

## **Thomas Francis Meagher**

Contributed by Brian P. Hegarty Jr.

### **PART I: TO BE IRISH IN IRELAND**

Thomas Francis Meagher (pronounced Mahr) was born August 3, 1823 in one of the largest houses of the oldest city in Ireland – Waterford. His father was the mayor of Waterford, British MP and a wealthy Catholic merchant at a time when Ireland had been occupied by Great Britain for hundreds of years. Catholics had been barred from practicing their religion or speaking their language. At one time, an Irishman's fingernails would have been pulled out for playing the harp. Still, by the 1800s, the young Meagher could have settled into a fine home and an easy life of picnics and fancy-dress balls. But he gets radicalized rather dramatically by the Great Famine. There was plenty of food on the Island while one million-people died and two million more emigrated. There was grain, beef, corn, wheat, oats, barley – food from Irish land and Irish labor, but it didn't go into Irish mouths. The streets of Ireland's cities were filled with starving families driven from their farms, yet Britain insisted that crops continue to flow out to foreign markets. So, one of the things that Thomas Meagher tried to do was to stop food from being exported from Ireland. And there are all these documents now that have come out and show there was a British policy called extermination. They thought the Irish had bred too fast, and this was nature's way – in some cases they called it God's way – of culling the Irish. It was so much more than a potato famine, of course there was an awful blight on the potato crop, but it was so much more than that. The term genocide didn't exist back in the early Victorian age, but many of historians now apply the term genocide to what happened.

The task of doing something about Irish starvation fell to Charles Trevelyan, an inflexible nobleman from one of England's oldest families. He faced a flood of criticism from the United States and Europe and agreed to let food relief ships dock in Irish ports. The problem was that Trevelyan could not just give the food away, the Irish would have to pay for it otherwise this would upset the hand of private enterprise. So, the food was stored, under guard, at major cities distributed only after it had been purchased. "Dependence on charity is not to be made an agreeable mode of life", said Trevelyan. England's most educated thinkers, provided an explanation so they could sleep better at night – divine design. "The Great Hunger", he wrote could very well be the "the judgement of God," the Almighty's answer to overpopulation. "Being altogether beyond the power of man, the cure has been applied by the direct stroke of an all-wise Providence." In other words, "the cure."

Horried, Thomas Meagher joined the young Ireland movement and as a gifted orator raised his voice. Meagher benefited from a quality education during which he won awards for poetry and debating – the man could talk. He was a gifted orator and used these skills which gave him a strong voice in the Young Ireland movement. These young revolutionaries had lost patience with the elder statesmen Daniel O'Connell's non-violent approach to gaining independence from Britain, and now advocated armed insurrection. Meagher's fiery speeches at Dublin's Conciliation Hall earned him the nickname "Meagher of the sword."

Meanwhile, Meagher conceived an idea for an Irish flag: One third green for Catholic Ireland, one third orange for the Protestant north and a unifying white in the center. He presented the flag in Dublin. "I present it to my native land," said Meagher. "And I trust that the old country will not refuse this symbol of new life from one of her youngest children." A few days later, the banner flew over Waterford, and in time became the national flag of Ireland.

When the Young Ireland rebellion finally mounted an uprising in 1848 the pathetic skirmish took place with a gun fight with the local police in County Tipperary that became known as the “Battle for Widow McCormack’s cabbage patch.” Meagher and a handful of other rebel leaders were sentenced to hang, then to be drawn and quartered. It was the most fascinating tempted revolution in modern history because these people didn’t know diddly about fighting a war. They were young and in love with each other’s words and of course they were all well-educated. They were poets, educated women, philosophers and journalists. One of the women who was in love with Thomas Meagher was a poet named Speranza. She went on to become the mother of Oscar Wilde. They thought they could take on the British empire with words alone. But they eventually had to take up arms, trying to motivate and move a largely illiterate peasant class – the masses - to revolt against their British overlords with poetry and words. Queen Victoria, bowed to public pressure, commuted these sentences to life in the penal colony of “Van Dieman’s Land” in Australia (now referred to as Tasmania).

You might ask what was Great Britain’s biggest export to Ireland? Troops. Great Britain had more troops in Ireland than colonial India. One fourth of the earth’s land surface has the union jack flying over it and the only part of the British empire that’s totally ungovernable is 30 miles away, is Ireland. There was a larger garrison in Ireland than there was in India for more than 200 years, troops stationed ready to level any city that would threaten uprising against British rule.

After three years of penal servitude, Meagher escaped from Australia in an open rowboat and spent 10 days on Waterhouse Island before rescued by the merchant vessel *Elizabeth Thompson*. A few months later in 1852, he ended up in New York where he was greeted as a hero. He felt at home here as one out of every four New Yorkers out of a city of 600,000 were born in Meagher’s homeland.

Thomas Francis Meagher was an Irishman who thought often about Ireland and his fellow countrymen who were dispersed around the world in a migration unlike no other due to British atrocities. Meagher might have said “We have a burden of memory. That burden of memory is our history, and we will not forget that. We’ll not forget the famine, we’ll not forget the centuries of oppression.” If Meagher was a keynote speaker at a banquet he’d might say “If there’s a skeleton at this feast. That skeleton is that burden of memory.”