

Thomas Francis Meagher

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PART II: TO BE IRISH IN AMERICA

Thomas Francis Meagher is arrested in Ireland for sedition, never firing a shot, and is banned to Tasmania. For a man who speaks 5 languages he is lonely and ends up talking to his only companion, his dog. He says he will never make his mark as long as he stays here. The British had this idea for political prisoners. If you give your gentlemen's code of conduct and promise that you would not escape they did not put you in jail. He is put into a 7 by 7-mile zone which he was never supposed to leave. The way he gives up his parole is typical of the flamboyant Meagher. Thomas Meagher sends this note to the governor general of Tasmania.

Sir:

Circumstances of recent occurrence urge upon me the necessity of resigning my ticket of leave, and consequently withdrawing my parole.

I write this letter, therefore, respectfully to appraise you, that after 12 o'clock tomorrow noon, I shall no longer consider myself bound by the obligation which that parole imposes.

In the meantime, 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 honour to your Government at present inflicts.

I have the honour to be, Sir, with sincere respect, Your obedient servant,

Thomas Francis Meagher

The governor sends troops to get him and Meagher gets on his horse and in his flamboyant way raises his arm and says, "I'm Thomas Francis Meagher catch me if you can" and then takes to the Australian wild.

Thomas Meagher arrives in New York in 1852 when one in four New Yorkers are Irish from Ireland. He comes ashore and is appalled to see the degradation of his people. He sees the Irish living in squalor. The New York Times writes articles about Paddy's living with pigs. But he's also encouraged because some of the educated in Ireland have done very well – becoming lawyers, prosecutors, judges, writers, and politicians. The Irish hail Meagher as the Savior of the Irish masses. They say this man can unite the Irish masses – calling him essentially Jesus for the Irish. The backlash is the Know-Nothing party which is the second biggest political party in the U.S. in the 1850's. It's the only party in our history founded for one reason and that is its anti-Irish stance. So, the Know-Nothings attack Meagher and call his escape dishonorable. How could escaping from a penal colony where he is supposed to spend the rest of his life dishonorable?

On August 9 of that year, Meagher appeared in New York's Superior Court and announced his plan to become an American, taking the oath of intent. With relish, he unshackled himself from his jailer. "I, Thomas Francis Meagher, do declare on oath this is my intention to become a citizen of the United States and to renounce forever all allegiance and fidelity to any foreign Prince, Potentate, State or Sovereignty whatever, and particularly the Queen of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland." Damn, that felt good, Meagher confided. Meagher, eventually became an American citizen when the civil war broke out.

Meagher became a lawyer, a lecturer and speaker, and founded a weekly newspaper called the *Irish News* and wrote travel articles for the *Harper's Magazine*. For a man with a restless tongue, the career solution was obvious: speak. He speaks to audiences of 5,000 to 10,000 giving his elaborate story of his escape. In the fall of 1852, he was booked into New York's Metropolitan Hall for his first lecture, on the penal colony of Australia. The New York Times reported 6,000 people packed the hall. The New York Herald wrote, "Never has a building so filled with human beings before." Afterward, Meagher received a check for \$1,650. He remarks "What a country this is. They would pay me to talk."

Meagher is agnostic on slavery saying, "I'm against it but there's nothing we could do about it, so we might as well not break up the Union over it." But the minute the war breaks out it becomes a dramatic change for him. He says "this is the country that gave us refuge, this is the country that took us in after the catastrophe (famine). I myself am an exile. I'm a fugitive. I'm wanted by the British Empire, yet I'm a friend of Presidents in this country. I'd be in a cell back in Britain - we have no choice but to fight for the Union." Meagher received a general commission directly from President Lincoln. Lincoln liked Meagher and vice versa even though they were from different political parties. Lincoln made time to see Meagher even though he saw no one else. Lincoln shrewdly named Meagher a general as a way to win over the Irish masses to the Union cause. He then forms the Irish Brigade which is formed out of the fighting 69th militia in New York City.

Meagher performs admirably in all major battles of the war. Word was the Irish couldn't organize a parade without getting into fisticuffs let alone march in formation without walking backwards and crisscrossing. They go down to Bull Run, the first battle of the Civil War and it's a southern rout except for the Irish. The Irish did not run and suddenly all the stories in the papers were about where did these Irish warriors of the Irish Brigade come from. They get all this amazing press. Meagher returns to New York triumphant. It's a loss for the Union but a win for the Irish. Because they proved themselves in battle, Lincoln visits and asks, "I need to see some soldiers who can fight." He pays a visit to the Irish and compliments Meagher for not running. Sometime later, Lincoln was seen after the battle of Malvern Hill grasping the banner of the 69th saying "God Bless the Irish" and then kissing the flag. It should be noted that no king of England, no prime minister, would ever do that.

The Irish perform admirably at Antietam's 'Bloody Lane.' However, the worst for the Irish is Fredericksburg where it's going to be a complete slaughter. General Burnside orders the Irish Brigade march up Marye's heights to take this stone wall. There's no cover and they are utterly exposed. Meagher knows it's going to be a disaster. He tells his men to take a little sprig of green boxwood and put it under their cap and he says, "when they find our bodies they will know we die as Irishmen." They were destroyed. He leads 1200 men on several charges to the wall and only 250 live. Robert E. Lee while watching this all happen says, "there goes those damn green flags again."

After Fredericksburg, he fell into disrepute because so many of his Irish people had died that Meagher was just disgusted. He could no longer face the mothers of people who'd died on his watch. Many of his Irish recruits were from families he had known in Ireland. Numerous recruiting efforts to replenish the lost numbers in the Irish Brigade proved unsuccessful as the Irish community expressed a dissatisfaction with the war. Many of the Irish felt they were taking most of the burden for the war and since Meagher stuck to the union cause, he was no longer held in such high esteem as when he first arrived in New York. The draft riots might have cost him his life at the hands of his fellow Irishmen had he been there in New York when the rioting broke out. He resigned from the army in May of 1863 when General Hooker refused his request to replenish soldiers for the Irish brigade.

After the war, Meagher became the territorial acting governor of Montana. He went west only to discover a new form of political infighting in which power struggles were often resolved with a rope. He had his enemies. In July 1867, he was most likely stabbed on the steamboat where he was staying and pushed into the Missouri river. His body was never recovered.

Thomas Francis Meagher is probably the most famous Irish American up until John F. Kennedy. He became friends with Abraham Lincoln, Chief Red Cloud of the Sioux and Horace Greely. He knew Daniel O'Connell, Ireland's liberator. The man who freed Catholics in Ireland.

When John F. Kennedy goes to Ireland in 1963, a triumphant return of the Irish, he gives a speech to the Irish Parliament. He noted Benjamin Franklin had sent leaflets to Irish freedom fighters, that Daniel O'Connell was inspired by George Washington and that the emancipator Abraham Lincoln was influenced by the rebel Robert Emmet. Kennedy's longest anecdote was the story of General Meagher and his Irish Brigade. He recounted the bloodbath at Fredericksburg, a band of 1,200 men going to battle with a pinch of green in their caps. He said by that blood sacrifice that's what made them American. Then Kennedy displayed a present he had brought from the United States – he gives the people of Ireland a flag of the Irish Brigade from that battle. It contains a harp and a sunburst, and it hangs in the Irish Parliament to this day. "What is it", Kennedy asked, "that got so many families through centuries of subjugation, through starvation, through mass eviction, through exile, through Know-Nothing persecutions, epics of tragedy broken only by temporary periods of joy? What was it that made people like Thomas Francis Meagher never lose faith?" The "quality of the Irish," the president concluded, is "the remarkable combination of hope, confidence and imagination."