

## Irish Confederates in America's Civil War

Contributed by Brian P. Hegarty Jr.

Perhaps no role of any participant in the Civil War has been more misunderstood than that of the Irish. The general assumption has been that Irish Americans fought almost exclusively for the Union. What is not generally known is that many Irishmen fought and died while in service to the Confederate States of America.

The notable absence of the Confederate Irish from the historical record in part reflects the fact that the majority, especially the immigrant Irish, were illiterate. The immigrant Irish in gray left relatively little behind regarding letters, diaries, memoirs and journals. (*John Edward Dooley, was an exception, the younger brother of James Henry Dooley, recorded wartime experiences in his journal which provided a firsthand glimpse into a soldier's life on and off the battlefield.*)

The Irish Brigade of the Army of the Potomac also helped obscure the role of the confederate Irish. Altogether, an estimated 150,000 Irish served in the Union army. There were an estimated 30,000 Irish born Irishmen who served in the ranks of the Confederate Army and that figure would be higher if we included the Scotch-Irish. Most notable Irishmen fighting for their "Righteous Cause" is reflected in the writings of many of the South's leaders. Some Southerners, especially the Celtic Irish, believed that the Celtic contribution was decisive in winning a victory for the Union. The Irish Catholic was discriminated in the South but were more successful to assimilate into mainstream southern life and society, whereas the Irish of the North, met with greater prejudice and hostility, i.e. nativist sentiment of the Know-Nothing Party of the 1850s.

Capt. John Edward Dooley, of the First Virginia Infantry of Richmond, who was wounded at the ill-fated "Pickett's Charge" at Gettysburg on July 3, 1863 recorded an analogy between the Civil War and the failed Irish Revolution of 1798 in his journal: "Read today of the fearful cruelties perpetuated by the English soldiers in 1798 upon the Irish. Their fiendish acts upon defenseless people we find sometimes paralleled by the infamous brutalities of the Yankee mercenaries of the present day."

The South wasn't without their priests which supported their cause. Father John B. Bannon, the fiery Irish-born Jesuit priest known as the "fighting chaplain" of the First Missouri Brigade, often described the Confederacy's struggle for nationhood as identical with that of Ireland – like Ireland's fight against the British – was a righteous national struggle for self-determination, or "Home Rule."

And there was John Mitchel, the Irish nationalist and revolutionary of the failed 1848 Young Ireland Nationalist movement, who lost two sons in defense for the Confederacy, emphasized the certain "sort of parallel existing between the condition of the Southern states and that of Ireland". He added the South's ultimate solution "as the way in Ireland, is Repeal of the Union, or secession, and the winning of independence by way of violent revolution."

Patrick Cleburne, a Confederate general, was the highest-ranking Irish-born general from either side. Born in County Cork, Cleburne was an intelligent and courageous commander throughout the American Civil War. From the battles of Shiloh to Franklin, Cleburne distinguished himself as both a brigade and division commander and was wounded at both the battles of Perryville and Richmond, Kentucky. His division became one of the crack units in the Army of Tennessee, and he eventually came to be known as "the Stonewall of the West." It was discovered in the 1880's that

Cleburne wrote a letter to Jefferson Davis on January 2, 1864 proposing arming slaves to fight for the Confederacy in return for their freedom. Davis ordered that the proposal go no further and ordered it suppressed. Cleburne made his suggestion based purely on the practicalities of the North's numerical advantages, rather than any deep-seated desire to see emancipation. This letter most likely prevented him from attaining higher rank as he would never rise beyond divisional commander. (*On March 13, 1865, legislation was finally passed that would free black slaves if they enlisted in the Confederate Army, although they had to have consent from their masters. Only a handful of black soldiers, probably less than 50, enlisted because of this legislation and were still in training when the war ended.*) On November 30, 1864 at the Battle of Franklin, Tennessee, Patrick Cleburne was killed while attacking Union fortifications. Today a city of nearly 30,000 people bears the Cleburne name in Texas, as do counties in both Alabama and Arkansas. He has become a focus of biographies and his popularity continues today due to admiration for his 1864 slave proposal and his military prowess.

There were notable battles among the Irish. The fierce Irish rebels of the Tenth Louisiana "Tigers" clashed with the Irish Brigade at Malvern Hill, July 1, 1862. The Irish Confederates from Georgia helped defend Burnside's Bridge at Antietam September 17, 1862. And the Twenty-fourth Georgia, fortified behind the stone wall, meets the Irish Brigade at Marye's Heights Fredericksburg. And the list goes on.

From the beginning to the war's end, combat prowess of the Irish Confederates rose to legendary heights across the South. Irish Confederates were the fiercest fighters and suffered the highest and disproportionate number of casualties. This was evident when the Confederate War Department, advised that "Catholic Irish be preferred," when converting Union prisoners into Confederate soldiers upon exchange. The casualty rates were highest among the Irish than among other groups; these soldiers typically refused to give up where others would retreat.

For centuries, Celtic warriors were not only noted for their ferocity in combat but also for their over-reliance on offensive warfare, regardless of the odds or situation.

In 1982, Dr. McWhitney and Dr. Jamieson, two respected scholars, proposed a central thesis. Their thesis was the Confederacy bled itself to death by an over-reliance on the tactical offensive partly because of the successful offensive lessons of the Mexican War. This was before the advances in weaponry – primarily the rifled musket – made those offensive tactics largely obsolete. This work maintained that the Southerners' heavy reliance on the tactical offensive throughout the war resulted from the cultural and historical legacy of a Celtic past.

Perhaps this is a reason why so little remained of the Army of Northern Virginia when General Lee surrendered at Appomattox Court House in April 1865.