



PADDY'S LAMENT: THE IRISH AND THEIR MUSIC IN THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR

Posted on March 1, 2020 by John Coleman



Introduction

In this essay we will look at songs concerning the Irish in the [American Civil War](#), in order to come to a deeper grasp of this community in that war. By doing so, we will explore the interaction of the Irish with other minority groups caught up in the conflict, and their common lot with the larger Anglo culture.

We will examine period pieces and modern compositions related to the Irish. These songs are "The Opinions of Paddy Magee," "We'll Fight For Uncle Sam," "Irish Volunteer," "Kelly's Irish Brigade," "Tramp, Tramp, Tramp," "Two Brothers Masterson," "Boys That Wore the Green," "Paddy's Lamentation," the equally doleful "Mick Ryan's Lament," and "Modern Army O." Passing references will be made to "I Goes to Fight Mit Sigel" and "List of Generals."

The Civil War produced a great many musical pieces. I chose the ones in this essay that especially invite distinct topical consideration. Briefly, "We'll Fight For Uncle Sam" looks at Irish soldiers from the North. It also allows us to delve into [George McClellan's](#) persistent popularity with his units, both ethnic and otherwise, throughout the course of the conflict. "Kelly's Irish Brigade," examines Irish southerners. In "Two Brothers Masterson" we look at the tensions that immigrants had with Africans. The role Germans and natives played in the war and its music is also considered.

The song "Tramp, Tramp, Tramp" permits us to see connections with political movements back in Ireland. "[The Irish Volunteer](#)" demonstrates an eagerness to adopt native concerns and politics by new arrivals. "The Boys Who Wore the Green" is a look into the unit and cultural diversity, and chaos, which the 19th-century citizen-soldier model of military organization allowed for. "Paddy's Lamentation" gives us insight into the disillusion which mid-war Irish were feeling, along with the rest of America.

Finally, "Modern Army O" and "Mick Ryan's Lament" take us to the postwar world of an America eager to get back to normal. There is, of course, overlap in some of the themes chosen here, and each verse carries much historical meaning. Therefore, these works of popular art allow us to take a survey of topics related to Irishmen in the definitive American experience, the Civil War.

Gratitude and Patriotism

At the top of our list is "[The Opinions of Paddy Magee](#)." The song addresses the proximate reason many Irish came to America in the mid-19th-century: the [Great Hunger](#) of 1845-49.

Along with other Anglosphere lands (Britain, of course, but also Canada and Australia) - starving Celts arrived in these United States by the hundreds of thousands at that time. Immediately they were recipients of native hostility.

The 1860s conflict gave refugees like "Opinions'" fictional narrator Paddy a chance to route the libel of divided loyalties, and show his gratitude towards his adopted home. During the real-life outbreak of war, the Catholic archbishop of New York, [John Hughes](#), could not hang flags fast enough from his parishes. With memories of the popular "Know Nothing" Party and the horrific anti-Catholic Philadelphia riots of 1844 not far from mind, our soldier-singer declares:

*Whin Ireland was needing, and famine was feeding
And thousands were dying for something to ate,
'Twas America's daughters that sent over the waters
The ships that were loaded with corn and whate.
And Irishmen, sure, will forever remember
The vessels that carried the flag of the free.
And the land that befriended, they'll die to defend it
And that's the opinions of Paddy Magee.*

According to the song, the Civil War allowed these new Americans to repay charity given them a generation before.

Pay

Next at bat we have a pair of songs, "[We'll Fight For Uncle Sam](#)" and "[The Irish Brigade](#)." With these pieces we confront the basic question of why Irish immigrants participated so robustly on both sides of the conflict? [The Crisis of 1860](#) and the war it precipitated were many miles removed from the concerns and culture of the Irish.

Whatever theoretical appeal Constitutional liberties like freedom of religion held for Hiberians, the

welcome they actually received was not a warm one. Anti-Irish animosity became so desperate that famously during the [Mexican War](#) (1846-48) an entire brigade of the Federal army deserted over to the Mexican side!

Like German immigrants two generations later, Irish support for the Union was not a given. One pedestrian, though evergreen, reason immigrants fought in large numbers was for money. The famous \$13 per month which Union privates received, even the Confederate's \$11 per month, a holdover from the prewar pay scale, was head and shoulders better than the unstable morsels which urban day laborers took in, to say nothing of the tempestuous lives of rural farmers.

In "We'll Fight for Uncle Sam," a Union piece, it contains the line, "Not long ago I came here from the bogs of sweet Kilarney. I used to cry out, 'Soap Fat!' because that was my trade, sir; 'til I 'listed as corporal in Corcoran's brigade, sir." Many of the Irish immigrants of the 1860s had come from rural stock. They had few marketable skills in the crowded cities of the north. If the army didn't allow for a better life, it at least provided a less indigent one.

Geopolitics:Cotton

It is unwise to consider the Civil War in a vacuum. As comfortable as it is to study as such, as our definitive event, we must recall what [Walter McDougal](#) of the Foreign Policy Research Institute says. The War of the Rebellion was not an insular oddity, but, "part of the deepest rhythms of world history." The trends of centralization, servile abolition, and a "shrinking" technological world were forces America participated in along with the rest of the world.

Both "We'll Fight" and "Opinions" additionally invite the humble listener into the world of international politics. British support for the Confederacy is warned off with the line, "If John Bull should interfere, he'll suffer for it truly, for the Irish boys in action will give him balley hooley." We also hear, "John Bull, ye ould divil. Ye'd better keep civil!"

Through mid-war there was a chance of Britain supporting the Confederacy. This would have possible military advantages, and definite financial advantages. For a country heretofore not permitted to raise funds on the international markets and from major banks, legal recognition amongst the world community was a must.

The hungry textile mills of Europe lustfully weighed on the minds of British MPs as they considered the U.K.'s official reaction to the North American bloodletting. With the nearsightedness characteristic of speculation, the southern economy was a one-trick, cotton pony by the start of the war in 1861. "[Guns for Cotton](#)" was the dear hope of Confederate statesmen. Until the Crown could develop its cotton market in India, which eventually came on line by mid-war, this was an equation British statesmen were inclined to consider.

European powers, and others besides, needed cotton from the South for their mills. This commercial concern weighed heavily against ethical reservation concerning slavery. "[Scott's Anaconda](#)," the blockading of the entire Confederate coastline by the Lincoln administration, put a wrench in the French supply chain for the entirety of the war.

The "[Famine du Coton](#)" in Alsace, Normandy, and Brittany matched the supply hardships experienced by the English. The financial angle could have put European powers in the Confederate corner, and this was possibility enough for our Irish songsters to put John Bull - and by extension, Marianne - on alert.

Geopolitics: The Trent Affair

The possibility of English support for the Confederacy was made likelier still with international guffaws by Union leaders. For example, the [Trent Affair](#) in November 1861 was when Union sailors boarded British ships to arrest two Confederate agents under the laws of war.

The Lincoln administration was adamant that the Confederacy was not a nation. Thus, according to their own logic, southern agents were not subject to the rule of international law. The only conclusion left, then, was that Union sailors trespassed on British property, and kidnapped British guests.

Earnestly for them in the moment, and amusingly for us 150 years later, Northern attorneys engaged in great rhetorical gymnastics trying to justify their Administration's position, while also fending off charges of criminality. This incident, combined with [William Seward's](#) subsequent bluster in the press, brought the relationship between the U.K. and U.S. the closest to war since 1812.

Geopolitics: Slavery

Slavery is a topic which does not enter into any of the immigrant-related songs chosen for this essay, north or south. In fact, even in general works from the war period, forced servitude is only mentioned obliquely. Examples of this include, "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," and "Marching Through Georgia," both Union songs; and "Bonnie Blue Flag," and Albert Pike's reworking of "Dixie," for Confederate examples.

As a slave power, nearly alone in the Western world besides Brazil and Cuba, the Confederate States of America (CSA) did not do themselves any favors when appealing to European nations for legal recognition, much less material assistance. France and Britain were the two biggest candidates for Confederate support. France had abolished slavery in 1794 (albeit briefly resurrected by Napoleon) and the United Kingdom in 1833. In the age of 19th-century mores, whatever the temptation of cotton, the CSA's "peculiar institution" worked against their international interests.

Irish Confederate Units

The odds against the Confederate cause from the start tended to lend its partisans to associate their enterprise with grand moral and political motives, and historical precedents. "[Kelly's Irish Brigade](#)" attempts to weave the Confederate struggle and its Hibernian involvement into the larger saga of Irish liberation.

When nowhere near technical brigade size, the southern narrator sings, "[Northerners] have called us rebels and traitors, but themselves were called that name of late." While the song immediately goes on to reference the Rebellion of 1798, we also intuit the songster's general scorn for Yankees.

Like the British in the American Revolution, an event which was within reaching memory at the time of our topic, invading Yankees were occupying another country as far as southerners were concerned. This certainly is a parallel not lost on the narrator of "Kelly's Irish Brigade." He sings, "They dare not call us invaders. 'Tis but states' rights and liberty we ask. And Missouri we'll ever defend her. No matter how hard the task."

Larger Struggles

We next have "[Tramp, Tramp, Tramp](#)." This song allows us to connect the Irish struggle in the Civil War

with another fight in another land. It speaks with the voice of an imprisoned Union soldier trying to keep up his spirits despite his condition. As he says, "Tramp, tramp, tramp, the boys are marching. Cheer up, comrades, they will come!" Just wait, just hope, we'll be free in time.

Most people today would not associate "Tramp, Tramp, Tramp" with the Civil War. The tune was co-opted and popularized a few years after [Appomattox](#) for the Irish nationalist cause. Rebranded as "[God Save Ireland](#)," it commemorates the [Manchester Martyrs](#). The Martyrs were three [Fenians](#) hanged by the Crown in 1867. The retooled "Tramp, Tramp, Tramp," now "God Save Ireland," became the de facto anthem of Irish Republicans through the [War of Independence](#) (1919-21).

Rather than a forlorn, pining captive, though, "God Save Ireland" has its prisoner-singer defiant 'til the end. One stanza reads, "They met him [the hangman] face to face, with the courage of their race. And they went with souls undaunted to their doom." When we recall [Cathal Brugha's](#) famous use of "God Save Ireland," we must remember its connection to an earlier generation and an earlier war.

[The Fenians](#)

We turn now to the influences of the Fenians on the Civil War. The Fenian Brotherhood was a group founded simultaneously in America and Ireland in 1858 (on St. Patrick's Day, of course). The Civil War promised a ready means for these secret revolutionaries to build and drill a corps of fighters to ship back home.

One of the stranger aspects of Celtic participation in the War of the Rebellion, as the United States government still calls the 1860s bloodletting, is that a people dominated by an outside power, as Ireland was by the British, would enthusiastically enlist in significant numbers on the side of a power trying to squash the self-determination of another group of people, the American southerners. This is a curious dynamic we'll see later with the post-war Irish participation in the western Indian Wars.

In his infamous summons of 75,000 men, a move which initially worsened the Crisis, President Lincoln plainly said his intention was, "To suppress said combinations." However, practical considerations overruled die-hard revolutionary ideology. The majority of immigrants lived in Northern cities like Boston and New York, as opposed to southern ports like Charlestown and New Orleans.

Additionally, the Union's chances of victory were more secure from the start. While it took at least two years to come to full strength, once the Federal government brought its organizational and industrial might to bear, their ability to train and arm mass bodies of men recommended Fenian support for the Union. The conflict would provide free quality training which Irish revolutionaries could deploy back in Ireland.

In *On Deciding to Fight for the Union*, Union Irish Brigade leader, [Thomas Francis Meagher](#) said, "We could not hope to succeed in our effort to make Ireland a Republic without the moral and material support of the liberty-loving citizens of these United States."

This decision can be directly tied to individuals who helped raise Irish units. Meagher (pronounced "mar") was involved in the [Young Irelander](#) uprising of 1848, that "Year of Revolutions." Transported to Australia after his conviction of treason, Meagher escaped and made his way via Brazil to America.

Another revolutionary was [Michael Corcoran](#). In addition to a revolutionary pedigree as rich as Meagher's, Corcoran made a name for himself when he was court-martialed for not leading the largely-Irish [69th New York Militia](#) on parade when the [Prince of Wales](#) visited America in 1860. The charges were dropped upon the eruption of hostilities. However, "The Boys Who Wore the Green" saucily remembers, "Colonel Corcoran led the 69th on that eventful day [i.e., [Bull Run](#)], I wish the Prince of Wales were there to see him in the fray."

Meagher and Corcoran organized and drilled an expanded 69th New York following the Confederate firing on [Ft. Sumpter](#) in April 1861. The unit was altogether green. However, several soldiers had seen service in recent European wars. These included ten officers lately in the service of [Pope Pius IX's](#) own "[St. Patrick's Brigade](#)," in the [Papal States'](#) luckless fight against [Garibaldi](#).

Narratives

When, how, and why minority groups align their interests and narratives with related groups is a topic well worth its own treatment. By "narrative" I mean a group's own reading of its revolutionary history, especially in light of similar struggles elsewhere.

Such is also the forging of the Irish nationalist "apostolic succession" narrative. This narrative attempts to

link Ireland's own desperate rebel history. It also includes foreign efforts for the Liberal cause in its understanding. The Fenian narrative in this case includes friendly connections with America's Revolutionary experiment.

The ancient clan system in Ireland was smashed with the [Tudor conquest](#). The 1745 [Battle of Culloden](#) in neighboring Scotland brought this truth home. Suddenly the passing of the clan system went from a suspected abstraction to a bloody, grim reality. Celtic nationalists ultimately retrenched and settled upon the most cutting-edge political philosophy of the day to rally around: republicanism.

America's two wars with Britain, as well as the explosion of the French Revolution on the Continent, gave added inspiration to independence-minded Hibernians for their own liberty. However ill-served rebels like [Robert Emmet](#) were by the republican National Assembly, the international republican experience provided garrisoned Ireland an example to imitate.

Indeed, during the heady days before his imprisonment for sedition in 1848, Thomas Meagher advocated physical force republicanism against the pacifistic position of [Daniel O'Connell](#)'s supporters. He specifically used the American example as justification. Ireland's revolutionary past merged with the American saga as theoretical examples which expats like Corcoran and Meagher were keen to develop and fuse for the ends of their Irish story.

Other Ethnic Groups

Next, we consider the role of race, the Irish, and the Civil War. In introducing this theme, we recall that Irishmen were not the only subgroup to be caught up in the majority-Anglo Civil War. Indians, blacks, and Germans all richly participated as well.

Native Americans, however, come from a vastly different musical tradition than the various European ethnicities which participated in the war (including the majority Anglo one). Additionally, they made a different use of martial music. Thus, we have no corpus of native Civil War music.

Another possible field of study is German participation in the war. They were closer to the Irish military and musical experiences. The Germans were also a community numerically as robust as the Irish. However, the language barrier meant that few period songs were written, and less survive for our

perusal.

There is one delightful exception to this Saxon dearth: "[I Goes To Fight Mit Sigel](#)." Reasonably concerned with his martial alcohol access, our patriot-narrator explains, "Dere's only von ting vot I fear, Ven pattling for de Eagle. I vont get not no lager bier, Ven I goes to fight mit Sigel!"

[Franz Sigel's](#) command of the largely-[German XI](#) of the [Army of the Potomac](#) is also noted, along with Irish commanders, in the 1864 song "List of General."

African-American Interactions

When it comes to Irish interactions with African-Americans, "[Two Brothers Masterson](#)" does not blush. The 19th-century was not a politically correct era. Perhaps this allows us a truer picture of the times. "Masterson" is set to the tune of the "[Croppy Boy](#)," and it follows an equally doleful trajectory. At this point you ought to be noticing a cross-over of music in the later development folk. Both America and Ireland equally influenced the other's music.

Twice in "Masterson" we note the unhappy interaction of American blacks and Irish. The singer states, "With savage blacks [the brothers] did not agree." When put upon to help hang his sibling, Patrick refuses. Sensing a need, a nearby, "wild black sergeant proposed to do the deed."

This artistic animosity can be traced to the actual competition both groups faced for northern jobs during this period. Indeed, we remember that during the New York draft riots in 1863 African-Americans were especially targeted by the rioters, and a great many of those rioters came from the Irish community centered around New York City's [Hell's Kitchen](#) district.

Chaos

In "[The Boys That Wore the Green](#)" we get a taste of the chaos of those early days of the Rebellion. The song memorializes the motley units which found themselves at the [First Battle of Bull Run](#) in July of 1861. The peacocking and bluster which both sides liberally engaged in, from well before Lincoln's election the previous autumn, quickly drained away as the grim reality of protracted battle loomed.

After a solid start on the morning of July 21st, the Rebels rallied and broke the Union ranks. It's a debacle commemorated in the fourth stanza of "Boys." The singer talks about the capture and recapture of the 69th's battle flag, declaring, "The colors of the 69th, I say it without shame, Were taken in the struggle to swell the victor's fame." Politely omitted is the fact that Michael Corcoran was wounded and also captured in the battle. He was paroled and went on to organize [Corcoran's Legion](#), another majority-Irish unit.

The rearguard fight the Irish Brigade made at Bull Run with the [11th New York Zouaves](#) is mentioned in the fifth stanza. It states, "In that hour of peril, the flying mass to screen, Stood the gallant New York firemen, with the boys that wore the green."

After several verses lauding the mutual assistance each unit gave the other during the Civil War's seminal battle, the song finishes, "Farewell, my gallant countrymen, who fell that fatal day. Farewell, ye noble firemen, now mouldering in the clay. Whilst blooms the leafy shamrock, whilst runs the old machine, Your deeds will live bold Red Shirts, and Boys that Wore the Green!" And indeed, each unit had cause to be nostalgic. By mid-war both, due to attrition and maturation, regiments were drastically different from their early-war selves.

Militia Model

At Bull Run, the citizen-soldier model favored in America well into the 20th Century was sorely tried. If the Confederate national army wasn't itself in its birth pangs on "that eventful day," however, things would have been worse for the north. The rebel inability to consolidate and counter-attack is the biggest "what if" of the entire conflict.

The organizational militia model in force, during those well-sung early days of the fight, allowed for a small perpetual corps of men, mostly alumni of the military academies, to be the nucleus around which a much larger mass of militia could form. Those militia units were called in the Federal parlance of the time, "Volunteers." True to their forebears in the American Revolution, these Volunteers were led by officers chosen either for quality, charisma, or graft.

While the militia system provided against an ancient Cesarean takeover, or a modern Military Industrial Complex, it made for chronically messy military starts. The United States would know this well into the

20th-century. In any case, the behavior of the 69th at Bull Run was something the men could be proud of.

It was a legacy they would have an opportunity to build upon, a year and a half later at [Antietam](#). As the [late Connecticut author, Thomas Craughwell, wrote](#), "The Irish Brigade turned the tide at Antietam. By driving off the Confederates, it all but ensured a Union victory. The Irish had been building a reputation as tenacious fighters; at Antietam they cinched it."

Unit Diversity

Not all of early-war messiness was bad or incompetent. It occasionally allowed for local flare. Ethnic regiments such as Irish, German, and Indian units are examples of this diversity. Likewise was the "[Zouave](#)" phenomena. Inspired by French soldiers, these light infantry units were recruited from the fire brigades of New York City by the early-martyred [Elmer Ellsworth](#).

Clothed in their distinctive red and blue embroidered uniform, the 11th New York was one early group to buttress the defenses of Washington, following weeks of anxious waiting and rumors, during the Secession Crisis in the spring of 1861. Both their unusual accoutrements and their baptism of fire at Bull Run guaranteed the mutual affection of both regiments in "The Boys Who Wore the Green."

Little Mac

Lastly, "The Boys Who Wore the Green," along with "We'll Fight for Uncle Sam" and "[List of Generals](#)," raises the specter of "Little Mac." [George McClellan](#) was the Army of the Potomac's sometimes-commander. Notoriously reluctant to engage with a southern opponent who was two or three times his size, Abraham Lincoln once humorously said, McClellan had a case of, "the slows."

Nevertheless, "Little Mac," as his troops affectionately called him, was an excellent organizer. Units always had the supplies they requested, and after defeats like the [Second Bull Run](#), McClellan was able to rebuild the army and boost its confidence.

While their affection wasn't able to take Little Mac to the White House in 1864, it was able to live on in

songs with verses like, "Once again, the stars and stripes, Will to the breeze be swellin'. If Uncle Abe will give us back Our darlin' boy McClellan;" and, "Of one more [general] I'll be telling, and who should be restored straightway. To put an end to this rebellion: Little Mac, he knows the way!"

Burnout

The gay, baggy pants and striped shirts of the Zouaves went by the wayside in "[Paddy's Lamentation](#)." Thanks to [Sinead O'Connor](#), this is the only piece in our Civil War selection with popular play. The song describes the wariness Irishmen were feeling by mid-war.

This song also reflects the greater mood of America. Similar to the narrator of "Masterson," our pleading singer advises, "To America I'll have ye's not be going. There is nothing here but war, where the murderin' cannons roar. And I wish I was at home in dear old Dublin." Like many ethnic songs, "Paddy's Lamentation" has "Easter eggs" in it which betray its North American composition. "Dear old Dublin" was far removed for most 19th-century Irish immigrants. Hibernians who came to America, mostly came from the west of Ireland.

In any case, all the men who were inclined to go in for Meagher's transatlantic revolutionary schemes had done so by the war's second year. After that, the motives were less idealistic. Cap-stoning this sentiment was the death of Michael Corcoran in 1863 in a riding accident in Fairfax, Virginia.

As Craughwell writes, "[Corcoran's] death came as a shock to the Irish Brigade, whose men had loved and revered Corcoran since 1860 when he refused to march the 69th Regiment in a parade honoring the Prince of Wales." Either money or the force of law stocked the ranks of the Irish Brigade after the initial idealism died down.

Manifest Destiny Resumed

Finally, we close with two postwar pieces: "[Mick Ryan's Lament](#)" and "[Regular Army O](#)." The one doleful, the other comical, both songs take us from the eastern seaboard to the Wild West, with the downsized U.S. military. With the Rebellion over, the American government returned to its pre-war hobby: westward expansion. Our refugee-cum-trooper, Mick Ryan, sings, "I swear I did not see the irony,

"When I rode with the Seventh Cavalry. I thought that we fought for the land of the free, When we rode from Fort Lincoln that morning." In other words, the expat from Erin was used in his turn to dispossess Indians from their homes. This ultimately led to his death at the [Battle of the Little Bighorn](#), commanded by former Civil War hero, [George Armstrong Custer](#).

In "Modern Army O," we're introduced to a man who, making no idealistic motivational pretense, "had the choice of going to the army or to jail." Compelled to endure longer and longer marches on less and less grub, our modern soldier throws off the whole army and skedaddles to Mexico.

In both songs we are confronted with one of the curses of war: addiction to fighting. As long-standing the battlegrounds of today attest, places like Somalia, Afghanistan, or Syria, after a while a country's young men have no stock and trade but war.

That was the condition many veterans found themselves in, in 1865. Decidedly less ideological or reverential than earlier pieces, the song shows an increased assimilation of Irishmen by the later part of the 19th-century, due in part to their military service. As Craughwell writes, "The courage and sacrifice of the Irish Brigade during the Civil War helped diminish prevalent anti-Irish prejudice in America."

Conclusion

Our selections have featured both early-war, red-blooded martial anthems, burned-out ballads from later in the conflict, and ironic and irreverent postwar choices.

The songs were written from historic moments of patriotism, and contemporary meditations on the hardships of history. They permit us to dive into aspects of the American Civil War which standard study does not allow for. We come closer to our subject. We laugh and cry and bleed and gripe along with the soldiers, who fought the war – and we sing with them, too.

*John Coleman is the founder of **Apocatastasis: An Institute for the Humanities**, an alternative college and high school in New Milford, Connecticut (USA). Apocatastasis is a school focused on studying the Western humanities in an integrated fashion, while at the same time adjusting to the changing educational field. [Information about the college can be found at its website.](#)*

The [*image*](#) shows, "July 27, 1861: New York's 69th (Irish) Regiment return from 1st Battle of Bull Run" by Louis Lang, and painted in 1862-1863.

