

“A Country in Their Hearts”: Irish Identity in the Union Army during the American Civil War

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“A Country in Their Hearts”

**Irish Identity in the Union Army during the American Civil
War**

Immigrants have played a role in the military history of the United States since its inception. One of the most broadly studied and written on eras of immigrant involvement in American military history is Irish immigrant service in the Union army during the American Civil War. Historians have disputed the exact number of Irish immigrants that donned the Union blue, with Susannah Ural stating nearly 150,000.¹ Irish service in the Union army has evoked dozens of books and articles discussing the causes and motivations that inspired these thousands of immigrants to take up arms. In her book, *The Harp and the Eagle: Irish American Volunteers and the Union Army, 1861-1865*, Susannah Ural attributes Irish and specifically Irish Catholic service to “Dual loyalties to Ireland and America.”² The notion of dual loyalty is fundamental to understand Irish involvement, but to take a closer look is to understand the true sense of Irish identity during the Civil War and how it manifested itself. The key to the era is understanding the nineteenth century context that the Irish were viewed not only as a different nationality, but as an entirely different race in America, the Irish or Celtic race. The Irish viewed their involvement as Irishmen fighting in a foreign land for the cause of the Union and the U.S. Constitution rather than as aspiring American citizens fighting to defend their homeland. Through this lense we are better able to understand and view assertions of distinct Irish identity, through the idea of an Irish race, clinging to the notions of Irish martial tradition, and Irish nationalism. Then by grasping this sense of identity one can view the Irish sense of loyalty to the cause of the Union; and how that loyalty stemmed from an Irish American identity.³

¹ Susannah J. Ural, “Ye Sons of Green Assemble: Northern Irish American Catholics and the Union War Effort, 1861,1865,” in *Civil War Citizens: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity in America’s Bloodiest Conflict*, ed. Susannah J. Ural (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 100.

² Susannah J. Ural, *The Harp and the Eagle: Irish American Volunteers in the Union Army, 1861-1865* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 6.

³ Ural, *The Harp and the Eagle*, 81.

In July of 1861 the *Boston Pilot* recorded a parade of the 9th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry Regiment, a regiment made predominantly of Irish immigrants, through the streets of Boston, stating that; “the ladies and gentlemen stationed at the windows on the route waved their flags, all unconscious of any distinction between the loyalty of the Anglo-Saxon and Celtic races, which make up the American people”.⁴ This excerpt, though proclaiming with optimism at the start of the war how the cause of defending the Union would bring together its citizens, highlights the very real ethnic and racial divide that shaped the sense of identity in Civil War America. In the nineteenth century it is important to note that the simple distinction of being racially “white” was in that era too general, but that in reality there were increased classifications based primarily on European geography and religion. In his book *Irish Nationalists and the Making of the Irish Race*, Bruce Nelson spent an entire chapter discussing the racialization of the Irish people in the nineteenth century, through the context of Ireland’s relationship to England. Nelson provided the background of how the distinguishment of a “Celtic” race inferior to that of the “Anglo-Saxon” was created. Nelson detailed how the negative perceptions of this Celtic race developed over the course of the nineteenth century especially during the Great Famine of the 1840s and due to the writing of the Scottish anatomist Robert Knox.⁵ In his book *The Races of Men: A Fragment*, Knox described how the superior Saxon race of England, believed to be strong and rational, was charged with ruling over the uncivilized and over passionate Celtic race of Ireland.⁶

⁴ *Boston Pilot*, 6 July 1861.

⁵ Bruce Nelson, “Celts, Hottentots, and ‘White Chimpanzees’: The Racialization of the Irish in the Nineteenth Century,” in *Irish Nationalists and the Making of the Irish Race* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 30-37.

⁶ Nelson, *Irish Nationalists and the Making of the Irish Race*, 38.

Though Nelson is discussing the Irish race in relation to England and British rule over Ireland, it is important to recognize that such prejudices and stereotypes of race were easily transported across the Atlantic and held by both the Irish and White Anglo-Saxon Protestants in the United States. In America during the nineteenth century this theory of White Anglo-Saxon Protestant supremacy manifested itself primarily in the form of nativism. A discussion of nativism in the Union army during the Civil War warrants much further emphasis than can be offered here, but suffice it to say that there existed within the army significant prejudice between Irish and naturally born American soldiers. From the nativist standpoint the arguments usually spoke of how the Irish were unruly and undisciplined for military service. In a letter to his mother dated March 14, 1862, Robert Gould Shaw described the inferiority of Irish soldiers to native born Americans, stating: "With the Irish left out, the other New England regiments are of as good material as the Thirteenth".⁷ Shaw was expressing the long held sentiment felt by many Union officers that the Irish were difficult to command in a military system. This sentiment was again echoed in a letter dated August 2, 1862 from Brigadier General Isaac Stevens to Massachusetts governor John Andrew stating that: "my own experience leads me to the conclusion, that a citizen of American birth and descent would command an Irish Regiment better than an Irishman".⁸ Here there can be viewed the strong distinction that echoes in writing throughout the war, the notion that the Irish were truly foreign or alien, un-American in this ultimate American conflict. From this divide and this prejudice displayed by nativist officers

⁷ Robert Gould Shaw to Sarah Blake Sturgis Shaw, 14 March 1862, in *Blue Eyed Child of Fortune: The Civil War Letters of Colonel Robert Gould Shaw*, ed. Russell Duncan (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1992), 182.

⁸ Isaac Stevens to John Andrew, 2 August 1862. 28th Regiment, 1861-1864, Executive Department Letter Series, Massachusetts State Archives.

Irish identity would surge as Irishmen would be forced to continue to assert themselves in this new country.

It is important to note that the existence of the perception of an Irish race was not only used in negative connotations by nativists in order to imply Celtic inferiority in the broader Union war effort. The Irish themselves accepted and came to embrace the notion of being part of a Celtic race, and through that identity strove to prove their martial prowess. Multiple instances throughout the war highlight Irishmen stating their pride in being Celts. In a letter published in the New York based newspaper the *Irish American* an Irish priest wrote to the editor that, “during the last 20 years, got a very considerable accession to the Irish race by those who have emigrated from Ireland, and whose educational, moral, and religious culture places them eminently above the emigrants from any other country of Europe”.⁹ The *Irish American* in its issue of June 14, 1862 discussed the valor of Irishmen in both Thomas Francis Meagher’s Irish Brigade and the Excelsior Brigade in battles near Richmond, Virginia. The newspaper stated: “The recent battle before Richmond has again stated the superior military qualification of the Celt...the Celts, whether in distinct corps, or detached bodies, make up an aggregate at one large and influential”.¹⁰ Through this distinct identity as their own race the Irish could perform in battle enough to overcome the sentiment of the nativists. A later issue of the *Irish American* in July of 1862 highlighted how the accolades won by Meagher’s Irish Brigade on the battlefields of the eastern theatre of the war stood testimony to the fighting abilities of the Irish people.¹¹

The assertion of Irish identity as a distinct group in America would manifest itself with the deeds of Irishmen on the battlefield, and during the Civil War the most noted Irishmen in

⁹ New York, *Irish American*, 2 August 1862.

¹⁰ New York *Irish American*, 14 June 1862.

¹¹ New York *Irish American*, 26 July 1862.

service to the Union would be hailed to be the great champions of the Irish race. Men such as Thomas Meagher and Michael Corcoran who were already renowned amongst the Irish community in America in the antebellum, quickly rose to heroic status and icons to rally around. In February of 1862 the *Irish American* published an account from the camp of the 9th Massachusetts detailing how, “we were visited by our distinguished countryman, in whom we all take a great pride, General Thomas F. Meagher”.¹² Here again the implication can be made that Irish soldiers, in referring to Meagher as their countryman, were highlighting a divide in the Union army that could either be used by nativists against them, or one the Irish themselves could claim as source of distinguishment and pride. The American Civil War was defined by the states and ethnic groups that fought it, and each group had its own heroes to cling to and use as a way to showcase the best of themselves against the backdrop of this conflict. For the Irish in service to the Union, Meagher and Corcoran were exactly those types of men. Their significance lay in their conforming to the nineteenth century notions of what it meant to be Irish and thus to be foreign or alien in America during the Civil War. They were not just Irish immigrants, they were men whose reputations were built on being prototypical of their community. Thomas Meagher had risen to prominence in Ireland due to his leadership in the failed Young Ireland uprising of 1848. Michael Corcoran on the other hand, was a sworn member of the Irish revolutionary organization in America, the Fenian Brotherhood (of which more later). He had risen to fame in America due to an occurrence in 1860 while serving as the commander of the predominantly Irish 69th New York State Militia Regiment. Corcoran had refused to lead the regiment on parade through the streets of New York in honor of a visit by the Prince of Wales and was later court-martialed.¹³

¹² New York *Irish American*, 22 February 1862

¹³ Ural, *The Harp and the Eagle*, 44-46.

These men stood for what it meant to be Irish in the Union during the Civil War. This feeling of their iconic stature especially in the case of Corcoran was particularly felt after his death in 1863. Corcoran had gone on to organize an “Irish Legion”, and after his death the officers of the second regiment of that legion, the 170th New York Volunteer Infantry, passed a heartfelt resolution in tribute to their fallen commander and idol. In it they placed Corcoran both in the context of his native Ireland and his adopted America, again conforming to the notion put forward by Ural in the duality of Irish loyalties¹⁴, but the significance lies in that at one point they resolved that he was, “a future leader in the great cause of her redemption from the galling yoke of British tyranny.”¹⁵ It is in this statement that one may understand a massive element within Irish identity in the Union army during the Civil War, and that is the context of Irish nationalism and the belief that the war might serve as a training ground for a future armed revolution in Ireland.

In the mid nineteenth century Irish nationalism in America primarily existed in the form of the Fenian Brotherhood. The Brotherhood was founded in 1859 by Irish exile John O’Mahony in New York, to complement and help the Dublin based Irish Republican Brotherhood in its’ revolutionary exploits.¹⁶ Fenian membership became prevalent amongst the Irish community in cities such as New York, Boston, and Philadelphia prior to and during the war.¹⁷ O’Mahony was a firm believer in the ability of Irish revolutionary nationalism to flourish in America under the

¹⁴ Ibid, 3.

¹⁵ Minutes of meeting of the officers of the 170th Regiment, New York Volunteers (2nd Corcoran’s Irish Legion) at Union Mills, Virginia 26 December 1863, James P. McIvor Papers, New York Historical Society.

¹⁶ Owen McGee, “The American Civil War, the Fenians and Ireland,” in *Fighting Irish in the American Civil War and the Invasion of Mexico: Essays*, ed. Arthur H. Mitchell (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2017), 466-467.

¹⁷ Ural, *The Harp and the Eagle*, 49.

protection of American laws.¹⁸ At the outset of the conflict Fenian attitudes towards military service were apprehensive and in some cases negative. Historians such as Patrick Steward and Bryan P. McGovern attributed Fenian leadership in discouraging service because it would turn the attentions of Irish immigrants away from freeing their homeland.¹⁹ Christian G. Samito also cited Corcoran's belief at the outset of the war that a rush of Irish recruits would put an Irish revolution off track.²⁰ As the war progressed however, membership in the Brotherhood would come to exist amongst several groups of Irish officers serving in the Union army, as exhibited primarily in the publishing of the Fenian Brotherhood's convention in Chicago in the fall of 1863 in the *Irish American*. At the end of the resolution passed by the convention at least 6 out of the 25 signatories including O'Mahony and Corcoran were commissioned officers in the Union Army, three being officers in the Army of the Potomac.²¹ In 1864 James Stephens, the leader of the Irish Republican Brotherhood, was allowed by the high command of the Army of the Potomac to recruit from its Irish officers and NCOs to form Fenian circles.²²

The impact of Fenian membership in the Union army was particularly manifested after the death of Captain James M. Fitzgerald of the 10th Ohio Volunteer Infantry Regiment in the Army of the Cumberland. Fitzgerald was one of the signatories of the Fenian Brotherhood convention in Chicago and a member of the military circle of the Brotherhood within the Army of the Cumberland. After his death the military circle published their own resolutions in the *Irish American*, attesting to Fitzgerald's character and his prowess as an Irish nationalist and a Fenian,

¹⁸ Ryan W. Keating, *Shades of Green: Irish Regiments, American Soldiers, and Local Communities in the Civil War Era* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), 244.

¹⁹ Patrick Steward and Bryan P. McGovern, *The Fenians: Irish Rebellion in the North Atlantic World, 1858-1876* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2013), 29.

²⁰ Christian G. Samito, *Becoming American Under Fire: Irish Americans, African Americans, and the Politics of Citizenship During the Civil War Era* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), 113.

²¹ New York *Irish American*, 21 November, 1863.

²² John Devoy, *Recollections of an Irish Rebel* (Shannon: Irish University Press, 1969), 47.

in their words, “the unswerving fidelity with which he has sustained and directed the labors of our organization for the emancipation of his native land”.²³ To those officers who were sworn members of the Brotherhood, the memorialization of dead Fenians such as Fitzgerald was imperative to their assertion of the belief held by many Irishmen in Union service that the war might be viewed in the light of one day freeing Ireland. As part of their memorial tribute to Fitzgerald, the Fenian circle within the Army of the Cumberland used the opportunity to be published in the *Irish American* in order to voice their belief in the opportunity to gain military experience in America to use against British imperialism. The heading underneath the excerpt referred to the Army of the Cumberland as “The True School for Ireland’s Redemption”, and went on to detail how due to service in the Union army the Irish could be transformed from helpless peasants to battle hardened warriors, how, “The rebellion has opened to us vast stores of knowledge, of which we were, heretofore, profoundly ignorant.”²⁴ Thus Fenianism could look to military service in an optimistic light when regarding the future of Ireland’s prospects for freedom. Some regiments in the Union army were seemingly organized on Fenian principles, as was the case with the the “Phoenix Regiment” organized under the command of Colonel James C. Burke in New York. When discussing the Irish nationalism of the volunteers of the regiment the paper stated that: “They hope someday to form part of the ‘Army of Ireland,’ under the gallant Shields, with the twin objects of their ambition fairly in view-the humbling of England and the liberation of our oppressed native land.”²⁵

The important realization to make however is that to have Irish nationalist sentiment in the Union army did not automatically qualify one as a Fenian. Susannah Ural argued in *Civil War*

²³ New York *Irish American*, 19 December 1863.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ New York, *Irish American*, 19 July 1862; Michael Cavanagh, *Memoirs of Gen. Thomas Francis Meagher* (Worcester: The Messenger Press, 1892), 372.

Citizens that: “It is essential to understand Irish support for Irish interests when studying their role in the Union war effort, though this should not be overemphasized to the point where readers see every Irish American soldier as a Fenian.”²⁶ Owen McGee contended in his essay on Fenianism in the Civil War that when James Stephens made his tour of the Army of the Potomac in 1864 the majority of Fenians were officers instead of enlisted men, thus in the minority, and many were primarily concerned with the fighting of the war itself at that moment rather than an Irish revolution.²⁷ The Fenian movement was the leading force in Irish nationalism, but the sentiment to free Ireland was one held by many in the Irish community, and thus constituted part of the sense of Irish identity in Union service.

This Irish nationalism that was unaffiliated with Fenianism was expressed numerous times throughout the war. The feeling of viewing America as a future staging ground for the freeing of the homeland from Britain was held by many Irishmen, not just sworn members of the Brotherhood. The Irish priest Father Vaughan in his same letter expressing the virtues of the Irish race in America would go on to say that, “there is no hope for Ireland except through America.”²⁸ The *Boston Pilot* in August of 1862 published an article entitled “America Freeing Ireland,” where it detailed the grandeur of an army of Irish Americans returning to their homeland to free it from “bondage.”²⁹ When Colonel Thomas Cass of the 9th Massachusetts succumbed to his wounds sustained at the Battle of Malvern Hill, the *Irish American* wrote of his love for Ireland, “whose highest ambition would have been to pour out his life in her service as

²⁶ Susannah Ural, *Civil War Citizens*, 127.

²⁷ McGee, “The American Civil War, the Fenians, and Ireland,” in *Fighting Irish in the American Civil War and the Invasion of Mexico*, 471.

²⁸ New York *Irish American*, 2 August 1862.

²⁹ Boston *Pilot*, 9 August 1862

freely as he offered it in the cause of the Union, which he regarded as her best ally and protector.”³⁰

Perhaps the most iconic and oft quoted piece of Irish nationalist rhetoric from the Civil War came from one of Irish America’s leading figures, Thomas Francis Meagher. In a speech published in his memoirs decades after the war by Michael Cavanagh, Meagher stated that: “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.”³¹ Though Michael Cavanagh was personally a Fenian, it is important to distinguish that Meagher himself was never an active member of the Brotherhood.

Irish nationalism was a fundamental piece of Irish identity during the Civil War. Understanding the narrative of Irish nationalism and how it influenced the minds of Irishmen fighting for the Union whether sworn Fenians or not, speaks to the uniqueness of Irish identity, as no other ethnic minority group in the service of the Union could claim such distinct and defined nationalist rhetoric on such a large and well recorded scale. What also set Irish identity apart was its martial traditions that stemmed from the rhetoric of Irish nationalism and the belief in an Irish race. This was the perception of the Irish as outcasts, forced from their homes to fight and die on foreign shores due to the cruelty of their ancient oppressor. It was these traditions and the symbols of these traditions that formed another key element in Irish identity in the Union army.

In a song by D.S.F. of Brooklyn entitled “New War Song of the 69th Regiment”, the song ends with the verse:

Now to conclude and finish, as I’ve no more to say,

³⁰ New York *Irish American*, 19 July 1862.

³¹ Cavanagh, *Memoirs of Gen. Thomas Francis Meagher*, 369.

May the Lord assist their arms, let every Christian pray;
 So we know they're done their duty, which no man can deny
 As brave as their ancestors, on the plains of Fontenoy.³²

The final line was in reference to an event that was near and dear to the hearts of the vast majority of Irishmen who fought for the Union. Many of the Irish soldiers of the Union army viewed themselves to be the nineteenth century equivalent of the “Wild Geese,” the scores of Irish exiles who had fled their homeland at the conclusion of the Williamite Wars and had distinguished themselves in Irish units in the armies of England’s continental enemies, chiefly Spain and France. In the French Army during the eighteenth century the Irish had been organized into le Brigade Royal Irlandois, and during the Battle of Fontenoy in 1745 during the War of the Austrian Succession, had executed a bayonet charge into the collapsing French center line against the advancing Anglo-Dutch troops. Through this act they secured victory for the French and a place for themselves forever in the annals of war.³³ The memory of Fontenoy and the Wild Geese was an important part in how the Irish viewed their service in the Civil War, as it established them as part of a long tradition.³⁴ To take this notion further though is to understand that this link to the Wild Geese was more than just recognizing a tradition, but forging an identity. By placing themselves in the context of the Wild Geese it meant that the Irish fighting for the Union were but another chapter of an exiled people forced to die far from home, but that could continue to bring glory to their own race. In a report in the *Irish American* on the charge of the Irish Brigade of the Union army at the Battle of Fredericksburg, the author spoke of how the sacrifice of the men who fought and died would echo amongst the glorious tradition of the Irish

³² Broadides, 1861-1865 (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society).

³³ Ural, *The Harp and the Eagle*, 63; Ural, “Ye Sons of Green Erin Assemble,” in *Civil War Citizens*, 104; Steward and McGovern, *The Fenians*, 30.

³⁴ Ural, *The Harp and the Eagle*, 63.

Brigade at Fontenoy and would add, “to the characteristic Celtic dash and Celtic desperation of the last battle.”³⁵ Through service and heroic deeds on the battlefield the Irish believed they could be part of an epic line that stretched back for centuries, and be part of something almost immortal in its stature as part of a warrior, Celtic race. Apart from the remembrance of the Wild Geese and Fontenoy, the other great transcendent image that is mentioned throughout the war by Irishmen fighting for the Union that speaks to the immortal nature of the Irish martial tradition is the “green flag.”

The color green has long been the color of Irish nationalism, and countless variations of green banners bearing symbols of Ireland such as the harp of Brian Boru, the sunburst or the shamrock have been used by the Irish in war to assert themselves and their identity. In the American Civil War this practice continued to take place by Irish soldiers. In a letter to Massachusetts governor John Andrew on the matter of retiring the regiments’ battle worn colors, Colonel Patrick R. Guiney of the 9th Massachusetts wrote of how “Sometimes when all else loomed vague and battle-fortune seemed to be against us, there was a certain magic in the sight of this old symbol of our enslaved but hopeful Ireland.”³⁶ This “certain magic” that Guiney spoke of would continue to surface in the way that the Irish spoke of the green flag throughout the war. In January of 1863 the *Irish American* published the discourse of the speech of the Reverend Dr. O’Reilly on the fallen men of the Irish Brigade at Saint Patrick’s Cathedral in New York. O’Reilly spoke of how carrying the “Green Banner” forward into battle through “many a red Southern field,” would win such glory for the Irish people, “that has ever followed the flag and illuminated the standards around which Celtic blood, muscle, enthusiasm and

³⁵ New York *Irish American*, 10 January 1863.

³⁶ Patrick R. Guiney to John Andrew, 22 October 1862. 9th Regiment, Executive Department Letter Series, Massachusetts State Archives.

fortitude have arrayed themselves.”³⁷ The importance of the flag was again exhibited in the letters of Peter Welsh of the 28th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry. On March 19, 1863 Welsh wrote to his wife that: “I shall feel proud to bear up that flag of green the emblem of Ireland and Irish men and especially having received it on that day dear to every Irish heart the festival of St Patrick.”³⁸ Welsh would later express the same feelings of attachment to the flag in a letter to his father-in-law in Ireland in June of 1863, saying that: “I feel proud to bear that emblem of Ireland’s pride and glory and it shall never kiss the dust while I have strength to hold it.”³⁹ The green flag was the ultimate symbol and expression of Irish identity, it was the vessel by which Irish soldiers in the Union army could place themselves alongside every generation that had ever fought for Ireland and the Irish people. It was a symbol that stood for several meanings, not just as a regimental standard, but as the symbol of the Irish people in America, their gateway and link to their heroic and ancient past, while also in the minds of Fenians and Irish nationalists the hypothetical banner that might one day symbolize an Irish Republic born from the efforts of those Irishmen who had fought in the Civil War. To all Irish people it could be a guide-on to lead them to a brighter future, whether in America or back in Ireland depending on the interpretation. As was written in a poem published in the *Boston Pilot* in August of 1862:

Fling our Green Banner high,
 Let the summer wind breathe on its harp as of yore.
 Till the stars kiss its folds as it floats the blue sky,
 And together they lead us to glory once more;⁴⁰

³⁷ New York *Irish American*, 24 January 1863.

³⁸ Peter Welsh to Margaret Welsh, 19 March 1863, in *Irish Green and Union Blue: The Civil War Letters of Peter Welsh Color Sergeant 28th Regiment Massachusetts Volunteers*, ed. Lawrence Frederick Kohl and Margaret Cosse Richard (New York: Fordham University Press, 1986), 80.

³⁹ Peter Welsh to Patrick Pendergast, 1 June 1863, in *Irish Green and Union Blue*, 103-104.

⁴⁰ *Boston Pilot*, 9 August 1862.

When studying and discussing Irish identity in the Civil War it is important to understand how Irish identity fit into the cause of the Union. Irish nationalism played a significant part as has been previously discussed, but to understand Irish identity further is to understand the elements of the cause of the Union that lead to Irish service in the Union army. The belief in fighting to defend the adopted homeland was expressed in words by many Irishmen. At the outset of the war in April of 1861 the *Irish American* published an article on the 69th New York stating that: “Among Irish-Americans, in every direction, there is but one sentiment-that of ardent devotion to their adopted country.”⁴¹ The notion of the foreigner defending the adopted homeland that has given shelter is the primary narrative when discussing Irish loyalty to the Union. The *Boston Pilot* wrote on the duties of aliens in August of 1862 that: “The great point is that all should be patriots, and discharge their obligations to the government that gives them safety and protection.”⁴² The heading of the article was on “The Duties of Aliens,” this meant that the Irish did indeed recognize themselves as foreigners, outsiders, through the vein of their tradition of being an oppressed people and an oppressed race. Through the recognition of these traditions they could realize the necessity in fighting for the nation that had given them shelter as their ancestors had done before.

The case of America however stood apart from other countries such as Spain or France in the reverence that was paid to the unique nature of America and its institutions by Irish soldiers in the Union Army. In a speech given in Boston on Saint Patrick’s Day published in the *Pilot* in September of 1862, Michael Corcoran spoke of the notion that America was a, “beacon of hope to every oppressed nationality all over the world.”⁴³ In the previously discussed letter to

⁴¹ New York *Irish American*, 27 August 1861.

⁴² Boston *Pilot*, 23 August 1862.

⁴³ Boston *Pilot*, 6 September 1862.

his father-in-law Peter Welsh of the 28th Massachusetts went to great lengths to articulate his feelings of loyalty to America and specifically the United States Constitution as a protector of individual rights and freedoms.⁴⁴ The importance of the Constitution to Irish immigrants lay in the fact that it was something they had never before encountered prior to landing in America. Their homeland was one of oppressive powers in their minds and within the confines of British rule they had nothing to legally protect themselves with against persecution and injustice. Here in the New World the Irish could assert themselves as a race without a government trampling their civil liberties, and that was something that many Irishmen were willing to fight and die to protect.

The American Civil War has been widely regarded as the ultimately definitive moment in American history, in the words of Pulitzer prize winning historian James McPherson, “five generations have passed, and that war is still with us.”⁴⁵ In the context of Irish service to the Union during the American Civil War an understanding of Irish identity and the Irish experience opens up a broad vista of viewpoints on mid nineteenth century America. Through Irish identity and the chronicling of the Irish experience we may gain a key understanding of the history of ethnicity in America, and how America has dealt with ethnic minorities in its past. The Irish constituted one of the, if not the largest white ethnic minority to take up arms in the Civil War and further examination will garner not only further understanding of the Irish experience in America, but the experience of the immigrant in American history.

⁴⁴ Peter Welsh to Patrick Pendergast, 1 June 1863, in *Irish Green and Union Blue*, 100-104.

⁴⁵ James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), viii.

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