated the need for Southern independence with that of Irish independence, noting that the “remedy here, as in Ireland, is *Repeal of the Union.*”<sup>102</sup> (Emphasis in original.)

Indeed, Mitchel frequently compared the South’s plight with Ireland’s in the *Southern Citizen* and endeavored to stir up as much hatred of the British Empire amongst that journal’s predominantly Southern readers as existed in Ireland. As Bryan McGovern puts it, “The real intent of the *Southern Citizen* was twofold --- to provoke war between the sections and to provoke war between Great Britain and the United States.”<sup>103</sup> In accordance with the goal of creating animosity against Britain amongst his readers, Mitchel wrote a history of the Young Ireland movement and the Famine years called, *The Last Conquest of Ireland (Perhaps)*, which he serialized in the *Southern Citizen* in 1858 and 1859.

In *The Last Conquest*, Mitchel again presents his thesis, in a much lengthier and detailed form than in *Jail Journal*, that the British government intentionally committed genocide upon the Irish people during the Great Famine. Along the way, he also damns O’Connell again as “next to the British Government, the worst enemy that Ireland ever had --- or rather the most fatal friend,” accusing him of using “all his art and eloquence to emasculate a bold and chivalrous nation” and whose “continual denunciations of arms . . .

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<sup>101</sup> Quoted in McGovern, *John Mitchel*, 247-248.

<sup>102</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 249.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 246.



degraded the manhood of his nation to such a point that to rouse them to resistance in their own cause was impossible.”<sup>104</sup>

But the real villains in *The Last Conquest* are the British officials whose callously indifferent or, as Mitchel would argue, purposely ineffectual efforts at Famine relief, were responsible for the deaths and forced emigration of one-quarter of Ireland’s population. Sir Charles Edward Trevelyan, the treasury official in London who oversaw the Irish Famine relief efforts, comes in for special condemnation, as shown in this excerpt, in which Mitchel once again describes his trip through County Galway during “Black ‘47”:

I could see, in front of the cottages, little children leaning against a fence when the sun shone out, --- for they could not stand, --- their limbs fleshless, their bodies half-naked, their faces bloated yet wrinkled, and of a pale, greenish hue, --- children who would never, it was too plain, grow up to be men and women. I saw Trevelyan’s claw in the vitals of those children: his red tape would draw them to death: in his Government laboratory he had prepared for them the typhus poison.<sup>105</sup>

Trevelyan was a “Providentialist” who interpreted the Famine as “the stroke of an all-wise Providence” intended to remove “the inveterate root of social evil” in Ireland by partially depopulating the island; Trevelyan prayed on behalf of the British government that “we may rightly perform our part and not turn into a curse what was intended as a blessing.”<sup>106</sup> With British officials writing and speaking publicly during the worst days of the Famine in such a fashion, it is no wonder that Mitchel concludes in *The Last Conquest* that a “million and a half of men, women, and children, were carefully,

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<sup>104</sup> Mitchel, *The Last Conquest*, 136.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.

<sup>106</sup> Quoted in Kinealy, *The Great Irish Famine*, 26.

prudently, and peacefully *slain* by the English government”<sup>107</sup> during the Famine. As

Mitchel sums up his argument in *The Last Conquest*’s most famous passage:

I have called it an artificial famine . . . which desolated a rich and fertile island, that produced every year abundance and superabundance to sustain all her people and many more. The English, indeed, call that famine a “dispensation of Providence”; and ascribe it entirely to the blight of the potatoes. But potatoes failed in like manner all over Europe; yet there was no famine save in Ireland. The British account of the matter, then, is first, a fraud --- second, a blasphemy. The Almighty, indeed, sent the potato blight, but the English created the famine.<sup>108</sup>

Mitchel’s equation of British Providentialism with genocide resonated with several generations of Irish and Irish-American nationalists but professional historians have always dismissed it. Still, recent scholarship in the field has supported the thrust of many of his claims. For example, although Ireland may not have produced enough food during the Famine to feed “all her people *and many more*,” as Mitchel asserted, Christine Kinealy, a leading light of modern Famine historians, has persuasively argued that “Ireland had enough food to feed its people after 1846.”<sup>109</sup> Furthermore, as America’s most prominent Famine historian, James S. Donnelly, Jr., has written: “Even though some of Mitchel’s accusations were far-fetched or wildly erroneous, others contained a core of truth or an important aspect of the truth.”<sup>110</sup> Large quantities of food were, after all, exported out of Ireland while people were starving there. That fact alone speaks volumes about British policy and puts the lie to the notion that the British truly considered Ireland to be part of a *United Kingdom*. Surely British policy would have

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<sup>107</sup> Mitchel, *The Last Conquest*, 219.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.* Interestingly, Mitchel’s old nemesis, Archbishop Hughes, in an address given in New York in 1847, when Mitchel was still in Ireland, declared: “I may be told that the famine in Ireland is a mysterious visitation of God’s providence, but I do not admit any such plea. I fear there is blasphemy is charging on the Almighty what is the result of man’s own doings.” Quoted in James S. Donnelly, Jr., *The Great Irish Potato Famine* (Thrupp, Stroud, Gloucestershire: Sutton Publishing, 2001), 233.

<sup>109</sup> Kinealy, *The Great Irish Famine*, 90-91.

<sup>110</sup> Donnelly, *The Great Irish Potato Famine*, 20.

been different if hundreds of thousands of Britons were starving in England during that time instead of in Ireland, Providentialism and a reluctance to interfere with the Free Market notwithstanding. As Donnelly sums the matter up:

The great majority of professional historians of Ireland now recognize . . . that a million people should not have died in the backyard of what was then the world's richest nation, and since a million did perish while two million more fled, this must have been because the political leaders of that nation and the organs of its public opinion had at bottom very ambivalent feelings about the social and economic consequences of mass eviction, mass death, and mass emigration.<sup>111</sup>

Speaking in Cork, Ireland one hundred and fifty years after "Black '47," British Prime Minister Tony Blair stated the following:

That one million people should have died in what was then part of the richest and most powerful nation in the world is something that still causes pain as we reflect on it today. Those who governed in London at the time failed their people through standing by while a crop failure turned into a massive tragedy. We must not forget such a dreadful event.<sup>112</sup>

What Blair failed to make clear was *why* "those who governed in London . . . failed their people." The reason, plainly enough, is that "those who governed" did not consider the Irish to be "*their* people." (Emphasis added.) Though Mitchel's claim that the British committed genocide is over the top, they do appear to have been guilty of negligent homicide --- to use a legal term of art --- on a massive scale.

If the regularly published excerpts from *The Last Conquest* did not instill enough hatred of Britain in *Southern Citizen* readers, Mitchel tried to pound the point home by penning other anti-British articles in that paper. Later, he took his anti-British show on the road, lecturing Southern audiences about Britain's exploitation of India. Predictably, the message fell flat on Southern ears. As Mitchel himself later acknowledged, he "tried

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 245.

<sup>112</sup> Kinealy, *The Great Irish Famine*, 1.

to expound to my audience the odious and predatory policy of England in the East [but] it was . . . too evident that this cotton-growing, cotton-selling community could not be brought to feel any serious indignation against so good a customer as England.”<sup>113</sup>

Mitchel had returned to the lecture circuit in the winter of 1857-1858 not only to propound his pro-slave trade and anti-British views but also to make a buck. The *Southern Citizen* would never be a particularly profitable venture and, as he explained to his sister, Henrietta, in a January 9, 1858 letter, though lecturing was “a loathsome business which I thought I had renounced forever . . . I want money, and can only think of preying on the public.”<sup>114</sup> But Mitchel was not a natural born orator like Meagher and he occasionally got panned by the critics. For example, in a review from the *Mobile Advertiser* entitled “An Impertinent Foreign Meddler Rebuked,” the critic wrote that Mitchel’s “ability and boldness seems to surpass his discretion and modesty and he now vapours and struts as if the whole South belonged to him.”<sup>115</sup>

The South did not belong to Mitchel but he was hoping that Central America would soon belong to the United States. He advocated bold annexation of that region, not by filibusters but by the American military itself. Writing in the January 21, 1858 *Southern Citizen*, Mitchel contended that Americans should “plant our institutions in Central America . . . by honorable war, and not by piratical foray.”<sup>116</sup> Of course, Mitchel may have been hoping that an aggressive move by America in that region would provoke war with Britain, which, in turn, could trigger an Irish revolt.

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<sup>113</sup> Quoted in McGovern, *John Mitchel*, 250.

<sup>114</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 248.

<sup>115</sup> Quoted in Toomey, “Saving the South With All My Might,” 134.

<sup>116</sup> Quoted in McGovern, *John Mitchel*, 250.

While Mitchel was trying to stir up a war in Central America, Meagher decided to visit that area himself in hopes of “ascertaining the true condition of things there, and becoming familiar with a noble region, for which there inevitably approaches an eventful future.”<sup>117</sup> Since Meagher was known for defending filibusters in court, he made certain that his trip would not be misinterpreted by the natives by, first, obtaining letters of introduction from a high Costa Rican official and, second, by taking with him as his traveling companion, Ramon Paez, a son of the famous Venezuelan revolutionary and caudillo, Jose Antonio Paez. Meagher had gone to Clongowes Wood with the younger Paez, a talented scientist and artist.<sup>118</sup>

In the course of a nearly three-month stay in Costa Rica during the spring of 1858, Meagher and Paez traveled to San Jose where they were welcomed by the local Catholic bishop and by the president himself, who presided over an elaborate presidential ball which they also attended. Meagher also visited a hospital where an Irish doctor was treating wounded combatants from both sides in the recent fighting between Walker’s filibusters and their Central American opponents. Finally, Meagher and Paez climbed the volcanic mountain of Irazu. Meagher described all of these events and more in a series of colorfully descriptive articles that were illustrated by Paez and eventually published by *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*.<sup>119</sup>

Meagher had originally intended to write a book based on his trip but, based on the disinterested reaction of audiences at a few lectures he delivered on the topic upon his

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<sup>117</sup> Quoted in Ahearn, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 70.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 70-71.

<sup>119</sup> Thomas Francis Meagher, “Holidays in Costa Rica,” Part I, *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, December 1859, 18-38; Thomas Francis Meagher, “Holidays in Costa Rica,” Part II, *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, January 1860, 145-164; Thomas Francis Meagher, “Holidays in Cost Rica,” Part III, *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, February 1860, 304-325.

return, he wrote the articles for *Harper's* instead for a set fee.<sup>120</sup> But Meagher remained fascinated with the region himself and the opportunities that were there for adventuresome entrepreneurs. The world's first transcontinental railway had been completed in Panama in 1855 and Meagher was certain that others would follow.

Libby Meagher took the occasion of her husband's lengthy Central American trip to travel to Ireland to meet his father and see the son that Meagher had never seen. Apparently, all parties agreed that it was in the boy's best interest to have him stay in Ireland, even though Meagher was legally barred from returning there. Libby would never bear Meagher any children but they remained happily married regardless.<sup>121</sup>

Resuming his duties at the *Irish News*, Meagher sided with Illinois Senator Stephen Douglas when Douglas broke with President Buchanan over the proposed Lecompton Constitution, which would have made Kansas a slave state. Buchanan endorsed the proposed constitution for Kansas but Douglas, the apostle of "popular sovereignty," felt that it had been fraudulently and undemocratically enacted. Though Douglas lost his Southern base of support by opposing Buchanan on the issue, Meagher, as a New York Democrat, had nothing to lose by backing the "Little Giant" from Illinois.<sup>122</sup>

Nor was Meagher out of the Northern Democratic mainstream when he attacked abolitionists in the July 24, 1858 *Irish News* for veiling "their hostility to our republican form of government by their assaults on the domestic institutions of the South."<sup>123</sup> He noted with derision a recent meeting of the Anti-Slavery Society of Massachusetts at

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<sup>120</sup> Keneally, *The Great Shame*, 307.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 305.

<sup>122</sup> Ahearn, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 76-77.

<sup>123</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 77.

which William Lloyd Garrison “was the presiding genius [who] delighted the free love and motley audience by the fervor of his treason to the Republic.”<sup>124</sup>

John Mitchel could not have said it better himself. But Mitchel and Meagher had something else in common during 1858 besides their disdain for abolitionism: a common visitor from Ireland named James Stephens. A mercurial man with a messianic complex, Stephens had started a new, oath-bound revolutionary organization in Ireland called the Irish Republican Brotherhood. An American branch would soon be started called the Fenian Brotherhood and members of the movement on both sides of the Atlantic would come to be called Fenians.<sup>125</sup>

Stephens had earned his *bona fides* as an Irish nationalist when he was wounded in the Widow McCormack’s cabbage patch and escaped arrest afterwards by staging a phony funeral for himself and fleeing to France. He later returned to Ireland in his “resurrected” form and walked three thousand miles across the island to determine if the people would rise up and rebel if properly organized and led. After deciding that they would, he further concluded that he was to be their leader. He thus came to America in 1858 to raise money for his group from Irish-American nationalists, particularly from those in charge of the Irish Directory with its large fund of cash. The elite membership of the Directory at that time included Meagher, his old mentor, Judge Emmet, O’Gorman, and Horace Greeley. Stephens was convinced that if Meagher and Mitchel endorsed his efforts then the Directory would follow their lead and release all of its funds to him.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>125</sup> The name “Fenian” derived from a band of mythological Gaelic warriors known as the “Fianna.” Kee, *The Green Flag*, 310.

<sup>126</sup> Desmond Ryan, *The Fenian Chief: A Biography of James Stephens* (Coral Gables: University of Miami Press, 1967), 40-43, 80-81, 101-102.

Not that Stephens was enamored of Mitchel and Meagher himself. In a diary he kept while on his American trip, Stephens assessed them as follows:

I was certain of the cooperation of both Mitchel and Meagher. Not that I had high opinion of --- or even believed --- in their patriotism. But I believed that they would not dare hold out . . . because by so doing, it would be evident to all that they were shams, had been shams probably at all times and had abandoned their country.<sup>127</sup>

In time, Mitchel and Meagher would come to hold similarly derogatory opinions of Stephens. But when Stephens first met Meagher at his father-in-law's Fifth Avenue mansion on October 19, 1858, he made a good impression on him and Meagher was excited about the new revolutionary movement. In fact, Meagher offered to accompany Stephens as far as Washington, D.C. on his way to meet Mitchel in Tennessee. In Washington, Meagher introduced Stephens to President Buchanan at a reception and, before Stephens left for Tennessee, Meagher gave him a letter of introduction for Mitchel, which stated that Stephens was "one of the truest of the true" and "the Wolfe Tone of our generation."<sup>128</sup>

Stephens met Mitchel in Knoxville on October 21, 1858. Again, Stephens impressed Mitchel enough at first to convince him to make a personal contribution of \$50.00 to the cause and to write letters of endorsement to the Directory members. Later, Meagher also promised Stephens his support with the Directory and even signed a statement dated December 9, 1858 that the egomaniacal Stephens had been circulating amongst Irish-Americans giving him "supreme and absolute authority" over the movement "at home and abroad."<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 112.

<sup>128</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 127.

<sup>129</sup> R. V. Comerford, *The Fenians in Context: Irish Politics and Society, 1848-82* (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1998), 51.



By January, 1859, Stephens sensed that something had changed with Mitchel and Meagher. A chance encounter with Mitchel on January 12 in Brooklyn, where Mitchel was visiting his mother, left Stephens thinking that Mitchel would have preferred to avoid him that day. Later, after Meagher returned from a speaking tour and a winter vacation in the South, Stephens visited him at the *Irish News* office.<sup>130</sup> That visit was shortened considerably after Meagher handed him a letter dated January 26, 1859:

My Dear Stephens,

I have come to the conclusion, after some days of conscientious reflection, that, if it be not criminal, it is unworthy of me, in any way, however trivial or indirectly, to urge or authorize a revolutionary movement, in the hazards of which, from a conviction of their utter uselessness, I feel at present no disposition to participate. You will, therefore, be so good as to erase my name from the paper you did me the honour to submit to me for my signature a few weeks ago, since by this letter it is virtually withdrawn.<sup>131</sup>

Unbeknownst to Stephens, John Blake Dillon, a Young Ireland exile and *Nation* founder who had practiced law with O’Gorman in New York and served on the Directory before returning to Ireland in 1855, had written to Mitchel warning him to steer clear of Stephens. Apparently, Mitchel had relayed that warning to Meagher and the two old friends both decided to back away from Stephens and his movement, at least for the time being.<sup>132</sup>

Even without their support, the American Fenian movement took shape and started to grow under the leadership of Stephens’s ally, John O’Mahony, yet another Young Ireland exile. Irish-American Fenians formed “Phoenix” militias or else joined predominantly Irish state militia units like New York’s 69<sup>th</sup> Regiment in order to learn

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<sup>130</sup> Ryan, *The Fenian Chief*, 139-140; 154-155.

<sup>131</sup> Quoted in Pat McCarthy, “The Lost Leader? Thomas Francis Meagher and the Fenian Brotherhood,” in *Thomas Francis Meagher*, eds. Hearne and Cornish, 167.

<sup>132</sup> Comerford, *The Fenians in Context*, 51.

the art of war in preparation for the anticipated revolt against the British in Ireland.<sup>133</sup> To the extent that Stephens, if he had anything to do about it, would be leading that revolt, Mitchel and Meagher were not optimistic about its chances.

Shortly after he met Stephens in Knoxville in late October, 1858, Mitchel moved with his family to Washington, D.C., buying a home near Capitol Hill. He and Swan had decided that the *Southern Citizen* would have more of an impact by being published in the seat of the federal government, where the sectional dispute was starting to dominate the agenda; the December 4, 1858 edition was the first *Southern Citizen* published there.<sup>134</sup>

While living in Washington, Mitchel began to socialize with many prominent senators and congressmen, mostly, but not exclusively, from the South. These contacts came in handy for him when he welcomed Smith O'Brien to Washington during a triumphant tour of America. O'Brien's tour began on February 25, 1859 when he landed in New York City and was greeted by Meagher. In the nation's capital, Mitchel threw a reception at his home for O'Brien where he introduced him to such notables as Stephen Douglas, Senator William Seward of New York, and Georgia Congressman Alexander Stephens, the future vice president of the Confederacy. Both Seward and Stephens would later host O'Brien at their own homes, hoping to get the Irish hero to take their respective side in the ongoing sectional debate. Stephens introduced O'Brien and Mitchel to President Buchanan and even hosted O'Brien at his Georgia plantation. In the end,

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<sup>133</sup> McCarthy, "The Lost Leader?," 167-168.

<sup>134</sup> McGovern, *John Mitchel*, 256.

O'Brien remained diplomatically neutral on all American political issues although he privately expressed a fundamental aversion to slavery.<sup>135</sup>

Despite his differences with Mitchel on that and other issues, O'Brien always got along well with him. So too, on a personal level, did most everyone. In a letter O'Brien wrote to his wife during his tour, he said, "though neither you nor I agree with the political views of Mr. Mitchel there are few persons more beloved by his private friends and family than this formidable monster."<sup>136</sup> Describing O'Brien's visit in a letter to a friend, Mitchel noted that as "widely as we differ, and heartily as we censor one another, we can never be other than friends."<sup>137</sup> And yet, Mitchel would never allow that friendship to get in the way of the revolution he envisioned for Ireland, or so he said for effect, as he reflected later that year as follows:

I am convinced, and have long been, that the mass of the Irish people cannot be roused in any quarrel less than social revolution, destruction of landlordism, and denial of all tenure and title derived from English sovereigns. This kind of social revolution [Smith O'Brien] would resist with all his force, and patriotic citizens could do nothing less than hang him, though with much reluctance.<sup>138</sup>

During O'Brien's tour of the country, he must have certainly noticed the massive public attention being paid to the murder trial of New York Congressman Daniel Sickles in Washington, which lasted from April 4 to April 25, 1859. On February 27, 1859, Sickles had shot Philip Barton Key to death in Lafayette Square, across the street from the White House, and then turned himself in to authorities. Sickles had killed Key in a fit of jealous rage, having learned that Key was having an affair with his wife. But Key was more than a paramour, he was also the United States Attorney for the District of

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 258.

<sup>136</sup> Quoted in Keneally, *The Great Shame*, 308.

<sup>137</sup> Quoted in McGovern, *John Mitchel*, 259.

<sup>138</sup> Quoted in Ibid., 259-260.

Columbia and the son of Francis Scott Key of “Star Spangled Banner” fame.<sup>139</sup> All of these factors combined to make the Sickles murder case a national sensation. With the American public avidly following the trial from start to finish, the case was an historical precursor of the famous O.J. Simpson murder trial of the 1990s.

And just like Simpson, Sickles hired a “Dream Team” of skilled attorneys to defend him that included his friend, Thomas Francis Meagher. Sickles and Meagher were both New York City Democrats and Sickles had long been supportive of the Irish-American community there. Meagher was added to the eight-man defense team not because of a great legal mind or extensive courtroom experience but mainly because his undoubted skill at fashioning persuasive and emotional appeals could prove useful during closing arguments. During the earlier stages of the trial, a *New York Herald* reporter noted that Meagher merely “contents himself with suggestions to his seniors. His is the pleasantest face at the lawyers’ table.”<sup>140</sup>

Sickles’s defense team was headed by the brilliant Edwin M. Stanton and featured the skilled trial tactician, James Topham Brady. Since Sickles had killed Key in front of several witnesses, his lawyers concocted a novel legal defense that had never been used in an American court, temporary insanity, to save their client from the gallows. But those same lawyers also cleverly propagated to the all-male jury the notion that “a man’s home is his castle,” and that Sickles had done what any man would do to preserve the sanctity of his marriage bed. In this latter appeal, Meagher’s talents came to the fore. As Brady ended his closing argument on behalf of Sickles, he read to them verbatim a final, emotional appeal that Meagher had drafted:

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<sup>139</sup> Ahearn, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 79.

<sup>140</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 80.

If your love of home will suffer it --- if your genuine sense of justice will consent to it . . . if your pride of manhood will stoop to it --- if your instinctive perception of right and wrong will sanction it, stamp “murder” upon the bursting forehead. . . . Do this, do it if you can, and then, having consigned the prisoner to the scaffold, return to your homes, and there, within those endangered sanctuaries, following your ignoble verdict, set to and teach your imperiled wives a lesson in the vulgar arithmetic of a compromising morality. And let them be inspired with a sense of womanly dignity by a knowledge of the value you attach to the sanctity of the household, to the inviolability of the wife, to the security of the hospitable roof, and last of all, to the inherited tradition of an innocent but ruined offspring.<sup>141</sup>

As the courtroom burst into applause, Brady sat down and burst into tears. The jury deliberated for a little more than an hour before rendering a verdict of “not guilty.” When they did so, the courtroom, packed with Sickles’s supporters, celebrated deliriously with many men weeping openly and Stanton declaring that he would dance like David in front of the Ark of the Covenant. When even the jailor broke down crying, Meagher, showing the old Irish wit, walked over to him and mockingly consoled him for suffering the loss of his most prominent prisoner.<sup>142</sup>

Meagher was pleased to have served as part of Sickles’s winning defense team but the publicity he received for his efforts was not enough to enliven his dormant law practice. Additionally, he had resigned his managerial position at the *Irish News* when the Sickles trial got underway.<sup>143</sup> Though he would continue to contribute columns to that paper, which enjoyed a healthy circulation of 50,000 at its peak, the newspaper business, as a business, had not allowed him to “realize a respectable competence” as he described his goal to President-elect Buchanan more than two years earlier. Besides that,

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<sup>141</sup> Quoted in Thomas Keneally, *American Scoundrel: Love, War and Politics in Civil War America* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2002), 194.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 197.

<sup>143</sup> Ahearn, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 80-81.

his celebrity status had dimmed with time, a fact that he had alluded to in September of 1858 when addressing the faithful members of the T. F. Meagher Club at a picnic:

Six years have elapsed since I first met this club. I was then a dazzling novelty. . . . My autograph flew to an extravagant premium. It was the highest strip then upon the 'Change. A lock of my hair would have fetched considerably more than what people give now for a foot or two of the Trans-Atlantic submarine cable. But the most favorable novelties must fade and come down in the market. The day of their transcendent demand grows dim on the record. So it was, sir, and so it is with me."<sup>144</sup>

On May 28, 1859, another one of yesterday's heroes, Smith O'Brien, left New York for Europe with Meagher and Mitchel, who had come up from Washington for the occasion, sending him off.<sup>145</sup> In an August 15, 1859 letter to O'Brien, Meagher expressed dismay at his current state of life:

Perhaps I've lost too much faith --- perhaps I've grown too sluggish --- perhaps, too selfish. Whatever the reason, the fact is indisputable. I've ceased to be a participator in historic commotions. I've become an impassioned spectator. Yet a spark might re-light the fire, the materials of which have not been exhausted.<sup>146</sup>

While Meagher searched for a spark to re-light his fire, the fire that burned in Mitchel's heart for an independent Ireland had never ceased burning. In that same summer of Meagher's angst, France and Austria were at war and Mitchel was hoping that Britain would intervene on Austria's side, thus opening up the long-awaited opportunity for an Irish rebellion, possibly aided by a French expeditionary force. Even when the Franco-Austrian War ended on July 11, 1859, Mitchel still thought that an Anglo-French war was in the offing. With Swan's consent, he shut down the *Southern Citizen* at the end of July; the move to Washington had not helped the struggling paper anyway. By the end of August, Mitchel was in Paris where he would remain for several months trying to

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<sup>144</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 78-79.

<sup>145</sup> McGovern, *John Mitchel*, 259.

<sup>146</sup> Quoted in Ahearn, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 81.

instill Anglophobia into as many French hearts and minds as possible. By early 1860, however, Mitchel reluctantly concluded that Anglo-French hostilities would not be breaking out in the very near future and, by February, he was reunited with his family in Washington.<sup>147</sup>

Interestingly, while in France, Mitchel had reversed his former position, which he had promulgated so vigorously in his dispute with Archbishop Hughes, that the Pope should cede control of the Papal States to the Italian nationalists. Now, with Britain aiding those nationalists, Mitchel changed his mind, as he explained in a letter he sent to the *Phoenix*, an Irish-American nationalist newspaper, on November 22, 1859: “I begin to love the Pope. I am, by tradition and inheritance, a species of Protestant . . . but one thing I know --- if the Pope be an enemy of the British Empire, he is a friend of mine. He must not lose a square inch of his state.”<sup>148</sup>

Upon returning to America, Mitchel embarked on a lecture tour of New York, Richmond, and several Midwestern cities in which he addressed the current state of affairs in Europe, taking care to lambaste the British Empire at every turn. In May of 1860, back in Washington, Mitchel finally took his oath of citizenship and became, officially, an American, less than one year before the Civil War broke out.<sup>149</sup>

But Mitchel was not even in the country when the North and the South went to war. After vacationing with his family in New York over the summer of 1860, Mitchel once again became convinced that Britain and France would soon commence hostilities and, after making arrangements with the *Charleston Mercury* and yet another Irish-

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<sup>147</sup> McGovern, *John Mitchel*, 263-268.

<sup>148</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 267. As McGovern also relates, Mitchel later admitted that “I would if I could erase from the page and all men’s memory, about three-fourths of what I then wrote and published to the address of Archbishop Hughes” back in 1854. Quoted in *Ibid.*

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, 268-269.

American paper based in New York, the *Irish-American*, to serve as their French correspondent, Mitchel moved back to Paris. This time, he took Jenny, his daughters, and his youngest son, Willy, with him. His two oldest boys, now adults, chose to stay behind; John was working as a civil engineer in Alabama and James was in the insurance business in Richmond.<sup>150</sup>

In France, Willy went to a day school while his three sisters eventually all attended a Catholic convent school run by the Sisters of the Sacred Heart. Mitchel's oldest daughter, Henrietta, converted to Catholicism in 1861 when she was nineteen, having received his written permission to do so. As Mitchel described: "I instantly wrote the required consent. For this acquiescence I was most earnestly blamed by some of my connections."<sup>151</sup> These "connections" included his mother, who accused him of disrespecting his Protestant father's memory. But Mitchel explained to her in a letter that he did not believe "that respect for my father's memory is anyway concerned in the matter. He vindicated the right of private judgment above all things. If one's private judgment leads him into the Catholic Church, it is a private judgment still."<sup>152</sup> On another occasion, Mitchel explained that he "could not be justified in merely prohibiting [his children's] profession of any particular faith which [they] may be inclined to without directing them to any better or any other [faith]."<sup>153</sup> Lacking deep religious convictions of his own, Mitchel gave his children the freedom to find their own spiritual way.

Mitchel also claimed that Henrietta, by "declaring that she desired to embrace the ancient faith of her forefathers" was "greatly influenced by her very strong Irish feeling,

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<sup>150</sup> Hegarty, *John Mitchel*, 101-102.

<sup>151</sup> Quoted in Keneally, *The Great Shame*, 354.

<sup>152</sup> Quoted in McGovern, *John Mitchel*, 268.

<sup>153</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 267-268.



and had a kind of sentiment that one cannot be thoroughly Irish without being a Catholic.”<sup>154</sup> Though the religiously indifferent Mitchel had not imbued his children with many spiritual concepts, he had apparently endeavored to make them proud of their Irish heritage. But there was more to Henrietta’s conversion than a mere desire to be more “Irish” since it was not long after she converted that she also declared her intention to join the Sisters of the Sacred Heart as a nun.<sup>155</sup>

An interesting confluence of Irishness and Catholicism had occurred in 1860 as over a thousand Irishmen had formed the Battalion of Saint Patrick and gone to Italy that summer to help Pope Pius IX defend what remained of his Papal States from Italian nationalists. The Battalion fought briefly but bravely in the losing struggle and, on their way back to Ireland in the fall, Mitchel met with them and hailed their efforts.<sup>156</sup> Not only did Mitchel endorse their cause, but he must have been happy to see that some Irishmen were still willing to fight somewhere. Little did he realize that tens of thousands of Irish-Americans would be fighting soon, not in Europe, but in their own adopted country. And three of those warriors would be his sons.

A prospective civil war in America was far from Meagher’s mind in that fall of 1860. He had spent most of that year in Central America on a mission that he hoped would bring him great fame and fortune and, for a while, it looked like it would. The mission began in the fall of 1859 when he met Ambrose Thompson, a wealthy shipping magnate and land speculator from Philadelphia who had been working for years to gain the rights to build a railroad across the Isthmus of Panama in the province of Chiriqui. Thompson had already successfully negotiated a contract with the United States Navy

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<sup>154</sup> Quoted in Hegarty, *John Mitchel*, 106-107.

<sup>155</sup> McGovern, *John Mitchel*, 267.

<sup>156</sup> Comerford, *Fenians in Context*, 59-62.

that would pay his Chiriqui Improvement Company \$1,000,000 for access to the ports at each end of the proposed new transit route through Chiriqui as soon as he secured the necessary grant to use the land. But that was just for starters. Thompson's company stood to profit handsomely during and after the construction of the railroad. Thompson asked Meagher if he would like to travel to the region, reconnoiter the land, and negotiate a final land concession in return for, presumably, a generous stake in the bonanza to come. He did not have to ask Meagher twice; in January of 1860, Meagher, Libby, and a servant sailed for Costa Rica.<sup>157</sup>

Upon their arrival, Meagher left Libby and their servant in relative comfort while he set out on an ambitious journey through Chiriqui, which he described in his usual colorful if fulsome fashion in an article for *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* entitled "The New Route Through Chiriqui" that was published several months later.<sup>158</sup> In that article, Meagher sounds like a Chamber of Commerce booster as he lavishly praises the potential for economic development of all sorts in Chiriqui. He also assumes the role of a sycophant, albeit a patriotic one, with respect to Thompson in this passage:

The energy, quick intelligence, nerve and enterprise of Mr. Ambrose Thompson . . . --- a young and successful representative of that spirit of practical and enlightened adventure which so strongly marks the American character and is destined to achieve for the American people so vast a measure of prosperity and national power. . . <sup>159</sup>

When Meagher wrote that the "American character" was marked by a "spirit of practical and enlightened adventure" that would lead to "prosperity and national power," he was writing as a proud mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century American who believed that the sky was the

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<sup>157</sup> Ahearn, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 85-86.

<sup>158</sup> Thomas Francis Meagher, "The New Route Through Chiriqui," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, January 1861, 198-209.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, 208.

only limit for his country and for those of his fellow countrymen who were willing to embark on their “American” adventure. John Mitchel would never have written such words. He would have dismissed such sentiments as typical, 19<sup>th</sup> Century balderdash, not so much because of their jingoistic nature but due to the unspoken premise behind them that Americans were leading the world in “progress.” But Meagher, one gets the sense, believed in what he wrote about America in *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*. So too, by and large, would the readers of that popular national magazine. Having lived in the country for several years, Meagher had absorbed and embraced the American spirit of that time, which was tailor-made for talented, ambitious, and adventurous men like him.

In the summer of 1860 in Costa Rica, it appeared that the man had finally met his moment. Meagher skillfully negotiated a grant from the Costa Rican government to allow Thompson’s company to build a railroad across the Isthmus and, on July 13, 1860, the Congress of Costa Rica approved the grant. Later that month, Meagher, the Costa Rican president, and his minister of the treasury all affixed their signatures to the appropriate documents and Meagher had once again become a “participator in historic commotions.”<sup>160</sup> Or so he thought.

As Libby remained in Costa Rica luxuriating in the presidential palace, Meagher returned to the States in late August in apparent triumph. His old *Irish News* gushed in its September 1, 1860 edition that Meagher’s “success has something extraordinary in it and may be fairly regarded as a matter of special congratulations to his friends. He has shown that Irishmen can succeed as well as other people.”<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> Ahearn, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 86-87.

<sup>161</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 87.

But Irishmen can also, like other people, celebrate prematurely at times. The land covered by the grant that Meagher had obtained from Costa Rica was also claimed by the Grenadine Confederation, which had recently replaced the former Republic of New Granada. Though Costa Rica contended that New Granada had ceded the land by treaty, the treaty had never been ratified by New Granada. Nor, for that matter, had the United States Senate ever ratified Thompson's contract with the Navy. That contract required the Navy to pay Thompson's company \$300,000 down with the remaining \$700,000 to be paid once title to the land had been finally cleared. Meanwhile, Meagher's agreement with Costa Rica required him to deposit \$100,000 with that government as a sign of good faith. Though Meagher intended to pay that \$100,000 out of the \$300,000 from the Navy, no money would be coming from the Navy without Senate approval. Though President Buchanan supported the project, he was an unpopular, "lame duck" president by that point who had failed to resolve the steaming sectional crisis that was about to boil over. Naturally, the Senate was more concerned with that crisis and the upcoming November election than a contract to build a railroad in Central America on disputed land. Realizing that the Senate would not be approving Thompson's contract with the Navy, Meagher returned to Costa Rica empty-handed.<sup>162</sup>

Once there, Meagher felt like he had on the eve of the 1848 Irish rebellion: he had not gone far enough to succeed, but too far to turn back. In desperation, he tried to get Costa Rican authorities to grant him an exclusive india rubber concession but his suddenly diminished cachet with them precluded the deal. The mission that had begun with such high hopes and had looked so promising had ended in utter failure. There was nothing left to do but to gather up Libby and their servant and head home. He would

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<sup>162</sup> Ibid., 86-87.

never return to Central America nor have anything further to do with Thompson. But Abraham Lincoln, who had just been elected president, would have dealings with both men before too long. During the upcoming Civil War, Meagher would command one of the best known brigades in Lincoln's Union army while Thompson would sign a contract with Lincoln's federal government to colonize his Chiriqui lands with freed slaves. Had the Senate approved Thompson's contract with the Navy, Meagher could have spent the Civil War in Central America building a railroad or negotiating the Chiriqui colonization scheme with the Lincoln administration. Instead, he would have the inestimable honor of commanding the legendary Irish Brigade and being associated forever with its memory. In that respect, the failure of his Central American venture was a blessing in disguise.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: *The Unsheathed Sword and the Bloodied Pen***

When the Meaghers returned to New York on January 25, 1861, they learned that Terence MacManus, the first Young Ireland exile to escape from Van Diemen's Land, had died ten days earlier in San Francisco. McManus had been a successful shipping merchant in Ireland but, unable to translate his business skills to the fast-based California economy, he died in poverty.<sup>1</sup> His anticlimactic death, however, would be overshadowed by the dramatic use of his corpse by Fenians in America and Ireland who decided in the spring to exhume his body and transport it to Ireland for burial, with memorial events held throughout America along the way.<sup>2</sup>

This campaign was aided by Meagher who, although not a Fenian, gave some lectures on McManus in the Northeast. Meanwhile, his old mentor, Judge Emmet, a Republican stalwart, wrote to William Seward, Lincoln's incoming Secretary of State, to suggest that Meagher be appointed to a diplomatic position in Venezuela where his old friend Paez's father was back in power; as Emmet told the Republican Steward, Meagher "assures me that he has carefully abstained from meddling with the political questions which have agitated the country during the late Presidential Election."<sup>3</sup> Of course, Meagher had been in Costa Rica during most of that campaign and his old newspaper, the *Irish News*, had unsurprisingly endorsed Lincoln's opponent, Stephen Douglas.<sup>4</sup> Meagher was not likely to score a position in America's first Republican administration.

Moreover, as tensions heated up following Lincoln's inauguration in March with Southerners threatening Fort Sumter, Meagher was quick to defend the newly formed

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<sup>1</sup> Keneally, *The Great Shame*, 316-317.

<sup>2</sup> Comerford, *Fenians in Context*, 74-75.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Ahearn, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 90.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

Confederacy, a position that produced tensions in his own house. During an early April morning discussion with his father-in-law, when Mr. Townsend referred to the Southerners as a “set of rebels,” Meagher indignantly replied that, “You cannot call eight millions of white freemen ‘rebels,’ sir; --- you may call them ‘revolutionists’ if you will.”<sup>5</sup> (Emphasis in original.) Later that day, while at Delmonico’s restaurant, Meagher was listening to customers conduct an informal debate on the sectional crisis when someone asked him what he thought; he replied, “in this controversy, my sympathies are entirely with the South.”<sup>6</sup>

The Confederate attack on Fort Sumter on April 12, 1861 changed everything for Meagher and many other Northerners. Away on a lecture tour when the attack took place, upon his return, Meagher stopped in at the local Fenian Brotherhood office, located in the same building as the *Irish News*, and ran into Lieutenant Colonel Robert Nugent of the 69<sup>th</sup> New York Militia, which had just been mobilized into action in the wake of Fort Sumter. Nugent asked Meagher what he felt about matters now: “I don’t know what to think of them, --- I never saw such a change in public opinion as has taken place during the past week. --- I feel like one carried away by a torrent. The whole cry is --- ‘The Flag!’ ‘The Flag!’ Damn them! They didn’t let that flag alone.”<sup>7</sup> In that same office later that day, Meagher seemed to have come around to a final decision in favor of the North, as he explained in a private conversation with Michael Cavanagh, a former Young Irelander who was now secretary of the Fenian Brotherhood:

Looking at every aspect of the question, I do not see what better course I could take. Duty and patriotism alike prompt me to it. The Republic, that gave us an asylum and an honorable career, --- that is the mainstay

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<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Cavanagh, *Memoirs of General Meagher*, 367-368.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 368.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 368-369.

of freedom the world over --- 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. . . .  
. . . . It is a moral certainty that many of our countrymen who enlist in this struggle for the maintenance of the Union will fall in the contest. But even so; I hold that if only one in ten of us come back when this war is over, the military experience gained by that *one* will be of more service in a fight for Ireland's freedom than would that of the entire ten as they are now.<sup>8</sup> (Emphasis in original.)

When Meagher hypothesized to Cavanagh that only one out of every ten Irish-Americans would survive fighting for the Union, he was obviously exaggerating for effect. But tragically, he was not that far off the mark.

Nugent had challenged Meagher to join up with the 69<sup>th</sup> but it was a little late. The unit left New York for the Washington, D.C. area on April 23. However, on that very day, an advertisement appeared in the *New York Daily Tribune* summoning one hundred "Young Irishmen" who were "healthy, intelligent and active" to join a company of "Irish Zouaves" that would serve "under the command of Thomas Francis Meagher" and be attached to the 69<sup>th</sup> Militia. After successfully recruiting his company, Meagher was commissioned its captain.<sup>9</sup>

By June, Captain Meagher's Zouave company, with their fancy and exotic uniforms, had joined up with the 69<sup>th</sup> at Fort Corcoran near Washington, D.C. The fort had been named in honor of Colonel Michael Corcoran, the 69<sup>th</sup>'s commander, who was also a leading Fenian. In the fall of 1860, Corcoran had made national headlines by refusing to allow the 69<sup>th</sup> to march as ordered in honor of a visit to New York City by the young Prince of Wales. While that principled stand made him a hero to Irish-Americans,

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<sup>8</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 369.

<sup>9</sup> Ahearn, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 93.



others thought that he should be punished for disobeying a lawful order to march his troops. Meagher, who was home briefly from Costa Rica when the controversy erupted, stated in the October 20, 1860 *Harper's Weekly* that Corcoran had “refused lawfully as a citizen, courageously as a soldier, [and] indignantly as an Irishman” to march in front of that “beardless youth,” the Prince of Wales.<sup>10</sup> The politically potent Irish-American community notwithstanding, it appeared that Corcoran would be punished for his disobedience in some fashion; he was facing a court-martial when Fort Sumter was attacked. But again, Fort Sumter changed everything. With Lincoln calling for 75,000 troops on an emergency basis, all was forgiven Corcoran as he quickly recruited 1,040 new volunteers and marched all of his men swiftly off to war.<sup>11</sup>

After weeks spent fortifying Camp Corcoran, the 69<sup>th</sup> was finally ordered into the field. At long last, “Meagher of the Sword” would actually wield one in a real battle, fighting not to sever his native land from its “Union” with Great Britain but to preserve the Union of his adopted country. On July 21, 1861, with spectators watching from hillsides with picnic baskets, the 69<sup>th</sup> did as well if not better than any other Northern unit in the war’s opening conflict, the First Battle of Bull Run in Manassas, Virginia which ended with the defeated Union forces beating a generally hasty and disorganized retreat from the field. Before retreating, the 69<sup>th</sup> made more than one gallant charge against Confederate strongholds and then maintained their discipline during the final mass retreat. Unfortunately, Corcoran was wounded and captured near the end of the battle.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Joseph G. Bilby, *The Irish Brigade in the Civil War: The 69<sup>th</sup> New York and Other Irish Regiments of the Army of the Potomac* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Da Capo Press, 1997), 3.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>12</sup> Ahearn, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 96-97.

The 69<sup>th</sup> had fought at Bull Run as part of a brigade commanded by Colonel William Tecumseh Sherman. Shortly after the battle, in a letter mostly lamenting the sorry performance of many of his troops, Sherman consoled himself by noting that “I have the Irish 69<sup>th</sup> New York, which will fight.”<sup>13</sup> Besides impressing their commander, the 69<sup>th</sup> received accolades from their battlefield opponents with one Confederate officer opining that the regiment stood “like a rock in the whirlpool rushing around them. . . . The Irish fought like heroes” and only at the very end “did slowly retire,”<sup>14</sup> while a reporter for the *Memphis Argus* wrote that “No Southerner but feels that the Sixty-ninth maintained the old reputation of Irish valor.”<sup>15</sup>

Meagher’s Irish Zouaves sustained heavy casualties in the battle, partly because their bright red uniforms made them an easy target.<sup>16</sup> Meagher himself served as an acting-major in the battle but, in what would become a puzzling pattern during the war, his performance in the field was subject to wildly different interpretations. According to his own account, which he first serialized in the New York-based *Irish American* and the *New York Daily Tribune* and later published as a booklet entitled *The Last Days of the 69<sup>th</sup> in Virginia*, Meagher took part in several charges before he was “knocked head over heels and fell senseless on the field”<sup>17</sup> late in the battle only to be dragged by a cavalry private to relative safety. Meagher then hitched a ride on a retreating artillery wagon only to be pitched into a river when one of the wagon’s horses was shot. Meagher swam out of the river and eventually reached his camp.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in David Power Conyngham, *The Irish Brigade and Its Campaigns*, edited, with an introduction, by Lawrence Frederick Kohl (New York: Fordham University Press, 1994), 41, 43.

<sup>15</sup> Paul Jones, *The Irish Brigade* (Washington: Robert B. Luce, Inc., 1969), 89.

<sup>16</sup> Conyngham, *The Irish Brigade*, 37.

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in Ahearn, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 97.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

Meagher's version of events was, at first, roughly confirmed and then, later, sharply contradicted in a wartime diary kept by Maria Lydig Daly, the non-Irish wife of the renowned New York jurist and prominent Irish-American, Judge Charles Daly. Mrs. Daly was an unofficial patroness of the 69<sup>th</sup>, having purchased a green battle standard for the unit from Tiffany's. She eventually developed quite a distaste for Meagher and his wife as the war progressed, which may have had something to do with the prominence Libby Meagher would later assume as a patroness of the yet-to-be-formed Irish Brigade. Initially, in a July 28, 1861 diary entry, Mrs. Daly wrote that, based upon what she and Judge Daly had heard "from those who were in the battle of Bull Run," that "Meagher behaved very gallantly when the ensign who bore the green flag was killed. He seized it, and, calling to his men, . . . charged and carried the battery, not perceiving that his horse was shot until he fell with him."<sup>19</sup> Several months later, on February 4, 1862, the Dalys entertained several officers of the 69<sup>th</sup> who had fought at Bull Run; her diary entry on the following day was allegedly based on their accounts:

It would seem, from all we can learn, that Meagher was intoxicated and had just sense and elation enough to make one rush forward and afterwards fell from his horse drunk, and was picked up by the troopers, who he says brought him off the field behind him. So much for our Irish hero, Thomas Francis Meagher. He has made bitter enemies in the 69<sup>th</sup> Regiment.<sup>20</sup>

The claim that Meagher was drunk during the battle receives some confirmation from Henry Villiard, a *Cincinnati Commercial* correspondent, who spoke with the captain before the battle and, based upon his eyes and the manner in which he swayed in the saddle, concluded that "he had braced himself internally for the fight."<sup>21</sup> Villiard,

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<sup>19</sup> Maria Lydig Daly, *Diary of a Union Lady*, edited by Harold Earl Hammond with an introduction by Jean V. Berlin (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), 40.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>21</sup> Quoted in Daniel M. Callaghan, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 33.

though, had been a critic of Meagher even before the war.<sup>22</sup> Another correspondent, George Wilkes of the New York-based *Spirit of the Times*, witnessed Meagher, drunk or not, fighting courageously during the battle: “Most prominent among [the 69<sup>th</sup>] was Meagher, the Irish orator, who frequently, during the contest of that turbulent day, waved the green banner of his regiment up and down the hottest line of the fire.”<sup>23</sup>

The most outlandish account of Meagher’s actions at Bull Run came from William Howard Russell, a correspondent for London’s *Times* whose dispatch from Washington describing the battle was picked up by the *New York Daily Tribune*. According to Russell, he witnessed Meagher cowardly running away from the battle but so not fast that Russell could not hear him exclaim, with perfect eloquence, that “The Southern Confederacy ought to be recognized tomorrow; they have beaten us handsomely, and are entitled to it.”<sup>24</sup> Russell’s account was so ludicrous and generated so much outrage from its readers that, in its July 25 edition, the *Daily Tribune* asserted squarely that Meagher “bore himself with distinguished gallantry.”<sup>25</sup>

Russell’s account drew particular ire from the 69<sup>th</sup>’s officer corps, more than two dozen of whom signed a statement about Meagher proclaiming that “no officer or soldier could have borne himself more gallantly, nor with more perfect coolness and intrepidity, than he did all through the labors and terrors of that battle”<sup>26</sup> at Bull Run. According to those officers, after Meagher’s horse was shot out from under him, he led his Zouave company on foot as they charged a Confederate position, and “in the face of the deadliest

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.; William L. Burton, *Melting Pot Soldiers: The Union’s Ethnic Regiments* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1988), 246 (n 18).

<sup>23</sup> Quoted in Conyngham, *The Irish Brigade*, 42.

<sup>24</sup> Quoted in Keneally, *The Great Shame*, 327.

<sup>25</sup> Quoted in Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Quoted in Cavanagh, *Memoirs of General Meagher*, 400.

fire, with his head uncovered, stood his ground, waved his sword, rallied the Sixty-ninth in the name of Ireland . . . and was among the last, if he himself was not the very last, to leave”<sup>27</sup> the battlefield. The officers concluded that “on the march no one was more eager; in battle, none more reckless of his life.”<sup>28</sup>

Apparently, the officers of the 69<sup>th</sup> were not the only ones impressed with Meagher who, after the battle, was offered a captaincy in the regular army as well as several colonelcies, including a staff position under Major General John C. Fremont, the former Republican presidential nominee.<sup>29</sup> But he turned those offers down, noting that he had “no ambition to increase the catalog of blunderers and imposters”<sup>30</sup> in the command ranks given his “limited military practice and information.”<sup>31</sup> One general who did *not* offer him a staff position was the newly promoted Brigadier General Sherman, whom Meagher had excoriated in *The Last Days of the 69<sup>th</sup> in Virginia* as a “rude and envenomed martinet” who, before Bull Run, “exhibited the sourest malignity towards the 69<sup>th</sup>.”<sup>32</sup> Attacking a fellow officer in print during a war did not show good form on Meagher’s part who, while not a West Pointer or an experienced veteran, was still expected to conduct himself as an officer and a gentleman. Meagher was one of the so-called “political” officers of the Civil War, men who received their commissions by virtue of their political connections or else because they had recruited a lot of soldiers into the ranks.

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<sup>27</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 401.

<sup>29</sup> Ahearn, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 97.

<sup>30</sup> Jones, *The Irish Brigade*, 99.

<sup>31</sup> Ahearn, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 99.

<sup>32</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 96.

Meagher would put all of his recruiting skills to work in his next endeavor, which was to organize, as he related in a September 7, 1861 telegram to the War Department, “an Irish Brigade of five thousand . . . and have it ready in thirty . . . days to march.”<sup>33</sup> Following Bull Run, Meagher had returned to New York with the rest of the 69<sup>th</sup>, most of whom had only signed up for three-month enlistments. Those enlistees, joined in New York by additional volunteers, now generously signed up for three-year commitments but Meagher thought that other Irish-American units could be raised to fight alongside them, not only from New York but from Boston and Philadelphia as well. After getting a green light from Washington, Meagher formed an aggressive recruitment staff and headlined major rallies himself to draw in recruits. Addressing tens of thousands at an outdoor rally in New York, Meagher targeted an appeal at Irish Democrats, admonishing them to put their country ahead of their party:

I care not to what party the Chief Magistrate of the Republic has belonged. I care not upon what plank or platform he may have been elected. The platform disappears before the Constitution, under the injunction of the oath he took on the steps of the Capitol the day of his inauguration. The party disappears in the presence of the nation --- and as the Chief Magistrate, duly elected and duly sworn, is bound to protect and administer the national property for the benefit of the nation, so should every citizen concur with him in loyal and patriotic action, discarding the mean persuasions and maxims of the local politician --- and substituting the national interests, the national honor, for the selfishness, the huckstering or the vengeance of a party.<sup>34</sup>

On September 23, 1861, Meagher addressed a throng at the Music Hall in Boston, where nativist sentiment had long been rampant. Such sentiment would be greatly alleviated if the Irish volunteered in large numbers for the Union Army and fought well in battle. By so doing, they would bring an end to “Know-Nothingism” and the Irish

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<sup>33</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>34</sup> Quoted in Cavanagh, *Memoirs of General Meagher*, 415-416.

soldier could “take his stand proudly by the side of the native-born, and will not fear to look him straight and sternly in the face, and tell him that he has been equal to him in his allegiance to the Constitution.”<sup>35</sup> America had provided the Irish with asylum and freedom and now it was time to repay the debt, Meagher argued. Plus, the North was in the right; the South had been wrong to rebel. As Meagher put it: “What single grievance is there to justify . . . rebellion? What inch of territory was invaded? What single item of . . . State rights which the Constitution gives . . . was in the slightest degree violated or impaired?”<sup>36</sup> According to Meagher, the South rebelled because it saw its political power dissipating in a democratic republic and had thus decided to replace the ballot box with “the Mexican rule of election --- the bayonet and cartridge box.”<sup>37</sup> Responding to those who accused him of inconsistency in supporting the right of Ireland to rebel but not the South, Meagher noted that Britain was actually favoring the South and that the political situations in Ireland and the South were hardly comparable:

As for the cause of Ireland, and for the cause of the South, to these same apologists for the South . . . when they ask me how it is possible that while I contended for the independence of Ireland, I am opposed to the independence of the South, I answer this; had Ireland been under the enjoyment of such privileges and such rights, and such guaranteed independence as South Carolina enjoyed, I would not have been here tonight.<sup>38</sup>

Finally, answering those who wondered why Irish-Americans had to form their own distinctive brigade instead of joining non-ethnic units, Meagher contended that “an Irishman never fights so well as when he has an Irishman for his comrade.”<sup>39</sup> But the real, unstated purpose of an all-Irish unit was to ensure that the bravery and loyalty of the

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<sup>35</sup> Quoted in Cornish, “An Irish Republican Abroad,” 149.

<sup>36</sup> Quoted in Ahearn, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 103.

<sup>37</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> Quoted in Forney, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 94.

<sup>39</sup> Quoted in Ahearn, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 103.

Irish would stand out as conspicuously as possible to non-Irish Americans. Neither the term nor the concept of an “Irish Brigade” was a new one. For centuries, Irish expatriates had joined together to fight in their own units for various continental European powers such as France and Spain. To no one’s surprise, they seemed to fight with special tenacity whenever those continental nations were engaged in hostilities with Britain.<sup>40</sup>

The Battalion of Saint Patrick that had recently fought for the Papal States was an expeditionary force as opposed to an expatriate unit but it too exemplified the “fighting Irish” spirit. In the Mexican-American War of 1846-1848, another St. Patrick’s Battalion emerged, albeit one that most Irish-Americans in 1861 would have liked to forget. The “San Patricios,” as they were known, were founded by John Riley, a native-born Irishman who defected from the American Army to the Mexican Army on the eve of the war. Commissioned by the Mexicans as an officer, Riley recruited perhaps as many as 150 other American deserters to join him in an artillery unit that paid tribute to his Irish heritage by its name and green battle flags.

The San Patricios engaged their former comrades and suffered heavy casualties in several key battles of the war. Seventy of them were captured at Chorususco, with fifty later hanged for desertion while fifteen others were branded with a “D.” Contrary to false myths that persist in Mexico, most of the San Patricios were *not* Irish-Catholics, nor does it appear that they, sympathizing with Mexicans as fellow Catholics and chafing at the bits of their bigoted nativist officers, deserted primarily for religious reasons. Though some Protestant officers certainly did abuse their Catholic soldiers and though there was a pathetic shortage of Catholic chaplains in the American Army in the theaters of war, the fact remains that only a tiny percentage of Irish-American soldiers deserted in a war that

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<sup>40</sup> Keneally, *The Great Shame*, 332.



featured the highest desertion rate of any war in American history.<sup>41</sup> Still, there was considerable publicity in America surrounding the executions of the captured San Patricios that served only to fuel nativist fires in the years between the wars. Many Irish-Americans hoped that Meagher's Brigade would display enough courage and bravery to erase the memory of the San Patricios from the American consciousness.

Meagher's recruiting campaign proceeded to Philadelphia where S. H. Hayes, an Irish Confederate sympathizer, tried to undermine his efforts, as he later described in a January 6, 1864 letter to Confederate President Jefferson Davis:

After the first battle of Manassas, T. F. Meagher came to Philadelphia to drum up recruits for his Irish Brigade. He made a capital speech; I feared a telling one. I worked night and day to neutralize his speech. His treatment of the Irish girl [who] aided him in making his escape from Australia, and his subsequent marriage to a Yankee girl, was an admirable argument against him, which I failed not to use [on] every occasion. The result was he obtained but few recruits in Philadelphia --- not more than a corporal's guard.<sup>42</sup>

Though Hayes exaggerated the effect he had on Meagher's efforts, recruiting for the Brigade did prove more fruitful in New York than in either Pennsylvania or Massachusetts. Consequently, when the Irish Brigade was initially formed in the fall of 1861, it was composed of three New York regiments: the newly styled 69<sup>th</sup> New York Volunteer Infantry Regiment, the 63<sup>rd</sup> New York, and the 88<sup>th</sup> New York, also known as "Mrs. Meagher's Own," given Libby's special patronage of that unit and the fact that many of its officers came from Meagher's old Zouave company. All three regiments eventually arrived in Virginia early in 1862, where they were based at Fort Shuyler,

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<sup>41</sup> See Robert Ryal Miller, *Shamrock and Sword: The Saint Patrick's Battalion in the U.S.-Mexican War* (Norman: The University of Oklahoma Press, 1989). Dr. Miller's book is the most scholarly and objective treatment of the controversial San Patricios.

<sup>42</sup> U.S. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (hereafter *OR*), 128 vols. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1881-1901), Series 4, Vol. 3, 5.

otherwise known as “Camp California,” under the temporary command of Colonel Nugent.<sup>43</sup>

“Camp California” was so named in honor of Brigadier General Edwin Vose “Bull” Sumner, the Brigade’s divisional commander, who was heading east from California after serving as commander of the Department of the Pacific. Heading in from property he owned in Mexico, James Shields was expected to take command of the Brigade itself upon his arrival in the theater. Shields was America’s foremost Irish-born military hero having served with distinction as a brigadier general in the Mexican-American War. Later, he served as the governor of the Oregon territory before being elected as a United States senator from, first, Illinois, and then Minnesota. Meagher had proposed him as the obvious choice to command the Brigade but Shields thought he was worthy of commanding a division. Having once faced off against Lincoln in a farcical duel in Illinois that ended with the men becoming friends, Shields soon got the division he wanted. Shields then recommended Meagher to command the Brigade and, with strong backing from New York Governor Edward D. Morgan and most of the Brigade’s officers, on February 3, 1862, Congress confirmed Lincoln’s appointment of Meagher as a brigadier general and, two days later, he took personal command of the Brigade.<sup>44</sup> Having no other combat experience besides First Bull Run to guide him, Meagher had now been entrusted with leading three regiments of men into battles that would make Bull Run look like the picnic-goers’ entertainment that its civilian spectators naively thought it would be before the first shots were fired there.

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<sup>43</sup> Bilby, *The Irish Brigade*, 20-23.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 23-27; Ahearn, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 109.

For the next fifteen months, the war would absorb Meagher but, back in September of 1861, as his recruiting efforts were just getting underway, he had taken time to welcome his old comrade MacManus's corpse to New York on its triumphant Fenian-sponsored tour. Remarkably, Meagher had even convinced Archbishop Hughes to allow the casket into St. Patrick's Cathedral for a solemn Requiem Mass, an honor that would not be duplicated, interestingly enough, in Dublin, where Catholic bishops had censured the oath-bound Fenian movement as the type of "occult society" that papal teaching had consistently condemned.<sup>45</sup>

On September 5, Meagher was chairing a public meeting in New York held in preparation for the arrival of MacManus when members of the audience spontaneously gave three rousing cheers for Meagher, Corcoran, and the 69<sup>th</sup> respectively. With those cheers still ringing in Irving Hall, an emotional Meagher faced the crowd and cried, "Now that you have testified your loving admiration for the brave Irish soldier of the Union, I call upon you to give three cheers for the two sons of John Mitchel, who are fighting as bravely on the other side."<sup>46</sup> The audience did as directed, cheering even louder than before.

One month earlier, in an August 7, 1861 letter, Mitchel himself had expressed delight that the 69<sup>th</sup> had upheld Irish pride by performing well at Bull Run:

For the sake of the island that bred them I am rejoiced that the 69<sup>th</sup> Regiment did its duty in the bloody day of Manassas. --- They have seen some service at last, and of the sharpest; so that I imagine the men who faced Beauregard's artillery and rifles until Bull Run ran red, will not be likely to shrink on the day (when will it dawn, that white day?) that they will have the comparatively light task of whipping their weight of red-coats.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Keneally, *The Great Shame*, 335; Donal McCartney, "The Church and Fenianism," in *Fenians and Fenianism*, ed. Maurice Harmon (Seattle: The University of Washington Press, 1970), 15-16.

<sup>46</sup> Quoted in Cavanagh, *Memoirs of General Meagher*, 416.

<sup>47</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 417.

Mitchel wrote those words from Paris where he was still writing for the *Irish American*, the *Charleston Mercury*, and, now, the *Dublin Irishman* as well, hoping that the “white day” on which Ireland would rise up again was coming soon. But his two oldest sons were, as he knew better than Meagher, fighting for the Confederacy, with John serving in an artillery unit in Richmond, and James in the 1<sup>st</sup> Virginia Volunteers. They were fighting in a war that Mitchel had encouraged and still endorsed. Shortly before Bull Run, Mitchel enjoyed a visit from Smith O’Brien, which ended with O’Brien predicting as he departed, “As for your Southern Confederacy, you will hear the collapse of *that* in a few days.” To which Mitchel responded, “Farewell then, royal heart! --- the best and noblest Irishman of our generation, and for this reason alone, sentenced to be hanged, drawn, and quartered!”<sup>48</sup> The two would never meet again. Mitchel could only hope that he would see his two oldest sons again.

No doubt someone must have told Meagher’s only son in Ireland that his father had become a general in a faraway land. And if Meagher’s inexperience sometimes prevented him from acting the part, at least he always looked the part. According to the Reverend William Corby, a Holy Cross priest who served as the chaplain for the 88<sup>th</sup> and would later be president of the University of Notre Dame, Meagher and his staff were a sight to behold:

Gen. Meagher’s staff was known as a “brilliant staff.” It was composed of gallant young officers, who were decked out not only with the regulation gold straps, stripes and cords on their coats, trousers, and hats, but they had great Austrian knots of gold on their shoulders, besides numerous other ornamentations in gold, which glittered in the Virginia sun enough to dazzle one.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Quoted in Keneally, *The Great Shame*, 329.

<sup>49</sup> William Corby, C.S.C., *Memoirs of Chaplain Life: Three Years with the Irish Brigade in the Army of the Potomac*, edited, and with an introduction, by Lawrence Frederick Kohl (New York: Fordham University Press, 1992), 75.

Meagher had always been a natty dresser in civilian life and he extended his sartorial good taste into the military sphere, designing his own and his officers' uniforms. Meagher did not, however, bring military experience to the table; fortunately for him, many of his officers and soldiers did. Possibly as many as a third of the men in the 88<sup>th</sup> alone had "taken the Queen's shilling" by serving in various Irish regiments of the British Army, not an unusual circumstance for poor young men in Ireland. Still others had experience fighting in such continental forces as the Austrian Army or one of the Papal Brigades. Indeed, some of Meagher's officers had come from Europe just to serve in the Brigade. Francis Reynolds, the 88<sup>th</sup>'s surgeon and the Brigade's top Fenian and poet laureate, had been with the British medical staff in the Crimean War. According to Father Corby, Meagher's officers were, "for the most part, men of superior education, gallant beyond any around them in the army; and as for bravery, this they imbibed with their mother's milk, yea, it was born in them."<sup>50</sup>

Father Corby was similarly impressed by the common soldiers of the Brigade: "The 'rank and file' was composed of healthy, intelligent men, far above the average, and in many cases of liberal education. . . . In my regiment, as private soldiers, there were seven first-class lawyers."<sup>51</sup> A survey of five hundred Brigade enlistees from New York showed that most of them were older, married, and nationalized American citizens.<sup>52</sup> Still, after citing that study, author Joseph G. Bilby concludes that the "preponderance of the brigade's rank and file were . . . urban workmen [and] some of them were pretty tough customers."<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Bilby, *The Irish Brigade*, 29.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 27.

These “urban workmen” would have also been hit hard by the economic downturn in the North that accompanied and immediately followed the secession crisis, according to Brigade scholar Lawrence Frederick Kohl, who concludes that many of the Brigade’s enlisted men joined to get a steady paycheck that they could send home to their families. Kohl holds that others who enlisted were motivated by anti-British feelings, given that England seemed to favor the South and that a break-up of the American Union would empower Britain; some of these enlistees were also interested in getting military experience that they could use against the British in a later war. Still other men enlisted, according to Kohl, because they wanted to prove the nativists wrong about the patriotism of the Irish by winning their respect on the battlefield. Finally, some men enlisted because of a heartfelt patriotic duty to aid the country that had given them succor and freedom.<sup>54</sup> Notably, in his recruiting appeals, Meagher touched upon all the key motivating factors for enlistment identified by Kohl with the exception of appealing to base, economic motives; Meagher did not have to tell men who needed money what they already knew all too well themselves.

But Meagher could provide his men, within reason, with what they wanted in the field and as their commanding officer, he generally strove to do so. According to Father Corby, the Brigade’s “great body of officers and men was, I might say, entirely Catholic, and one may easily infer that the influence, for good or evil, was considerable.”<sup>55</sup> Meagher ensured that the spiritual needs of his men would be met by having a separate priest-chaplain for each of the Brigade’s regiments. As noted, Father Corby served the 88<sup>th</sup>; serving the 63<sup>rd</sup> was the Reverend James M. Dillon, another Holy Cross Father,

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<sup>54</sup> Lawrence Frederick Kohl, introduction to *The Irish Brigade* by Conygham, xiv-xvi.

<sup>55</sup> Corby, *Memoirs of Chaplain Life*, 31.

while the Reverend Thomas Ouellet, a French-Canadian Jesuit, served the 69<sup>th</sup>. As Father Corby relates, “although not what we would call a pious man, [Meagher] loved his faith, and assisted in making religion take a front rank.”<sup>56</sup> Leading by example, Meagher attended Mass regularly and even led the band while there. Meagher also “did not neglect going to confession from time to time, especially before battles.”<sup>57</sup>

Though Meagher went to Mass and confession, he certainly never took a temperance oath while in the field, although, at the behest of their chaplain, Father Dillon, some seven hundred members of the 63<sup>rd</sup> did take “the Pledge” in November, 1861, when the unit was first organized. After they did so, Father Dillon started the “Temperance Association of the Irish Brigade” and had medals struck and delivered to the pledge-takers to remind them of their commitment. Many men remained faithful to their pledge during their service and would even abstain from the daily whiskey ration that was offered to the soldiers along with quinine to ward off a deadly malaria epidemic in June, 1862 as the Brigade was camped near the swampy Chickahominy River.<sup>58</sup>

In his headquarters tent, Meagher freely dispensed whiskey, for medicinal and other reasons, from portable kegs. He generously shared his booze with visiting generals and, on special occasions, provided his soldiers --- presumably the ones who had not taken the Pledge --- with immoderate amounts of alcohol as well. Though mindful of his men’s spiritual needs, Meagher also saw the need for organized recreational diversions and amusements, which were occasionally conducted on a grand scale. On May 31, 1862, for example, the Brigade sponsored an all-day party featuring a Gaelic football

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 291-295. The account of Father Dillon’s temperance campaign was written by Major John Dwyer of the 63<sup>rd</sup>.

game in the morning, followed by steeplechase races in the afternoon, with an amateur play to be held at night in a theater that had been specially constructed for that purpose. Generals from other divisions attended the festivities and helped judge the races. Unfortunately, as the afternoon races wound down, artillery fire was heard in the distance; the Battle of Fair Oaks was on and the Irish Brigade's party was over.<sup>59</sup>

Up to that point, Meagher's Brigade had seen little action. In April, the Brigade had been ordered out of camp on a moment's notice and sent on a twenty-four hour march in a rainstorm. Expecting an imminent battle, a nervous Meagher paced and fretted in a makeshift headquarters as his men were slow to reach the designated camp. "Great God! The Irish Brigade will be brought into action at daybreak, and the work of a brigade will be expected of them, while I have scarcely two hundred men. Are these the men I expected in some future time to free Ireland with?"<sup>60</sup> As it turned out, the Brigade was not needed to fight after their long march in the rain. They were, however, needed at Fair Oaks on June 1.

There, Confederate forces commanded by General Joseph E. Johnston launched an attack upon General George McClellan's Army of the Potomac, which included the Brigade, and which had been marching towards the Confederate capital of Richmond in its Peninsula Campaign. The Union forces were surprised by Johnston's attack but responded well enough to forestall a Confederate victory. Two of the Brigade's regiments, the 69<sup>th</sup> and the 88<sup>th</sup>, were called into action and fought well, sustaining minor

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<sup>59</sup> Keneally, *The Great Shame*, 340, 343-344.

<sup>60</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 343.



casualties in the process. After the battle, Generals McClellan and Sumner both praised the Brigade for a job well done.<sup>61</sup>

As for Meagher, his performance at Fair Oaks remains somewhat of a mystery. David Power Conyngham claimed that, during the battle, “General Meagher and staff were indefatigable, riding from line to line, cheering on the men. The general was all the time under fire.”<sup>62</sup> But Conyngham’s portrayal of Meagher throughout his 1867 work, *The Irish Brigade and Its Campaigns*, is invariably glowing. Conyngham was a Young Irelander who simply appeared at the Brigade’s camp one day in late 1862 asking to be made an honorary member of Meagher’s staff. His wish was granted and he stayed with the Brigade for several months. He wrote as a proud Irish nationalist and not an objective historian, as exemplified in this description of Meagher: “As he stands erect, clothed in his rich uniform of a brigadier-general, there is a grandeur and stateliness, and a sense of intellect and power about him, that make you almost think you are looking upon one of the old Irish princes of medieval times.”<sup>63</sup>

Standing as a polar opposite to Conyngham when it came to Meagher was Colonel Edward E. Cross, commander of the Fifth New Hampshire Volunteers. A well-traveled newspaper reporter, silver speculator, and Indian fighter before the War, Cross was also a Know-Nothing and a Freemason who despised Irish Catholics.<sup>64</sup> He kept a private journal during the War, in which he continually blasted Meagher, starting with this entry posted shortly after Fair Oaks:

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<sup>61</sup> Bilby, *The Irish Brigade*, 37-40.

<sup>62</sup> Conyngham, *The Irish Brigade*, 154.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 75. Biographical information on Conyngham from Kohl’s introduction in *Ibid.*, xix-xx.

<sup>64</sup> Walter Holden, William E. Ross, and Elizabeth Slomba, introduction to *Stand Firm and Fire Low: The Civil War Writings of Colonel Edward E. Cross*, eds. Walter Holden, William E. Ross, and Elizabeth Slomba (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 2003), 2-4.

One fact I here desire to note, namely, that Gen. Thos. F. Meagher of the Irish Brigade was *drunk* on the march to the battlefield, and while the army was being posted behaved in a very disgraceful style, shouting and riding about in a manner highly unbecoming an officer and a gentleman, especially on such an occasion.<sup>65</sup> (Emphasis in original.)

In further describing the battle, Cross claims that members of his regiment were killed by “friendly fire” from the Brigade:

The Irish Brigade fired a volley into the backs of my men --- killing or wounding several. There was no excuse for this murderous act only stupidity of the grossest kind. Fortunately the aim was high or my Reg’t would have been annihilated. This act and the charge up to the rear of my Reg’t was all that the Irish Brigade did at the battle of Fair Oaks. Gen. Meagher was not present to command, nor did I see any mounted officers.<sup>66</sup>

When the *New York Herald* published an account of the battle in which the “terrific volleys” of the 69<sup>th</sup> were given credit for having driven back a Confederate assault, Cross fired off a letter on June 12, 1862 challenging that assertion and describing the “friendly fire” incident with the Brigade in significantly different terms than in his journal: “While advancing the second time on the enemy’s line, the 69<sup>th</sup> fired a volley --- one of the “terrific volleys” mentioned by your correspondent --- right into the backs of my men, for I had obliqued my line to the right, to prevent being flanked.”<sup>67</sup> Notably, in this letter, Cross does not accuse the 69<sup>th</sup> of “stupidity of the grossest kind” as he does in his journal but rather praises that regiment’s “gallant officers and men” and relates how, after he was wounded, “some soldiers of the Sixty-Ninth kindly relieved my men and carried me to the rear.”<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 112.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 111-112.

In Cross's defense, his journal was private and, had he not been killed the following year at Gettysburg, it may never have seen the light of day. But that has not kept some of Meagher's caustic critics in the history field from relying on extracts from Cross's journal and similarly questionable sources in their work. By the same token, Meagher's admirers routinely and uncritically quote Conyngham and other hagiographic accounts in their books and articles. In the end, it becomes nearly impossible to sift fact from fiction in either the pro-Meagher or anti-Meagher sources.

Adding to the mystery surrounding Meagher's actions at Fair Oaks is his own official report of that battle, which offers few details as to what he actually did during the engagement.<sup>69</sup> He certainly did not report leading a massive charge of the Irish Brigade and yet, for some reason, *Harper's Weekly* would later publish a heroic portrait of Meagher doing so.<sup>70</sup> It was enough to make a man like Cross cringe and Meagher and his friends chuckle.

Neither Cross nor Meagher were laughing much between June 25 and July 1, 1862 when the aggressive Confederate General Robert E. Lee launched several assaults against McClellan's Army of the Potomac as it tried to beat a strategic retreat in an intense period of warfare later designated as the Seven Days' Battles. The Irish Brigade would be heavily involved in four of the battles waged during that period: Gaines's Mill, Savage Station, White Oak Swamp, and Malvern Hill.<sup>71</sup> Once again, the Brigade fought so tenaciously as to garner the respect of their Confederate opponents. As the 69<sup>th</sup> and 88<sup>th</sup> started to charge the Rebel lines at the week's last battle, Malvern Hill, a Confederate

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<sup>69</sup> OR, Series 1, Vol. 11, 775-779.

<sup>70</sup> Callaghan, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 69-71.

<sup>71</sup> Bilby, *The Irish Brigade*, 42-47.

officer reportedly cried out, “Here comes that damned green flag again!”<sup>72</sup> The Southerners had seen enough of the Brigade’s battle flags over the past few days.

Actually, one of those battle flags was new and it was not green. After Fair Oaks, the Brigade had been fortified by the addition of a new regiment, the 29<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts Infantry, and not the 28<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts as expected. The 28<sup>th</sup> was an Irish unit, recruited in no small part by Meagher. The 29<sup>th</sup>, on the other hand, was mostly composed of Yankee Protestants with old-stock Puritan heritage. But civil wars can make strange bedfellows and Meagher welcomed the Yanks to the Brigade.<sup>73</sup>

Again, accounts of Meagher’s actions during the Seven Days’ Battles were mixed and even puzzling. A soldier from General William French’s brigade saw Meagher, early on in the week of fighting, pick one man out of a group of walking wounded and knock him down with his sword before riding off.<sup>74</sup> Two days later, Meagher was placed under military arrest for a twenty-four hour period. Author Daniel M. Callaghan speculates that Meagher may have been arrested for striking the wounded soldier but history has left the question open.<sup>75</sup> In his official report, Meagher refers matter-of-factly to his “being temporarily placed under arrest until eight o’clock” without explaining why and then praises Colonel Nugent for filling in for him ably during his arrest.<sup>76</sup>

During the Battle of White Oak Swamp, an artillery lieutenant, Rufus King, Jr. reported that Meagher “stood by one of the pieces, and exposed to the hottest fire, assisted the men in running the gun forward.”<sup>77</sup> Meagher then volunteered to ride to the

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<sup>72</sup> Callaghan, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 85.

<sup>73</sup> Forney, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 102.

<sup>74</sup> Stephen W. Sears, *To the Gates of Richmond: The Peninsula Campaign* (New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1992), 248.

<sup>75</sup> Callaghan, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 78.

<sup>76</sup> OR, Series 1, Vol. 11, Pt. 2, 71.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

divisional commander, General Israel Richardson, to have more ammunition sent to King, who was running low. Also during that battle, Captain P. K. Horgan of the 88<sup>th</sup> saw Meagher riding along a firing line seemingly oblivious to the danger; when some officers advised him to dismount, Meagher asserted, “No, I’ll not dismount. If I am killed, I would rather be killed riding this horse than lying down.”<sup>78</sup>

On the last day of the eventful week, at Malvern Hill, Meagher was asked by an aide to General McClellan to send one of his regiments to support an artillery battery.<sup>79</sup> Intending to send the 63<sup>rd</sup> on that mission, Meagher rode over to that regiment and said to its officer-in-charge, Lieutenant Colonel Henry J. Fowler, “What are you doing here when your comrades are being slaughtered? Follow Me!”<sup>80</sup> Fowler, however, would not obey Meagher’s orders, claiming that another general had ordered him to hold his position. At that point, Meagher flew into a rage, telling Fowler, “You are a disgrace to the Irish Brigade. I place you under arrest, sir!”<sup>81</sup> Meagher then had Fowler’s sword seized and leadership of the 63<sup>rd</sup> fell by seniority to Captain Joseph O’Neil. But when Meagher called on the 63<sup>rd</sup> to follow him up a hill, only two companies did so as there was massive confusion in the 63<sup>rd</sup>, which was being shelled at the time, as to who was in charge. The two companies then returned to the rest of their regiment where, finally, Father Dillon cried out, “I will take command, if no else does. Lie down boys, and wait for orders.”<sup>82</sup> The brave priest then went from soldier to soldier to inform them that Captain O’Neil was now in charge, whose orders they subsequently obeyed.

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<sup>78</sup> Quoted in Ahearn, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 113.

<sup>79</sup> OR, Series 1, Vol. 11, Pt. 2, 73.

<sup>80</sup> Corby, *Memoirs of Chaplain Life*, 288. Account written by Major John Dwyer of the 63<sup>rd</sup>.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 289.

Later in that battle, Thomas T. Ellis, an army surgeon not affiliated with the Brigade, reported witnessing Meagher riding at the head of the 69<sup>th</sup> and brandishing a sword while Colonel Nugent ordered a bayonet charge; as Ellis put it, “Meagher was conspicuous in the fight.”<sup>83</sup> Meagher had definitely been “conspicuous” throughout the Seven Days’ Battles, sometimes by his actions and sometimes by his absence.

Also conspicuous, unfortunately, were the gaps in Meagher’s ranks following the week’s worth of bloodletting. The three original regiments, the 69<sup>th</sup>, 63<sup>rd</sup>, and the 88<sup>th</sup> had, combined, suffered nearly a thousand casualties since they originally took the field as the Irish Brigade. With McClellan’s permission, Meagher returned to New York on a recruiting mission to replenish the ranks shortly after the end of the Seven Days’ Battles.<sup>84</sup>

Meagher’s recruiting drive climaxed with an address he gave to a packed audience in the Seventh Regimental Armory on July 25, 1862. Recognizing the difficulty of drawing recruits into a unit that had sustained heavy casualties, Meagher labored to explain to his audience that it was “neither insufficient nor unsound food, nor insufficient clothing, nor excess of work, nor disease, nor any injustice, blunder, or neglect [that] has been the cause of those red gaps in the ranks of the Brigade.”<sup>85</sup> Rather, the ranks had been thinned because the Brigade had earned a reputation as ferocious fighters that, in turn, caused them to be sent into battle more frequently than other units:

If Irishmen had not long ago established for themselves a reputation for fighting, with a consummate address and a superlative ability; if it had not long ago been accepted, the world over, as a gospel truth, that Galway beats Bannagher, and Bannagher beats the devil; and if

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<sup>83</sup> Thomas T. Ellis, *Leaves From the Diary of an Army Surgeon: Or Incidents of Field, Camp, and Hospital Life* (New York: J. Bradburn, 1863), 161.

<sup>84</sup> Ahearn, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 114-115.

<sup>85</sup> Quoted in Conyngham, *The Irish Brigade*, 251.

the boys of the Irish Brigade had not, with an untoward innocence, shown themselves, the first chance they had, as trustworthy as their blessed old sires . . . [then] the Irish Brigade would not have had any more fighting to do than any one else. . . . There's not a doubt or question of it, it was the fighting did all the mischief to us, and nothing else.<sup>86</sup>

Essentially, Meagher was appealing to the pride that Irishmen have in their “fighting Irish” reputation to get them to enlist in an Irish unit that would, because of that very reputation, be sent into battle more frequently than other units and, as a result, sustain more casualties. It was not a strong recruiting pitch. Still, it was probably the best that Meagher could do under the circumstances. He could not deny the undeniable: the Brigade had a high casualty rate that was unlikely to get much better.

Meagher also had to counter various “whispered” explanations for the Brigade’s heavy casualties that had been spreading in the Irish-American community. One rumor had it that Meagher was recklessly exposing his men to danger in order to win greater glory for himself. Another rumor held that it was Meagher’s incompetence as a military leader that was causing his men to be killed or wounded. Meanwhile, there was a popular conspiracy theory that the Brigade was being purposely put into harm’s way by a Republican administration bent on reducing the ranks of Northern Democrats as much as Confederates.<sup>87</sup>

Meagher’s recruiting efforts were also hurt by bad timing. Though men who enlisted in the Brigade received bounties from both the Brigade and the federal government, some young men thought they could make more money by holding out until conscription was mandated and then getting paid as substitutes for draftees.<sup>88</sup> As of

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<sup>86</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 248-249.

<sup>87</sup> Callaghan, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 90-93.

<sup>88</sup> Ahearn, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 115.

August, 1862, Meagher also had some serious competition in the quest for Irish-American recruits: Michael Corcoran was finally released from Confederate confinement that month in a prisoner exchange and immediately began to raise troops for his own unit, having been named a brigadier general of volunteers while imprisoned. Corcoran, with his Fenian connections, did much better on the recruiting trail than Meagher in the summer of 1862; while Meagher only signed up about 250 enlistees, Corcoran raised four regiments of a thousand men each to form his own “Corcoran Legion.”<sup>89</sup>

Meagher returned to the field in August but the Brigade was not engaged in any significant fighting until the bloody Battle of Antietam on September 17, 1862, the deadliest day in American military history. The Irish Brigade, for its part, both added to the carnage and suffered from it in an equally disproportionate fashion that day.

The Brigade was called into action midway through the battle to launch an assault upon Confederate forces who were entrenched in a sunken road that became known as “Bloody Lane” due to the massive casualties that piled up around it. Riding a white charger, Meagher led his men forward for the attack, which was to commence with several volleys of musket fire followed by a bayonet charge. As Meagher explained in his official report, “relying on the impetuosity and recklessness of Irish soldiers in a charge, [I] felt confident that before such a charge the rebel column would give way and be dispersed.”<sup>90</sup> It was not to be. The Brigade advanced to within thirty paces of “Bloody Lane” but deadly fire from the Confederates prevented them from going any further. With his men being felled by the hundreds, Meagher cried out to Colonel Francis Barlow, commanding the 61<sup>st</sup> and 64<sup>th</sup> New York, for relief: “Colonel! For God’s sake,

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<sup>89</sup> Keneally, *The Great Shame*, 356.

<sup>90</sup> OR, Series 1, Vol. 19, Pt. 1, 294.



come and help me!”<sup>91</sup> But Barlow would not send his forces into the killing field until his superior, General John Caldwell, ordered him to do so. As the Brigade ran out of ammunition, Barlow was finally ordered to move in and the Brigade --- or what was left of it --- was allowed to retreat.<sup>92</sup>

At some point, Meagher either fell or was shot off his horse during the battle. Again, the matter is open to controversy. In his official report, Meagher wrote that, “my horse having been shot under me as the engagement was about ending, and from the shock which I myself sustained, I was obliged to be carried off the field.”<sup>93</sup> This version of events was seconded by McClellan himself in his official report, in which he also praised the Brigade for its heroic efforts:

The Irish Brigade sustained its well-earned reputation. After suffering terribly in officers and men, and strewing the ground with their enemies as they drove them back, their ammunition nearly expended, and their commander, General Meagher, disabled by the fall of his horse, shot under him, this brigade was ordered to give place to General Caldwell’s brigade.<sup>94</sup>

Others told a different story. Whitelaw Reid, a Republican activist and a future GOP vice-presidential nominee then serving as a war correspondent for the *Cincinnati Enquirer*, disputed Meagher’s account:

[Meagher] was not in the charge at all! --- did not lead or follow it! He was too drunk to keep the saddle, fell from his horse . . . several times . . . was too stupidly drunk to answer the simplest question . . . and was finally taken up on a stretcher, covered with a cloth, and carried off the field --- the bearers circulating the story as they went that Gen. Meagher was dangerously wounded.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> John M. Priest, *Antietam: The Soldier’s Battle* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 180.

<sup>92</sup> Bilby, *The Irish Brigade*, 55-60.

<sup>93</sup> OR, Series 1, Vol. 19, Pt. 1, 295.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>95</sup> Quoted in Burton, *Melting Pot Soldiers*, 123.

Colonel Davis Hunter, a McClellan staffer, wrote in his diary that “Meagher was not killed as reported, but drunk, and fell from his horse.”<sup>96</sup> Hunter, however, was at least a mile away from the battlefield when Meagher allegedly fell drunkenly from his horse.

Author John M. Priest contends that Meagher fell from his horse while trying to mount a second attack on the sunken road:

The 132<sup>nd</sup> Pennsylvanian, . . . heard a louder ruckus from the rear. Once again, General Thomas Meagher, aboard his white charger, led his men at the double-quick toward the Bloody Lane. As the general neared the Pennsylvanians’ left flank, he toppled from the saddle. Getting to his feet, he staggered and reeled about, “swearing like a crazy man,” Adjutant Hitchcock (132<sup>nd</sup> PA) wrote. (The enlisted men insisted that Meagher was drunk.)<sup>97</sup>

Father Corby, for his part, recalls this about the battle:

Our brigade received orders to go in “double quick,” that is, on a full run. . . . As they were coming toward me, “double quick,” I had time only to wheel my horse for an instant toward them and gave my poor men a hasty absolution, and rode on with Gen. Meagher into the battle. In twenty or thirty minutes after this absolution, 506 of these very men lay on the field, either dead or seriously wounded. Gen. Meagher’s horse, a beautiful bright bay, was shot under him . . .<sup>98</sup>

When Father Corby’s account is read in a fuller context, it appears that he did not personally witness Meagher’s horse being shot out from under him but was, rather, simply reporting that fact. Still, had he seen that memorable horse in camp after the battle, he surely would not have reported that Meagher’s “beautiful bright bay” had been shot. Besides that, Corby was not naive about Meagher’s drinking problem:

It is to be regretted that, at times, especially when no fighting was going on, and time grew heavy on his hands, his convivial spirit would lead him too far. But by no means must it be concluded from this that he was a

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<sup>96</sup> Quoted in Keneally, *The Great Shame*, 362.

<sup>97</sup> Priest, *Antietam*, 206.

<sup>98</sup> Corby, *Memoirs of Chaplain Life*, 112.

drunkard. It was not for love of liquor, but for the love of sport and joviality that he thus gave way, and these occasions were few and far between. Besides, he was polite and gentlemanly, even when under the influence of liquor; never sinking to anything low or mean, beyond indulging too freely in unguarded moments.<sup>99</sup>

Father Corby could obviously tell when Meagher had been drinking and yet he does not intimate at all in his account of Antietam that Meagher was drunk when he rode with him into that battle. Beyond that, no member of the Irish Brigade ever accused Meagher of being drunk at Antietam.

Of course, there were, tragically, far fewer members of the Brigade left to accuse him of anything after Antietam. Father Corby accurately reported that Meagher's four regiments had suffered over 500 casualties in their assault on "Bloody Lane," more than double the number of new recruits that Meagher had mustered in over the summer. Thus, Meagher was relieved when, on October 10, 1862, the 116<sup>th</sup> Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry was added to the ranks of the Brigade. This undersized regiment included many Irish-American soldiers who had been inspired by Meagher's initial recruiting drive in 1861 but had been filled out by many non-Irish Pennsylvanians.<sup>100</sup>

Later, on November 23, 1862, the 28<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, the Irish-American regiment mostly recruited by Meagher in 1861, was finally added to the Brigade as well, although their arrival meant the departure of the Yankee 29<sup>th</sup>. It was a switch that made sense and was welcomed by both regiments. Although the 29<sup>th</sup> refused Meagher's parting gift of a green flag, its commander, Colonel Ebenezer Pierce, later

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>100</sup> Bilby, *The Irish Brigade*, 60-61.

wrote that his regiment had “added to its reputation by the mere fact of its being connected with the Irish Brigade.”<sup>101</sup>

Besides picking up a couple of new regiments, as of November 5, 1862, the Brigade would have a new Army of the Potomac commander as well: General Ambrose E. Burnside had been selected by Lincoln to replace the ineffective McClellan. Meagher and his men, however, were McClellan loyalists and, when McClellan passed them standing at attention on his farewell revue of the troops, the Brigade’s color bearers, at Meagher’s command, dropped their flags at his feet. McClellan appreciated the gesture but asked that the flags be picked up.<sup>102</sup>

When several of his officers threatened to resign in protest over McClellan’s removal, Meagher warned them that he would refuse to accept any such resignations. The men were sworn to serve the republic, not a particular commander. Meagher used Irish history to prove his point:

The great error of the Irish people in their struggle for an independent national existence, has been their passionate and blind adherence to an individual, instead of a principle or a cause. Thus for generations their heroic efforts in the right direction have been feverish and spasmodic, when they should have been continuous, equable and consistent.<sup>103</sup>

John Mitchel, the inveterate critic of Daniel O’Connell, could have penned those words himself. By the summer of 1862, however, though still living in Paris and working to instigate an Anglo-French conflict, his two oldest sons were fighting in a war whose mounting casualty count eventually convinced him that he should move to the Confederate States of America to be near them. At the time, his daughters Henrietta and Minnie were living with the Sisters of the Sacred Heart and were content to stay there but

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>102</sup> Forney, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 112.

<sup>103</sup> Quoted in Ibid.

his youngest son, Willy, insisted on accompanying him back to the South. That left Jenny and their daughter Isabel who would go to Ireland with Father Kenyon's help. As Mitchel explained it all in a letter to a friend:

So there is another break-up of our household. Two trembling and saying their prayers in Ireland; two passing anxious hours in the Paris convent; two in camp and garrison beyond the Atlantic; and two making ready to penetrate the Yankee blockade in disguise, and by way of New York.<sup>104</sup>

As contemplated in that letter, Mitchel and Willy traveled from Paris to New York where they made connections with a Confederate smuggling operation that successfully landed them in Virginia but not before they spent a fretful night in the woods near the Potomac evading Union patrols. They soon made their way to the Confederate capital of Richmond where Willy immediately and eagerly joined his brother James's 1<sup>st</sup> Virginia outfit while his father called on President Davis at the Confederate White House to volunteer his own services for the cause. Middle-aged, asthmatic, and near-sighted, Mitchel was rejected for military service but he soon became active in Richmond's Ambulance Committee, which transported and treated wounded Confederate soldiers.<sup>105</sup>

To earn a living, Mitchel returned to the newspaper business, being hired as an editor and writer for the *Daily Richmond Enquirer*, the house organ of the Davis administration. Naturally, in that position, he promoted the Confederate cause but he managed to do so with a decidedly anti-British twist. While many Southerners held out hope that Great Britain would recognize the Confederacy and possibly intervene in the War on their behalf, Mitchel tried to convince them otherwise: "It ought to be known here from the first, but was not, England could be no friend to the Confederacy or its

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<sup>104</sup> Quoted in Keneally, *The Great Shame*, 354.

<sup>105</sup> McGovern, *John Mitchel*, 270-274.

cause,”<sup>106</sup> he wrote in the *Enquirer*. The substantial cotton trade between the South and Britain notwithstanding, Mitchel pointed out that Britain was shipping far more goods to the North than to the South. As British recognition of the Confederacy and intervention on its behalf became increasingly unlikely as the War dragged on, Mitchel tried to turn Southern disappointment with the British into full-blown Anglophobia. Given Mitchel’s zealous Irish nationalism, this effort was predictable enough but it caused some Southerners, including editorialists at the *Raleigh Standard*, to question whether he was sufficiently dedicated to the cause of the Confederacy or just a monomaniacal Anglophobe.<sup>107</sup> As it turned out, Mitchel’s loyalty to the South would never be tested during the War thanks to Britain’s continued neutrality. But no one doubted that he was an Irish nationalist first and a Confederate nationalist second.

But he also decidedly remained a white supremacist. Construing Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation as an intentional prelude to a planned race war, Mitchel remarked in one of his *Enquirer* columns that “a servile war is necessarily one of extermination, and the peculiar character of the negro adds to its inevitable horrors.”<sup>108</sup> Interestingly, though Mitchel was convinced of the “peculiar character of the negro” and supported negro slavery as a positive good, not only did he never own a slave but he seems to have had very little contact with them either. “A man of means by no means,”<sup>109</sup> Mitchel could barely afford a slave nor would Jenny have wanted him to purchase one anyway. As she wrote to a childhood friend when her husband first contemplated moving down South in 1854: “Do not be alarmed for me, I am not likely to

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<sup>106</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 272-273.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 272.

<sup>108</sup> Quoted in Kelly O’Grady, *Clear the Confederate Way! The Irish in the Army of Northern Virginia* (Mason City, Iowa: Savas Publishing Company, 2000), 44.

<sup>109</sup> Roger Miller, *King of the Road*.

become --- no --- nothing would induce me to become the mistress of a slave household. . . . My objection to Slavery is the injury it does to the white masters.”<sup>110</sup> Even with Jenny living in Europe, Mitchel dared not purchase a slave in Virginia; he must have realized that even the most faithful and longsuffering spouse can reach a limit.

As Mitchel settled into his slaveless environment, with his paid work at the *Enquirer* and his volunteer work with the ambulance corps, Meagher and the Brigade soldiered on in the Army of the Potomac. On November 13, 1862, that army’s new leader, General Burnside, and several other high-ranking officers gathered for an evening strategy session in Meagher’s tent. Private William McCarter of the 116<sup>th</sup> Pennsylvania, whose superb penmanship had led Meagher to regularly use him as a scribe, was standing guard outside the tent when he observed an inebriated Meagher propping himself up by the tent’s main pole, dangerously close to a ground fire that had been lit to heat the tent. Suddenly, Meagher let go of the pole and stumbled towards the fire. McCarter acted quickly: “I immediately rushed towards him. With the bayonet on my musket, I stopped his progress and threw him back on the ground. I had to use my bayonet because he would have fallen into the blazing logs before I could catch him with my hands.”<sup>111</sup> The other officers then rushed over and helped McCarter lift Meagher up with one of them exclaiming to Meagher, “General, you owe your life to that man.”<sup>112</sup> In the excitement, McCarter’s rifle fell into the fire and discharged. When McCarter reported to Meagher’s tent the next day to copy papers, Meagher gave him a brand new musket and bayonet. Later, he made McCarter his personal secretary and once gave him a fifty-dollar bill for

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<sup>110</sup> Quoted in Keneally, *The Great Shame*, 272-273.

<sup>111</sup> William McCarter, *My Life in the Irish Brigade: The Civil War Memoirs of Private William McCarter, 116<sup>th</sup> Pennsylvania Infantry*, ed. Kevin E. O’Brien (Cambridge, Mass.: Da Capo Press, 2003), 70.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

inscribing a poem that Meagher had written; when Meagher learned that McCarter intended to send the fifty dollars home to his wife, he gave him ten more and arranged to have the fifty-dollar bill hand-delivered to Mrs. McCarter in Philadelphia by one of his lieutenants.<sup>113</sup> As McCarter wrote in his memoirs: “Reviewing General Meagher’s kindness to me, I concluded that it was no wonder that the Irish Brigade was so devoted to its commander. It has been said that our boys would fight ‘through seas of blood’ if ordered to do so by Meagher.”<sup>114</sup>

As McCarter recounts, Meagher endeared himself to his men by caring for them:

Meagher made unceasing efforts to have his soldiers all well provided for and made comfortable. He often brought some poor, sick, or perhaps dying soldier into his own private tent in cold weather. Wrapping him up there in blankets, Meagher administered with his own hands such medicine as was prescribed by the brigade head doctor.<sup>115</sup>

According to McCarter, Meagher was impressive in other facets as well:

In polished, gentlemanly manners and bearing (when himself), he was head and shoulders above any other man occupying a similar position . . . His conversation was dignified. In point of education, his equal was hard to find. He spoke fluently not only English, but also Greek, Hebrew, French, German, Welsh, and the native Irish language.<sup>116</sup>

But Meagher was not without at least one fault, as McCarter relates: “Alas, poor fellow, he had one besetting sin. It was the besetting sin of so many Irish then and now -- - intemperance.”<sup>117</sup> Still, after the incident where he may have saved a drunken Meagher from tumbling to a fiery death, McCarter says “I never saw General Meagher intoxicated again.”<sup>118</sup> But McCarter would only see Meagher for one more month after that.

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 132-134.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 128.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 71.



Disobeying Meagher's orders to stay behind and guard his personal belongings when the Brigade next went into battle, McCarter was seriously wounded during the Battle of Fredericksburg on December 13, 1862.<sup>119</sup>

Fredericksburg was a battle that the Army of the Potomac should never have waged. For weeks before the battle, Confederates had been building up fortifications in the hills west of the city of Fredericksburg, Virginia while the Union forces had congregated east of that city on the other side of the Rappahannock River. On December 11, Burnside ordered a pontoon bridge built across that river enabling Union troops to get into the city, within shelling range of the Confederate artillery. Such a move only made sense as a prelude to an attack on the well-entrenched Southerners. As rumors spread amongst Northern troops that an attack was brewing, a soldier from the Brigade asked Father Corby, "Father, are they going to lead us over in front of those guns which we have seen them placing, unhindered, for the past three weeks?"; Father Corby replied, "Do not trouble yourself; your generals know better than that."<sup>120</sup> Father Corby did not know Ambrose E. Burnside.

On December 13, at Burnside's orders, one Union brigade after another charged across an open plain only to be mowed down by well-placed Confederates behind a stone wall. When it came time for the Irish Brigade to mount their charge, Meagher gathered them together in Fredericksburg, delivered an inspirational address, and distributed a sprig of green boxwood to each of his soldiers that they were to place in their hats. This was to identify them clearly as members of the Brigade when they took the field. Though their green battle flags would normally accomplish that purpose, the bullet-torn flags of

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 142-144, 179.

<sup>120</sup> Corby, *Memoirs of Chaplain Life*, 131.

the three New York regiments had been sent home and replacements had not yet arrived. Only the 28<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts still had a serviceable green flag, causing Meagher to place that unit in the middle of the Brigade column.<sup>121</sup>

By the time the Brigade began its charge, it could tell by the massed bodies of dead and wounded Union soldiers lying on the path ahead of them that they had been assigned a task that was, at best, hopeless, and, at worst, suicidal. And yet, they charged on, advancing closer to the Confederate lines than would any other brigade that deadly day, awing their opponents as they did so. As Confederate General George Pickett wrote to his wife: “Your soldier’s heart almost stood still as he watched those sons of Erin fearlessly rush to their death. The brilliant assault . . . was beyond description. Why, my darling, we forgot they were fighting us, and cheer after cheer at their fearlessness went up all along our lines.”<sup>122</sup> Years later, Confederate General James Longstreet called the charge “the handsomest thing in the whole war.”<sup>123</sup> Robert E. Lee, in an interview conducted by a Northerner after the War, praised Confederate General Patrick Cleburne, the South’s most prominent Irish-American commander, before addressing Meagher and his Brigade:

Meagher, on your side, though not Cleburne’s equal in military genius, rivaled him in bravery and in the affections of his soldiers. The gallant stand which his bold brigade made on the heights of Fredericksburg is well known. Never before were men so brave. They ennobled their race by their splendid gallantry on that desperate occasion. Though totally routed, they reaped harvests of glory. Their brilliant, though hopeless assaults on our lines, excited the hearty applause of our officers and soldiers.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> Cornish, “An Irish American Abroad,” 152.

<sup>122</sup> Quoted in Ahearn, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 120-121.

<sup>123</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>124</sup> Quoted in Cavanagh, *Memoirs of General Meagher*, 470-471.

Even a London *Times* correspondent stationed on the Confederate side of the lines had to tip his hat to the Brigade, albeit reluctantly:

There are stories that General Meagher harangued his troops in impassioned language on the morning of the thirteenth, and plied them extensively with the whiskey found in the cellars of Fredericksburg. After witnessing the gallantry and devotion exhibited by his troops, and viewing the hill-sides for acres strewn with their corpses thick as autumnal leaves, the spectator can remember nothing but their desperate courage, and regret that it was not exhibited in a holier cause.<sup>125</sup>

Once again, the Brigade had performed bravely; once more, the cost for doing so was high. Before Fredericksburg, the Brigade had twelve hundred men. After that bloodbath, it had less than five hundred.<sup>126</sup> It was a “brigade” now in name only.

Meagher’s conduct during the battle again proved controversial. His divisional commander, General Winfield Scott Hancock, had ordered all officers to dismount from their horses and remain on foot during the charge. Accordingly, Meagher was on foot when the charge began but, as his soldiers went forward, he turned back, explaining his actions later as follows:

I myself ordered the advance, encouraged the line and urged it on. Owing, however, to an ulcer in the knee-joint, which I had concealed and borne up against for days, I was compelled, with a view of being of any further service to the brigade that day, to return . . . to get to my horse . . .<sup>127</sup>

General Hancock later echoed Meagher’s account in his own:

Brig. Gen. T. F. Meagher, commanding Second Brigade, led his brigade to the field under a heavy fire; but, owing to a serious lameness, making it difficult for him to either ride or walk, he was unable to bear that prominently active part which is usual with him.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*

<sup>126</sup> Callaghan, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 132.

<sup>127</sup> Quoted in Burton, *Melting Pot Soldiers*, 124.

<sup>128</sup> Quoted in Cavanagh, *Memoirs of General Meagher*, 468.

Colonel Cross, not surprisingly, interpreted Meagher's actions at Fredericksburg differently in his journal:

Soon after 12 we received notice to prepare for the attack. Gen. Hancock, accompanied by Gen. Meagher, rode along the ranks of the Irish Brigade & the latter addressed his troops one of those frothy, meaningless speeches peculiar to the man. And here let me record the opinion formed after more than one year's observation in the field --- that there is not in the United States, certainly not in the Army of the Potomac, another such a consummate humbug, charlatan, imposter pretending to be a soldier as Thos. Francis Meagher. Nor do I believe him to be a *brave* man, since in every battlefield he has been *drunk* and not with his Brigade. I venture the prediction that the drunkenness and incompetence of Gen. Meagher will sooner or later be exposed.<sup>129</sup> (Emphasis in original.)

Cross obviously had an agenda. But one wonders if he would have written those same words had he seen what a Rhode Island corporal observed after the battle, namely, Meagher weeping profusely at the loss of his men while General Burnside, who had much to cry about himself at that time, tried to console him.<sup>130</sup>

Having done his crying the day before, on the day after the battle, Meagher decided to proceed with a long-planned banquet at which a committee from New York would present the Brigade with new colors, along with food and drink to toast the occasion. The timing could not have been worst, with dead and wounded soldiers still lying on the battlefield, but the "Death Feast," as it was later dubbed, was still held at a theater in Fredericksburg and attended by some three hundred officers, including twenty-two generals.<sup>131</sup> Hancock was one of those generals but he could not help thinking to himself while in attendance at this "Irish wake" of sorts that "only Irishmen could enjoy

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<sup>129</sup> Holden et al., *Stand Firm and Fire Low*, 56-57.

<sup>130</sup> George C. Rable, *Fredericksburg! Fredericksburg* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 276.

<sup>131</sup> Callaghan, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 136.

themselves thus.”<sup>132</sup> Though the party went on as planned, it did not go on as long as expected, as Colonel St. Clair A. Mulholland, the commander of the 116<sup>th</sup> Pennsylvania explained in his memoirs:

For two or three hours . . . the enjoyment and festivities ran high, the enthusiasm was great, but the loud cheers drew the fire of the Southern batteries, and the enemy, envying perhaps the good time our friends were having, sent their compliments in the form of shells . . .<sup>133</sup>

When a waiter brought in a covered tray that, instead of holding desserts, held a cannonball that had fallen nearby, everyone got the hint and the party broke up.<sup>134</sup>

The next day, Meagher was examined by Doctor Reynolds who diagnosed him as having a “Furunculous Abscess” of the left knee “which quite disables him for active duty in the field.”<sup>135</sup> Meagher was thus given permission to go home to New York on medical leave. There, on January 16, 1863, a Requiem Mass was offered for the souls of the fallen soldiers of the Brigade followed by a reception at Delmonico’s. At that reception, Meagher gave a candid address in which he noted the many acts of brotherly charity that the soldiers of the two sides had performed for each other and, in that vein, singled out for praise “what we are taught to regard as the rebel soldier.”<sup>136</sup> He then offered a toast to “the Stars and Stripes, and the heroism of both armies.”<sup>137</sup> Next, he applauded the many Irish-Americans who had volunteered to fight for the Union even though they were Democrats and had done nothing to bring the War about themselves.

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<sup>132</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*

<sup>133</sup> St. Clair A. Mulholland, *The Story of the 116<sup>th</sup> Regiment: Pennsylvania Volunteers in the War of the Rebellion*, edited, and with an introduction, by Lawrence Frederick Kohl (New York: Fordham University Press, 1996), 60.

<sup>134</sup> Cavanagh, *Memoirs of General Meagher*, 473.

<sup>135</sup> Quoted in Keneally, *The Great Shame*, 376.

<sup>136</sup> Quoted in Ahearn, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 122.

<sup>137</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 123.

Recognizing the provocative nature of that remark, he quickly added, “I shall never be a Major-General after this.”<sup>138</sup>

If Meagher was starting to sound somewhat jaded about the Union war effort, he had his reasons. His Brigade had been repeatedly thrust into the thick of the action where it had always fought fiercely despite sustaining high casualties. Now, he thought it only fair that the three New York regiments, at least, be given a furlough to go home, rest up, and help Meagher recruit some desperately needed new soldiers. But his request fell on deaf ears. After learning that several New England brigades had received their requested furloughs, his resentment deepened. Soon, he had converted his efforts to gain a furlough for his troops into a public controversy. Since his old paper, the *Irish News*, had folded, he used the *Irish American* as his mouthpiece. By March of 1863, that paper was declaring that, “if the Brigade were not so markedly *Irish*, they would not have been treated with positive injustice and neglect to which they have been exposed.”<sup>139</sup> The discrimination issue had officially been raised.

His medical leave long expired, Meagher had started to wind his way back to his troops in February, 1863, only to stop first in Washington where he waited on President Lincoln to ask him personally for the furlough. Invited to a large reception for the president, Meagher was pleased when the commander-in-chief walked across the room to shake hands with him immediately upon his entrance. Lincoln was familiar with the Irish Brigade’s stellar record as a fighting unit and promised Meagher that he would give his request all due consideration.<sup>140</sup> On February 19, 1863, Meagher wrote a personal appeal to Secretary of War Edwin Stanton, the former leader of Dan Sickles’s “Dream Team,”

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<sup>138</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*

<sup>139</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>140</sup> Conyngham, *The Irish Brigade*, 365.

asking again for a furlough. But Stanton must have forgotten “auld acquaintance” since Meagher waited in vain for an answer to his request.<sup>141</sup> Next, Meagher asked his new divisional commander, General Winton Scott Hancock, to grant a furlough to the Brigade and to allow Meagher himself a personal leave of three or four days so that he could visit some of his “influential and active friends” in Congress before they adjourned in order to “facilitate” the furlough.<sup>142</sup> Hancock supported Meagher’s request but when he forwarded it to the Army of the Potomac’s new commander, General Joseph Hooker, “Fightin’ Joe” denied it; Hooker wanted as many men in the field as he could get.<sup>143</sup>

As long as Meagher and his men were stuck in the field, they decided to make the most of it by staging a massive Saint Patrick’s Day festival on March 17. According to Joseph Bilby, the festival was “the most significant non-combat event that [the Army of the Potomac] ever experienced.”<sup>144</sup> The night before the big party, two captains were appointed to mix a special punch for the occasion but “before the mixture was complete both felt overpowered by their labors and had to be relieved from duty.”<sup>145</sup> March 17 itself dawned with a Mass celebrated by Father Corby, at which the firing of cannons replaced the traditional ringing of bells at the consecration of the elements; Meagher directed the band throughout the liturgy with soldiers “presenting arms” at appropriate times. Later, the “Grand Irish Brigade Steeplechase” was held with a \$500 prize awarded to the winner. There were also foot races, sack races, greased-pig races, Irish jig contests and the like with more than ten thousand soldiers attending and enjoying the festivities.<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> Cavanagh, appendix to *Memoirs of General Meagher*, 23-26.

<sup>142</sup> Ahearn, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 123.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> Bilby, *The Irish Brigade*, 74.

<sup>145</sup> Conyngham, *The Irish Brigade*, 373.

<sup>146</sup> Bilby, *The Irish Brigade*, 75-76.

Several generals attended, including Hooker and Meagher's old friend, Dan Sickles, who, like Meagher, was a "political" general. Meagher acted as master-of-ceremonies for all the day's events, strutting around the grounds dressed as an Irish gentryman with a visiting Libby at his side. When Meagher noticed several soldiers standing under a makeshift grandstand on which sat numerous generals and their staffs, he warned them: "Stand from under! If that stage gives way, you will be crushed by four tons of major-generals."<sup>147</sup> A summary of the day's events from the viewpoint of an enlisted man in the Brigade can be found in a March 19 letter to his wife from Peter Welsh, color sergeant for the 28<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts:

We had a great time here on St. Patrick's Day, the whole event got up by General Meagher --- there was horse racing and foot racing of all kinds --- nearly all the Generals in this army were present and some ladies from New York --- we all got two gills of whiskey each --- you will see a full account of it in the papers.<sup>148</sup>

Sergeant Welsh assumed that "the papers" would cover the Brigade's Saint Patrick's Day party with good reason; since its inception, the Northern press had followed the Brigade closely and recorded its exploits in depth. As "the most colorful, uniquely ethnic, and culturally distinct combat brigade of the Civil War,"<sup>149</sup> the Brigade made "good copy" for reporters. Indeed, with a flamboyant leader in Meagher and an unexcelled record of heroism in battle, the Brigade became well known in both the North and the South.

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<sup>147</sup> Quoted in Keneally, *The Great Shame*, 380.

<sup>148</sup> Lawrence Frederick Kohl and Margaret Cosse Richard, eds., *Irish Green and Union Blue: The Civil War Letters of Peter Welsh, Color Sergeant, 28<sup>th</sup> Regiment, Massachusetts Volunteers* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1986), 79.

<sup>149</sup> Phillip Thomas Tucker, introduction to *The History of the Irish Brigade: A Collection of Historical Essays*, ed. Phillip Thomas Tucker (Fredericksburg, VA.: Sergeant Kirkland's Museum and Historical Society, Inc., 1995), 1.



By January of 1863, this publicity was becoming all too much for John Mitchel who wanted to correct the erroneous assumption that *all* Irish-Americans were supporting the North in the War. Writing in the Richmond *Enquirer* that month, Mitchel labored to set the record straight: “There are more Irish in the army of the Confederate States (in proportion to the population) than in that of Lincoln’s. It is true, they flaunt no green banners nor *Sunbursts*, nor shout *Fontenoy!* Nor *Remember Limerick!* They are content to fight simply as Virginians, or as Georgians.”<sup>150</sup> Mitchel went on to estimate that some 40,000 Irishmen were fighting for the Confederacy, a figure that historian David T. Gleeson finds way too high. Gleeson calculates that about 20,000 Irishmen fought for the Confederacy, or seventy percent of all available able-bodied Irishmen in the South.<sup>151</sup> In contrast, there were about 145,000 Irish-born soldiers who fought for the North during the War<sup>152</sup> out of a total Irish-born Northern population of more than a million-and-a-half people.<sup>153</sup> Assuming that twenty-five to thirty-five percent of the total Irish-born population were men of fighting age,<sup>154</sup> the proportion of able-bodied Northern Irishmen fighting in Union forces was, indeed, far less than the seventy percent rate of Southern Irish participation, as Mitchel had argued.

By pointing out that the Irish in the South were on board with the Confederacy, Mitchel certainly did not intend to disparage his friend, Meagher, or the Brigade. And Meagher knew better than Mitchel that for every young Irishman from the North fighting in Union blue there were one or two others who had never worn anything but civilian clothes. But the fact that proportionately more Southern Irish than Northern Irish fought

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<sup>150</sup> Quoted in Keneally, *The Great Shame*, 377.

<sup>151</sup> Gleeson, *The Irish in the South*, 154.

<sup>152</sup> Callaghan, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 10.

<sup>153</sup> Gleeson, *The Irish in the South*, 20.

<sup>154</sup> See *Ibid.*, 230 (n 68).

for their respective regions must also be analyzed in the context of a higher Southern mobilization rate in general. In sum, the Irish did not fight --- or *not* fight --- as a bloc in the War but, as unfair as it may seem to those Irishmen who fought courageously for the South, the Irish Civil War soldier will always be generically associated first and foremost with Meagher's Irish Brigade.

In April of 1863, Meagher left his Brigade briefly on another medical leave, this time, according to Doctor Reynolds, for rheumatism. While home in New York, he addressed a fund-raising rally for the poor in Ireland who were once again experiencing the ravages of a famine, albeit not one on the scale of the Great Potato Famine.<sup>155</sup> He returned to camp just in time for the Battle of Chancellorsville in Virginia.

During that battle, which raged most intensely from May 2 to May 4, 1863, the Brigade was kept mostly in the rear of the main fighting though, in the evening of May 2, Meagher ordered his men to form into a line of battle and stem a stampede of Union fugitives with their bayonets if necessary. After successfully performing that duty, on the following day, the Brigade was sent to the front where the 5<sup>th</sup> Maine Artillery Battery, sent forward to cover a planned withdrawal of Union forces, was so viciously bombarded that it had to withdraw without its guns. Seeing this, Major Mulholland of the 116<sup>th</sup> Pennsylvania led his men on a daring mission to save those guns under fire, for which he later received the Congressional Medal of Honor.<sup>156</sup>

Ironically, during the battle, the 88<sup>th</sup> New York was removed from Meagher's command and used to form a temporary brigade commanded by none other than Colonel Cross, Meagher's old Know-Nothing journal critic. Writing after the battle in his journal,

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<sup>155</sup> Ahearn, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 124-125.

<sup>156</sup> Callaghan, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 149-151.

Cross had nothing bad to say about the 88<sup>th</sup> but he blasted Meagher for allegedly cowering during a shelling by the Confederates:

Let me record here that on the afternoon of the 6<sup>th</sup>, during a furious shelling, Brig. Gen. T. F. Meagher lay among the enlisted men of Company G of my regiment --- evidently badly scared. As soon as the firing ceased, he ran as fast as possible to the left rear where he had a private fortification constructed.<sup>157</sup>

Obviously, Cross's private anti-Meagher campaign had now become delusional. Even Daniel M. Callaghan, who draws a very unsympathetic portrait of Meagher in his recent book on the Brigade, has to admit that this last journal entry from Cross on Meagher was "recorded almost jokingly and [is] unlikely to be true."<sup>158</sup> For once, at Chancellorsville, the performance by Meagher of his command duties did not invite controversy.

Moreover, the Brigade had again performed heroically but, as usual, not without a price. The one hundred casualties it sustained at Chancellorsville reduced its already thin ranks by an additional twenty percent.<sup>159</sup> Meagher needed additional troops more than ever now but he had yet to hear a definite answer from Washington on his requested furlough for the Brigade. Of course, the fact that his request had been pending in Washington for several months now could have been read as an answer in itself. By this point, Meagher was simply fed up and, on May 8, 1863, he wrote a momentous letter to General Hancock:

I beg most respectfully to tender you . . . my resignation as Brigadier-General, commanding what was once known as the Irish Brigade. That Brigade no longer exists. . . . [It fails] to reach the strength and proportions of anything like an effective regiment. These facts I represented as clearly and forcefully as it was in my power to do in a memorial to the

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<sup>157</sup> Holden et al., *Stand Firm and Fire Low*, 88.

<sup>158</sup> Callaghan, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 152.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, 151-152.

Secretary of War [praying that the] Brigade . . . should be temporarily relieved from duty in the field, so as to give it time and opportunity in some measure to renew itself.

The memorial was in vain. It never was even acknowledged. The depression caused by this ungenerous and inconsiderate treatment of a gallant remnant of a Brigade that had never once failed to do its duty most liberally and heroically, almost unfitted me to remain in command. True, however, . . . to a position which I had considered sacred under the circumstances --- I remained with what was left of my Brigade, and though feeling that it was to a sacrifice rather than to a victory we were going, I . . . led them through all the operations required of them at . . . Chancellorsville, beyond the Rappahannock. . . .

. . . It would be my greatest . . . honor to remain in . . . charge of such men; but to do so any longer would be to perpetuate a public deception, in which the hard-won honors of good soldiers, and in them the military reputation of a brave old race would inevitably be involved and compromised. I cannot be a party to this wrong. . . .

In tendering my resignation . . . as the Brigadier-General in command of this poor vestige and relic of the Irish Brigade, I beg sincerely to assure you that my services, in any capacity that can prove useful, are freely at the summons and disposition of the Government of the United States. . . .<sup>160</sup>

As historian Rory T. Cornish has written:

Meagher's resignation has never been adequately explained; was it caused by fatigue, weariness, frustration at the continued official refusal to allow the brigade a leave of absence, his wish to seek another command or, the vain hope that his resignation, as a fine gesture, would prompt the government to grant the brigade a much earned furlough?<sup>161</sup>

Most likely, the last explanation cited by Cornish was closest to the truth:

Meagher was bluffing the War Department with his resignation, especially since his request for a furlough to Lincoln and Stanton had not even been acknowledged, hoping that his resignation would be refused and the Brigade would be furloughed. If that was the case, then his bluff was called and called quickly. On May 14, 1863, the War

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<sup>160</sup> Quoted in Cavanagh, appendix to *Memoirs of General Meagher*, 26-27.

<sup>161</sup> Cornish, "An Irish Republican Abroad," 154.

Department sent its response: "Your resignation has been accepted by the President of the United States, to take effect this day."<sup>162</sup>

On May 19, Meagher bid farewell to the Brigade:

A positive conviction of what I owe to your reputation, to the honor of our race, and to my own conscience, compelled me a few days ago to tender to the President of the United States my resignation of this command. . . . There is not a man in this command who is not fully aware of the reasons which compelled me to resign, and there is not a man who does not thoroughly appreciate and approve it.

Suffice it to say that, the Irish Brigade no longer existing, I felt that it would be perpetuating a great deception were I to retain the authority and rank of brigadier-general nominally commanding the same. I therefore conscientiously, though most reluctantly, resigned my command. That resignation has been accepted, and as your general I now bid you an affectionate farewell. . . .

. . . The graves of many hundreds of brave and devoted soldiers, who went to death with all the radiance and enthusiasm of the noblest chivalry, are so many guarantees and pledges that, so long as there remains one officer or soldier of the Irish Brigade, so long shall there be found for him, for his family and little ones, if there be, a devoted friend in Thomas Francis Meagher.<sup>163</sup>

With those touching remarks, Meagher shook hands with all of his officers and troops and headed home to New York, where he was received with high honors. In offering him the hospitalities of the city on June 16, 1863, Mayor George Opdyke declared that Meagher had given to the nation, "three of the most potent instruments --- the eloquence of your voice, the force of your pen, and the power of your sword."<sup>164</sup> On that same occasion, Meagher was awarded the Kearney Cross, an Army medal named after Union General Philip Kearney who had been killed a few months earlier at the Battle of Chantilly. In accepting the medal, Meagher touched upon his resignation,

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<sup>162</sup> Quoted in Callaghan, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 152.

<sup>163</sup> Quoted in Cavanagh, *Memoirs of General Meagher*, 485-486.

<sup>164</sup> Quoted in Ahearn, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 127.

noting that “it was but decent of me to relinquish the emoluments of a sinecure,”<sup>165</sup> but making it clear that he was still willing to serve the Union cause in another capacity.

Indeed, on that very day, Meagher sent a telegram to President Lincoln offering “to raise three thousand (3,000) Irish soldiers in this city to act as a cavalry & infantry wherever they may be needed.”<sup>166</sup> Lincoln immediately wired back: “Shall be very glad for you to raise three thousand (3,000) Irish troops, if done by the consent and in concert with Governor Seymour.”<sup>167</sup> Lincoln’s proviso that Meagher would have to work together with New York’s new governor, Horatio Seymour, in raising new Irish troops was unacceptable to Meagher. Though Seymour was a Democrat, Meagher was not one of his close allies nor, given Seymour’s own strained relationship with Lincoln, was he interested in becoming one; the last thing Meagher needed was to get on the bad side of the commander-in-chief. Plus, Seymour could insist on naming someone besides Meagher as the commander of the troops that Meagher recruited. For those reasons and more, Meagher wanted Washington to grant him direct authority to recruit troops but, despite repeated requests on his part, no such authority would be granted.<sup>168</sup>

By 1863, “political” generals like Meagher were becoming passé as the Union war effort became increasingly professionalized both in Washington and in the field. The European concept of “total war” that began with the French Revolution had finally come to America. “Amateur Hour” was over; instead of waiting for political leaders to raise volunteers and then commissioning those leaders as military officers, the government had

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<sup>165</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*

<sup>166</sup> Photocopy of telegram in Callaghan, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 169.

<sup>167</sup> Quoted in Ahearn, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 127.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, 127-128.

decided to eliminate the middleman by adopting the simple expedient of conscription.<sup>169</sup> The imposition of the draft would produce its own problems, of course, but for now, Meagher's services as a recruiter were not in high demand. As the War raged on, he found himself stuck on the sidelines as a civilian with no sure way of getting back into the action. He thus followed the Battle of Gettysburg in early July as a mere spectator, although he was surely pleased that his severely downsized Brigade performed valiantly in that pivotal battle.<sup>170</sup>

With time on his hands and no troops to command, the restive Meagher, cooling his heels at a summer estate in Orange, New Jersey, invited John O'Mahony, the Fenian Brotherhood's American leader, out for a visit. According to Cavanagh, Meagher's early biographer and a Fenian official himself, Meagher was following American-British relations closely in light of the Union Navy's May, 1863 capture of the *Circassion*, a British blockade-runner. Should those relations deteriorate, Meagher told O'Mahony that he could foresee the need "to raise a body of Irish troops for service in Ireland, . . . which, of course, would be commanded by experienced Irish soldiers."<sup>171</sup> Meagher seemed to be thinking that if he could not command troops in America, perhaps he could in Ireland. In any event, O'Mahony traveled to Orange and there, on July 11, 1863, initiated Meagher into the Fenian Brotherhood.<sup>172</sup> He took the following oath:

I, Thomas Francis Meagher, solemnly pledge my sacred word of honor as a truthful and honest man that I will labor with earnest zeal for the liberation of Ireland from the yoke of England and for the establishment of a free and independent government on Irish soil.<sup>173</sup>

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<sup>169</sup> Callaghan, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 154.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, 156-160.

<sup>171</sup> Quoted in Cavanagh, *Memoirs of General Meagher*, 489.

<sup>172</sup> McCarthy, "The Lost Leader?," 170.

<sup>173</sup> Quoted in Keneally, *The Great Shame*, 388.

Though James Stephens rejoiced in Ireland when he heard that Meagher had finally become a Fenian, Meagher's interest in the movement would wax and wane, waxing mostly when he appeared to have nothing else better to do.<sup>174</sup> Indeed, two days after he took the oath, Meagher was in Washington writing to Stanton from Willard's Hotel that, "I have now to request permission to withdraw my letter of resignation and beg to renew the offer of my services to the government."<sup>175</sup> Without question, Meagher was most interested in serving the Union; Fenianism was a fall-back option at best.

But the likelihood that Meagher would be called back into service soon was sharply reduced by the draft riots that erupted in New York City when Meagher was in Washington. For several days in mid-July, anarchy reigned in the city as public protests against draft lotteries being held there by the Army escalated into mob violence with blacks, prominent Republicans, businesses, and stores being the main targets. The draft was especially unpopular with the poor since it allowed a draftee to buy his way out of service for a \$300 payment to the government or else by paying a substitute to take his place. With the massive casualty figures from Gettysburg fresh in the minds of poor New Yorkers who had not forgotten the substantial butchers' bills from Antietam, Fredericksburg, and other battles either, and who worried that waves of Lincoln's emancipated slaves would soon be coming to the city to steal their unskilled jobs away from them, the draft could not have come at a worse time. In the end, scores of innocents

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<sup>174</sup> McCarthy, "The Lost Leader?," 170-171.

<sup>175</sup> Quoted in Keneally, *The Great Shame*, 386.



were killed and millions of dollars' worth of property damage was done before troops from the Army of the Potomac finally arrived to put the riot down.<sup>176</sup>

Though the New York Irish received much of the blame for the riot, it was not an ethnic riot so much as a class riot. But with many of the Irish being poor, many of the rioters were necessarily Irish. But then so too were some of its victims. Robert Nugent, Meagher's old friend and commander of the 69<sup>th</sup>, while recovering at home from wounds sustained at Fredericksburg, was given the unenviable task of supervising the Army's lottery drawing. Shortly thereafter, a mob sacked his house and tried to set it on fire; in a room containing his portrait as well as one each of Meagher and Corcoran, only Corcoran's was left unscathed.<sup>177</sup> Colonel Henry O'Brien of the 11<sup>th</sup> New York Vounteers, whose howitzer attack on a mob killed a woman and a child by mistake, had his house burnt down in retaliation before being shot, mutilated, and hung from a lamppost himself.<sup>178</sup> Besides being perpetrators and victims, some Irishmen were heroes during the riot. Archbishop Hughes did his best to calm the city while his priests went into the streets and personally dissuaded rioters from some of their murderous schemes. One Paddy McCafferty personally rescued the residents of the Colored Orphan Asylum before it was burnt to the ground, after which priests took the orphans into their care.<sup>179</sup>

Still, the Irish in general got a black eye from the riot, unintentionally fostering the nativism that the Brigade had been sacrificing their lives to allay. The riot revealed that many Irish-Americans, at least in New York City, did not share Meagher's fond

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<sup>176</sup> Edward K. Spann, "Union Green: The Irish Community and the Civil War," in *The New York City Irish*, eds. Ronald H. Bayer and Timothy J. Meagher (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 203-205.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*, 204.

<sup>178</sup> Kenally, *The Great Shame*, 387.

<sup>179</sup> Spann, "Union Green," 204.

feelings for the republic and the Union cause that he had promoted so zealously. The Irish-American community had been split by the War and Meagher knew it. When O'Mahony naively suggested to him later that, "Had you been in New York those days and shown yourself to the people, you would have stopped all the rioting," Meagher replied, "Not at all. The people those days were in a mood of mind to tear me limb from limb if they caught hold of me."<sup>180</sup> Meagher was a fully assimilated Irish-American who looked beyond the parochial wants and desires of his ethnic community and recognized a greater need to perform a service for the nation as a whole. But many other not-so-assimilated Irish-Americans were, quite understandably, unwilling to look beyond the squalid slums where they eked out a hand-to-mouth existence to see any greater need than their own material survival. Meagher had never been at that stage, not in any one of the three continents where he had lived, nor would he ever have to wonder where his next meal would come from. While yearning to be a "participator in historic commotions," his conservative nature prevented him from ever endorsing a class-based "commotion" like the New York draft riot, though he could perhaps understand, at least obliquely, what drove desperately poor people into the streets to commit random acts of violence and destruction.

What he could not understand were those assimilated Irish-Americans and other educated citizens in the North who refused to consistently and wholeheartedly support the Union war effort. Nor could he comprehend why educated commentators in his native Ireland were, by and large, more sympathetic to the Confederate cause than that of the Union. Sidelined as a combatant from the War itself, Meagher would enter into a war of rhetoric in 1863 against all opponents of the Union cause on both sides of the Atlantic.

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<sup>180</sup> Quoted in Callaghan, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 165-166.

John Mitchel would also take part in that polemical war, at least with respect to the shaping of popular opinion in Ireland. But when he first learned about Meagher's resignation, he could not help but take a swipe at his old friend's seeming inability to rally the Irish in the North behind his cause. Writing in the May 18, 1863 *Richmond Enquirer*, Mitchel claimed that Meagher had quit the Brigade because "he *cannot recruit his brigade*. . . . This fact . . . proves to us what we have believed before, that the Irish of the Federal States are entirely sick of the war."<sup>181</sup> (Emphasis in original.) Mitchel, for his part, was far from sick of the War at that point. Indeed, in a letter he wrote a couple of months earlier to his youngest son Willy, now with the 1<sup>st</sup> Virginia, he described what it was like living in the wartime capital of the Confederacy: "I confess that I delight in the spectacle of a people roused in this way to a full display of all its manhood, feeling itself indeed isolated from all other people, and without a friend in the world, but planting itself firmly on its own ground, stripped for battle, and defying fate."<sup>182</sup>

The Confederacy would not be able to defy fate for long. Nor, for that matter, would the Mitchel family, which, up to that point, had remained remarkably intact although spread out in three different countries. Though his son, James, had lost an arm in combat with the 1<sup>st</sup> Virginia and been hit by shrapnel in the chest on another occasion, he was at least now serving in a relatively safe staff position. What Mitchel would later describe in a letter as "the first break in our family of six children,"<sup>183</sup> came unexpectedly when his oldest daughter, Henrietta died of a sudden illness in May, 1863 at the Paris convent where she was studying to be a nun; her teen-aged sister, Minnie, still a student

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<sup>181</sup> Quoted in Keneally, *The Great Shame*, 384.

<sup>182</sup> Quoted in McGovern, *John Mitchel*, 275.

<sup>183</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*

at the convent school, was at her deathbed. Minnie soon left Paris to join her mother and her sister, Isabel, in Ireland, where Father Kenyon had been watching over them.<sup>184</sup>

The next tragedy to befall the Mitchels came at Gettysburg where Willy died as a flag bearer for the 1<sup>st</sup> Virginia Infantry during General Pickett's ill-fated charge that was so eerily reminiscent of the Irish Brigade's charge at Fredericksburg a few months earlier that Pickett himself had praised. Reportedly, when members of the Brigade learned at Gettysburg that one of Mitchel's sons had been killed in the charge, they left behind a quartermaster to search for his body. Though he never did find him, there was also a claim that some Confederates had found his body and left a note on it reading, "Private Mitchel, son of Irish patriot," before it was buried in an unmarked grave.<sup>185</sup> Mitchel himself did not get final word as to Willy's demise for several weeks and when he did, he had the sad duty of informing his son, John, of the circumstances by which "poor Will finished his first and last campaign."<sup>186</sup>

When the rest of the family in Ireland heard the news about Willy, they resolved in the fall of 1863 to travel to Richmond to reunite with Mitchel, the patriarch of a tragically dwindling family. Mitchel and Father Kenyon were against the idea and warned them about the dangers of running the Union blockade. That winter, however, the determined women did make it to Richmond, but not without difficulty or hardship. First, the blockade-running steamer they were on was chased and fired upon by some Union Navy vessels and ultimately ran aground. Taking no chances, the captain set the ship on fire, leaving the passengers to fend for themselves on a North Carolina beachhead. By foot and wagon, the Mitchel women eventually made it through the

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<sup>184</sup> Keneally, *The Great Shame*, 384, 388.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*, 385.

<sup>186</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*

swamps to the little town of Smith, North Carolina, from whence they caught a steamer to Wilmington, and from there, a train to Richmond. A relieved and delighted Mitchel later wrote that, “no more destitute refugees ever came to Richmond, even in those days of *refugeeing*, than my wife and two little girls.”<sup>187</sup>

As the remaining female portion of his family tried to adjust to life in wartime Richmond, they learned that Mitchel had been trading rhetorical blows with Meagher and other Union supporters in an ongoing battle for the hearts and minds of their native countrymen. In Ireland, Mitchel’s childhood friend, John Martin, though once critical of Mitchel for his unadulterated embrace of slavery, had nonetheless come to champion the Confederate cause and worked closely with Father John Bannon, a Confederate chaplain turned diplomat, in convincing Archbishop Paul Cullen of Dublin to adopt a pro-Southern position and to allow Bannon to post pro-Confederate propaganda at all of the Catholic churches in the archdiocese. Large numbers of Irish Catholics and Irish nationalists of all persuasions came to increasingly sympathize with the Confederates as the War progressed. Irish Catholics supported the South since it was, according to Father Bannon, “the only conservative political element [left] in America.”<sup>188</sup> Irish nationalists began to identify the South’s struggle to maintain independence from the North with their own efforts to free Ireland of British control. Nor were they apt to believe that the cause of Irish independence would be aided by the fall of the Confederacy. As Mitchel wrote to the *Cork Examiner* in February of 1863:

As for the [pro-] Northern Irish, who seem to have got themselves persuaded that the enfranchisement of Ireland is somehow to result from the subjugation of the South, and that repeal of one union in Europe depends on the enforcement of another union in America, our friends

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<sup>187</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 390.

<sup>188</sup> Quoted in Hennon, *Celts, Catholics, and Copperheads*, 105.

here do not well understand the process of reasoning which leads to that conclusion, nor do I.<sup>189</sup>

But in a series of letters that were published in Ireland, Meagher asserted that not all “unions” or “rebellions” were alike, that one must “discriminate between the unjustified and treacherous revolt of the South and the revolutions which [occur] in Europe aiming to shake off not sworn alliances and sacred compacts but mastership and domination.”<sup>190</sup> He elaborated on the nature of the Confederate rebellion as follows:

Sift it to the bottom, sift and probe it in every direction --- and you will find that the conspiracy and outbreak of the South against the Union is a conspiracy and outbreak of insolent pretension, lawless ambition and lust of power, as I have already said, and nothing more, if anything could be worse.”<sup>191</sup>

Nor would Irish sympathy for the Confederate cause help the Irish independence movement in the long run:

It was with a feeling of sore and somewhat scornful disappointment that the partisanship of the Irish public with the aristocrats of Carolina and Virginia was regarded here. This unnatural partisanship has done more harm to Ireland than . . . it could possibly do the United States. . . .

The identification of the Irish people at home with the Orangemen and Tories of England in their avowed sympathy and active connivance with the rebels . . . will not be forgotten by the jealous exclusionists of this country when the war is over. Nay, it may be difficult hereafter to rouse some of the staunch old friends of the Irish people, . . . when they remember how . . . the public opinion of Ireland . . . went forth to condemn the action of the national government, and approve the infidelity and usurpation of its enemies.<sup>192</sup>

Though Meagher recognized that Irish “sympathy with the Disloyal States of the American Union is the error of generous natures, inflamed with the love of liberty and an intense hatred of oppression,”<sup>193</sup> that sympathy was grossly misplaced. In the end, it

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<sup>189</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>190</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>191</sup> Quoted in Ahearn, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 129.

<sup>192</sup> Quoted in Hennon, *Celts, Catholics, and Copperheads*, 107.

<sup>193</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*

would be up to the Irishmen fighting in the Union Army to “rescue the Irish name from the disgrace of being involved in the infamous scheme to rend asunder”<sup>194</sup> the United States of America.

Meagher’s letters to Ireland presented the case for the Union in such an appealing fashion that they were later reprinted for American distribution as part of a series of “Loyalty Tracts” published by the Loyal Publication Society, a New York group seeking to bolster support for the Union war effort. Starting in 1863, Democratic anti-war activists called “Copperheads” had achieved various levels of power and influence in the North as the War dragged on and casualties mounted. Meagher castigated the Copperheads in print noting that they declared “for hostilities when war was the popular rage, and, after aiding in the equipment of Volunteers and fanning the martial fire, twirled or sneaked about to the rear, in a season of public depression or caprice, when the National cause was under a cloud.”<sup>195</sup> By the time Meagher wrote those words, in the fall of 1863, many Irish-Americans had become Copperheads and many others were reluctant to condemn them. Not surprisingly then, the *Irish American* called him to task over his attack on the Copperheads and so-called “Peace Democrats,” stating that he could now “only be regarded with pain by his friends, and with malignant triumph by his enemies.”<sup>196</sup> But despite losing Irish support in both his native and adoptive homes, Meagher would steadfastly remain faithful to the cause for which so many men he had inspired to join his Brigade had fought and perished. To him, the ultimate triumph of the Union would prove that those men had not died in vain.

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<sup>194</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*

<sup>195</sup> Quoted in Ahearn, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 129.

<sup>196</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*

Meagher was honored to have led those men into battle and they had honored him with their bravery under fire. Always the adventurous type, warfare offered Meagher an incomparable adrenalin rush and he missed serving in the field more with each passing day. As he explained in an October 9, 1863 letter to Captain James O'Beirne, an Irish-American Medal of Honor winner from the predominantly Irish 37<sup>th</sup> New York Volunteers:

Military life is my true life. It is, perhaps, the only honest, generous, noble life we can lead --- especially under the present circumstances in America, where Civil life has, for the most part, become so selfish and corrupt, owing to the vast amount of political patronage distributed through it. . . . I would wish very much to have the command of a Veteran Division, and remain in active service until the War was brought to a triumphant issue for the Union, or Heaven pleased that I should die 'with harness on my back.'<sup>197</sup>

While waiting to be called back into service, Meagher was nominated by the Fenians in the Army of the Potomac to serve as one of their delegates at the first general convention of the Fenian Brotherhood to be held in Chicago in early November, 1863. The Armies of the Cumberland and the Tennessee would also be represented and Meagher had promised O'Mahony that he would be in attendance. But when the convention convened on November 3, Meagher was nowhere to be found. The next day, O'Mahony received a telegram from Meagher explaining his absence:

Had to go to Washington on call of War Department. The call imperative. Have to go again on Saturday. Will proceed to the Army next week. I heartily concur in plan and regulations of reorganization as proposed by you, with such modifications as the Convention adopts. Fraternity and happiness and honor to all.<sup>198</sup>

Though Meagher's telegram made it sound that he was about to be recommissioned, there is no documentary evidence to support his claim that the War

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<sup>197</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*

<sup>198</sup> Quoted in Cavanagh, *Memoirs of General Meagher*, 490.



Department had called him to Washington at all at that time, leading some authors to suspect that he was simply making an excuse for not attending the Fenian Convention.<sup>199</sup> Given that he had been invited to visit the Brigade later in November and then intended to visit General Corcoran's Irish Legion, Meagher probably did not want to take on any commitments at the Fenian convention that would spoil his trip. Nor did he want to give Washington the impression, by assuming a public role as a Fenian leader, that he had moved on from the military life and was not interested in returning to the field.

Meagher's visits, first to the Brigade in November and, later, in December, to the Irish Legion, were joyous occasions for him. Both units were camped in Virginia and were generally inactive at the time. He was hailed and feted by the troops and entertained lavishly by Corcoran. The trip, however, ended on a tragic note. After Corcoran and his staff accompanied Meagher on a 17-mile horseback ride to Washington on December 22, 1863, Corcoran decided to ride Meagher's fast horse on the way back to camp. As they rode back, Corcoran pulled ahead of his staff at one point but was later seen to fall from the horse. When his staff reached him, according to Conyngham, they "found him senseless, merely breathing. Whether he fell off in a fit or was killed by the fall is unknown. He died in the course of the following night."<sup>200</sup> In her diary entry for December 30, Mrs. Daly records what she had heard about the incident up to that point: "General Meagher was on a visit to him, and riding his horse home, Corcoran fell (it was supposed in a fit) and never spoke afterwards. He had had one or two fainting fits before, it seems."<sup>201</sup> After noting in that same entry that Meagher was the first pallbearer at

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<sup>199</sup> See Keneally, *The Great Shame*, 388-389; McCarthy, "The Lost Leader?," 171.

<sup>200</sup> Conyngham, *The Irish Brigade*, 540.

<sup>201</sup> Daly, *Diary of a Union Lady*, 270.

Corcoran's funeral, Mrs. Daly took the occasion of that notice to once again record her dim view of him:

Meagher is cautiously frank, prudently *reckless*, and brave enough to risk his life when reputation actually requires it. He wears a swashing and martial outside with an appearance of whole-soulness. His generosity and liberality are very taking, but he pays no one. He is the fox all over, as anyone might see by watching his small bright eye. I confess I do not want him to come near us. In his neighborhood, there can be no good luck for others. . . . Now that Corcoran is gone, he is the representative of the Irish brave --- what he has all the time been aiming at!<sup>202</sup> (Emphasis in original.)

In referring to Meagher as the "representative of the Irish brave," Mrs. Daly was alluding to the news that Meagher had received on December 23, one day after Corcoran's fall, that his resignation had been rescinded, and to a rumor that the move had been made so that Meagher could assume Corcoran's command. The rumor was false; it would be several months before Meagher would be given a command. The professionals in the War Department were running the show now and Meagher could not expect to be given a leading role. Still, in early 1864, he was just happy to be part of the cast again.

He was also pleased to hear that the Brigade, like all units that boasted a high reenlistment rate, had been given a thirty-day furlough in January of 1864. Wearing his self-designed, hand-tailored general's uniform again, on January 16, Meagher addressed current and former Brigade members and their families at a celebratory banquet in New York City. He concluded his remarks by noting that, "history has no power to bestow upon me any higher distinction than that I have been the general in command of the Irish Brigade."<sup>203</sup> After his speech was heartily applauded and his health had been toasted with cheers, Meagher rose again to set the record straight for the benefit of his critics; as Conyngham describes:

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<sup>202</sup> Ibid., 271.

<sup>203</sup> Quoted in Conyngham, *The Irish Brigade*, 433-434.

He then said he would ask them a question with regard to a charge that had been privately circulated regarding him --- namely, that he had recklessly exposed the lives of the officers and men of his command. (Cries of “No, no.”) He called on all present --- officers as well as privates --- to say whether he had ever brought them into danger, except when he had been ordered there? (Renewed cries of “No.”) When he had brought them where danger was to be encountered, was he not the first in himself at the head of the column? (“Yes, yes.”) He thanked them for this contradiction to the malicious falsehoods which had been asserted against him . . .<sup>204</sup>

Several days later, on January 23, 1864, Meagher gave a eulogy for Corcoran at the Cooper Institute where, addressing many fellow Fenians, he reminded them that “the glorious project of having Ireland established as a nation” had become “the ultimate aim of [Corcoran’s] military life” and exhorted them, “Brothers, see to it that his wish, his prayer, his hope shall be fulfilled.”<sup>205</sup> Though he would continue to eulogize Corcoran in a series of spring lectures, Meagher was content to let his “brothers” in the Fenian movement move that cause forward while he waited for a command and, to the continuing consternation of the Democratic Irish-American press, publicly supported the Lincoln administration and berated the Copperheads for opposing it.<sup>206</sup>

As Meagher grew more fervent in his support for Lincoln, down in Richmond, Mitchel had become increasingly disillusioned with Jefferson Davis’s administration, so much so that, by 1864, he had left the pro-Davis *Enquirer* and joined the independent-minded *Richmond Daily Examiner*, run by John M. Daniel, who had served in American diplomatic positions in Turin and Sardinia before the War. A well-read intellectual, Daniel was nonetheless feisty with his pen, using a biting and sarcastic style to skewer those who disagreed with him. In other words, he was just like Mitchel and the two of

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<sup>204</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 434.

<sup>205</sup> Quoted in McCarthy, “The Lost Leader?,” 172.

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid.*; Ahearn, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 134.

them hit it off from the start. But Daniel also had tuberculosis and, as his health declined, Mitchel assumed a more prominent role at the paper.<sup>207</sup>

Daniel's *Examiner* had broken with the Davis administration in early 1862 and it would become, according to historian Emory M. Thomas, "perhaps the most popular newspaper in the Confederacy,"<sup>208</sup> possibly because its criticisms of the Confederate government and military were so telling. But even while becoming a vociferous critic of Davis, Mitchel was able to stay on good terms with the president, displaying once again his exceptional tact for remaining friends with those with whom he disagreed. Or perhaps Davis realized that it was better to have a man like Mitchel inside his tent aiming out rather than on the outside aiming in.

Mitchel realized before many did that the Confederacy would be doomed when the white masses grew tired of making sacrifices for a cause that the elites had initially promoted. As he wrote in the July 19, 1864 *Examiner*:

I am quite sensible that there is one vice in this Confederacy, one weak spot in its harness; one taint in its heart --- namely, that the poorer people --- the mean whites --- have not the same interest in the contest which wealthy planters have. They cannot, indeed, bear the thought of being, what they call, whipped; and have fought well these three years, still hoping that the Northerners will tire of their many defeats and humiliations. . . . Now they begin to see that the North is growing stronger every day, while *they* are growing weaker.<sup>209</sup> (Emphasis in original.)

On the day after those words were published, Mitchel would learn by a telegram delivered to the *Examiner*'s office that his own family had just grown weaker by the loss of his oldest son, John, Jr., who was killed by a mortar shell at, of all places, Fort Sumter. As the young artillery major lay dying, he declared, "I die willingly for the South, but oh!

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<sup>207</sup> Keneally, *The Great Shame*, 390-391.

<sup>208</sup> Quoted in Emory M. Thomas, *The Confederate Nation: 1861-1865* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1979), 222.

<sup>209</sup> Quoted in Keneally, *The Great Shame*, 391.

that it had been for Ireland.”<sup>210</sup> As Keneally describes, upon receiving the gut-wrenching telegram, Mitchel “took his hat, excused himself, and walked for two miles before being able to enter his house and face his wife and two daughters.”<sup>211</sup>

John and Jenny Mitchel had now lost three of their children in a 14-month period. One had died a natural though untimely death after having embraced a religion that Mitchel had never raised her in, while two had died fighting for a cause that they had adopted only after he made it his own but which, as his son John’s dying words attested, was not the cause nearest to his or their hearts. Yet, they all died exercising their private judgment; Mitchel did not force his daughter to remain a Protestant nor would he have forced his sons to fight for the Confederacy. Perhaps, had he forced his daughter out of the convent, she may not have contracted a fatal illness. Certainly, had his sons not appropriated his zeal for the South, they would not have enlisted in the Confederate forces and been killed or maimed. Having been exiled from his homeland for speaking his mind, Mitchel knew that private judgments could exact a price. But when he looked at his tragically shrinking family in that awful summer of 1864, he may have finally realized their true cost. Some people seem to know the price of everything but the value of nothing. John Mitchel was not one of those people. At least not any more.

While his friend Mitchel suffered internal torment that summer, Meagher was roaming about as a brigadier general without a command in the middle of a Civil War that had turned into a pre-modern war of attrition. In August, he visited his old divisional commander and friend, Winfield Scott Hancock, who was now a corps commander, and made himself right at home. Perhaps too much so, however, as the Army of the

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<sup>210</sup> Quoted in Gleeson, *The Irish in the South*, 156.

<sup>211</sup> Keneally, *The Great Shame*, 391.

Potomac's provost marshal, Marsena Patrick, reported in his diary entry for August 18, 1864: "Genl. Meagher is lying in the tent of the chaplain for the 20<sup>th</sup> as drunk as a beast, and has been so since Monday, sending out his servant for liquor and keeping his bed wet and filthy! I have directed Col. Gates to ship him tomorrow if he does not clear out."<sup>212</sup> Though the gossipy Patrick could be the Army of the Potomac's equivalent to Mrs. Daly at times, Colonel Theodore B. Gates, the post commandant, acknowledged later that after Meagher had been drunk for a week, he told him that he "could not furnish him quarters any longer and he left."<sup>213</sup>

Meagher next showed up in camp with the remnants of the Irish Brigade to share in the festivities as its members celebrated their third anniversary on September 4. Though there were few men left in the Brigade that remembered him, Meagher served as the master of ceremonies at a High Mass offered by Father Corby with General Hancock and several other generals present. Afterwards, there were the usual speeches with Meagher outshining all at the podium as expected followed by the fun and festivities that the Brigade had become know for. As Father Corby described it later, "When all the rest of the army was more or less dormant or bewailing the situation and longing for 'the flesh-pots of Egypt,' the Irish Brigade was making fun and cheer for itself and all the friends it could accommodate."<sup>214</sup>

Shortly thereafter, on September 13, 1864, Meagher may have thrown a party for himself when he received the news that he was to report promptly for duty in Nashville, Tennessee where he was to await orders from General Sherman. While awaiting orders in Nashville, Meagher involved himself full tilt in the presidential election campaign then

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<sup>212</sup> Quoted in Callaghan, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 175.

<sup>213</sup> Quoted in Bilby, *The Irish Brigade*, 139.

<sup>214</sup> Corby, *Memoirs of Chaplain Life*, 268.

heating up. President Lincoln was running for re-election against the Democratic nominee, George McClellan, Meagher's old Army commander. Although Meagher had sharply criticized Lincoln for removing McClellan from command in 1862 and still had great respect for him personally, now, in 1864, Meagher, as the Irish-American press had long suspected, revealed himself as a Lincoln man.<sup>215</sup>

Given wartime exigencies, the Republican Party had temporarily reconstituted itself as the National Union Party and given its vice presidential nomination to Andrew Johnson, who was a sitting Democratic senator from Tennessee when the secession crisis reached its climax. Not only did Johnson vehemently argue against secession but he was the only Southern senator to remain in Congress when his state did in fact secede. In 1862, his loyalty to the Union was rewarded when, after Union forces gained control of Tennessee, he was returned home as that state's military governor. Johnson's vice presidential nod was a calculated bid to win support for Lincoln from "War Democrats," who, as the name implied, supported the war and Lincoln's prosecution of it. The Democratic Party, in contrast, was dominated by Copperheads and had endorsed an anti-war platform, even though McClellan later made it clear that he was *not* opposed to the war that he had fought in.<sup>216</sup>

Though not all Irish-Americans were against the War, they were monolithically Democratic. Even those Irish who supported the War would vote Democratic in 1864 if only out of loyalty to the party that had welcomed them as immigrants and provided them with jobs and services in the large urban communities where they predominantly settled. Meagher had always been a Democrat himself, in fact, in New York City, quite a

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<sup>215</sup> Ahearn, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 134.

<sup>216</sup> Paul F. Boller, Jr., *Presidential Campaigns* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 115-117.

prominent one. But he decided to put loyalty to his commander-in-chief and the Union ahead of loyalty to his party in 1864 and backed Lincoln wholeheartedly. The president had conscientiously prosecuted the War and it needed to be brought to a victorious conclusion. A vote for McClellan would send the wrong message to the troops in the field who had suffered and sacrificed so much. It was a matter of principle for Meagher.

Or so he said. Cynics then and now would claim that Meagher was, at best, merely supporting Lincoln out of gratitude for restoring his commission and because he thought it would help further his military career or, at worst, that Meagher had been offered a deal: support Lincoln's re-election and get a new commission.<sup>217</sup> Though it is difficult to tell when an ambitious person is truly acting on principle, Meagher did not perfunctorily endorse Lincoln; he backed him with gusto knowing full well that such an endorsement would outrage Irish-American opinion leaders just as his attacks on Copperheads had.

Meagher, long before his resignation was rescinded, in an October 7, 1863 letter to Colonel Patrick R. Guiney of the Irish 9<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts Volunteers, disdainfully dismissed those hardcore Irish-American Democrats who resented his pro-War, anti-Copperhead sentiments. Colonel Guiney was himself a lone wolf amongst his fellow Irish-American soldiers; he was a highly educated lawyer who supported the Lincoln administration and even abolition. Thus, Meagher began his letter by referring to Guiney as an "intelligent and accomplished young Irishman"<sup>218</sup> and then contrasts him with their Irish-American community as a whole:

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<sup>217</sup> See Burton, *Melting Pot Soldiers*, 125, 210; Ahearn, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 142.

<sup>218</sup> Quoted in Christian G. Samito, ed., *Commanding Boston's Irish Ninth: The Civil War Letters of Colonel Patrick R. Guiney, Ninth Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1998), 225.



As for the great bulk of Irishmen in this country, I frankly confess to an utter disregard, if not a thorough contempt, of what they think or say of me in my relations to the questions and movements that are supported or designed to affect the fortunes of this nation, or actually do so. To their own discredit and degradation, they have suffered themselves to be bamboozled into being obstinate herds in the political field, contracting inveterate instincts, following with gross stupidity and the stoniest blindness certain worn-out old pathways described for them by their drivers, but never doing anything worthy of the intellectual and chivalrous reputation of their race. Democrats they profess themselves to be from the start --- the instant the baggage-smashers and cut-throat lodging-house-keepers lay hands on them --- and Democrats they remain until the day of their deaths, miserably and repulsively regardless of the conflicting meanings that name acquires through the progressive workings of the great world about them. . . Now-a-days to be a Democrat, is to be the partisan of a selfish and conscienceless faction, which . . . would cripple the national power, play with the wildest or wickedest recklessness with the hands of every foe who would see that power laid low, either to gratify his jealousy or vengeance, or bolster his mean condition on the wreck furnished him by its overthrow. Sadly, and almost savagely, have I noted this of late; and hence the energy . . . with which I have broken loose from what might have been considered any imprescriptible associations and traditions in public life. In doing so, I have discarded with the haughtiest insensibility and disdain the “Irish opinion” of this country, having come to the conclusion that it was passed redemption, and therefore, passed consideration or respect.<sup>219</sup>

Somehow, as the presidential campaign climaxed in the fall of 1864, several Irish-American newspapers got a hold of this letter and ripped into Meagher with unmitigated venom. For example, after reprinting Meagher’s letter in its October 15, 1864 edition, the *Irish American* anathematized him for his “uncalled for and unwarranted attack upon our countrymen,” concluding that, “between him and the people who loved and trusted him once he has opened a gulf he never can bridge over.”<sup>220</sup> Meagher widened that gulf even further when, after reporting for duty in Nashville, he delivered an election-eve address at Andrew Johnson’s personal invitation in the hall of the Tennessee legislature entitled “The National Cause and the Duty of Sustaining the National Government and

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<sup>219</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 225-226.

<sup>220</sup> Quoted in Callaghan, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 170.

the War.”<sup>221</sup> After this speech, the *Irish American* poured it on Meagher again in its November 12 edition:

In General Meagher’s fall from the high position he once held in the esteem and affection of his countrymen, we see only a subject for regret; our indignation at his unprovoked attack upon our people has long since subsided into contempt, and we have no desire to add a deeper tint to an act that has gone so far to darken the whole record of a life, of which the promise was once so fair.<sup>222</sup>

Meagher had, frankly, almost invited such a reaction by his attacks on the Democratic Party and did nothing to ameliorate his relationship with those who formed what he called “Irish opinion” in the country. It was a total break, a vicious and bitter divorce on both sides. He never retracted the sentiments he expressed in his letter to Guiney but stood firm in his opinions and took the heat that they generated. While skeptics could argue that he had just cynically substituted one constituency for another, discarding an Irish-American base for a more numerous pro-Union one, was it necessary for him to burn bridges in doing so? No, Meagher’s support for Lincoln appeared deep-seated and personal. It may have stemmed from a desire to honor all those men who, inspired by his soaring rhetoric, had volunteered to join his Brigade to preserve the Union and had died fighting for that cause. But whether he was doing it for them, for the cause itself, or both, he did not act in the whole controversy as a politically adroit creature of ambition would. On the contrary, he acted like Mitchel.

Like Mitchel, Meagher knew how to stand on a principle and how costly that exercise could be. Like Mitchel, Meagher had been exiled from his native land for supporting a principled rebellion and had initially even been sentenced to death for it. Having brazenly challenged the British Empire as a youth and later seen men he loved

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<sup>221</sup> Ahearn, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 134.

<sup>222</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*

die by the score as he led them into combat, he had no fear of offending the Irish-American community when he thought it was in the wrong. Though Meagher was the only prominent Irish-American in the country to support Lincoln's re-election, he did not see himself as standing alone; he was standing by his old troops.

Not surprisingly, Mrs. Daly, a staunch Democrat, did not see things that way. In her diary entry for November 7, the night before Lincoln's triumphant re-election, she castigated several prominent New Yorkers who were supporting Lincoln, including Meagher:

Judge Pierrepont and General Dix have disgraced themselves. They ought to be well paid by Lincoln for the sacrifice of character they have made for him. General Meagher too (whom I myself heard say that as a matter of choice he would prefer Jeff Davis for President), having a brigade given him a few weeks since, comes out for Lincoln. What a lesson in human nature McClellan has learned!<sup>223</sup>

Mrs. Daly was wrong about Meagher having been given a brigade. As of November 5, he was still awaiting orders from Sherman, as a telegraph that day from General J. D. Webster to Sherman indicates: "Brigadier-General Meagher desires me to inquire if there are any orders for him, and to say that he is unwilling to remain unemployed at a time when the service of every soldier seems needed."<sup>224</sup> On November 11, Sherman assigned Meagher to Major General George H. Thomas for orders who, in turn, informed Major General James B. Steedman of the following on November 15: "Brigadier General T. F. Meagher has been ordered to report to you for duty with convalescents and furloughed men; assign him to the command of the convalescents of the Fifteenth and Seventeenth Corps."<sup>225</sup> Meagher's new command would be styled the

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<sup>223</sup> Daly, *Diary of a Union Lady*, 310-311.

<sup>224</sup> OR, Series 1, Vol. 39, Pt. 3, 640.

<sup>225</sup> OR, Series 1, Vol. 45, Pt. 1, 913.

Provisional Division of the Army of the Tennessee, with the key word in that title being “provisional.” Meagher was commanding “convalescent” troops, a term that encompassed various categories of soldiers who had been separated from their original units either because they had been away on furlough, had been recovering from injuries, or had simply strayed away from their duties when the going got tough. As Keneally aptly describes them: “Convalescents were fellows who had seen too much to take the army with gravity.”<sup>226</sup> Meagher could give as many speeches to them as he liked but these men, for the most part, were not the kind of troops who would have relentlessly attacked the Confederates on the sunken road at Antietam or bravely charged the Rebels behind the stone wall at Fredericksburg. But Meagher would have to make do with them.

At first, things went very well for Meagher in his new command. With his headquarters in Chattanooga, Meagher deployed his men effectively all along the Chattanooga & Knoxville and Chattanooga & Atlanta railroads to protect them from would-be saboteurs. Then, when General Steedman was temporarily ordered out of Knoxville, Meagher assumed his duties as commander of the entire Military District of Etowah in east Tennessee, where enforcing martial law and fending off periodic attacks from recalcitrant Confederate guerillas were the order of the day. When Steedman returned in January, 1865, he praised Meagher effusively for a job well done in his absence, hailing his “splendid success in protecting the railroad and telegraph to Knoxville and Dalton, the steamboat transportation on the Tennessee River, the public property exposed to capture by the enemy’s cavalry, and the harmony and good order maintained by you throughout the district.”<sup>227</sup>

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<sup>226</sup> Keneally, *The Great Shame*, 394.

<sup>227</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 394.

Upon his return, Steedman learned that the Provisional Division of the Army of the Tennessee had been ordered to link up with General Sherman's main force, which had just concluded its "March to the Sea" through Georgia. This proposed troop movement would have been a logistical challenge at any time but frozen rivers made it particularly difficult in the middle of winter. For some reason, Meagher was eager to lead his command on this thankless assignment, as Steedman indicated in a January 10 cable to Washington: "Is it intended that Brigadier-General Meagher, commanding Provisional Division, Army of the Tennessee, will accompany his command to Savannah? He desires to do so."<sup>228</sup> Perhaps Meagher thought he would be able to take part in some springtime battles after he transported his troops to the coast. With the Confederate defeat at Nashville on December 24, 1864, the War in the West had effectively ended and there would be little for Meagher to do there.

And so, Meagher set out with his six thousand-plus troops from Nashville in the middle of January, where they took steamboats to Cincinnati. There, the first serious problems for the mission arose. With the Ohio River frozen, the troops would have to be transported by rail to Pittsburgh, but the railroads were not expecting such a demand on their services. Meanwhile, the troops loitered around Cincinnati, prompting *Cincinnati Commercial* editor Murat Halstead to complain to the War Department that "the troops that were and are ill treated and suffering, badly managed, shamefully deserted by drunken officers etc., etc., are those under Gen. Thomas Francis Meagher."<sup>229</sup> On February 2, the War Department cabled Meagher demanding the names of officers who had acted unprofessionally in Cincinnati but Meagher, his quartermaster, provost

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<sup>228</sup> OR, Series 1, Vol., 45, Pt. 2, 564.

<sup>229</sup> Quoted in Ahearn, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 136.

marshal, and one of his colonels all stoutly denied that the division's officers had committed misconduct.<sup>230</sup>

Eventually, the division made its way to Washington and, from there, it made its way in bits and pieces to Annapolis, where the troops were to be loaded on transports. Meagher commandeered a steamer for his headquarters in Annapolis and planned on waiting for all of his men to arrive before heading as a group to their next destination. But Major Robert N. Scott, a transport officer at Annapolis, had a different idea. He thought that ships should be filled as quickly as possible with incoming troops and shipped off one at a time. General Henry W. Halleck, the Army's chief-of-staff, agreed with him.<sup>231</sup>

On the evening of February 5, Scott boarded Meagher's ship to deliver some orders to him only to find that Meagher was in no condition to receive them. As Scott wrote on the papers: "Copy furnished to Capt. Flagg A Q M 8:30 pm his commander (Genl. Meagher) being too drunk to understand anything."<sup>232</sup> As Captain Flagg remarked to Scott: "It is a pity to see the General so."<sup>233</sup>

General Halleck thought the whole situation was pitiful as he told General Ulysses S. Grant in a message sent earlier that day, alleging that Meagher's forces "are in utter confusion, and he seems to be ignorant of what troops he has, or where they are. It is strange that General Thomas should have entrusted men to such an officer."<sup>234</sup> On the next day, Grant wired back to Halleck:

If Meagher has lost his men it will be well to send some officer from

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<sup>230</sup> Ibid.

<sup>231</sup> Keneally, *The Great Shame*, 395.

<sup>232</sup> Quoted in Ibid.

<sup>233</sup> Quoted in Ahearn, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 137.

<sup>234</sup> OR, Series 1, Vol. 47, Pt. 2, 306.

Washington to look after them and relieve Meagher. If he has lost his men it will afford a favorable pretext for doing what the service would have lost nothing by having done long ago --- dismissing him.<sup>235</sup>

As it turned out, Meagher had not lost his men; most of them made it to Beaufort, North Carolina by February 13, the same date that Meagher reported, as ordered, to General I. N. Palmer in nearby New Berne. Palmer described Meagher's convalescent unit in unflattering terms: "There is scarcely one officer to each 200 men, and the whole command is but a mob of men in uniform."<sup>236</sup> While Meagher and his "mob" rested up after their long journey, Grant continued to press for his dismissal, as related in a February 20 message to Halleck: "Has General Meagher been dismissed? If he has not, I think it will be well to relieve him from duty."<sup>237</sup> Halleck responded that day: "The President has not acted on Meagher. The Secretary of War thinks you had better order General Schofield to relieve and send him home."<sup>238</sup> Accordingly, on February 24, General John McAllister Schofield issued the following order:

By direction of the lieutenant-general commanding Armies of the United States, Brigadier-General T. F. Meagher is relieved from duty in this department. He will repair without delay to his place of residence and report by letter to the Adjutant-General of the United States.<sup>239</sup>

On March 10, Meagher arrived back in New York and immediately sent a telegram to the adjutant general as requested. But there would be no further orders for "Meagher of the Sword"; his military career was over. So too, within a few weeks, would be America's costliest War. But the debate over Meagher's military record has yet to cease.

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<sup>235</sup> Ibid., 318.

<sup>236</sup> Ibid., 416.

<sup>237</sup> Ibid., 501.

<sup>238</sup> Ibid.

<sup>239</sup> Ibid., 561.

All sides in that debate can at least agree on a couple of points. For one, Meagher was not a great military strategist or tactician. His sole contribution to the field of military science appears to have been his dictum, proven deadly wrong at Antietam, that, due to their inherent “recklessness and impetuosity” a bayonet charge by Irish soldiers will always succeed.

Nor is there any serious disagreement that Meagher had a drinking problem that was occasionally exhibited while on duty. Whether he ever took “courage from a bottle” and entered a battlefield drunk is quite another matter, but no one can argue that his episodic inebriation in non-combat situations was unprofessional and inexcusable, Father Corby’s talk of “joviality” notwithstanding. Bilby, however, adds perspective to that unassailable point by noting, first, that excessive drinking amongst Union officers was a common vice and, second, that “some of the stories regarding Meagher’s drinking by period diarists and writers [had their] roots in the anti-immigrant, anti-Catholic feelings shared by many Americans at the time.”<sup>240</sup> Bilby also cautions that “modern historians are not immune to such prejudices, whether subliminal or otherwise.”<sup>241</sup>

Prejudice definitely seems to have motivated some, if not all, of Colonel Cross’s observations of Meagher. With other Meagher critics, it is harder to detect. Nor does it seem likely that *all* of Meagher’s detractors have been motivated by bigotry. Besides, Meagher’s defenders may also be “subliminally” influenced to view him in an unjustifiably favorably light if only to counter the presumed prejudices of his accusers. As such, any objective analysis of the more controverted aspects of Meagher’s military

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<sup>240</sup> Bilby, *The Irish Brigade*, 137.

<sup>241</sup> Ibid.



career will not get far unless a minimum level of good faith is attributed to both the pro- and anti-Meagher camps.

Assuming such good faith on both sides, the fact remains that there is a strain running from contemporary sources down through several generations of historians that has accused Meagher of cowardice, drunkenness, and gross incompetence on the battlefield while a competing tradition has hailed him as a brave and inspiring warrior. While both sides cannot be right, the truth may not necessarily lie precisely in the middle of those two extremes. Even Ahearn, one of Meagher's more caustic biographers, noted that, "in reporting the many battles which the Irish Brigade had fought, every superior officer had been able to speak highly of Meagher's courage and leadership. Of all the things he had ever tried, military life seemed to be the vocation into which he fell the most naturally."<sup>242</sup> Though Bilby stands squarely in the pro-Meagher camp, he is no hagiographer and, unlike many historians of Meagher and the Brigade, is an actual combat veteran, having commanded a mortar platoon in the Vietnam War. He makes these salient points:

Meagher was far from alone as a general with minimal military experience in early 1862 . . . and none of his men seriously challenged his courage during the time he served as commander of the Irish Brigade. Many of the brigade's officers and enlisted men were soldiers seasoned by wars around the world, and would have given short shrift to any leader who demonstrated overt cowardice or culpable incompetence.<sup>243</sup>

Meagher's critics respond to these points by arguing that the Brigade's soldiers defended Meagher as a means of maintaining their own reputation. As Kelly O'Grady puts it: "The Irish Brigade's shining achievement came not in its attack at Fredericksburg

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<sup>242</sup> Ahearn, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 140.

<sup>243</sup> Bilby, *The Irish Brigade*, 137.

or Antietam but in its defense of Meagher's good name."<sup>244</sup> Or as Daniel Callaghan contends:

While Meagher's name became synonymous with the Brigade, it was the valor of the men who fought, and the need to preserve their gallantry, that caused doubts about their leader to be subsumed within an overall heroic, quasi-mythical narrative. The men were not to be styled lions led by donkeys, but lions one and all.<sup>245</sup>

On balance, the argument made by Bilby that Meagher's own men would not have tolerated him as their commander if he was a patent coward or grossly incompetent is more persuasive than the O'Grady-Callaghan contention that Meagher's men covered up his failings to protect their own name. Neither O'Grady nor Callaghan challenge the exemplary record of the Brigade itself. Though Bilby may be stretching it when he claims that the Brigade "may have been the best infantry brigade that ever was,"<sup>246</sup> officers and men wearing both blue and gray, during and after the war, showed nothing but the utmost respect for the Brigade's fighting prowess. The Brigade's reputation was never in danger of being seriously besmirched. And besides, their accomplishments on the battlefield would not be diminished but enhanced if it could be shown that they fought as well as they did despite having a cowardly and incompetent commander.

Finally, after noting that the Brigade's "loss of 961 soldiers killed or mortally wounded in action was exceeded by only two other brigades in the Union army,"<sup>247</sup> Bilby lays to rest the common claims during the War that the Brigade's high casualty rate was caused either by Meagher's incompetence or his lust for personal glory or, alternatively, by the deliberate use of Irish-American soldiers as cannon fodder by Protestant generals.

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<sup>244</sup> O'Grady, *Clear the Confederate Way!*, 128-129.

<sup>245</sup> Callaghan, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 4.

<sup>246</sup> Bilby, *The Irish Brigade*, ix.

<sup>247</sup> *Ibid.*

As Bilby rightly concludes, “the casualties suffered by the Irish Brigade resulted . . . from [its] status as an elite unit which would rather fight than run, no matter what the odds, and the poor luck of being in the wrong place at the wrong time.”<sup>248</sup>

For a “political” general who admittedly came into the War as a rank amateur in all matters military, Meagher acquitted himself well. Though he did not *lead* his men so much as *inspire* them, the fact remains that virtually no other commanding general in the War got as much out of his men than did Meagher. They proudly served under him and never failed to do him proud on the battlefield. They also upheld the tradition of the “fighting Irish” while simultaneously proving their worth as loyal Americans. In sum, the men of the Brigade did all that Meagher could have asked for and more. Though any number of officers would have made better commanders for the Brigade than Meagher, he could not have commanded a better fighting unit. The fact that his name has been and will forever be linked to the Brigade is not unfair to the Brigade; for all his faults, without Meagher, there never would have been an Irish Brigade.

While it is too much to say that without Mitchel, there would never have a Civil War for the Brigade to fight in, Confederate Vice President Alexander Stephens once said that Mitchel “did a great deal in bringing on the war.”<sup>249</sup> In turn, the War had brought Mitchel unspeakable grief. But he stood by the Confederacy until the bitter end, living and working in its capital city, where there was plenty of grief to go around and more with each passing day. Through it all, he kept a stiff upper lip. As Mary Pegram, a Richmond resident who lost two of her brothers, one a general and the other a colonel, in the last days of the War recalled about Mitchel:

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<sup>248</sup> Ibid., 137.

<sup>249</sup> Quoted in Toomey, “Saving the South With All My Might,” 135.

When his own heart was almost broken by the deaths in battle of his two sons . . . he never stopped to bewail his afflictions, but with the Ambulance Corps in the field, or in the hospitals at home, did all he could to soothe and relieve the suffering.<sup>250</sup>

He also never stopped working at the *Examiner* with Daniel, whose health was deteriorating as rapidly as the Confederacy. Doing his best to keep Southern resistance alive, Mitchel warned his readers of the potentially dire consequences of defeat in the War. Pointing to several centuries of British oppression in Ireland, and referencing his own struggle against British rule that led to his exile, Mitchel issued ominous warnings of what a triumphant North would do to the South and warned Southerners that “failure will compel us to drink the cup of humiliation, even to the bitter dregs of having the history of our struggle written by New England historians.”<sup>251</sup>

But the survival of the Confederacy depended upon more than the mere will to resist. The most immediate concern was a military manpower shortage vis-à-vis the more populous North; unless that disparity was repaired quickly, the South was doomed to lose the current war of attrition. Consequently, President Davis, on November 7, 1864, proposed that the government purchase a massive amount of slaves from their owners, arm them to fight against the North, and then emancipate them after the War.<sup>252</sup>

This proposal went over like a lead balloon with Mitchel, Daniel, and other stalwart white supremacists. In fact, in February of 1865, when a desperate Robert E. Lee also suggested that the slaves be armed, the *Examiner* openly questioned whether the general was “a ‘good Southerner.’”<sup>253</sup> But by its March 9, 1865 edition, the *Examiner* had changed its tune on enlisting slaves in the armed forces. So too had other racial

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<sup>250</sup> Quoted in Keneally, *The Great Shame*, 396.

<sup>251</sup> Quoted in Hegarty, *John Mitchel*, 110.

<sup>252</sup> Thomas, *The Confederate Nation*, 290-292.

<sup>253</sup> Quoted in Keneally, *The Great Shame*, 396.

hardliners and, on March 13, the Confederate Congress authorized the enlistment of slaves, but without promising them emancipation.<sup>254</sup>

It was too little too late, which Mitchel probably realized. Daniel may have as well but he did not live to see the collapse of his beloved Confederacy. On April 2, Mitchel attended his funeral and wrote his obituary in the *Examiner's* last wartime edition. On April 3, he and his family evacuated Richmond, which soon went up in flames that were put out by a Yankee occupation force. When the Mitchels returned to the burned-out city following Lee's surrender and Lincoln's assassination, they found that their house was miraculously undamaged.<sup>255</sup>

While his wife and remaining children moved back into their house, Mitchel headed back to New York City where he hoped to resume his writing career. He also planned to mount a campaign to dissuade the North from exacting severe retribution on the South, whose honor he further intended to defend.<sup>256</sup> But while those goals may have been well and fine for Mitchel to pursue, his decision to do so in the North's biggest city at the end of a war in which tens of thousands of its residents had died fighting against the South was rather imprudent. Though there had been many Copperheads in New York, their *raison d'être* had expired, if not with Lincoln's re-election then definitely by Appomattox. Mitchel had always been impulsive; now he was getting reckless.

At least that is what Meagher thought when he heard of Mitchel's plans.<sup>257</sup> But Meagher did not intend to stick around in New York for Mitchel's inevitable comeuppance. Having lost his Irish-American power base in New York, Meagher

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<sup>254</sup> Emory M. Thomas, *The Confederate State of Richmond: A Biography of the Capital* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1971), 189-190.

<sup>255</sup> Keneally, *The Great Shame*, 397.

<sup>256</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>257</sup> *Ibid.*

wanted to move elsewhere. In Washington following Lincoln's assassination, Meagher personally offered his services to the new president, Andrew Johnson. Naturally, Johnson remembered Meagher from the election campaign; he told him to put any requests he had in writing. After serving in an honor guard of general officers while Lincoln lied in state, Meagher returned to New York and wrote a "memorandum" to Johnson asking for a brevet promotion to major general and a new military assignment. But Meagher soon realized that the Army would be downsized quickly to a peacetime level and so, in an April 30 letter to his friend, Major James O'Beirne, who would be getting a job at the White House, he asked O'Beirne to pass along to Johnson some additional options:

Could you ascertain if there is any Territorial Governorship vacant? Next to a Military Command, this is precisely what would suit me best. Indeed, for every reason, it might prove greatly more advantageous than the latter. It would enable me, after a little, to enter Congress; and once there, I have no fear but that I should make myself Master of the Situation --- to my own credit, to the gratification of my friends, to the confusion and mortification of my enemies, and to the honour of our race. . . .

. . . You have here, in these few timid words, my wishes, my ambitions, my anticipations.<sup>258</sup>

Ahearn called this letter "the most revealing letter of [Meagher's] lifetime. It characterizes him in beautiful clarity."<sup>259</sup> Certainly, at times, Meagher could be as shamelessly immodest in revealing his ambitions as Mitchel could be amazingly injudicious in expressing his opinions. Meagher thought highly of himself and Mitchel thought highly of his own opinions. But Meagher's ambitions never seemed to fully pan out and Mitchel's opinions only rarely carried the day.

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<sup>258</sup> Quoted in Ahearn, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 139.

<sup>259</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

In expressing support and sympathy for the South while in the North in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War, Mitchel was asking for trouble and he got plenty of it. Well known as a Southern polemicist, his very presence in New York at that time angered many. Mitchel would add to that list beginning on June 3, 1865, when he became the editor of the New York *Daily News*, a paper that had been pro-Southern since before the War. In that position, as he later described, “I set myself at once to tell the truth concerning the Southern cause, to explode and expose the villainy of affecting to consider Jefferson Davis as a criminal and our Confederacy as a penitentiary offence.”<sup>260</sup> His efforts were not appreciated and, as if his unwelcome opinions were not guaranteed to get enough attention on their own, other New York dailies started taking swipes at him, thus further inciting a groundswell of public indignation, which, he recalled later, made him fearful for his life. But he had more to fear from the federal government than from outraged New Yorkers. On June 14, 1865, he was placed under arrest and taken into federal custody by General John Adams Dix, who was acting upon orders from General Grant himself.<sup>261</sup>

Mitchel was immediately transported to Fort Monroe on the tip of the Virginia Peninsula, where he would be jailed for the next four-and-a-half months even though no charges had been or would be brought against him. His imprisonment was a textbook example of “victor’s justice,” as Mitchel realized:

I suppose that I am the only person who has ever been a prisoner-of-state to the British and the American government one after the other. It is true the English Government took care to have a special Act of Parliament passed for my incarceration; but our Yankees disdain in these days to

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<sup>260</sup> Quoted in Keneally, *The Great Shame*, 397-398.

<sup>261</sup> Ibid.

make any pretense of law at all.<sup>262</sup>

The man who tipped his hat when he first saw Old Glory flying was now comparing the United States to the hated British Empire: “I despise the civilization of the nineteenth century, and its two highest expressions and grandest hopes.”<sup>263</sup> Moreover, unlike his treatment on British ships following his exile from Ireland, Mitchel would not be accorded the status of a “gentlemen” at Fort Monroe. Rather, he was kept in solitary confinement in a damp cell and barred from exercising or reading. The food he was given was barely enough to exist on and it was served to him in an unsanitary fashion. Naturally, these conditions only caused his asthma to worsen and, after a couple of months, the prison doctor informed the War Department that Mitchel would be dying soon of tuberculosis if his treatment did not improve. Accordingly, from that point on, he was given better food and allowed to exercise for an hour each day. He was also permitted to read books and newspapers and write to Jenny for news on the family. Not all the family news was good: his mother had died in Ireland after returning there earlier from New York in bad health. The last time he had seen her was before the War.<sup>264</sup>

The last time he saw Jefferson Davis was during the War but now Davis was imprisoned at Fort Monroe as well along with former Alabama Senator Clement C. Clay, who had been wrongly suspected of involvement in Lincoln’s assassination. Though contact with other prisoners was not allowed, he received special permission one day to approach Davis in the yard and silently shake hands with him.<sup>265</sup>

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<sup>262</sup> Quoted in Keneally, *The Great Shame*, 398.

<sup>263</sup> Quoted in McGovern, *John Mitchel*, 280.

<sup>264</sup> Hegarty, *John Mitchel*, 112-114.

<sup>265</sup> Keneally, *The Great Shame*, 400.



Shortly after Mitchel was arrested, Meagher referred to it in a June 20 letter he wrote to O'Beirne, in which he again sought a brevet appointment to the rank of major general. Such an appointment would have been highly unorthodox given that the War was over and Meagher was no longer even in the military. Along with other general officers, he had been ordered to submit his resignation in May as the Army was being trimmed down to a peacetime force; on May 15, his resignation was accepted. But now, in late June, Meagher wanted to wear a major general's uniform on the Fourth of July. Showing little sympathy for his old friend, Mitchel, Meagher wrote to O'Beirne: "If in one striking case, an Irishman is being punished for his bad conduct towards his country - -- in another equally striking at least, let an appropriate recognition be made of good conduct and devotion."<sup>266</sup> Meagher continued to press O'Beirne in that letter: "Do urge this right away, like a good fellow. Let me have the delightful satisfaction of wearing my two stars on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July, and showing that the Government is true to Irishmen that are true to it."<sup>267</sup> Besides a brevet promotion, Meagher also told O'Beirne that he was interested in the newly vacant governorship of the Idaho Territory: "Entreat the President to let me have it, and all will be forthwith right and glorious with me. Urge this at once."<sup>268</sup> To drive his point home, Meagher wrote "*Let me have Idaho*"<sup>269</sup> across the letter.

But Meagher would not get Idaho nor, it appears, his two stars; he marched in New York's Fourth of July parade wearing civilian clothes.<sup>270</sup> But if he could not have

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<sup>266</sup> Quoted in Keneally, *The Great Shame*, 398-399.

<sup>267</sup> Quoted in Ahearn, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 140.

<sup>268</sup> Quoted in Keneally, *The Great Shame*, 399.

<sup>269</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*

<sup>270</sup> Keneally notes that there is an undated card from the White House in War Department records at the National Archives, which reads: "It is ordered by the President that the Communication from the War Department accepting the resignation of Brigadier General Meagher be forthwith cancelled, and that his

Idaho, perhaps the Montana Territory would do. Meagher had already agreed to accompany a colorful explorer, James Fisk, on an expedition to Montana, which had just been named a territory by President Lincoln in 1864 following its settlement by gold and copper miners. Meanwhile, he held out hope that O'Beirne would eventually come through with something for him at the White House.<sup>271</sup>

Before leaving New York to stake his fortune in the West, Meagher wrote excitedly about his trip to Montana to his father in Ireland, noting that if things went well for him there that he may “pay you a visit in France next summer.”<sup>272</sup> Perhaps Meagher planned to strike gold quickly in Montana, return home, and then head to Europe to see his father and his son, now eleven, for the first time but it appears more likely that he was just saying that to be polite. Meagher knew that it would take some time to build either a fortune or a political career out West. As he prepared for his trip, his good friend and admirer, W. F. Lyons, who emigrated from Ireland to fight in the Brigade and was now writing for the New York *Herald*, visited him one last time in New York. On that occasion, Meagher showed him a photograph of his son, prompting Lyons to later write: “Of course, Meagher had never looked upon his face.”<sup>273</sup> As Keneally remarks, “A mystery lies in that ‘Of course.’”<sup>274</sup> Keneally wonders why Meagher never had his son brought over to America for a visit or took the time to visit him in France. Lyons’s “of course” seems to imply that seeing his son was not a high priority for the busy Meagher,

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commission as Brevet Major General be forthwith made out.” Quoted in *Ibid.*, 398. Keneally then states that “the question of whether Meagher could or could not consider himself a brevet major-general was one which would confuse friends and enemies alike.” *Ibid.* Ahearn contends firmly that Meagher never received the brevet promotion but admits that word “that such promotion had been made somehow got abroad and was not corrected during the remainder of Meagher’s life; nor did he make any effort to see that such a mis-statement of fact was corrected.” Ahearn, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 145.

<sup>271</sup> Ahearn, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 140.

<sup>272</sup> Quoted in Keneally, *The Great Shame*, 400.

<sup>273</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 399.

<sup>274</sup> *Ibid.*

trying to become “Master of the Situation.” But then again, that “of course” may have simply been an innocuous acknowledgment that Meagher was legally barred from entering Ireland and that a lengthy Civil War, the immense physical distance between them, and the boy’s tender age had all conspired to keep father and son from ever meeting. Plus, Libby had visited the boy in Ireland several years before but did not return with him, indicating that perhaps his grandfather and guardians were intent on keeping the boy in Ireland until he was of age. Keneally correctly calls the relationship between Meagher and his young son a “mystery,” but it is one that is unlikely to be solved.

In July, Meagher headed out with Fisk and his expedition, arriving in St. Paul, Minnesota on the twenty-third. There, Meagher was welcomed warmly by the city’s Irish-Americans, several thousand of whom had settled in the area after fleeing the crowded tenements and squalor of the Irish ghettos out East. The prime moving force behind this westward migration was Father John Ireland, a future archbishop who, at the time, headed the Minnesota Irish Immigration Society. Meagher told Father Ireland that he wanted to colonize Montana as well with Irish Catholics and to bring as many priests into the territory as needed to fulfill their spiritual needs. Meagher also agreed to give a speech to benefit that Society while Fisk’s expedition continued to be peopled and outfitted. Speaking on August 2 in front of a sold-out crowd, Meagher unveiled a “new political creed” for post-War America that the August 19 *Irish American* denounced as radical.<sup>275</sup> Perhaps the new political principle that most upset that paper was Meagher’s call for full citizenship for black freedmen:

[The] black heroes of the Union Army have not only entitled themselves to liberty but to citizenship, and the Democrats who would deny them the rights for which their wounds and glorified colors so eloquently plead is

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<sup>275</sup> Ahearn, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 145.

unworthy to participate in the greatness of the nation.<sup>276</sup>

Before the War, Meagher had shown no real concern for black Americans, particularly those enslaved in the South, telling readers of his *Irish News* in 1856 to mind their own business and “let slavery alone.” But then he had seen how well the “Colored Regiments” had fought for the Union in the War. The War, for Meagher, was indeed a transformative experience. Out of respect for the hundreds of his Brigade members who had died fighting for the Union, he had broken from the Democratic Party and supported Abraham Lincoln for re-election, knowing that Lincoln, and not the Democrats, could be counted on to prosecute the War to a victorious conclusion. Now, with the War over, he was calling for black citizenship, not because he had suddenly come to believe in the equality of the races but because he thought the blood shed by black Union soldiers was a sufficient price to pay for their people’s citizenship.

In the speech that made him famous nearly twenty years before, “Meagher of the Sword” had repeatedly asserted that he did not “abhor the sword,” that he would not “stigmatize the sword.” He was telling the truth. After wielding a sword himself in one of the deadliest civil wars in human history and watching others whom he had inspired to do likewise fall around him, Meagher was determined that at least their swords would, in the prophetic words of his immortal speech, “blossom into flowers to deck the freeman’s brow.” Yes, Meagher was a vain and ambitious man. But he was not without principles or integrity. He told the truth again in his January, 1864 speech to the remnants of Brigade in New York when he informed them that, despite maintaining high aspirations for himself, he knew in his heart that history “would never bestow upon me any higher distinction than that I have been the general in command of the Irish Brigade.”

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<sup>276</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*

When Meagher gave his “Sword Speech,” he was a pampered young man who had never heard a shot fired in anger. But he came to realize through his own experience in the Civil War the true meaning of his eloquent words. When Mitchel, for his part, called for an armed rebellion in Ireland, he was an opinionated writer who had yet to personally witness a rebellion in action. When he later instigated and supported an armed rebellion on another continent, he too came to fully appreciate the power of his words and to personally experience, through the deaths of two sons, the painful and unanticipated side effects that occur when loaded words on paper give way to loaded weapons on a battlefield.

After his speech in St. Paul on August 2, Meagher received a telegram from Washington: President Johnson wanted him to serve as secretary of the Montana Territory. At last, he had been offered an official government position. Two days later, he wired back his acceptance of the offer and prepared to leave for Montana ahead of Fisk’s expedition.<sup>277</sup> His bold and brazen solicitations to O’Beirne had finally paid off. Perhaps he could once again become a “participator in historic commotions.” The ambitious Meagher proceeded to Montana with a new lease on life.

Meanwhile, the principled Mitchel was stuck in a jail cell, having learned once again the price of exercising one’s private judgment.

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<sup>277</sup> Ibid., 145.

## CHAPTER SIX: *The Wild West and a Long Way to Tipperary*

Meagher was not the only person to come to Montana with high hopes and the desire to start a new life. When he finally arrived in Bannock after a grueling stagecoach ride on September 28, 1865, he found himself in the booming southwestern corner of the territory, an area which had been bereft of white settlers just a few years before but which now teemed with some ten thousand residents living in nine primary mining camps near Alder Gulch; Virginia City was the largest city in the area boasting five thousand residents.<sup>1</sup> There was a large population of Irish-Americans who mostly worked in the mines and not a few transplanted Southerners, many of whom with Confederate sympathies. Before federal judges arrived in the territory, “Vigilance Committees” brutally imposed “law and order” in the camps and cities. The members of these committees were called “Vigilantes,” and they were predominantly Republicans and Freemasons. The first federal judges and officials appointed to the territory were also Republicans, as could be expected with Lincoln in the White House and his party dominating Congress. But most of the settlers were Democrats, setting up an inevitable political clash between the ruling elite and the masses. The historical antipathy between Freemasons and Catholics also made for a tense situation with the Vigilantes enforcing their version of justice upon rough-and-tumble Irish miners and prospectors.<sup>2</sup> In sum, southwestern Montana was one of those areas that gave the “Wild West” its name.

Meagher went to Bannock since that is where Sidney Edgerton, the territory’s governor, had first set up a capital, although the Territorial Legislature had recently voted to move the capital to Virginia City. The democratically elected legislature was fairly

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<sup>1</sup> Forney, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 149.

<sup>2</sup> Jon Axline, “With Courage and Undaunted Obstinacy: Meagher in Montana, 1865-1867,” in *Thomas Francis Meagher*, eds. Hearne and Cornish, 177-178.

evenly divided between Republicans and Democrats, but the next election promised to give the edge to the Democrats. Desperate to hold onto power, Edgerton refused to allow the legislature to reconvene for its next annual session in 1865 on grounds that the legislature had failed at its last session to set a date for the next session before it adjourned, as required by the federal Organic Act of 1864 that created the territory.<sup>3</sup> Supporting Edgerton was a clique of prominent businessmen, lawyers, judge, and merchants headed by his son-in-law, Wilbur Fisk Sanders, the Grand Master of Montana's Masonic Lodge.<sup>4</sup> Edgerton's refusal to reconvene the legislature displeased the Democrats to no end but they could do nothing about it while he remained governor.

On the day Meagher arrived, however, Edgerton left Montana to return to his home state of Ohio, without mentioning whether or not he would return. Since the Organic Act provided that the territorial secretary was to assume the governor's duties in the latter's absence, Meagher, suddenly and unexpectedly, became Montana's acting governor. After the surprise wore off, he headed for Virginia City to begin governing and immediately wrote his friend Lyons to have him spread the word in New York that he was now the "Acting Governor of the richest territory of the Union."<sup>5</sup>

As Meagher settled into a position he had not expected to fill, influential Irish-Americans were working behind the scenes to get Mitchel released from prison. The old Young Irelander, attorney Richard O'Gorman, presented a signed petition to President Johnson seeking Mitchel's release while the Fenian Brotherhood deputized Bernard Doran Killian to personally negotiate with Johnson and Secretary of State William

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 177.

<sup>4</sup> David Emmons, "The Strange Death of Thomas Francis Meagher: Tribal Politics in Territorial Montana," in *Thomas Francis Meagher*, eds. Hearne and Cornish, 228.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Ahearn, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 147.

Seward on Mitchel's behalf. With Johnson needing Irish-American support for his slate of candidates in an upcoming statewide election in New York, Killian easily persuaded the president to order the release. Killian claimed later that Johnson had also promised him that American forces would not interfere with a planned Fenian invasion of Canada.<sup>6</sup> Regardless, on October 30, 1865, Mitchel was released from Fort Monroe but he did not leave before saying goodbye to Davis and Clay on the way out. As an officer asked for his autograph as he left, Mitchel wrote that "The thieves have bound the true men,"<sup>7</sup> before signing his name.

Mitchel returned briefly to his family in Richmond where they noticed that he had developed a permanent hacking cough. Indeed, physically, he would never be the same man again; those first two harsh months of his imprisonment had taken years off his life and Mitchel was understandably resentful. He traveled to New York to meet with O'Gorman and other attorneys in hopes of suing the federal government for having falsely imprisoned him. But the attorneys convinced Mitchel that anti-Southern sentiment was still running strong in the North and that he should let the matter rest and perhaps go to Europe while things cooled off.<sup>8</sup>

Soon, Mitchel had another reason to go to Europe: a job offer from the Fenians. The movement had grown in both America and Ireland and Stephens was reportedly ready to strike in Ireland. Though Mitchel had never cared for Stephens as a leader and had never thought much of oath-taking societies, if Ireland's hour was truly about to arrive, he wanted to be near the action; as he wrote: "In short, if this gallant game is to be

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<sup>6</sup> McGovern, *John Mitchel*, 292-293.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 294.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*



set afoot, I must have a share in it.”<sup>9</sup> The Fenians were offering to place him in France as their financial agent with a \$2,500 annual salary. The Fenians needed a man with proven integrity that they could trust with large sums of money to handle all of the movement’s financial matters. They also hoped that he could favorably dispose Emperor Napoleon III’s government towards the Fenian cause. Mitchel quickly accepted the job and, on November 10, 1865, he sailed to Paris from New York with \$60,000 in contributions from American Fenians in hand to advance the cause of Irish independence.<sup>10</sup>

Once in France, Mitchel slowly began to realize that Stephens had exaggerated the readiness of his Fenian forces to stage a rebellion in Ireland. He also came to realize that Anglo-French relations were not likely to deteriorate any time soon meaning that Britain would not be distracted if the Fenians did revolt. Mitchel thus found himself with unexpected time on his hands in Paris and he used it to reflect somewhat on the last few eventful years of his life. In a January 31, 1866 letter to an old family friend in Ireland, he bluntly assessed what his commitment to the Confederacy had cost him:

We have suffered heavily indeed, one way and another by that Confederate business, and although it was a good cause, I must admit that I grudge it what it has cost us --- the lives of our two sons in defence of a country which, after all, was not their own.<sup>11</sup>

In referring to the Southern rebellion as “that Confederate business” and *a* good cause, and lamenting that his sons had died for the Confederacy and not Ireland, Mitchel conclusively revealed in that letter that the South’s cause never came close to supplanting Irish independence in his heart and mind. He would never have referred to Ireland’s cause as “that Irish business” or merely *a* good cause. For him, it was always “the” cause

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<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Keneally, *The Great Shame*, 435.

<sup>10</sup> McGovern, *John Mitchel*, 295.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 281.

and yet he sacrificed two sons and several years of his life fighting for the Confederacy, a struggle that also landed him in jail and wreaked havoc on his health. Nor did that struggle serve to advance the Irish independence movement one bit. When he wrote that he “grudge[d]” what his dedication to the South “has cost us,” it was as close as Mitchel would ever come to admitting that, at the very least, his level of commitment to the Confederacy had been too high. As Alexander Stephens told him before the War: “Your problem, John Mitchel, is that you plunge into everything all the way.”<sup>12</sup> But Mitchel could not do otherwise. He had to be right and right had to triumph. Though not as personally ambitious as Meagher, he was every bit as willful if not more so. Meagher found a home in America, a land of dreams and opportunity, where personal achievement and advancement were hailed and celebrated. Mitchel, on the other hand, could never see himself as an American. As he wrote from Paris around this time, “How happens it, that though I have lived so long in America, and have met many good people there, I can never think of any Americans as touching me very closely.”<sup>13</sup> Having been exiled by the British authorities and imprisoned by the Americans, Mitchel seemed destined to be a “Man Without a Country.” But he would never be without a cause. And in the last years of his life, he would focus on his favorite cause of Irish independence.

Back in Montana, Acting-Governor Meagher was focused on learning everything he could about his territory. One thing he found out was that some of the Indian tribes that dominated central and eastern Montana were increasingly coming into conflict with white traders and settlers at Fort Benton, which was well to the northeast of the Alder Gulch area. As acting governor, Meagher also served as the territory’s superintendent of

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<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Hegarty, *John Mitchel*, 141-142.

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Keneally, *The Great Shame*, 437.

Indian affairs. In that capacity, in early November, 1865, Meagher accompanied Federal Judge Lyman E. Munson and a federal Indian agent to a negotiating session with representatives of the Blackfeet tribe, which ended with the Indians agreeing by treaty to move further north towards Canada and away from Fort Benton in return for \$7,500 in annuities. Meagher later marveled in front of a white audience at what the Indians had agreed to, noting that only “a comparative small reservation . . . is guaranteed to the original owners of this vast domain.”<sup>14</sup>

But Meagher was not complaining; he quickly adopted the standard view of the white community that the Indians were, for the most part, “savages” who must not be allowed to stand in the way of progress. As a result, he began to beseech Secretary of State Seward and General Sherman, who now commanded the Army’s Department of the Missouri, which included Montana, to send troops to his territory in anticipation of future conflicts with the Indians. Writing to Sherman on December 16, Meagher advised him to send only Army regulars to command the troops since “Volunteer Officers become politicians too rapidly in these new Territories.”<sup>15</sup> As Meagher biographer Gary R. Forney notes, when Sherman read that, “it must have brought a smile to the face of the man Meagher thought humorless,”<sup>16</sup> and had once called an “envenomed martinet.” But Meagher was unlikely to get what he wanted from Sherman regardless of past indiscretions; other territorial governors were also beseeching Sherman for troops but he simply did not have enough to go around following the Army’s post-War demobilization.

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<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Forney, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 168.

<sup>15</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 169.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

Though the War was indeed over, Sanders and other Republican leaders initially convinced Meagher that the Democratic masses of the territory were led by unrepentant Southern sympathizers who aimed to undermine the great victory for liberty that the Union Army had won. Hence, Meagher wrote to Seward on December 11 that if Montana were to become a state, its state government and congressional delegation would be “monopolized by men who in their hearts regard with aversion and vindictiveness the great triumph of the Nation, and the liberty our advancing and victorious arms secured the bondsmen of the South.”<sup>17</sup> But after traveling extensively through the populated areas of his territory and getting to know its people better, by January of 1866, Meagher concluded that the masses and their Democratic leaders were not dangerous rebels after all and that he had been hoodwinked by the Republicans into thinking that they were. Consequently, he announced that he would be convening a Territorial Convention to consider whether the territory should apply for statehood since, as he stated in a January 20 letter to President Johnson, he was “unwilling . . . to keep the Territory dumb and inactive.”<sup>18</sup> Also in that letter, Meagher expressed strong support for the president’s lenient and moderate approach to Reconstruction of the South and informed him “that the radicals and extremists of the Republican party of the Territory [are] animated by the same malevolent and bitter spirit that confronts your grand policy,”<sup>19</sup> and were threatening to “*disable me by slander, or overthrow me in Washington by scandalous misrepresentations.*”<sup>20</sup> (Emphasis in original.)

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<sup>17</sup> Quoted in Ahearn, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 148.

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 149.

<sup>19</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 150.

<sup>20</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*

Besides calling for a convention to discuss statehood, Meagher soon decided to call the legislature back into session as well, disregarding Republican claims that it would be illegal for him to do so, a position that he had recently held himself. He explained his reversal of course in a February 20 letter to Seward: “I have frankly to confess that I was greatly in error. . . . On more maturely considering the powers vested in me by the Organic Act, and the laws of the Territory, I came to the conclusion that . . . it was legally and constitutionally within the scope of my prerogatives to summon it into action.”<sup>21</sup> Also, should Montana become a state, Meagher told Seward that it “would take rank among the staunchest of the President’s Democratic supporters.”<sup>22</sup> Meagher and Johnson had once been War Democrats and now that Johnson was president, Meagher was a Johnson Democrat. But Meagher had also been linked in several Eastern newspaper accounts to a Fenian scheme to invade Canada. Also, though it is unlikely that the Johnson Administration knew of it, the January 21 *Waterford News* in Meagher’s old Irish hometown claimed breathlessly that, having been named “Dictator” of the Fenians, Meagher planned to invade both Canada and Mexico, intending to bolster the French-supported regime of Maximilian I in the latter country. In any event, Meagher told Seward truthfully that any and all rumors associating him with Fenian military plans were simply “absurd.”<sup>23</sup>

Meagher was not interested in any Fenian invasion of Canada. He was too busy trying to heal Montana society from the lingering divisiveness of the Civil War. In a February 21 speech, he announced his vision of a Johnsonian-style reconciliation in Montana:

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<sup>21</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Quoted in McCarthy, “The Lost Leader?,” 175.

The war is over and I would not plant thorns where the olive has taken root. Here at all events, among the great mountains of the new world no echoes should be awakened save those that proclaimed true and glorious peace, the everlasting brotherhood of those who had been foes upon the battlefield.<sup>24</sup>

These were fine sentiments but Meagher knew that he was unlikely to be enjoying an “everlasting brotherhood” with Montana’s Republican oligarchy. In fact, on the very next day, February 22, he widened that split with them when he issued a reprieve for one James Daniels, who had stabbed a man to death during a contentious poker game in a saloon in Helena on November 29, 1865. In a late December trial presided over by Judge Munson, the jury convicted him of manslaughter and Munson sentenced him to three years of imprisonment at hard labor.<sup>25</sup>

But Daniels had his supporters, thirty of whom, including some of the jurors who had convicted him, signed and presented a petition to Meagher asking for a pardon. Under the Organic Act, the governor was authorized to “grant pardons and respites for offenses against the laws of said territory, and reprieves for offences against the laws of the United States until the decision of the President of the United States can be made known thereon.”<sup>26</sup> Meagher gave Daniels a reprieve from his sentence, noting as he did “that the circumstances under which the aforesaid offence was committed were most provoking on the part of the deceased or the parties in conflict, and to a great extent justifiable on the part of the said Daniels.”<sup>27</sup> Daniels was soon released from prison.

When Judge Munson heard about Daniels’s release, he was furious. Claiming, as he later put it, that Meagher was “under the influence of an unfortunate habit,” when he

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<sup>24</sup> Quoted in Forney, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 180.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

<sup>26</sup> *An Act to Provide a Temporary Government for the Territory of Montana, Statutes at Large* 13, Sess. I, 1864, Ch. 95, 86 (1866).

<sup>27</sup> Quoted in Keneally, *The Great Shame*, 435.

granted Daniels a reprieve, the judge ordered that Daniels be re-arrested and returned to prison. But before the law could catch up with Daniels, the Vigilantes found him in Helena in early March and strung him up from a tree, pinning a note to his jacket warning Meagher that he would be next if he released another convicted criminal from prison. When Daniels was buried, however, a huge crowd attended the funeral and later held a rally against vigilantism.<sup>28</sup> Thus, while Meagher was making more enemies, he was also gaining more friends, with neither being a surprising development in a raucous frontier environment.

On March 5, Meagher attended the opening of the legislative session he had controversially summoned in Virginia City. When the session adjourned on April 14, 138 bills had been introduced and sixty-four had been passed by both houses with Meagher vetoing sixteen of those sixty-four. In doing so, Meagher demonstrated that he took his executive responsibilities seriously, offering rational and persuasive explanations for opposing certain bills. For example, he felt that a bill establishing a superintendent of public education failed to give that official the authority to “prevent and suppress sectarian instruction, in which as the world knows, teachers, of every religious denomination are apt and prone to indulge.”<sup>29</sup> The legislators agreed with him and amended the bill to his liking. When Meagher learned that the legislature was contemplating awarding him a \$2,500 annual stipend from territorial funds to supplement his federal salary, he wrote a letter stating that “I do not wish to have a single dollar voted me out of the Territorial funds. The Federal Government ought so to provide for its officers, that the latter should in nowise be a burden to the Territory. . . . If there is

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Quoted in Forney, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 185.

anything due the Executive office, it shall be transferred to the Miner's Hospital at Helena."<sup>30</sup>

Meanwhile, as Meagher predicted in his January 20 letter to President Johnson, his Republican enemies from the Sanders camp began vilifying his character in a campaign aimed at influencing powerful persons in Washington. To wit, on March 12, William Chumasero, an attorney who was also Sanders's brother-in-law, described Meagher's behavior as follows in a letter to Illinois Senator Lyman Trumbull:

On his first arrival in Virginia City he became intoxicated and remained so for a number of days in his room polluting his bed and person in the most indecent and disgusting manner --- and has in fact been drunk nearly every day since he has been in the Territory. In Virginia City it is publicly stated in the streets that the Executive office is a place of rendezvous for the vilest prostitutes and *they* state the fact publicly, and *boast* of their profitable *intercourse* with him. . . . In fact, his whole conduct since his arrival has been that of a drunken madman.<sup>31</sup> (Emphasis in original.)

Apparently, the spirit of the late Colonel Cross lived on in the Montana Territory. If Meagher had been having so much fun since his arrival in Virginia City, one wonders why he invited Libby to join him there, which she did that very spring, and spoil it all. Interestingly, earlier in his letter, Chumasero told Senator Trumbull that he originally had high hopes that Meagher would be able to "cast aside the natural proclivities of the people from whom he sprang,"<sup>32</sup> but was sorely disappointed.

Five days after Chumasero wrote that letter, Meagher gathered with a large crowd of "the people from whom he sprang" at the People's Theatre in Virginia City to deliver a lecture in honor of Saint Patrick's Day. With tongue-in-cheek, Meagher began his

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<sup>30</sup> Meagher, Thomas Francis, *Lectures of Gov. Thomas Francis Meagher in Montana*, ed. John Bruce (Virginia City, Montana: Bruce & Wright, 1867), 74.

<sup>31</sup> Quoted in Ahearn, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 153.

<sup>32</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 152.



address by asserting that Protestants were entitled to celebrate Saint Patrick's Day as well as Catholics:

My Protestant fellow-countrymen will not . . . understand me to claim that this day is exclusively a Catholic festival . . . It is their day as well as ours, and I have no objection to their appropriating St. Patrick as a zealous member of their Church, for I well know he would convert every mother's sowl of them with that miraculous crozier of his, should he ever get among them.<sup>33</sup>

Later, Meagher turned serious as he answered forcefully the nativist contention that Irish-Americans must discard their ethnic pride and continued passion for Irish independence upon becoming Americans:

There are some vicious bigots --- men of small brains and smaller hearts --- men of more gall than blood --- who, even here, assert that love of Ireland, devotion to her cause, active sympathy with the protracted contest for her redemption, invoke an equivocal allegiance to the United States. Out upon the bastard Americanism that spews this imputation in the face of the gallant race, whose blood, shed in torrents for its inviolability and its glory, has imparted a brighter crimson to the Stripes, and made the Stars of that triumphant flag irradiate with a keener radiance. . . . Let the woods and swamps of the deadly Chickahominy, the slopes of Malvern Hill, the waters of the Antietam, the defiant heights of Fredericksburg, the thickets of the Wilderness --- a thousand fields now billowed with Irish graves, declare that love for Ireland blends in ecstasy with loyalty to America, and that America has been served by none more truly than by those who carried in their impetuous hearts the memories and hopes of Ireland.<sup>34</sup>

Meagher had come full circle. In his famous "Sword Speech" of 1846, he had pointed to the American Revolution as proof that the use of force was sometimes justified; he would not "abhor or stigmatize" the sword when the Revolutionaries had used it to form a great republic. Now, in 1866, he was arguing that Irish-Americans, by wielding the sword in the Civil War, had proved their worth as citizens of the Great Republic. No, he would not "abhor or stigmatize" the sword; without it, there would be

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<sup>33</sup> Meagher, *Lectures of Gov. Meagher*, 22.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

no America and, without it, Irish-Americans would not have been able to prove their patriotism and loyalty to America.

But as loyal and as patriotic an American as Meagher was, he still took pride in his Irish heritage and encouraged other Irish-Americans to do likewise, especially in light of bigoted attacks by some “Yankee” Americans. Later in that speech, Meagher showed that he could dish it out as well as take it when making comparisons between Irish-Americans and mainstream “Yankees” or “Puritans”:

It is the American who has no heart, who has no thought beyond putting a mighty dollar out at mighty interest, who has no zest for any other book than his Easy Accountant or his soulless Ledger --- who hates the Irish for their generous qualities, their infallible religion, and their inveterate democracy . . . It is he alone who regards with a cod liver eye, a nutmeg nose, a Maine-Liquor-Law howl, and a Cromwellian depreciation, the love of Ireland which the Irishman brings with him to America, . . . and with which, . . . whether he be in rags or purple and fine linen, whether he is digging for gold like a drudge in Montana, or spending it like an Irish prince in New York, he celebrates St. Patrick’s Day. . . .

. . . Let the marrowless bigot, then, carp and deprecate; let the hungry Puritan with his nasal music importune the God of Blue Laws to save the Yankee nation from the witch-craft of St. Patrick’s daughters and the deviltry of St. Patrick’s sons --- [but they], like the faithful Kent, will pursue their “old course in a country new.”<sup>35</sup>

While serving as the acting-governor, Meagher still pursued his “old course” of speechmaking in Montana, addressing various civic groups on an occasional basis and, as his Saint Patrick’s Day address demonstrated, he had lost none of his oratorical touch. But wielding executive political power was a totally new experience for him and, as conscientiously as he applied himself to his gubernatorial duties, he would soon learn that no politician, no matter how skillful or tenacious, wins every hand he plays.

For example, his much-hyped Territorial Convention convened on April 9 in Helena but adjourned six days later with its own only tangible accomplishment being a

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 28-29.

rough draft for a state constitution. Then, a few weeks later, on June 4, Judge Munson issued an order holding that the recent legislative session had been illegally convened and that all acts passed by it were therefore null and void. Showing that he could play hardball too, Meagher promptly announced that statewide legislative elections would be held in September and the Legislature would be convene again in the fall. But Meagher knew that the legality of these legislative sessions would ultimately be decided in Washington, where he had not been having much luck lately in getting what he wanted from the Johnson administration.<sup>36</sup>

For months, Meagher had been lobbying to get the president to formally appoint him as governor but Edgerton, back in Ohio, still held the position and would not go easily. Explaining in a letter to Secretary of State Seward in January of 1866 that he only left Montana because his children could get a better education in Ohio, he was now willing to return to the territory. But Seward did not accept Edgerton's excuse and removed him as governor on April 13.<sup>37</sup>

When Meagher was not immediately appointed governor upon Edgerton's dismissal, he must have sensed that something was wrong. Three failed invasions of Canada by American Fenians, one in April and two in June, embarrassed the Johnson administration and certainly did nothing to advance Meagher's cause, although he had assured them that he had nothing to do with the raids. By July 13, Meagher realized that he was not going to have the "acting" part removed from his title and so he wrote that day to President Johnson asking him to create a new Superintendent of Indian Affairs position, thus relieving the governor from having to get into the saddle on a regular basis

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<sup>36</sup> Forney, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 185-186.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 188-189.

to handle those duties. Further, Meagher recommended himself for the new position, suggesting that it would be “far more in consonance with my predilections than either the Secretaryship or Governorship. . . . Nothing delights me so much as being on horseback, and taking long, rough, and adventurous journeys.”<sup>38</sup> Nothing ever came of Meagher’s sensible though self-serving suggestion but, coincidentally, on the very day he wrote to Johnson, the president appointed a new governor for the territory, Green Clay Smith, a Congressman from Kentucky.

Like Meagher, Smith was a lawyer and a former general, having commanded volunteer troops from his native Kentucky in both the Mexican-American War and the Civil War.<sup>39</sup> Unlike Meagher, he was an evangelical Protestant teetotaler with presumably little tolerance for the “deviltry” of “St. Patrick’s sons.” When Meagher learned of the appointment, he quickly began investigating opportunities in the private sector. On August 5, in an address to the locals on his first visit to Diamond City in the central Montana county that had been named Meagher County in his honor, the acting-governor announced that he would be resigning as secretary as soon as Smith arrived in the territory. At that point, he would set out to make himself financially independent and would abandon politics until he had done so. As he explained, nothing was “so harassing and torturing to any one of pride and sensibility as to occupy a high position in the political world, and be a struggling and dependent man in private.”<sup>40</sup>

Indeed, in a letter he would write that fall to an old friend in New York, he indicated that he had turned down the Democratic nomination earlier that year for Montana’s non-voting congressional seat since he was not “rich enough as yet to support

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<sup>38</sup> Quoted in Ahearn, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 155.

<sup>39</sup> Forney, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 192-193.

<sup>40</sup> Meagher, *Lectures of Gov. Meagher*, 54.

the grand responsibilities of position.”<sup>41</sup> He further denied any senatorial aspirations should Montana become a state: “I’d infinitely prefer, any day, to have a splendid yacht, a box at the opera, and a four-in-hand, than have a seat for six years in the Senate.”<sup>42</sup>

And he would not be leaving Montana, as he explained to another Eastern correspondent, until he had made his fortune there:

I’m resolved not to turn my back upon the Rocky Mountains until I have the means to whip my carriage and four through the New York Central Park, and sail my own yacht, with the Green Flag at the Mizzen-peak, within three miles of the Irish coast.<sup>43</sup>

Apparently, by this point, Meagher had given up his dream of leading a liberating army onto Irish soil to drive out the Brits; merely sailing a boat with a green flag along its coast would satisfy him now. But he was probably never serious about leading an invasion force back to Ireland anyway; he could have easily joined the Fenians in their ill-fated Canadian excursions if he was as singularly motivated as they were by visceral anti-British sentiments. But he had learned back in 1848 what happens when you go too far to turn back and yet not far enough to succeed. Indeed, he rapidly distanced himself from the Fenians when he thought that his association with them was harming his budding political career. And when that political career did not readily blossom, his materialistic ambitions took over. Meagher had not moved out West for the scenery; like so many others, he intended to strike it rich out there. Nor did he consider it shameful to admit it. In America, one need not be shy about one’s ambitions and it was no sin to have them. For Americans, the sin was *not* to have ambition. No one could accuse Meagher of committing that sin; Meagher was an American.

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<sup>41</sup> Quoted in Keneally, *The Great Shame*, 447.

<sup>42</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> Quoted in Ahearn, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 154.

As Meagher dreamed of carriages and yachts while awaiting Smith's arrival in the fall of 1866, Mitchel's hopes that the Fenian movement would finally lead to Irish independence had turned into a pipe dream. James Stephens had declared that 1865 would be the year of rebellion in Ireland; when that year ended uneventfully, he announced that 1866 would be "the year." Stephens was a good recruiter and organizer but he tended to exaggerate his movement's strength, which may explain why he was always reluctant to pull the trigger on an actual revolt. Having grown impatient with Stephens, the American Fenians launched their disastrous invasions of Canada in 1866. The failed raids devastated the morale of the American Fenians, who had previously been split into two competing groups by a leadership squabble between O'Mahony and William Randall Roberts, a future New York Congressman, further weakening the movement. Declining morale and the large sums of money wasted on the Canadian incursions served to reduce the amount of Fenian money flowing from America to Mitchel in Paris.<sup>44</sup>

Meanwhile, in Ireland, by late 1865, the British had successfully infiltrated the Fenian ranks and started arresting and detaining some of its leaders, a process that picked up steam when habeas corpus rights were once again suspended on the island in early 1866. With some of the arrestees being American citizens, Mitchel hoped that Anglo-American tensions might rise but they did not. By this point, Mitchel had lost faith in Stephens and the Irish Fenians, as he noted in a March, 1866 letter to Mahony: "The prompt action of the English Government was precisely what they ought to have

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<sup>44</sup> McGovern, *John Mitchel*, 296-297.

expected; what they ought to have prepared for; what they ought to have anticipated by striking two months ago, if they were to strike at all.”<sup>45</sup>

In Paris, as Mitchel complained in an April 7 letter, his cover had been blown by French newspapers, “advertising me as a mark to all the thieves in Europe [and] directing the special attention of the British government to me.”<sup>46</sup> Indeed, Mitchel’s residence was burglarized and financial documents were stolen while three British agents moved into his neighborhood and followed his every move. When he complained to French officials, however, they politely told him that the British agents would be allowed to continue their spying just as Mitchel would be permitted to continue his work. Though Mitchel had once been hopeful that he could make diplomatic inroads on behalf of the Irish independence movement with the French, he soon realized that, “while France is at peace with England, they would not even listen.”<sup>47</sup> By the middle of 1866, with little money coming in for him to handle, Mitchel started to feel guilty about drawing his own salary and wrote to Stephens that he was resigning his position: “I need assign no reason further than I have now lost all hope of being enabled to communicate with the French government and that I do not think it right to continue, with a considerable salary, to merely receive and pay over sums of money.”<sup>48</sup>

After resigning, Mitchel stayed on in Paris for awhile, working as a freelance journalist, visiting his daughter’s grave, and enjoying a pleasant reunion in September with Father Kenyon and his lifelong friend, John Martin. But Mitchel yearned to return to his family in America; his dedication to various causes had kept him away from them

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<sup>45</sup> Quoted in Hegarty, *John Mitchel*, 117.

<sup>46</sup> Quoted in McGovern, *John Mitchel*, 300.

<sup>47</sup> Quoted in Keneally, *The Great Shame*, 437.

<sup>48</sup> Quoted in *Ibid*, 444.

for too long, and had cost two of them their lives. As he wrote to Jenny from Paris: “I have been a martyr now for 18 years, and it is altogether a bad trade. . . . My poor children --- it is they who are the real martyrs.”<sup>49</sup> And so, in late 1866, Mitchel returned to America. He would never return to France although that was probably just as well; as Mitchel once wrote to a friend, given his track record with British and American authorities, had he stayed long enough in Paris, he would have probably wound up in prison there too.<sup>50</sup> Mitchel had to be Mitchel. He could not help acting upon his private judgments despite repeatedly paying the price for doing so.

Meagher, for his part, was not so devoted to his private judgments. But he remained fiercely jealous of his honor and could not help but seek retribution when he felt it had been besmirched. In early October, 1866, the offending party was Henry Blake, the editor of the pro-Republican *Montana Post*. Three days after Governor Smith and his family finally arrived in Montana on October 3, Blake hailed his arrival in the *Post*, contrasting the high hopes that the territory had for Smith with the “universal contempt with which his predecessor, ‘the great Irish patriot’ is greeted everywhere.”<sup>51</sup> Referring to Meagher as a “notorious individual,” Blake opined that Smith’s arrival made Meagher “the most unimportant member of the community.”<sup>52</sup> This was too much for Meagher to take and he promptly challenged Blake to a duel. Acting quickly, Blake tried to lighten things up by satirizing Meagher’s challenge in a column entitled, “Pistols and Coffee for Two.”<sup>53</sup> He also managed to smooth things over in print by writing that Meagher would “now have a chance to enjoy the roses of the Secretaryship and not be

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<sup>49</sup> Quoted in McGovern, *John Mitchel*, 27.

<sup>50</sup> Hegarty, *John Mitchel*, 112.

<sup>51</sup> Quoted in Forney, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 193.

<sup>52</sup> Quoted in Axline, “With Courage and Undaunted Obstinacy,” 184.

<sup>53</sup> Forney, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 193-194.



annoyed by the thorns of the gubernatorial chair.”<sup>54</sup> In the end, no duel was fought, with Meagher satisfied that he had adequately defended his honor.

To Meagher, Blake symbolized the worst of the elitist “Radical Republican” clique that was thwarting the popular will of hard-working Montanans and their democratically elected legislature. As he remarked in an October 26, 1866 letter to a New York friend: “Every day intensifies my hatred of the Radicals --- I see them here face to face, in such colours as I fail to perceive them in the greater crowds of the Eastern cities. So fiercely do I detest them, I am often on the brink of wishing that the South had won the day in the field.”<sup>55</sup> Meagher’s hatred of the Republicans was mutual, of course, and the Republicans were hopeful that they could emasculate Meagher by winning Smith over to their side as they had initially done with Meagher.

But much to the Republicans’ horror and everyone’s surprise, Meagher, the flamboyant Irishman, and Smith, a future presidential nominee of the Prohibition Party, got along famously with each other from the very start of their relationship. Smith came to endorse the well-intentioned work that Meagher and the legislature had done in their last, questionably legal session and the new governor worked in a collegial fashion with the new legislature during its next session, held from November 3 through December 15. As he had planned before Smith’s arrival, Meagher officially resigned as secretary but, when Smith found that out, he wired President Johnson on November 6 asking that the resignation not be accepted. Convinced by Smith that he should stay on the job, Meagher withdrew his resignation that very day.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Quoted in Axline, “With Courage and Undaunted Obstinacy,” 184.

<sup>55</sup> Quoted in Keneally, *The Great Shame*, 446.

<sup>56</sup> Forney, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 194.

The legislators worked well with Smith and, before adjourning, they asked him if he would go to Washington to lobby for the territory with his former colleagues in Congress. Smith was more than willing to oblige and he asked President Johnson for a five-month leave of absence to do so. His request was granted and, on January 7, 1867, Smith headed back to the nation's capital, making Meagher once again the acting-governor.<sup>57</sup>

As it turned out, Judge Munson and Wilbur Fisk Sanders were also on their way to Washington hoping to undo all the hard work that Smith, Meagher, and the Territorial Legislature had done in their last two sessions. Back on February 20, 1866, Meagher had written to Seward warning him that Sanders was “the most vicious of my enemies, an unrelenting and unscrupulous extremist.”<sup>58</sup> But Seward was no longer in Congress; he was still serving as secretary of state for Johnson, whose political power was dissipating by the day now that the Radical Republicans had assumed a dominating position in Washington as a result of the 1866 congressional elections. It therefore came as no surprise when, on March 2, 1867, Congress voted to nullify both the second and third sessions of the Montana Legislature and declared that all of the laws passed in those sessions were null and void. In protest, Meagher resigned as secretary, though he would continue to serve as acting-governor until Smith returned from his leave or a newly appointed secretary arrived.<sup>59</sup>

Realizing that there would be no more legislative sessions in Montana's near future, Acting-Governor Meagher began concentrating on Indian affairs. The territory was undergoing an Indian “scare,” and rhetoric was running hot, as exhibited in an

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 194-195.

<sup>58</sup> Quoted in Ibid., 217.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 196-197.

January 26, 1867 editorial from Blake's own *Montana Post*: "It is high time the sickly sentimentalism about humane treatment and conciliatory measures should be consigned to novel writers, and if the Indians continue their barbarities, wipe them out."<sup>60</sup> Though Indian "barbarities" were certainly not widespread in the populous southwestern portion of the territory, Indian raids upon settlers and travelers along the Bozeman Trail, a short-cut between the Oregon Trail and the mines of the Alder Gulch region, had been increasing. On March 25, John Bozeman, a failed miner who became a pathfinder, wrote to Meagher seeking protection for settlers in Montana's Gallatin Valley, where he resided himself along the trail that had been named for him --- and which he had blazed through the middle of traditional Indian hunting grounds. Responding to Bozeman's request, Meagher wired General-in-Chief Grant on April 9, asking for authority to raise a citizens' militia, to be paid with federal funds, to ward off the Indians until federal troops could arrive. Grant wrote on the back of that telegram, "If there is the danger which Governor Maher [*sic*] apprehends, and there wood [*sic*] seem to be, . . . the Citizens of Montana ought to have some organization to defend themselves until [federal] troops . . . can give them the required protection. . . . If the services rendered by them warrant it, they should, afterward look to Congress for compensation."<sup>61</sup>

Though Grant and Meagher seemed to be on the same page, express approval from the War Department was needed before Meagher could start raising troops. But when John Bozeman was killed along his trail in mid-April, allegedly by Indians, the ensuing public panic led Meagher to form a militia on his own authority while waiting for Washington to approve funds to pay for it. In an April 24 proclamation, Meagher

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<sup>60</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 198.

<sup>61</sup> Quoted in Ahearn, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 158.

informed the citizenry that, “our territory having been invaded by Indians . . . I have come to the conclusion, that it is my duty to effect, if possible, a military organization, which shall be equal to the circumstances of the hour, and the duty they demand.”<sup>62</sup> Meagher further declared that if this “military organization” succeeded in defeating the Indians, that its members “shall be at full liberty to appropriate and hold whatever horses, ropes, arms, and everything and anything else in the way of spoils they may capture.”<sup>63</sup> Regular Army soldiers did not enjoy such a right to plunder, of course, but Meagher had to attract volunteers somehow given that the federal authorities had yet to authorize funds for the militia, not that Meagher had not been besieging Washington to do so.

Perhaps exasperated by Meagher’s requests, Secretary of War Stanton passed the buck to General Sherman in St. Louis, authorizing him to make the call on all troop and militia requests from territorial governors in his Department of the Missouri. After meeting with Governor Smith on his way back to Montana, Sherman wired Stanton his opinion on May 4 that, “Meagher, in Montana, is a stampeder, and can always with a fair show of truth raise a clamor, and would have in pay the maximum number of men involved.”<sup>64</sup> Sherman did not trust the other territorial governors either, telling Stanton that, “to be candid, each has an interest antagonistic to that of the United States.”<sup>65</sup> He did tell Stanton that, following his discussion with Governor Smith, he had authorized the shipment of 2,500 muskets to be sent up the Missouri River to arm any militia that Meagher may form.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Meagher, *Lectures of Gov. Meagher*, 62.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>64</sup> Quoted in Ahearn, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 160.

<sup>65</sup> Quoted in Forney, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 202.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 203.

Sherman also asked General Christopher Augur in Omaha to send an officer to Montana to observe the situation firsthand. Augur selected Major William H. Lewis who arrived in the territory in the middle of May. But before Lewis could do much investigating, he received a cable from Sherman on May 24 advising him that Meagher had been authorized to raise an 800-man militia for two months of service. However, Sherman advised him, "Let the men furnish their own horses and arms at forty cents per day, and be rationed by contract."<sup>67</sup> Though Meagher could not raise many men at only forty-cents-a-day pay, it would at least be well supplied; local merchants accepted Sherman's telegram as a guarantee of future payment for their goods and gave Meagher all the supplies he needed. Unfortunately, they charged him exorbitant prices for their wares and also billed him for supplies that were never delivered. In other words, Meagher's militia, known as the "Montana Volunteers," became a boondoggle and Meagher, never a businessman himself, was oblivious to the scam. All told, the federal government would be billed for over \$1,100,000 in expenses for the militia with the government eventually agreeing to pay \$513,000 on the tab.<sup>68</sup>

The Montana Volunteers never mustered into service more than 250 men with nearly twenty-five percent of them officers including, ironically enough, Henry Blake, who was commissioned a captain. Discipline and cohesion in the unit was about on a par with Meagher's last command, the "convalescents" of the Provisional Division of the Army of the Tennessee. Though the troops never fought any Indians, they did fight with each other frequently in one of the two camps that had been established for them, including one named Camp Elizabeth Meagher. Moreover, the troops would come and

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<sup>67</sup> Quoted in Ahearn, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 161.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

go as they pleased; they were looking for promising spots to mine for gold as much as they were Indians. Showing some self-deprecating humor, Meagher referred to his unit in several letters to friends as “not an invincible, but an invisible force.”<sup>69</sup> But at least “Meagher of the Sword” was back in the field again.

When not leading his troops on patrol, Meagher seems to have spent most of his time in camp writing letters as well as an article for *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* entitled “Rides Through Montana,” a travelogue piece intended to highlight the natural beauty of Montana. Meagher wrote that article under the pseudonym of “Colonel Cornelius O’Keefe, Late of the Irish Brigade.”<sup>70</sup> O’Keefe was a real person, an Irish-born Montanan whom Meagher used as a source for much of the article since O’Keefe had explored several parts of the territory that Meagher had not.<sup>71</sup> O’Keefe had not served in the Brigade but he appears to have loaned Meagher \$1,000 in the fall of 1866 and was later appointed Missoula County Commissioner, perhaps at Meagher’s instigation.<sup>72</sup>

In a couple of his letters, Meagher indicated that he was looking forward to Smith’s return so that he could go back to the private sector. For example, he wrote to a New York attorney friend that “Governor Smith has not yet relieved me . . . On his arrival I shall be free --- and right glad it will make me to be so for I am downright sick of serving the *Gvt* in a civil capacity.”<sup>73</sup> (Emphasis in original.) Similarly, in a June 7 letter to a Fenian leader in San Francisco declining an invitation to speak at a Fenian

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<sup>69</sup> Quoted in Forney, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 207.

<sup>70</sup> Thomas Francis Meagher, “Rides Through Montana,” *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, October 1867, 568-585.

<sup>71</sup> Axline, “With Undaunted Courage and Obstinacy,” 188.

<sup>72</sup> Forney, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 247, 278-279 (n 50).

<sup>73</sup> Quoted in Keneally, *The Great Shame*, 450.

rally, Meagher told him that he could not leave Montana until either Smith or his replacement as secretary arrived there, noting, “I am detained here, much to my vexation,” before closing with “God speed the Irish nation to liberty and power!”<sup>74</sup>

Perhaps Meagher was tired of taking flak in the public sector. Though there was an authentic fear of the Indians amongst the populace after Bozeman’s murder, Meagher and his Montana Volunteers were still criticized in some quarters. To wit, A. H. Chapman, a federal Indian agent, wrote that Meagher’s “Indian war in Montana is the biggest humbug of the age, got up to advance his political interest, and to enable a lot of bummers who surround and hang onto him to make a big raid on the United States treasury.”<sup>75</sup> Chapman went on to worry that Meagher’s plunder policy could actually invite trouble with the Indians: “When volunteers are sent out and told by their commander . . . *that they shall have all the property they capture . . .* it would be strange indeed if they did not create unnecessary trouble with the Indians.”<sup>76</sup> (Emphasis in original.) The *New York Herald*, in its May 31 edition, ridiculed the militia and Meagher, noting that he “is as good at a palaver as at a fight, and his eloquence is just of the character to suit the Indians. He will quiet them by talking their heads off --- a much less costly and more humane process than that of exterminating them.”<sup>77</sup>

In late June, Meagher and several of his officers decided to ride some 200 miles up to Fort Benton to retrieve the 2,500 muskets that Sherman had promised to send up the Missouri River; Meagher planned to use the muskets as a recruiting tool if nothing else.

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<sup>74</sup> Quoted in Cavanagh, *Memoirs of General Meagher*, 494.

<sup>75</sup> Quoted in Ahearn, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 163.

<sup>76</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*

<sup>77</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*

It was a long, hot, unpleasant trip for Meagher and his men. Along the way, Meagher took ill and the journey had to be suspended for several days while he recovered his strength. When the party finally arrived in the city of Fort Benton on July 1, he was said to be still suffering from “dysentery,” although, as historian David Emmons points out:

Nineteenth-century physicians would have probably identified his condition as dysentery, but that generic label is too imprecise to be of much use as dysentery was used to describe any ailment that caused or was accompanied by extreme diarrhea. . . . Meagher’s “dysentery” may well have been cholera or, because no other members of his party were stricken, typhoid fever, possibly caused by drinking contaminated water from buffalo wallows and mud holes. Whether he was feverish is unknown, but by the time his party reached Fort Benton, Meagher was displaying anxiety and delusionary fears, symptoms of the dehydration typically associated with typhoid.<sup>78</sup>

Upon arriving at Fort Benton, Meagher was informed that the muskets his party had come to retrieve had been left at Fort Cooke, a hundred miles away. Given Meagher’s condition, he would need rest before resuming the journey. Stopping in at Isaac G. Baker’s general store, the proprietor Baker invited the acting-governor to rest up in the shaded rear quarters of his establishment while he brought him some blackberry wine to ease his physical ailments. By that point, Meagher had only hours to live but alleged eyewitness accounts as to how he spent those hours are conflicting.<sup>79</sup>

According to Johnny Doran, the pilot of the *G. A. Thompson*, a steamship docked at Fort Benton, when he heard that Meagher was in town at Baker’s store, he went there to see him. Doran, an Irish-American who admired Meagher, first met him when he piloted another steamship that had brought Libby Meagher into the territory. Doran sat with Meagher in Baker’s backroom but noticed that the acting-governor had to repeatedly excuse himself and go outside into the brush due to his “summer complaint,” a polite

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<sup>78</sup> Emmons, “The Strange Death of Meagher,” 225.

<sup>79</sup> Forney, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 212.



term for diarrhea. Doran invited Meagher to spend the night in a stateroom aboard the *G. A. Thompson* and Meagher accepted the offer. After having dinner aboard that ship, Doran and Meagher took a pleasant stroll through town before re-boarding the ship where they enjoyed some desserts and cigars, with Meagher later reading and writing some letters. Suddenly, Meagher became panicked, telling Doran, “Johnny, they threaten my life in that town!”<sup>80</sup> Doran tried to calm him down and even gave him a couple of loaded pistols to take to bed with him in the stateroom, which was on the upper deck of the boat and faced the river. Once Meagher appeared to be settled in, Doran went to the lower deck intending to return to check on him shortly when he heard a splash followed by a sentry yelling “Man overboard!” The sentry later told Doran that he saw a man in bedclothes on the upper deck who looked like he intended to relieve himself in some fashion; turning his back on the man to afford him some privacy, the sentry then heard a splash and issued his verbal alarm. A search was immediately conducted but with the river current running at least nine miles an hour, it was given up before too long.<sup>81</sup>

A different version of Meagher’s last hours was offered by Wilbur Fisk Sanders, Meagher’s ubiquitous political opponent, who just happened to be in Fort Benton when Meagher arrived on July 1. Sanders stated that he welcomed the acting-governor to town at around noon and then accompanied him on a walk through the business section of the city, during which time Meagher repeatedly refused offers for a drink from hospitable locals. Sanders next saw Meagher at Baker’s store later in the afternoon where he claims Meagher accepted a dinner invitation from a prominent furrier. That evening, Sanders saw Meagher in town with a few companions but he was acting deranged, “loudly

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<sup>80</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 214.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 212-214.

demanding a revolver to defend himself against the citizens of Fort Benton, who in his disturbed mental condition, he declared were hostile to him.”<sup>82</sup> Sanders then claims that he and Meagher’s companions took him to the *G. A. Thompson*, where he finally settled down and apparently turned in for the night in a berth that faced the shore, not the water. Sanders returned ashore only to hear some shouting thirty minutes later coming from the boat. He returned to the ship where “a colored man, one of the men connected with the boat --- the barber, I believe,”<sup>83</sup> told him that he saw a man descend from the upper deck to the lower deck and jump into the river intentionally. Sanders claimed that a search for Meagher began immediately and continued fruitlessly for two or three days.<sup>84</sup>

Sanders’s account seems to imply that Meagher, in a state of delirium caused by his illness and *not*, as Sanders repeatedly asserts, because of drunkenness, committed suicide, in effect. As Emmons notes, this account “may have been intended to suggest that Meagher was not only a bad Irishman, but also a worse Catholic,”<sup>85</sup> a bad Irishman because he refused a drink and a bad Catholic because he committed suicide. However, the possibility that Meagher committed suicide is discounted by all historians. That very day, Meagher wrote a letter to John H. Ming, the territorial auditor, requesting back pay “due me as acting governor for nearly two years,” noting that “I believe you have decided on giving me the pay.”<sup>86</sup> Apparently, now that Meagher would be re-entering the private sector, he had changed his mind about being paid by Montana for his services. Though Meagher also stated in his letter to Ming that “I am utterly --- utterly --- out of funds and

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<sup>82</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 215.

<sup>83</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 216.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 214-217.

<sup>85</sup> Emmons, “The Strange Death of Meagher,” 224.

<sup>86</sup> Quoted in Smith, “Meagher in Love and War,” 212-213.

it is absolutely necessary I should have some,”<sup>87</sup> there is nothing to indicate that Meagher was feeling suicidal over what was, at worst, a temporary cash-flow problem. Or perhaps, Meagher was just “crying poor,” as some upper class persons have been known to do. In January of 1866, Meagher had purchased over 300 acres of land in Madison County, Montana<sup>88</sup> and, at some point he also bought a substantial amount of “shares in mineral leases”<sup>89</sup> in the territory. He was not depressed but looking forward to his future in Montana, as Richard O’Gorman asserted in his eulogy for Meagher, given at the Cooper Institute in New York on August 14. During that eulogy, O’Gorman read a letter from an unnamed friend of Meagher’s in Montana who had received an optimistic letter from him written on the day of his death. That unnamed friend, referred to by O’Gorman as a “source in all respects reliable,” also wrote that, “here, it is supposed, [Meagher] stumbled on a coil of rope, lost his balance, and was precipitated over the side of the boat. The river is greatly swollen, and the current is so strong that the best swimmer has no chance in it.”<sup>90</sup>

That explanation for Meagher’s death was generally accepted by Meagher’s family and friends at the time. Presumably, his well-documented sickness of that day caused him to step out of the stateroom to vomit or relieve himself on deck somehow when he lost his balance and fell overboard. But given Meagher’s well-earned but frequently exaggerated reputation for non-abstemious behavior, the rumor quickly spread amongst friend and foe that he fell off the ship in a drunken stupor. On July 3, one of

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<sup>87</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 213.

<sup>88</sup> Forney, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 177, 269 (n 100).

<sup>89</sup> Quoted in Keneally, *The Great Shame*, 456.

<sup>90</sup> Quoted in Cavanagh, *Memoirs of General Meagher*, appendix, 10.

James Fisk's brothers, Andrew Jackson Fisk, wrote the following in his diary from Montana:

The Benton Coach in this morning brought news of the drowning of Gen. Thomas Francis Meagher --- on the night of the 1<sup>st</sup> inst. He had been on board one of the Steamers to visit some of his friends --- got on a spree --- was heard to get up and go out on the guards --- a splash was heard --- and the once brilliant and brave man was seen no more. Another victim of Whiskey.<sup>91</sup>

As Ahearn noted: "The extreme bitterness of his enemies had spread the legend of his insobriety so far and wide in Montana that the story of a drunken demise fell on willing ears."<sup>92</sup> Ahearn tended to believe that Meagher's death was accidental and more likely caused by illness than drunkenness.<sup>93</sup> So too did Isaac G. Baker, the man who welcomed Meagher into his store on the day in question. Decades later, he recalled that a night watchman told him at nine o'clock that evening that "he'd just seen a man fall off the boat, and disappear under the keel of another boat. He seemed to be vomiting and lost his balance, the watchman said."<sup>94</sup> Though there are too many inconsistencies in the stories of those who saw Meagher and described his activities and utterances on the last day of his life to come to any definite conclusion as to how he died, the strongest evidence indicates that he suffered an accidental fall off the *G. A. Thompson* that was precipitated by illness.

But that version has not been universally accepted. Meagher's enemies and detractors, then and now, have continually insisted he fell off the side of the ship because he was drunk while some of his allies and friends have long maintained that he was assassinated by Montana Vigilantes angered at his past actions and determined to prevent

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<sup>91</sup> Quoted in Ahearn, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 165.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 166.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>94</sup> Quoted in Keneally, *The Great Shame*, 455.

him from achieving his political ambitions. To the conspiratorialists, when Meagher told Doran that his life had been threatened in Fort Benton, he was telling the truth and not experiencing the delusions of an illness.

The curious presence of Wilbur Fisk Sanders, Montana's leading Republican politico and Freemason, in Fort Benton on the day Meagher died initially triggered suspicions of a conspiracy to murder Meagher. Sanders claimed to be waiting for his family to arrive on a steamboat on one of the last legs of their trip from his old home state of Ohio; Sanders had accompanied his family on parts of that journey after returning from his successful political mission in Washington, according to a diary kept by his wife.<sup>95</sup> Even if that explanation of his presence in Fort Benton on July 1 is accepted as true, conspiracy buffs could still argue that Sanders may have decided to arrange Meagher's murder on the spot by enlisting the help of other Freemasons or Vigilantes in the city at that time. It does not seem likely, given the slow nature of travel and communications in 1867 Montana, that Sanders and his presumed henchmen would have been able to plan Meagher's assassination far in advance even if they had learned of Meagher's planned trip to Fort Benton from an informer in his camp. Still, there were at least two known former Vigilantes who served as officers in Meagher's militia and Sanders, an attorney, was himself a former Vigilante "prosecutor."<sup>96</sup>

Moreover, Sanders's account of Meagher's final day rings false in several respects. It seems most unlikely that these two bitter political opponents, happening upon each other in Fort Benton, would spend the better part of an afternoon walking down the streets of that city like long-lost friends. Also, Sanders's claim that Meagher's berth was

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<sup>95</sup> Forney, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 214-215, 274 (n 8).

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 222.

on the land side of the docked ship runs counter to Dolan's assertion that it was on the river; as Foran points out, Dolan, the ship's pilot, would certainly know on which side of the boat Meagher bunked down on. Furthermore, in 1902, late in his life and after having served as a United States Senator from Montana from 1890 to 1893, Sanders recalled his old rival Meagher with surprising fondness:

I can well appreciate the affection which General Meagher inspired among his race and countrymen. His form was manly, his manners cordial, his demeanor gracious, his conversation instructive, his wit kindly, his impulses generous and I agree with Horace Greeley, who once said to me that General Meagher was one of the finest conversationalists he had ever known.<sup>97</sup>

Though the passage of time may have healed old wounds for Sanders, his complimentary treatment of Meagher late in his life seems suspicious, as if he were going out of his way to disguise the animosity he held for him when Meagher was alive.

As Emmons has pointed out, the rivalry between Sanders and Meagher was not so much personal but symptomatic of a great cultural divide in early Montana between Freemason Republicans on one side and Irish Catholics on the other, with Sanders leading one faction and Meagher the other.<sup>98</sup> According to Emmons, Meagher's pointed rhetoric in his 1866 Saint Patrick's Day speech regarding the differences between Irish-Americans and native "Puritans," was the opening blast in a cultural struggle: "Meagher's speech was an announcement that in this cultural war for the future of Montana there would be no limits on rhetoric. Whether it would be waged without limits on violence is less easily determined."<sup>99</sup> Emmons does not directly conclude that

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<sup>97</sup> Quoted in Axline, "With Courage and Undaunted Obstinacy," 182.

<sup>98</sup> Emmons, "The Strange Death of Meagher," 226-233.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 233.

Meagher was the victim of a political or culturally inspired assassination, but insists that historians not discount the possibility out of hand.<sup>100</sup>

Emmons also relates how the Irish-American community in Montana increasingly came to believe that Meagher had been assassinated by Vigilantes as the 19<sup>th</sup> Century wore on. Hence, he cites an 1878 book entitled *The Irish Race in California and on the Pacific Coast*, written by Father Hugh Quigley, in which the author notes that “it is the general opinion now, formed from reliable data, that poor Meagher was dogged day and night by the agents of the vigilantes, who, in the dark hour of midnight, assassinated the hero . . . by stabbing him and flinging his body into the muddy waters of the Missouri.”<sup>101</sup>

Montana’s culture war continued into the 1890s when a nativist organization called the American Protective Association (“APA”) became politically prominent in the new state, which had been admitted to the Union in 1889. Tensions between the APA and Irish-Catholic Montanans reached a peak during a statewide referendum in 1894 over the location of the permanent state capital: the APA favored Helena while Irish-Catholics, led by Marcus Daly, favored Anaconda, a city that the wealthy Daly had founded himself after building his copper mining business there. Helena won in a close vote but Daly was determined to have a consolation prize. He thus formed a committee to collect \$20,000 to build a gigantic bronze statue of Meagher to be placed on the capital grounds. Contributions were accepted from everyone except, according to the committee, Sanders: “If a subscription be received from Wilbur Fisk Sanders it is to be

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<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 236.

<sup>101</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*

returned . . . through the public press.”<sup>102</sup> On July 4, 1905, the statue was unveiled, showing Meagher mounted and waving a sword in his Union general’s uniform. More than a century later, it still dominates the state Capitol Building grounds. As Emmons writes, the statue “was intended not just to honor Meagher, but also as an open act of Irish defiance. . . . The Meagher Statue was . . . an Irish testament to their participation in the creation and development of Montana.”<sup>103</sup>

While money for the Meagher Statue was being collected, starting in the summer of 1899, a “petrified man” allegedly found on a Missouri River sandbar with a bullet-hole in his head was exhibited at various fairs throughout the country. Apparently, this exhibit of a naturally mummified man was not in itself sufficient to attract carnival-goers’ attention and so the promoter began to claim that the “petrified man” was General Meagher. The *Bozeman Chronicle* and the *New York World* publicized the claim, which was later exposed as a hoax.<sup>104</sup>

In 1913, a Montanan using the name of “Frank Diamond” made a “deathbed” confession that he shot Meagher on board the *G. A. Thompson* and then threw his body overboard in order to receive an \$8,000 bounty from the Vigilantes. However, when he recovered from his illness, he quickly recanted his confession. Diamond’s confession jogged the memory of another long-time Montanan, 86-year old David Billingsley (a.k.a. “Dave Mack”), who claimed that a cadre of Vigilantes had seized Meagher from his bunk, taken him off the ship, and hanged him in an isolated spot before burying him in a

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<sup>102</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 235.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>104</sup> Forney, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 223-224.



secret grave. Billingsley said he knew this because he was a Vigilante himself at the time but did not, of course, take part in the abduction and hanging.<sup>105</sup>

Unless his remains are miraculously found someday, Meagher's murder will always remain mysterious and controversial. But somehow that is fitting. For a man whose every endeavor seemed to generate controversy, why should his death not do the same? Did he die a martyr for his people at the hands of bigots? Or did he die a victim of an unfortunate accident caused by a regrettable illness? Or did he die as a drunken stumblebum? For that matter, why did he *really* fell from his horse at Antietam, or why did he *really* back Lincoln for re-election, and, if he ever got that yacht he yearned for, would he *really* sail it off the shores of Ireland or simply stay on the Eastern seaboard or perhaps take it down to Central America. While serving as the acting-governor of the Montana Territory, his political enemies derisively referred to him as "the Acting One."<sup>106</sup> But when was he acting and when was he being himself? When was he speaking for effect and when was he speaking from the heart? Did he become a leader of Young Ireland or raise a brigade for the Union Army because he believed so strongly in those causes? Or did he do so for personal glory and aggrandizement? Meagher's death was mysterious but so too was his life.

There was little that was mysterious about John Mitchel. Throughout his entire adult life, he remained devoted to the cause of Irish independence. Though some would argue that he allowed himself to be detoured from that cause by his support for the Confederacy, Mitchel did not see things that way. As he explained after the War, "all the time, I was thinking of Ireland, and contending for the South as the Ireland of this

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 221-222

<sup>106</sup> Axline, "With Courage and Undaunted Obstinacy," 181.

continent.”<sup>107</sup> Having returned to the North American continent in late 1866, he would continue to think of Ireland and, over time, he came to think of nothing else.

In fact, Mitchel had been writing a book about Ireland, on and off, for several years, that he finally completed and sent to the publisher in 1867. Called *The History of Ireland, From the Treaty of Limerick to the Present Time*, Mitchel intended this work to be a dispassionate and objective account of the island from the triumph of William of Orange in 1691 to the present. Thus, in his introduction to the 600-page tome, Mitchel promises that “the reader will find in the present work very few opinions or theories put forward at all; the genuine object of the writer being simply to present a clear narrative of the events as they evolved themselves one out of the others.”<sup>108</sup> Two sentences later, however, Mitchel writes that readers of his book should reach “the conclusion, in short, that, while England lives and flourishes, Ireland must die a daily death, and suffer an endless martyrdom; and that if Irishmen are ever to enjoy the rights of human beings, the British Empire must first perish.”<sup>109</sup> Once again, Mitchel could not help being Mitchel. For him, objectivity chiefly meant referring to himself in the third person as “Mitchel” and “Mr. Mitchel” when he described in the book the role that he played in Irish history.

Much of the analysis in the book is borrowed heavily from *The Last Conquest of Ireland (Perhaps)*. Again, he repeats his charge of British genocide relating to the Famine. And again, he assails Daniel O’Connell, especially for canceling the monster meeting in Clontarf in 1843. Mitchel argues that O’Connell should have directly challenged the authorities; even if it meant sacrificing his life and the lives of five or ten

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<sup>107</sup> Quoted in Toomey, “Saving the South With All My Might,” 136.

<sup>108</sup> John Mitchel, *The History of Ireland, From the Treaty of Limerick to the Present Time* (New York: Lynch, Cole & Meehan, 1868), iv-v.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, v.

thousand unarmed people at the rally, such an action would have prevented the deaths of hundreds of thousands in the later Famine.

In the book's conclusion, Mitchel reiterated his old point that, "while England is at peace with other powerful nations, it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to make so much as a serious attempt at a national insurrection, in the face of a government so vigilant and well prepared."<sup>110</sup> Mitchel made that remark with particular reference to a Fenian revolt in Ireland that had recently been squashed by the British. Stephens had been deposed as the Fenian chief in late 1866 and replaced by Colonel Thomas Kelly, a Union veteran of the Civil War, who ordered an uprising in Ireland on March 6, 1867, that was plagued by poor weather and poor organization. About a dozen Fenians were killed and hundreds were arrested and sent to English jails where they were treated horrifically. The barbaric treatment of Fenian prisoners served to keep the republican spirit alive in Ireland and amongst Irish-Americans.<sup>111</sup> But there would be no further armed rebellions in Ireland until the Easter Rising of 1916, launched, as Mitchel had long suggested, when Britain was engaged in a major war. Mitchel did not describe the Fenian rising in *The History of Ireland*, but did hail those men who participated in it: "All honor be to the men who made the daring effort, and staked their lives upon it. . . . No cause is utterly lost so long as it can inspire heroic devotion. No country is hopelessly vanquished whose sons love her better than their lives."<sup>112</sup>

Noticeably, Mitchel hailed the men on the front lines of the failed rebellion; he did not praise the Fenian leaders who had called for the hopeless uprising. And when the American Fenians asked Mitchel to become their president and heal the breach between

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 608.

<sup>111</sup> Hegarty, *John Mitchel*, 117-120.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 609.

the American branch's two wings, he declined to do so, explaining in a February 19, 1867 letter to a Fenian named Mortimer Moynihan:

I disbelieve in the existence of any fighting in Ireland, and in the possibility of making any fight there while England continues to be at peace. This has been my opinion for many years. I have never yet joined in any appeal to countrymen in America to contribute their money towards any such premature and impossible attempt. It is but wasting their means and what is worse, it is wasting and rising up their patriotic enthusiasm and destroying their trust in the faith of man.<sup>113</sup>

When the American Fenians once more offered Mitchel their presidency later in 1867, he again turned them down. By this point, Mitchel wanted nothing more to do with the Fenians, and wondered why they even wanted him as their leader, as he noted in a letter to John Martin:

Why to me? . . . I was not responsible for any of their doings or misdoings. I had not approved of any one of their enterprises, either on the side of Canada or on the side of Ireland. Whenever I had ventured to offer them any advice or give them any warning, it had been uniformly disregarded.<sup>114</sup>

Though Mitchel had despaired of Fenianism by this point, he was still very much interested in promoting the Irish cause, as bleak as its prospects seemed in the fall of 1867. And so, Mitchel decided to move back to New York one more time and start yet another newsweekly, this one aimed directly at the large Irish-American community there. He called his new paper, *The Irish Citizen*, and was confident enough of its future success to bring his family up from Richmond and to buy a house in the Fordham section of the Bronx. Published first in October, 1867, the paper also gave Mitchel the opportunity to provide a job to his remaining son, James, and to work side-by-side with him on the enterprise.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Quoted in McGovern, *John Mitchel*, 304.

<sup>114</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 306.

<sup>115</sup> Hegarty, *John Mitchel*, 123.

*The Irish Citizen* also gave Mitchel a forum in which to blast Fenianism, which he did with relish in a series of pieces entitled “Letters on Fenianism.” He also attacked the Fenians in a February 18, 1868 speech to a New Jersey Zouave regiment in which he claimed to have turned down the Fenian presidency because of their repeated violations of American neutrality laws, especially with respect to the group’s Canadian excursions. Mitchel denounced the use of American soil to launch attacks on Canada. A far better strategy, he asserted, would be to train and arm militia groups in America to fight in Ireland itself when the time was ripe; as American citizens who had not violated any American laws, the American government would come to their assistance if they were imprisoned by the British.<sup>116</sup> Writing in the April 25, 1868 *Irish Citizen*, Mitchel condemned the Fenians for the “*interium in interio* they propose to create in the U.S.,”<sup>117</sup> (emphasis in original), and reminded Irish-Americans of their obligations as American citizens. Coming from an old, “physical force” Irish revolutionary and a dedicated Confederate, Mitchel’s seemingly newfound respect for American law and citizenship was rather stunning. It certainly did not help his newspaper’s circulation with those many Irish-American New Yorkers who remained gung-ho Fenians. But Mitchel was no run-of-the-mill Old Glory-waver. Rather, he was simply making the point that Ireland’s fight was *Ireland’s* fight and that Irish-Americans should use but not abuse their privileges as American citizens in facilitating the struggle for Irish independence.

Though Mitchel resented Andrew Johnson’s administration for currying support with Irish-American voters by tacitly encouraging the Fenian invasions of Canada in 1866 only to oppose them once such operations were underway, he was more incensed

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<sup>116</sup> McGovern, *John Mitchel*, 308.

<sup>117</sup> Quoted in Keneally, *The Great Shame*, 445.

that the Fenians naively convinced themselves that the American military would not intervene against them. As Mitchel wrote in the February 27, 1869 *Irish Citizen*, no administration, whether Republican or Democratic, “could have suffered that invasion of Canada to take place, so long as the United States and England were at peace.”<sup>118</sup> Yet, in May, 1870, the same exact scenario played itself out as the Fenians invaded Canada twice that month, hoping that President Ulysses S. Grant’s administration would come to their aid; instead, American military forces arrested the Fenians as they withdrew after being beaten back quickly by Canadian militias. Still, before the congressional elections that fall, Grant suspended the jail sentences of several Fenian leaders caught after the raids. In the June 11 *Irish Citizen*, Mitchel hoped that the Fenians “have learned a hard lesson. We suppose these same Fenians will *not* march a third time to invade Canada.”<sup>119</sup> (Emphasis in original.) Mitchel also predicted that Fenianism was finally fading out: “The real Irish element in America is not represented in those noisy meetings for collection of money under pretense of equipping military expeditions.”<sup>120</sup> A far better use of Irish-American contributions, he argued in his paper the following week, would be to fund a gun-running operation to Ireland since “without rifles the Irish must perish”<sup>121</sup> when the time for the long-awaited rebellion finally arrives.

As Mitchel predicted, Fenianism was soon overtaken in America in the spring of 1871 by a new Irish independence movement called the Irish Confederation, led by such prominent Fenian exiles from Ireland as Jeremiah O’Donovan Rossa and John Devoy. Mitchel liked the fact that this organization publicly advocated Irish independence and

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<sup>118</sup> Quoted in McGovern, *John Mitchel*, 310.

<sup>119</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 311.

<sup>120</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*

<sup>121</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 313.

disdained secrecy and oaths and yet, by that fall, he had lost faith in the group, claiming in the October 14 *Irish Citizen* that it had “sunk into mere fenianism.”<sup>122</sup>

In late 1869, Mitchel welcomed his old friend John Martin to the States on a lecture tour that would last into the new year. By now, Martin was also Mitchel’s brother-in-law, having married Mitchel’s sister, Henrietta, in Ireland in 1868. Always more moderate than Mitchel, when Martin returned to Ireland, he became involved in the Home Rule movement, a peaceful and political drive to restore an independent Irish parliament. Soon, both Martin and P.J. Smyth would be elected to the British Parliament as members of a burgeoning Home Rule Party. But Mitchel eschewed the new movement, which for him, sounded like a retread of O’Connell’s old constitutional reform efforts. In the *Irish Citizen*, he continued to promote a full-scale revolution in Ireland, predicting that the Home Rule movement’s inevitable failure would convince the Irish that constitutionalism was the wrong path to Irish independence.<sup>123</sup>

Though the main focus of the *Irish Citizen* remained the fight for that independence, Mitchel did not shy away from addressing American political issues as well in his paper. Not surprisingly, the weekly came down hard against Radical Reconstruction of the South, opposing citizenship for blacks and the impeachment of President Johnson. Mitchel also editorialized against Sabbatarianism, remaining suspicious of all sectarian-driven reform efforts. Though Mitchel recognized religion as an important source of cultural cohesion and staunchly supported religious liberty, he was

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<sup>122</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 323.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 323-326.

a committed secularist to the extent that he opposed turning religiously-based social mores into laws governing the behavior of those that did not care to follow such mores.<sup>124</sup>

Besides commenting on American and Irish political controversies, Mitchel assumed the alias of “Professor Cornelius O’Shaughnessy” in authoring an ongoing series of *Irish Citizen* articles on Irish culture, geography, and history.<sup>125</sup> Mitchel’s health was rapidly deteriorating due to the tuberculosis he had contracted in Fort Monroe and, as he faced the prospect of death in the not-too-distant future, he became increasingly absorbed with all facets of the land of his birth, constantly staring at a map of Ireland in his home. Though the *Irish Citizen* had given him the pleasure of working with his son on a regular basis, the project had not been very profitable and Mitchel’s failing health and eyesight made it too much of a burden to continue; its last issue was published on July 27, 1872.<sup>126</sup>

Afterwards, Mitchel contributed some articles to the *Irish American* and wrote a few entries for Appleton’s Cyclopaedia. Several of his *Irish American* pieces were compiled in his last book, *The Crusade of the Period*, published in 1873, which took direct aim at arguments made by James Anthony Froude, a British historian, during an American lecture tour in 1872. Froude was an unblushing apologist for British imperialism with blatant anti-Irish and anti-Catholic tendencies. Hardly a responsible historian, there was enough in Froude’s work to criticize without stooping to his level, but in response to Froude’s whitewashing of historical British atrocities, Mitchel dismissed as Orange propaganda the established fact that thousands of English and

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 319.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 318-319.

<sup>126</sup> Keneally, *The Great Shame*, 526; Hegarty, *John Mitchel*, 125.



Scottish settlers were massacred by Irish natives in Ulster during a Catholic rebellion in 1641.<sup>127</sup>

Defending Ireland from Froude's attacks stoked a burning desire that had been building in Mitchel's heart to return to Ireland to die. As he wrote to his sister, Matilda, early in 1873: "I do hate this city and this country, and would like nothing so well as the chance of spending the remainder of my days amongst my own people."<sup>128</sup> However, having escaped from custody before his 14-year period of banishment was up, Mitchel was legally barred from returning to Ireland. If he went back there, he could indeed spend the rest of his life in Ireland, albeit in an Irish jail. Either that, or he could simply be sent back into exile.

While Mitchel pondered such distressing possibilities, he could at least take comfort in his children's happiness: his daughter Minnie was happily married to a former Confederate colonel while his youngest child, Isabel, had converted to Catholicism like her late sister and married a doctor. But Mitchel would have to endure one more family tragedy: in the summer of 1873, his son James lost both his young wife and their firstborn child to a fever shortly after the baby's birth.<sup>129</sup>

In his grief, Mitchel was comforted by a testimonial gift of \$10,000 from some of his supporters in Ireland who heard that he was ailing. Mitchel tried to earn money on his own by undertaking a lecture tour but the strain of such an undertaking only worsened his condition. Meanwhile, the secret ballot had arrived in Ireland and Irish nationalists had been nominating Mitchel for various positions including a seat in Parliament. When a seat in County Tipperary began to look like it would be vacant soon due to the illness of a

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<sup>127</sup> McGovern, *John Mitchel*, 327-328.

<sup>128</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 328.

<sup>129</sup> Keneally, *The Great Shame*, 445, 526; Hegarty, *John Mitchel*, 125.

member in the summer of 1874, Mitchel was asked to return to his homeland and campaign openly for the position.<sup>130</sup>

Not that Mitchel would have ever taken a seat in Parliament, of course; he made clear to his boosters that he would run only as a protest candidate and not as a Home Rule Party member. Mitchel insisted on running as an “Independent Nationalist,” a term that described him perfectly. And so, accompanied by his daughter Isabel and Doctor William Carroll, an Irish nationalist physician from Philadelphia who had served as a surgeon in the Union Army, Mitchel left New York for Ireland on July 14.<sup>131</sup>

Mitchel had not set foot on the old sod for twenty-six years but Ireland had not forgotten him; he was welcomed openly as a hero and the authorities let him move freely about the island. Tensions had considerably eased in Ireland from the Famine-ravaged year of 1848 when Mitchel had been exiled. The authorities did not care to risk a confrontation with a dying old polemicist nor, frankly, was Mitchel intent on fomenting an immediate rebellion of any sort. Landing in Queenstown in County Cork in late July, he spent the next two months traveling to Dublin, Belfast, and, of course, his old family home near Newry in Ulster’s County Down. Though he commented at times on issues of the day during his travels, the symbolic nature of his candidacy was illustrated by the fact that he never set foot in County Tipperary, where voters would decide his electoral fate, should the parliamentary seat become vacant as expected.<sup>132</sup>

Returning to New York to await developments, on December 8, Mitchel addressed a fund-raising gathering of a new Irish-American nationalist organization called Clan na Gael at the Cooper Institute. Clan na Gael was a secret group that, in

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<sup>130</sup> McGovern, *John Mitchel*, 329.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 330; Keneally, *The Great Shame*, 522, 526.

<sup>132</sup> Hegarty, *John Mitchel*, 127, 130.

contrast to the grandiose schemes of the Fenians, focused on more realistic objectives and rejected the notion of a massive revolt in Ireland unless Britain was at war. Doctor Carroll was one of its leaders and the members of the old Directory also joined the Clan. Mitchel told the group all about his recent trip and donated his speaking fee to the group's cause *du jour*, the release of captive Fenians in Australia.<sup>133</sup> As Mitchel told the gathering, "When I was in Australian captivity I never could have dreamed of any possibility of escape, but for the means supplied for that purpose by our good countrymen."<sup>134</sup> Mitchel would never address an American audience again.

With the Tipperary seat having finally been vacated, on February 6, 1875, Mitchel left America for the last time, as he and his son, James, boarded an Ireland-bound steamer from New York. While Mitchel was still en route, on February 16, he was elected to Parliament from Tipperary having been unopposed. On February 17, Mitchel arrived in Ireland but, on the following day, Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli moved Parliament to declare Mitchel ineligible for the seat due to his status as an escaped felon. On February 20, after considerable debate, Parliament voided Mitchel's election and scheduled a new election for March 11.<sup>135</sup>

Now, Mitchel really got his "Irish up," announcing, first, that he would stand again for election on March 11, second, that he would not serve if elected and, third, that he would continue to stand time and time again as long as Parliament kept voiding the election results. This time around, Mitchel had an opponent, a Tory named Stephen Moore. Given that opposition, Mitchel mounted a more traditional campaign, telling a crowd in Tipperary, "I am an Irishman, and I think you all seem to acknowledge that. . . .

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<sup>133</sup> McGovern, *John Mitchel*, 334.

<sup>134</sup> Quoted in Keneally, *The Great Shame*, 522.

<sup>135</sup> Hegarty, *John Mitchel*, 131.

I suppose Down is as Irish as Tipperary.”<sup>136</sup> Regardless of whether his predominantly Catholic listeners in southern Ireland accepted the pleas of the old Presbyterian from northern Ireland that he was as “Irish” as they were, they did not support him because he was Irish but because he had sacrificed more than most in Ireland’s age-old fight against British oppression. Mitchel realized this himself, as revealed in a victory statement that he released following his triumph over Moore by a count of 3,114 to 746:

In offering myself to the electors of Tipperary I had nothing to go upon but my past life, and I take it that the chief part about my past life which recommended me to the people of Tipperary was that I had made no peace with England.<sup>137</sup>

Mitchel did not have long to savor his victory; he was already on his deathbed in the house he grew up in when he received the news. By that point, James was en route to New York, where Jenny was getting ready to leave for Ireland, having heard that her husband was seriously ailing. But his brother William, his sisters, and, of course, his old friend, John Martin, were there to comfort him. Retaining his wit to the end, he asked his brother one day, “Am I dying, William? For that would be a serious business for me.”<sup>138</sup> He finally did die on March 20.

Despite a driving rain, some ten thousand mourners attended his funeral three days later with large numbers of Catholic priests and Presbyterian ministers walking ahead of his hearse, which led him to a Newry cemetery where he was entombed with his parents. While at the funeral, John Martin grew weak and had to be helped into a

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<sup>136</sup> Quoted in McGovern, *John Mitchel*, 335.

<sup>137</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>138</sup> Quoted in Keneally, *The Great Shame*, 528.

carriage. Taken back to the house where his lifelong friend had just died to recuperate there, Martin never did; he died in that same house on March 29.<sup>139</sup>

Months later, Jenny finally arrived in Newry to place a monument for Mitchel near his tomb. The monument included this description: “After twenty-seven years in exile for the sake of Ireland, he returned with honour to die among his own people.”<sup>140</sup>

Indeed he had. Mitchel was 59-years old when he died; he would have had to live beyond the century mark to have witnessed the Easter Rising in 1916 or the birth of the Irish Republic in 1922. It was not to be. The time was not right in 1875 for such events to occur; nor was it in 1848 when Mitchel was exiled. But without Mitchel as an inspiration for the generations of Irish republicans who followed him, those events may never have occurred. Virtually unknown in American history, Mitchel cast a long shadow over the Irish independence movement. His *Jail Journal*, *The Last Conquest of Ireland (Perhaps)*, and *The History of Ireland, From the Treaty of Limerick to the Present Time* all helped shape the historical and political mindsets of future Irish republicans. Though his old nemesis O’Connell has always been more revered in Ireland, Mitchel’s disciples can always point to history to prove him right: when a large portion of Ireland was finally freed in 1922, it did not happen through peaceful and constitutional means, as O’Connell had always urged, but by a “physical force” revolution precipitated initially by an uprising when Britain was at war. Mitchel did not live to see it, but his game plan eventually worked.

After the failure of Young Ireland’s rebellion, committed Irish nationalists kept the goals of that movement alive. Their children were taught the rudiments of Irish

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<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 528.

<sup>140</sup> Quoted in Hegarty, *John Mitchel*, 137.

republicanism through political catechisms, which mimicked the question-and-answer style of popular Catholic catechisms of that age. One common exchange in the republican catalogue went like this:

MASTER: For what crime was John Mitchel sent to Bermuda by the Saxon government?

BOYS: For his love of Ireland; and for his noble and brave attempt to save her from starvation, degradation, misery and slavery.

MASTER: When John Mitchel comes back to Ireland, what will he do?

BOYS: He will make Ireland a nation once again.<sup>141</sup>

When Mitchel came back to Ireland he did not quite make Ireland a nation once again; that would come later, in accordance with the plan of liberation that he had outlined long ago. He did, however, upon coming back to Ireland, use the occasion to poke a stick into the eye of the British Lion one last time before running away into Eternity, never to be placed in British chains again.

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<sup>141</sup> Quoted in Keneally, *The Great Shame*, 405.

## EPILOGUE

Jenny Mitchel lived in New York for the rest of her life, supported by generous gifts from Irish-Americans that totaled more than \$30,000. She lived to be 79-years old, dying on December 31, 1899, when the century that her husband despised had almost come to an end.

John and Jenny's surviving son James remained in New York as well and eventually remarried after the tragic death of his first wife and child. His new wife, Mary Purroy, a public school teacher, came from the politically connected Purroy family; her brother served as a Bronx alderman and as the New York City Fire Commissioner. James became the city's fire marshal himself, earning a reputation as an ace arson detective. In 1879, James and Mary had a son, John Purroy Mitchel, who would become the youngest mayor in the history of New York City, elected in 1913 on an anti-Tammany Hall reform platform as the nominee of the Fusion Party.<sup>1</sup>

In office, Mayor Mitchel showed that he had inherited his grandfather's honesty, integrity, and forthrightness but also his lack of tact. Unlike his grandfather, Mayor Mitchel was a Catholic but still managed to alienate himself from the Irish masses of his city by investigating Tammany Hall's connection to church-sponsored orphanages and by ordering the police to crack down on pro-Irish independence rallies held after the Easter Rising, an action that must have sent his grandfather's casket into turbo-spin. Irish culture and history meant little to Mayor Mitchel; he was an assimilated American to the core. Embracing Teddy Roosevelt's muscular Americanism as World War I broke out and, with America entering the war on Britain's side, he used that alliance as a further

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<sup>1</sup> Edwin R. Lewinson, *John Purroy Mitchel: The Boy Mayor of New York* (New York: Astra Books, 1965), 22-23, 100-101.

reason to squash pro-Irish, and thus anti-British, demonstrations in the city. Directly challenging his opponents' patriotism while running for re-election in 1917, Mayor Mitchel's self-proclaimed "100% American" campaign went down to defeat in the multi-ethnic city.<sup>2</sup>

Following his loss, the former Mayor Mitchel proved that he had the courage of his pro-war convictions by securing a commission in the Air Corps and training to become a fighter pilot. On July 6, 1918, however, he was killed on a training flight in Lake Charles, Louisiana. Over a million mourners turned out for his funeral procession.<sup>3</sup> Since 1926, visitors to New York's Central Park have been greeted at one of its entrances by a large, gilt bust of the "Boy Mayor," a man so much like, and unlike his grandfather.<sup>4</sup> John Purroy Mitchel was John Mitchel's only ancestor of historical note.

After searching in vain for her husband's body along the banks of the Missouri River, Libby Meagher returned to New York City where she welcomed her late husband's only surviving son into her home in the early 1870s. Known in America as Thomas Bennett Meagher, in 1872, the young man entered West Point but he was discharged four months later due to academic deficiencies in French and mathematics. He initially stayed in New York and became a member of Clan na Gael, stunning old-time Irish nationalists and former Brigade members by his physical resemblance to his father. Eventually, he left Libby and moved to California where he married a wealthy woman in 1884 and settled down in San Francisco, working as a civil servant in the San Francisco Mint and sailing yachts with the Pacific Yacht Club. Rendered a widower in

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<sup>2</sup> John M. McClymer, "Of 'Mornin' Glories' and 'Fine Old Oaks': John Purroy Mitchel, Al Smith, and Reform as an Expression of Irish-American Aspiration," in *The New York Irish*, eds. Bayor and Meagher, 382-384, 389-392.

<sup>3</sup> Lewinson, *John Purroy Mitchel*, 253-254.

<sup>4</sup> Hegarty, *John Mitchel*, 157.



1893, he rejected Libby's offer to adopt his eight-year-old son. Later that decade, Thomas moved to the Philippines, where he worked for the Fellowship of Eagles, a benevolent fraternal organization.<sup>5</sup>

Meanwhile, Libby continued living in her father's mansion on Fifth Avenue but, after his death, a relative apparently plundered the estate and, in 1887, she was granted a \$50 per month pension by Congress on grounds of financial hardship. A year earlier, she had traveled to Waterford, Ireland to donate some of her late husband's memorabilia to that city, including some portraits, a sword, a general's sash, a couple of Irish Brigade battle flags, and a "sprig of green" from Fredericksburg while tens of thousands cheered her on.<sup>6</sup> In 1887, she made a final trip to Montana to donate a painting of her late husband to the Society of Pioneers; while there, she also purchased a \$3,000 share in a gold mine.<sup>7</sup> Back in New York and still desperate for a child, she adopted a young man and changed his last name to Meagher.<sup>8</sup> By 1902, she had moved into a cottage in Rye, New York from whence she wrote to an old friend in Montana asking him to sell her interest in the gold mine, noting that "I came to end my days here, but the city of NY is taxing my small income so heavily that I do not know if I can stand it."<sup>9</sup> She died in on July 5, 1906, at the age of seventy-five; she had never remarried.

Three years later, on November 29, 1909, Thomas Bennett Meagher died in the Philippines from pneumonia following a failed suicide attempt. On December 15, 1910, a Celtic cross was erected in Manila in his memory at a ceremony officiated by the archbishop of Manila. Apparently, he had gone too far to turn back from his suicide

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<sup>5</sup> Smith, "Meagher in Love and War," 213-214, 216.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 215-216.

<sup>7</sup> Forney, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, 229.

<sup>8</sup> Smith, "Meagher in Love and War," 216.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Keneally, *The Great Shame*, 457.

attempt but, fortunately, not far enough to succeed, as the archbishop's presence at that ceremony would seem to indicate that General Meagher's son made it to confession before he died, an opportunity denied his father when he fell off the steamship so many years before. Meagher's son was well beloved in the Philippines, according to a letter sent to the *Waterford News* in 1911 by the head of his memorial committee, who also noted that Thomas Bennett Meagher, unlike his famous father, was a rather modest type: "It was a long time before [this] writer, and many others, too, were aware that he was the only son of one of the great Irish heroes of history."<sup>10</sup> Meagher's subsequent ancestors have also kept a low profile down through the decades.

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<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Smith, "Meagher in Love and War," 215.

## CONCLUSION

There is much truth in the old saying, “the child makes the man.” Thomas Francis Meagher grew up as the son of a wealthy philanthropist and statesman who imparted to his son the manners and education of a gentleman, an abiding Catholic faith, and a certain sense of *noblesse oblige*. Meagher’s father also ensured that his son was surrounded by doting relatives who showered love upon him when he lost his mother at an early age. Unintentionally, those same relatives would spoil the youngster.

All his life, Meagher would exhibit the marks of a spoiled child. He frequently acted as if the rules did not apply to him but did so in such a blissfully innocent fashion that observers did not whether to be outraged or amused. For example, he repeatedly decried political patronage and its evils while desperately trying on several occasions to gain favors and positions himself through his personal connections. He would also routinely denigrate “political” generals even though he was the prototypical “political” general himself. After Bull Run, he admitted that he lacked the competence to be a colonel but then accepted a general’s commission without a moment’s hesitation. Spoiled as a child, Meagher was raised to believe that he was someone special and that he was destined for great things. When he skyrocketed to fame as a young man in Ireland on the basis of a single speech, the experience merely confirmed what he had always suspected, that he was destined for greatness, that he would be a “participator in historic commotions” and, ultimately, the “Master of the Situation.” When things did not go his way, Meagher became frustrated and flustered. Things were supposed to go his way; he was Thomas Francis Meagher.

John Mitchel, on the other hand, was not a spoiled child. His father could not afford to raise his family in luxury on a minister's wages but he always made sure that they had what they needed. As a spiritual man, he placed material possessions in their proper perspective and his son John would never become a materialist either. What Mitchel did learn from his father was how to stand up and fight passionately for one's sincere beliefs. For years, Mitchel watched his father wage a costly and schismatic battle defending the inviolability of an individual's conscience. Through the pulpit and the printed word, Mitchel's father fought passionately for his principles and no one ever doubted the sincerity of his convictions. Though Mitchel himself would never imbibe his father's spirituality, he did adopt the core principle that one's private judgment is sacrosanct and that one should always follow one's conscience. He also inherited his father's fighting spirit; he just had to find something to fight for.

That something turned out to be Irish independence. It was the cause that gave meaning to Mitchel's life. His conscience told him that it was a good cause and his experiences fighting an unjust legal system as a budding young Irish lawyer bore it out. Now, all that was left was to throw himself wholeheartedly into the task, which Mitchel promptly did.

Meagher's motives in joining Young Ireland were probably not as pure. As an Irish Catholic, he knew that his people had suffered for centuries under British oppression. But Meagher also had a thirst for adventure and was hoping, indeed, almost expecting to make a name for himself; perhaps he could do so through the Irish nationalist movement.

So the two men from wildly divergent backgrounds became unlikely allies in the fight for Irish independence. Waging that fight with unremitting intensity if not always prudence, they were both exiled for their efforts and eventually made it to America where one embraced his new country and the other gravitated to its most atypical region and publicly encouraged that region to break away from the whole. The one became a committed American while the other did not. If the child does indeed make the man, apparently, America does not always make the American.

When Mitchel first arrived in New York, Meagher gave a speech welcoming his old friend to the United States. In that speech, Meagher hailed his new country:

Look to America --- look to Austria, look to Italy and even Russia and who will have the temerity to say they stand the competition with America. . . . When a nation is free, the nation is active, adventurous, occupied with great projects, competent to achieve great ends. . . . The most prosperous days, which nations have enjoyed, have been those in which their freedom was most conspicuous.<sup>1</sup>

When Meagher looked at America, he saw himself. And he liked what he saw. Just like America, Meagher thought of himself as being “active, adventurous, occupied with great projects, competent to achieve great ends.” He also wanted a yacht and “a carriage and four.” And how would he become all that and acquire all those things? Through the freedom that made America unique. America was a good fit for an ambitious, adventurous, confident man because America itself shared those very characteristics. It was a great nation for a man who thought he was something special because America was something special. And Meagher knew what made it special: freedom.

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Cornish, “An Irish Republican Abroad,” 147.

It was not a great nation for John Mitchel. He did not pine after a “carriage and four” or a yacht. He was not particularly adventurous or preoccupied with great individual projects. He was not so much interested in being a “participator in historic commotions,” as he was in seeing certain “historic commotions” bring about tangible results, such as the independence of Ireland or the survival of the Confederacy.

As a racist, Mitchel honestly viewed Southern slavery as a positive good. But slavery and racism ran counter to America’s founding principles of freedom and equality under the law. Though Meagher told his fellow Northerners before the War to “mind your own affairs . . . and let slavery alone,” after the war, he was calling for black citizenship in light of the sacrifices made during the War by the “Colored Brigades.” His experiences in America had changed his viewpoint on black America; America continued to make him more of an American. Mitchel, on the other hand, was unlikely to change his innately racist outlook no matter how many Frederick Douglasses he met or how many “colored” brigades he saw in action. Meagher broke with the Irish-American community over Lincoln’s re-election because he thought that a Lincoln victory was in the best interest of the nation as a whole, setting aside the parochial concerns of his ethnic group. America was not only making him an American, but an unhyphenated one to boot. While Mitchel went overseas to work for the Fenians, Meagher studiously avoided making any commitments to them. Meagher saw his future in America; Mitchel was intent on returning to Ireland before he died. Fittingly then, Meagher died serving the United States government; Mitchel died in the Ireland that he loved serving the cause that was nearest to his heart.

Both Thomas Francis Meagher and John Mitchel began their earthly journeys as Irishmen. Both later became Irish-Americans. But only Meagher became an American; Mitchel went back to being an Irishman before he died. America had made one American, but not two.

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## VITA

Joseph Jude Rzeppa was born in Detroit, Michigan on March 7, 1960. He is the son of the late Edward J. Rzeppa and Imelda McIntyre Rzeppa. A 1978 graduate of Brother Rice High School in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, he graduated Phi Beta Kappa with a Bachelor of Arts degree in religion from Texas Christian University in Fort Worth in 1983. In 1987, he received a Juris Doctor degree from Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **THOMAS FRANCIS MEAGHER AND JOHN MITCHEL: TWO IRISHMEN, TWO IRISH-AMERICANS, ONE AMERICAN**

By Joseph Jude Rzeppa, M.A., 2007  
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Thomas Francis Meagher and John Mitchel were Irish nationalists who escaped to America from a British penal colony in the early 1850s. Meagher settled in New York and became a patriotic American. Mitchel eventually settled in Tennessee where he became a polemicist for Southern independence.

During the Civil War, Meagher raised a brigade of Irish-Americans to fight for the Union while Mitchel edited two Richmond newspapers. After the War, Meagher became the acting-governor of the Montana Territory while Mitchel was imprisoned by the United States Army. After his release, Mitchel turned his attention solely to the Irish independence movement.

Meagher died in 1867 when he fell off a riverboat in Montana. Mitchel died in 1875 after returning triumphantly to Ireland where he was elected to Parliament as a protest candidate. America made Meagher an American; it did not do the same for Mitchel, who remained an Irishman at heart.