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Irish Regiments in The Union Army: The Massachusetts Experience

William L. Burton

A wave of patriotic sentiment swept the North when Fort Sumter surrendered on April 14. Mass meetings, often called Union meetings, occurred in large and small cities. Flags flew, orators orated, militia mobilized and volunteers flocked into recruiting stations. Wherever populations were great enough, members of ethnic groups gathered to demonstrate support for the Union. Quite typical was the April 16 meeting of Boston's Irish, and equally typical was the deluge of mail into the office of Governor John A. Andrew.¹ Letters from the rich and poor, the young and the elderly, from Democrats and Republicans, and from Irish leaders and the most humble Irish citizens, offered support to the state and nation.

Volunteer regiments raised by the states provided most of the manpower for northern military forces. Their organization and recruitment were thoroughly politicized; their very creation mirrored the institutions and practices of American politics at the state level.² In states like Massachusetts with significant populations of foreign-born voters, raising the regiments invariably involved ethnic politics. Ethnic leaders and ethnic periodicals devoted themselves to exploiting their positions and influence to enhance both themselves and the ethnic groups they served. The Irish of Boston and other Massachusetts cities, like their compatriots in New York, Chicago, Indianapolis and other northern cities, immediately demanded all-Irish regiments as a focus for the war efforts of their community. Most Irish and other foreign-born soldiers in northern uniforms would serve in regular regiments alongside native-born troopers, but the most visible service and the most politically potent was in ethnic regiments.³ These regiments, whose members represented the major immigrant populations of the early 1860s, tell us much about ethnicity, ethnic politics, and they gave rise to an enormous hagiographical literature that obscures the reality of the ethnic experience in the Civil War.

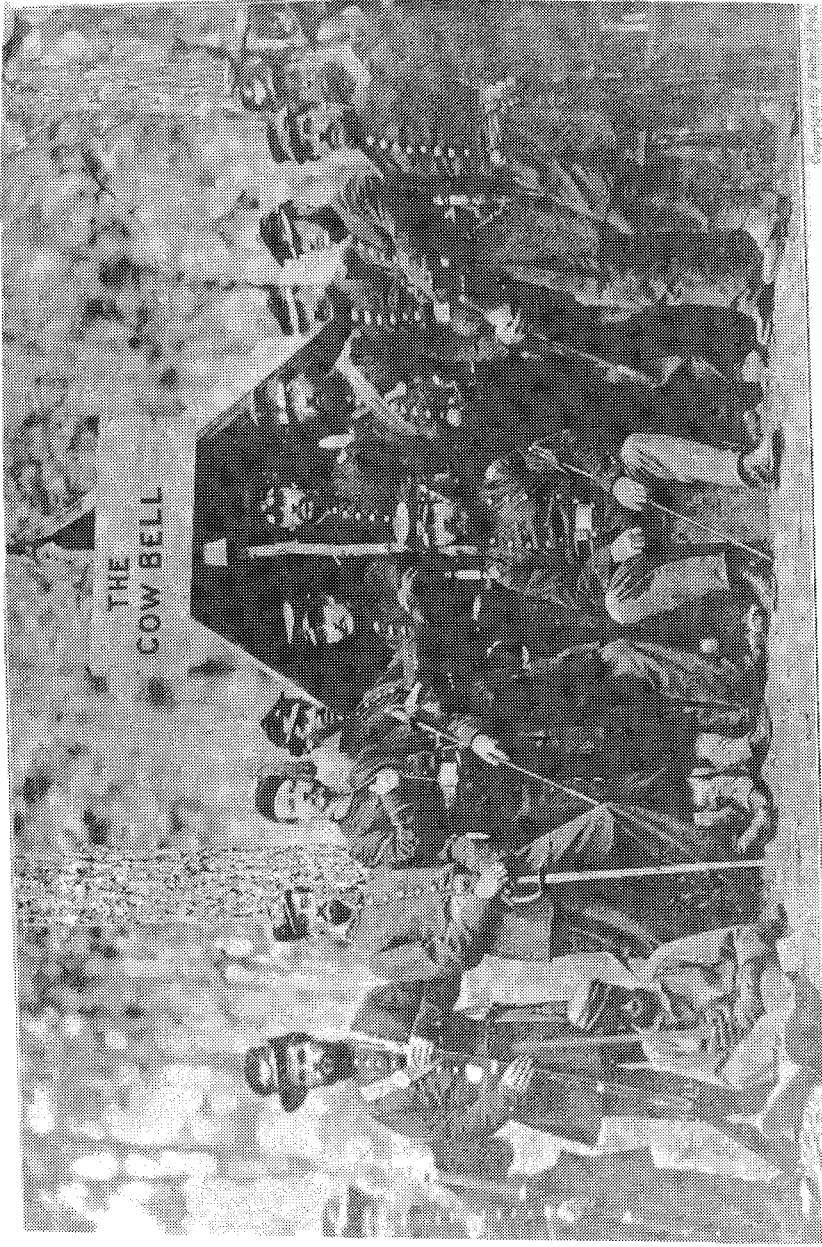
Following the outbreak of hostilities, Boston *Pilot* owner and editor Patrick Donahoe promptly forgot his earlier warning to the Irish that they should avoid participation in a civil war, and he threw his energies and his paper's influence behind the creation of an Irish regiment.⁴ Donahoe and Thomas Cass, along with other prominent Irish-Americans, urged Governor Andrew to create an Irish regiment, a regiment that would carry a green flag and bring fame and glory to

Massachusetts Irishmen.⁵ Thomas Cass, born in Queen's County, Ireland, in 1821, had emigrated to America with his family when he was only nine months old. As a young man Cass played an active role in Democratic politics, regularly served in ward offices, and was a member of the Board of the School Committee. He joined the prestigious 5th Regiment of the Massachusetts militia. Cass prospered in his business ventures; he owned ships and was a shareholder in the Boston Tow-Boat Company. His career is all the more significant when we remind ourselves that it occurred in a city allegedly in the grip of Know-Nothingism in the mid-nineteenth century. When Know-Nothing sentiment forced the elimination of Irish militia units in 1854, Cass and his fellow Irish simply changed the name of their militia company to the "Columbia Association" (an Irish nationalist organization) and continued the same pattern of activities.⁶

The governor agreed to the formation of an Irish regiment. He soon regretted it.⁷ By early May, 1861, the state's first Irish volunteer regiment, the 9th Massachusetts Infantry, was drilling, recruiting and complaining. Other regiments are getting more money, Colonel Cass grumbled to Governor Andrew. Familiar with this kind of whining, Andrew gave it little thought. Much more serious were the rumors pouring into Boston about the behavior of Irish soldiers in their training camps. To investigate these stories, Andrew dispatched to Fort Warren a trusted Boston Brahmin—George D. Wells, a Harvard Law School graduate and a man whose distinguished military career first as the lieutenant colonel of the 1st Massachusetts Infantry and then as colonel of the 24th Massachusetts Infantry would end with his death at the Battle of Cedar Creek.⁸

Wells advised the governor in a confidential report not to send any more Irish regiments to Fort Warren. Strife and bloodshed might follow the introduction of another such regiment, he wrote. Some of the officers, Wells continued, are good men—and he included Cass in that number—but others are "ignorant, vicious, vile."⁹ Massachusetts Irishmen will move forward to Washington or Baltimore, warned Wells, and what will people think of Massachusetts when they see such soldiers? To strengthen his argument, Wells offered anecdotal evidence. He reported seeing an Irish sentry patrolling in bare feet and with a pipe in his mouth. The men have no respect for authority, and he said that sending such men forward would disgrace the Bay State. The Irish regiments, in Wells' view consisted of the lowest element of the population. In his conclusion, Wells urged the governor to put non-Irish officers over Irish soldiers.

While Colonel Cass continued to bombard the governor with pleas for additional money, the editor of the *Irish Patriot*, one of the staunch supporters of Irish regiments, gave Governor Andrew an insider's assessment of the 9th Massachusetts.¹⁰ "When I last saw you," B. S. Treanor wrote to the governor, "I promised to give you an evaluation of the officers of the Cass regiment." His report was candid and pessimistic. According to Treanor, Cass himself was lacking in education and dignity, had no talent or skill for his position, and inflicted demeaning punishment on his men. The regiment's second in command, Lieutenant Colonel Cromwell G. Rowell, was a Boston policeman before entering the service, and was thoroughly disliked by his men. Treanor suggested that Rowell be replaced with "an Irishman of culture, (and) if such a one cannot be obtained,



Officers and men of the 9th Mass. Infantry.
From Miller, *Photographic History of the Civil War* (1912).

then . . . the office ought to be held by an American *gentleman*. . . .”¹¹ Major Robert Peard got a good recommendation, but the remaining regimental leaders emerge from the Treanor report as drunkards, inept bullies, former dance hall operators, and even worse, abolitionists.

More bad news followed. “The matter of the Irish Regiment seems to me a grave one,” still another critic noted to the governor.¹² Members of the regiment were a rough element, continued the correspondent, but it would not be wise to irritate the Catholic hierarchy. Governor Andrew faced a delicate political problem. Any sweeping reform of the regiment risked the ire of both Irish voters and the church hierarchy, while inaction might embarrass Massachusetts when the 9th Massachusetts went forward to the seat of war. Andrew chose the lesser of the two evils and left the regimental organization intact.

At the end of June 1861, escorted by eight hundred well-wishers in formal attire, the 9th Massachusetts Infantry paraded through the streets of Boston while Gilmore’s Band played Irish airs. Down Beacon Street to the Common the men marched; tables laden with cold meats, cake, and coffee awaited them under the trees. Food and drink were doubly welcomed by men who had endured long patriotic speeches and the response from Colonel Cass.¹³ Refreshed, the Irish 9th boarded steamers and headed for Washington.

Trouble and turmoil continued to plague the regiment. No sooner did the 9th Massachusetts set up camp in Seventh Street Park than two men were accidentally shot, and Colonel Cass was injured by an unruly horse.¹⁴ Vigilant George Wells, still making confidential reports to the governor, found the Irish up to their old tricks in Washington. “All these Irishmen keep poultry,” he fumed. “As I write a hen and chickens are picking about *in my tent*, and geese and ducks are quacking all around me.”¹⁵ Such unsoldierly behavior outraged his sense of military propriety. More seriously, Wells assured the governor that the wives and children accompanying the Irish troopers suffered no insults; the men behaved themselves in that regard.

Like soldiers everywhere, the Irish encamped in Washington found trouble. Michael H. McNamara, whose father came from Ireland in 1833, assaulted an officer, deserted his post, and found himself dismissed from the service.¹⁶ Regimental politics and bickering made life miserable for Colonel Cass. “. . . If ever a man had a hard row to hoe in this world,” Cass wailed to the governor’s adjutant, “I am that man, with incompetent Officers, different peculiarities, vices, attachments. . . .”¹⁷ Unruly men and bickering officers added to the colonel’s woes. Irish regiment soldiers quarreled and maneuvered like ward politicians. Governor Andrew heard all about it.

“You are no doubt aware of the bad feeling between Cass and some of his officers,” Lt. Col. Cromwell Rowell wrote to the governor. The regiment’s second in command asserted that despite the fact that he had helped to raise the regiment, “Col. Cass soon commenced a system of tyranny to his officers without parallel.” Rowell complained that the regiment’s chaplain, Father Thomas Scully, was against him. And then Rowell got to the heart of his criticism. As

a Protestant, he was subjected to both religious and national prejudice from the men, and both Cass and Scully encouraged this. They were determined to drive him from the regiment, he charged, but he was determined not to be driven. "As one proof of this national and religious feeling," Rowell told the governor, "I would state that the state flag has never been out on any parade review, nor line of battle. Since we have been in Virginia it has always been supplanted by the Irish Ensign—thus insulting the state." Rowell's bill of particulars against the Irish power structure in the 9th Massachusetts Infantry went on at great length. "Cass and the priest are both drunkards," he charged, "and have the lowest kind of carousals under their patronage in camp at unusual and unmilitary hours." The regiment's colonel was vulgar and unlettered, the drunken priest scoffed at his own religion and tried to supplement his salary by collecting money from the men, Rowell asserted. In a word, Rowell's perception of the Irish regiment was identical to the Boston establishment's perception of the earlier flood of Irish immigrants into the city. Rowell asked the governor to transfer him; the 9th Massachusetts Infantry was no place for a non-Catholic American soldier.¹⁸

Rowell's experience was not unique. "I desire to be transferred into some American Regiment for promotion or if I cannot be promoted then if it is possible to be discharged," wrote another member of the regiment to Governor Andrew.¹⁹ The soldier declined to give specific details of his unhappiness with the Irish soldiers, but he made clear his desire to escape from the Irish regiment and go to an American regiment. This was a common experience in ethnic regiments in the Union forces.²⁰

Was Cass a tyrant and a bigot? The evidence is conflicting.²¹ It does seem certain that Rowell played a familiar hand in the game of ethnic politics. Non-Irish members of Irish regiments protested against prejudice and discrimination when they sought promotion, while Irishmen in American regiments denounced prejudice and discrimination when they sought promotion or transfer to an Irish regiment. Despite their lavish praise of Irish culture and their Irish nationalism, it was also common for Irish soldiers to seek personal advancement by courting opportunities in greener pastures than those found under the green flag. Both McNamara brothers, for example, who served in the 9th Massachusetts and later wrote hagiographical regimental histories, tried to leave the regiment late in the war in order to get higher posts in a colored regiment—this in spite of Irish prejudice against blacks.²²

Whatever his qualities as a leader, there can be little question about Cass's bravery. Mortally wounded while leading his men at the Battle of Malvern Hill, he died in July 1862. His death precipitated an unseemly struggle for leadership of the Irish regiment, a struggle that revealed military politics with a vengeance.

Ordinarily, regimental leadership descended upon the second in command. At the time of Cass's death, the lieutenant colonel was Patrick R. Guiney. Born in Ireland, Guiney joined the regiment as a captain in June 1861, advanced to major in October, and by January 1862 was lieutenant colonel.²³ Governor Andrew barely got word of Cass's death before he received a petition signed by eleven officers protesting the appointment of Guiney to the top position. Guiney

was a shirker, the officers asserted, more interested in self-glorification than in the needs of the regiment.²⁴ Major General Fitz-John Porter telegraphed Governor Andrew to delay making the replacement appointment, and when Andrew went ahead with his appointment, Porter told the governor that Guiney was accused of cowardice, that there was probably some substance to the charges, and urged an early trial for Guiney.²⁵

Quite aware of the cabal against him, Colonel Guiney defended himself in his correspondence with Governor Andrew; he denied all the charges.²⁶ Guiney had the influential support of Father Scully in the power struggle, and Andrew remained determinedly neutral in the affair.²⁷ Guiney soon took the offensive against his detractors. One of the leaders in the drive to abort his appointment was Captain Timothy O'Leary. When O'Leary's name came up for promotion to major, Guiney got his revenge. O'Leary, the colonel told the governor, was vulgar, profane, a drunkard, and a frequenter of brothels. Moreover, he continued, O'Leary was known to the whole regiment as a trickster, a braggart, and at the Battle of Malvern Hill he hid in a barn until informed he would be shot on the spot unless he came out and fought.²⁸ Governor Andrew accepted Guiney's criticisms, and the appointment of major went to an officer who had not been a part of the cabal against Guiney.

For the rest of his tenure as commander of the 9th Massachusetts Infantry, Colonel Guiney found himself involved in problems and quarrels identical to those encountered by Cass. He saw himself surrounded by incompetent officers, but helpless to do anything about them because of their political influence.²⁹ As casualties mounted and the number of survivors dwindled, officers of the 9th Massachusetts sought replacements to fill the ranks, with numbers more important than ethnicity.³⁰ Guiney had no illusions about Irish soldiers. "I made up my mind long ago," he wrote to Colonel James McQuade, "that Irish soldiers cannot be governed by a military dove, with the rank of Colonel. They need to be handled as severely as justice will permit, when they do wrong."³¹ By April 1863 the regiment had 155 men absent without leave, and Guiney tried to cope with this hemorrhage of manpower by severe punishment inflicted upon those caught.

Experienced in the ways of nineteenth century politics, Guiney cultivated his relations with Governor Andrew. He sent a regimental flag to the governor and sent with it an eloquent plea that Massachusetts forget its past prejudices and treat its Irish citizens as equals in the future.³² That Governor Andrew learned from experience can be seen in his response to the receipt of the flag. He thanked Guiney for the Irish ensign, reminisced about the formation of the regiment and its symbols of both fatherland and adopted country, and assured the colonel that the Irish flag would be carefully preserved in the state's archives.³³

Guiney led the 9th Massachusetts Infantry until he was wounded during the Battle of the Wilderness in May 1864. Mustered out in June of that year, he was subsequently given the brevet rank of brigadier general. The first Irish regiment from Massachusetts was also mustered out in June 1864. Its history was a proud one, and the Irish citizens of Boston gave the survivors an enthusiastic welcome

home. The regiment fought valiantly on numerous battlefields, lost 152 men killed in action with another 105 dead from wounds or disease, and proved that ordinary soldiers could give a good account of themselves despite the political squabbles that raged both within the regiment and back home in Massachusetts. No other Massachusetts regiment lost more officers in battle than did the 9th.³⁴

Meanwhile, back in Boston, with the help of both local Irish leaders and a coterie of travelling, professional Irishmen, Massachusetts fielded a second Irish regiment. To understand what happened, we must recall briefly an event that occurred in New York City in 1860. That year, the Prince of Wales paid a visit to the United States. To honor this visiting dignitary, the 69th regiment of the New York Militia, an Irish regiment commanded by Colonel Michael Corcoran, was ordered to parade. Corcoran refused this order, and was scheduled for court martial while gaining great notoriety for what many Irish-Americans saw as a gallant and patriotic gesture. When war began the following year, charges against Corcoran were dropped, and the New York colonel became a central figure in efforts to raise Irish regiments in New York and other states. Irish military and political leaders, to win popular support for their cause, evoked the name of Michael Corcoran. Thus, an Irish-American entrepreneur in Illinois or Indiana or Massachusetts, who wanted to raise a regiment, quoted Corcoran as both inspiration and expert. Several Irish-Americans immediately surrounding Corcoran, such as Thomas Francis Meagher, acquired a similar aura of influence.

In early September 1861, strongly influenced by the activities of these Irishmen, Governor John Andrew decided to organize a second Irish regiment in Massachusetts.³⁵ B. S. Treanor and Patrick Donahoe, who were both instrumental in the creation of the first Irish regiment, made use of the reflected glory of Corcoran and Meagher to support a call for a second Irish unit. Treanor sent Andrew a collection of clippings from several New York and Boston newspapers, stories that extolled the virtues of Corcoran and calling upon state officials to organize additional Irish regiments. Treanor also forwarded to Andrew a copy of a letter he had received from Thomas Francis Meagher. Meagher was promoting the idea of an entire brigade of Irishmen. "My dear Treanor," he wrote, "won't you set to work and start an Irish regiment in Boston for the Irish Brigade?" Meagher went on to stress the urgent nature of the enterprise, that General James Shields (whom Meagher was touting as the leader of this paper brigade) was soon expected to arrive in New York to assume command. Meagher equated the secession movement in the South with an English plot and urged the Irish of Boston to rally around the Union cause and aid Irish independence at the same time.³⁶ Andrew, like other northern governors, received a barrage of propaganda from enterprising Irishmen. All a prospective colonel or general needed to go into business was a supply of green stationery (preferably embossed with a harp and a slogan in Gaelic), a store front office, an ability to write flowery prose and exhort audiences to recall the military exploits of the Wild Geese and leaders like Corcoran, and unlimited optimism and ambition. Persons with these qualifications commonly quoted each other as authorities and inspiration for action.

On September 23rd, Thomas Francis Meagher addressed a capacity crowd in Boston's Music Hall. Thousands of disappointed Irish-Americans failed to gain

entry to hear his stirring speech, hear Irish songs, and see Governor Andrew and Adjutant General William Schouler. Meagher's speech was typical of its genre. He spoke against the Confederate cause, telling his audience that the North deserved their support. This was necessary because many Irish-Americans equated the rebellion in the South with Ireland's fight to escape British rule. Meagher won a laugh with an anti-black remark, and declared that Know-Nothingism was dead. B. S. Treanor presided over a banquet in Meagher's honor after the speeches.³⁷ This same day Andrew's office issued a call for a second Irish regiment in Massachusetts.³⁸

Calling for another Irish regiment was one thing. Getting it organized without a political donnybrook was another. Would there be one or two additional Irish regiments? Would they be commanded by local talent, or led by New York Irishmen? Would the regiments escape the record of troubles experienced by the first Irish regiment from the state? Would the regiment or regiments retain a distinctive Massachusetts identity, or become one of several regiments in an Irish Brigade composed of regiments from several states? Keenly aware of the checkered career of the 9th Massachusetts Infantry in its early months, Massachusetts authorities worked diligently to avoid turmoil, but Irish-American politics were too much for them.

In early September while Governor Andrew considered the formation of another Irish regiment, he was the target of vigorous lobbying by competing Irish political leaders. In Boston, the editor of the *Pilot* pressed upon Andrew the name of Francis Parker.³⁹ Without waiting for Andrew's approval, Donahoe and his fellow Irish promoters approached Parker and got his consent. Meanwhile, the New Yorkers were hard at work persuading Andrew to give command of a second Irish regiment from Massachusetts to a group of officers from New York, men associated with Meagher's promotion of an Irish Brigade. B. S. Treanor made an eloquent plea for a regiment composed of Irish nationalists, men who would use their military skills later to fight for Irish independence. The New York publisher told Andrew that he had the names of twenty-five good, intelligent men for officers in such a regiment, and he would soon expect the name of an Irish gentleman for colonel. Treanor belittled the parallel campaign of Patrick Donahoe. "Neither Mr. Donahoe, Dr. Walsh or any other person has any conversation with Col. Meagher," he wrote, "don't know them and never spoke, and never will speak to either of them. They don't belong to the Irish National Party."⁴⁰

Governor Andrew decided to raise *two* additional Irish regiments. One, designated the 28th Massachusetts Infantry, was to be part of a New England force recruited by General Benjamin F. Butler, a power in Massachusetts Democratic politics. The second, the 29th Massachusetts Infantry, would be the state's contribution to the Irish Brigade then being raised in New York by Meagher and Robert Nugent.⁴¹ Meagher and Nugent, both associated with Michael Corcoran's famous Irish 69th New York Militia, used the remnants of the 69th regiment as the core for their activities; Corcoran himself had been captured at First Bull Run and was then in a Confederate prison.

The New York Irishmen made a clean sweep of the leadership of the two new regiments. Donahoe's favorites lost out in the political power struggle. Parker got command of neither regiment. Greatly irritated by the turn of the events, Parker, who had originally agreed to accept the command of an Irish regiment, had done so on the assumption that the Irish soldiers would have American officers, and that the regiment would have no connection with the Irish Brigade.⁴² Parker's ruffled feelings were soothed with the command of the 32nd Massachusetts Infantry, an American regiment. Thomas J. Murphy, an officer from the New York 69th, was the first in line to lead a new Massachusetts Irish regiment.⁴³ Ads calling for recruits for the second Massachusetts Irish regiment appeared in the *Boston Pilot*, with Meagher's name as well as that of Thomas Murphy as part of the recruiting team.⁴⁴ Another New York Irishman, William Monteith, won command of the 28th Massachusetts Infantry, which went into training at Camp Cameron. The second Irish unit, the 29th Massachusetts Infantry, began its organization at Framingham. Confusion and disorder were present from the beginning. As stories of turmoil and trouble at the two camps reached the governor's office, he dispatched Adjutant General William Schouler to investigate. His reports made grim reading.

When he arrived at the camp of the 29th regiment, Schouler found its commander absent. Moreover, the regiment's head was not Thomas Murphy, but Mathew Murphy, another Irish officer from New York's 69th. Schouler soon learned that Murphy was neither popular nor competent. The regiment's quartermaster informed the adjutant general in frank language that he regarded Murphy "as a fair example of a New York blower." "He is seldom at the camp," the informant continued, "The men are sorry when he comes and glad when he goes."⁴⁵ Schouler concluded that Murphy was useless. When he learned that he was about to lose his post, Mathew Murphy threatened to return to New York and have nothing more to do with Irish military affairs in Massachusetts. The threat sounded like good news to the governor, who told Murphy he was free to leave. Murphy thereupon went to the camp of the 28th regiment and made a speech urging the men to protest. Many members of the 28th promptly deserted.⁴⁶

Despite the episode of Murphy's appearance, Schouler found conditions at the camp of the 28th regiment much better than those at the 29th. Colonel Monteith, he believed, was doing a competent job of whipping the men into order. He recommended to Andrew that the two regiments be merged under Monteith's leadership.⁴⁷ This was done, and the combined organization was the 28th Massachusetts Infantry. Governor Andrew now confronted a delicate political problem. The 29th had been intended for Nugent and Meagher's Irish Brigade, the 28th as part of Butler's force. Whatever he decided, Andrew risked political damage. He first assigned the 28th Massachusetts Infantry to Butler's command, and later the second Irish regiment from Massachusetts went to Meagher's Irish Brigade.⁴⁸

Schouler's confidence in Monteith was misplaced. From the time the regiment left the state for the South, it suffered internal dissension and poor leadership. Part of the trouble was a sense that the New Yorkers had too much

influence. "A New York influence seemed to pervade the Regt.," complained one officer to the governor, "and anything but Massachusetts interests were thought of."⁴⁹ Several officers, lacking the confidence of their men and apparently not competent for their positions, resigned.⁵⁰ Monteith himself drank to excess and violated so many regulations that he was brought to trial on a variety of charges and dismissed from the service.⁵¹ Although proclaimed to be an all-Irish regiment, the 28th was not, and there were stresses and strains between the American soldiers and the Irish. As one officer put it, ". . . an American is entirely out of place in an *Irish* Regiment, and they make things hard as possible for me."⁵²

Officers of the 28th Massachusetts too often were more interested in advancing their own careers than they were in giving their men energetic and capable guidance. Back biting, charges and counter charges, and a chronic competition for position characterized the regiment's hierarchy. As soon as Monteith went to trial on the charges brought against him, Brigadier General Isaac Stevens, under whom the regiment served, tried to get his own son appointed colonel. Stevens lobbied Governor Andrew for weeks on the question of the fate of the state's second Irish regiment. ". . . A citizen of American birth and descent would command an Irish Regiment better than an Irishman," Stevens told the governor. "This is emphatically the case with the 28th Massachusetts."⁵³

With Monteith on trial and soon to be dismissed, Lt. Col. Maclelland Moore took over briefly as head of the regiment. He, too, soon resigned under pressure. The 28th Massachusetts faced a crisis of both morale and leadership. Patrick Donahoe, well aware of events, despaired of the regiment's future. The problem, he told Governor Andrew, was not the common soldier. It was the poor quality of their officers. The time has come, he suggested to Andrew, for him to appoint a competent and educated military man to lead the regiment.⁵⁴ Ability was more important than ethnicity.

Governor Andrew, bombarded with solicited and unsolicited advice about what he should do to save the regiment, made a masterful decision. He reached outside the regiment and beyond Massachusetts, he ignored all advice from those with a special interest to plead, and appointed as the new colonel of the 28th Massachusetts a professional soldier from the regular army, 2nd Lt. Richard Byrnes of the U.S. Fifth Cavalry.⁵⁵ Most of the officers of the 28th managed to bury their differences long enough to protest this move, but the appointment was firm.⁵⁶

Byrnes found his new command sadly reduced in numbers after many battles. As part of his program of renewal, he asked for new recruits. Such a request was virtually standard procedure under the circumstances. Most significant is the fact that, like the leaders of other ethnic regiments in the Civil War at this stage in their history, he wanted recruits that were able-bodied and without regard to ethnic origin.⁵⁷ In stark contrast to the initial recruiting of the 9th and 28th regiments, there was no appeal to romantic Irish nationalism, to the presumed glories of the Irish race or the historical superiority of Irish arms. What was needed now were warm bodies to fill the ranks. Byrnes served until he fell

mortally wounded at Cold Harbor in June 1864. During that period he also served briefly as the commander of the Irish Brigade.

In December 1864 the tattered remnant of the 28th regiment, two officers and twenty-one men, returned to Boston to be mustered out of federal service. The second Irish regiment, like the first, had a distinguished record. From its battlefield initiation in South Carolina in February 1862 to late 1864, the regiment fought with valor on some of the war's bloodiest fields—Second Bull Run, Antietam, Chancellorsville, Gettysburg, Cold Harbor, and New Market are just some of the names on the regimental history. Of the 1856 men who served in the 28th, 161 were killed in action and another 203 died of wounds or disease.⁵⁸ A critical examination of the regiment's early history and of the political contests involved in it does not detract from the solid contributions it made to the Union triumph in the Civil War.

In late June 1861, Massachusetts Governor John A. Andrew received an unsigned letter. The unknown correspondent burned with indignation as he described a visit to the camp of a Massachusetts regiment near Washington. Military equipment was shoddy, he reported. "The uniforms are very poor," he went on, "but good enough to answer the purposes to which I saw some of them put today—to cover the poor drunken creatures who were wallowing in them, like swine."⁵⁹ No, this was not the camp of an Irish regiment; it was the 1st Massachusetts Infantry, the regiment of George D. Wells, the Brahmin critic of the first Irish regiment. A voluminous correspondence in the Andrew Papers testifies to the history of a regiment that had a drunken, profane and ineffective colonel, that had poorly equipped troops, that was wracked with partisan politics, that harbored many officers constantly scheming for personal advancement, and whose soldiers frequently exposed their prejudice against the Irish.⁶⁰ There is nothing unique in the record of the Irish regiments in these areas that sets them apart from the American regiments—or the German, French or Scandinavian regiments. The history of the Massachusetts Irish regiments is not a monument to depravity or a memorial to behavior and attitudes alien to society's mainstream.

This simple truth is the first conclusion to be drawn from our inquiry into the Irish regiments of Massachusetts. In most respects these regiments are indistinguishable from other regiments. This truth, however, has long been buried in a mountain of hagiographical and filiopietistic literature written by ardent Irish-American partisans and their guilt-ridden supporters. Because the Irish once were victims of prejudice, their defenders felt a need to portray the Irish soldier and the Irish regiments as better than the best; because the Irish felt prejudice, we overlook the fact that Irishmen also harbored prejudice against Americans, Germans, blacks and others.

Perhaps the most important similarity between the Irish and non-Irish regiments is in officer politics. William B. Skelton describes the basic pattern of military politics that emerged in the early nineteenth century.⁶¹ Individual advancement was the key element in army politics. "The most widespread variety of political activity by military men," Skelton says, "was advancement of

their personal careers.”⁶² Military men often appealed to political friends on matters of personal advancement and took their personal quarrels to the public press. Ethnic regimental politics were right in the mainstream of military politics in America.

As London *Times* correspondent William Russell watched thousands of German and Irish members of the Union regiments streaming through Washington in 1861, he was struck by two thoughts. First, these foreign-born soldiers exhibited the same patriotism and enthusiasm for the North as did the American soldiers. Secondly, the Irishmen in the South supported the Confederacy with the same zeal as the native southerner.⁶³ While Russell did not mention it, the fact was that Irishmen in the South readily adapted their Irish nationalism to the theory of southern independence, just as readily as most Irishmen in the North used the rhetoric of Irish nationalism to justify support for the Union.

R. Laurence Moore has given us all a powerful analytical tool to use in interpreting the history of ethnic groups in America. Moore describes how historians write about “insiders” and “outsiders.” Whether they use these words or not, historians make assumptions about the distribution of power and status in American life, about how values are created in a pluralistic society. Historians locate a *mainstream* according to how they conceptualize majority and minority groups. Historical outsiders usually saw themselves as heroes or victims—but not as villains. Archbishop John Hughes of New York City, like the Catholic hierarchy in Boston, very early learned that the tradition of outsiderhood had important uses. He chose to encourage Irish-Catholic immigrants to keep their distance from the larger currents of American nationality. One technique he employed was that of keeping the stigma of outsiderhood attached to the people he tried to lead.⁶⁴ Hughes and other Irish-Catholic leaders had a vested interest in supporting the claims of nativists that America was a Protestant country, and make victimization a tradition for the Irish.

What Moore describes for the church leaders has its counterpart in those political and military leaders of the Civil War who played the role of outsider to carve out visibility for their cause and careers in ethnic regiments for themselves and their friends. Meagher, Treanor, Donahoe, Cass, Guiney and Monteith and the other professional ethnics associated with the Irish regiments of Massachusetts pursued self-interest at least as assiduously as they voiced the aspirations of a minority of Irish-Americans. Most Irish volunteers in Massachusetts and in the other states, after all, chose to join non-Irish regiments, not the Irish regiments.⁶⁵

NOTES

1. General Francis W. Palfrey, "Boston Soldierly in War and Peace," in Justin Winsor, *The Memorial History of Boston* (Boston, 1881), III: 303-30; James L. Bowen, *Massachusetts in the War* (Springfield, Mass., 1893), p. 16. Correspondence of Governor Andrew is in the John A. Andrew Collection, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston. Hereafter cited as Andrew Papers, MHS.
2. William L. Burton, "Title Deed to America: Union Ethnic Regiments in the Civil War," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, CXXIV (December 1980): 455-63.
3. Ella Lonn, *Foreigners in the Union Army and Navy* (Baton Rouge, La., 1951), *passim*.
4. *Boston Pilot*, April 27, 1861. While the editorials of the *Pilot* were often shrill and partisan, Donahoe's private correspondence with Governor Andrew was polite and friendly.
5. James B. Cullen, *The Story of the Irish in Boston* (Boston, 1889), p. 105; Bowen, *Massachusetts in the War*, pp. 189-95; William Schouler, *A History of Massachusetts in the Civil War* (Boston, 1868-71), 1:210; David G. Macnamara, *Ninth Massachusetts Infantry, passim*; Michael H. Macnamara, *The Irish Ninth in Bivouac and Battle* (Boston, 1867), *passim*. David and Michael Macnamara were brothers who both served in the 9th Mass. Inf. Their regimental histories are typical examples of ethnic hagiography.
6. *Boston Pilot*, July 27, 1861; Daniel G. Macnamara, *The History of the Ninth Regiment Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry* (Boston, 1899), pp. 2-3. Ethnic militia units were common in the cities of the East and the Midwest before the Civil War. The most famous of these units was the 69th New York Militia headed by Col. Michael Corcoran.
7. See Schouler, *Massachusetts in the Civil War*, 1:210-11.
8. Thomas Cass to John A. Andrew, Boston, May 3, 1861, 9th Massachusetts Infantry File, Boston, Massachusetts State Library. Hereafter cited as 9th Inf. File, MSL.
9. George D. Wells to Governor Andrew, Boston, May 16, 1861, Andrew Papers, Mass. State Library, Boston.
10. Cass to Andrew, Boston, May 31, 1861, and June 6, 1861, 9th Inf. File, MSL.
11. B. S. Treanor to Governor Andrew, Camp Wrightman on Long Island, June 10, 1861, Andrew Papers, MHS.
12. H. B. Sargent to Governor Andrew, Boston, June 14, 1861, Andrew Papers, MHS.
13. *Boston Pilot*, June 29, 1861.
14. *Washington Evening Star*, July 20, 1861.
15. Wells to Governor Andrew, Georgetown, July 22, 1861, Andrew Papers, MHS.
16. General Order No. 11, Army of the Potomac, September 14, 1861. 9th Inf. File, MSL.
17. Cass to _____, Fort Cass, September 25, 1861, 9th Inf. File, MSL.
18. Rowell to Governor Andrew, undated (late October 1861), Andrew Papers, MHS.
19. G. B. White to Governor Andrew, Boston, January 13, 1862, 9th Inf. File, MSL.
20. See William L. Burton, "Ethnic Regiments in the Civil War: The Illinois Experience," in *Selected Papers in Illinois History* (Springfield, Ill., 1982), and William L. Burton, "Indiana's Ethnic Regiments," *Journal of Popular Culture*, XIV (Fall 1980): 229-41.

21. John C. Willey (?) to Governor Andrew, Miners Farm, October 18, 1861, Andrew Papers, MHS. Willey praised Cass's leadership and said that those who complained about him were unhappy because Cass tried to bring discipline to the regiment.
22. Petition to Governor Andrew, January 3, 1864, 9th Inf. File, MSL. The Macnamara histories claim that the 9th Massachusetts Infantry was composed exclusively of men of Irish birth. This is obviously not true. Among others, the Macnamara brothers were born in the United States.
23. Mark Mayo Boatner III, *The Civil War Dictionary* (New York, 1959), p. 364.
24. Petition to Governor Andrew, Harrison's Landing, July 31, 1862, 9th Inf. File, MSL.
25. Maj. Gen. Fitz-John Porter to Governor Andrew, Harrison's Landing, August 6, 1862 and August 12, 1862, 9th Inf. File, MSL.
26. Col. P. R. Guiney to Governor Andrew, Harrison's Landing, August 12, 1862, 9th Inf. File, MSL.
27. Father T. Scully to Governor Andrew, Washington, September 9, 1862, 9th Inf. File, MSL; Governor Andrew to Guiney (copy), Boston, August 14, 1862, Governor Andrew Letters, MSL.
28. Guiney to Governor Andrew, Sharpsburg, September 29, 1862, 9th Inf. File, MSL.
29. Guiney to B. S. Treanor, October 25, 1862, 9th Inf. File, MSL.
30. A. G. Browne, Jr., to Colonel Byrnes, Boston, December 8, 1862, (copy), Governor Andrew Letters, MSL.
31. Guiney to Col. James McQuade, Falmouth, April 5, 1863, Boston Public Library.
32. Guiney to Governor Andrew, Sharpsburg, October 22, 1862, 9th Inf. File, MSL.
33. Governor Andrew to Guiney, Boston, October 31, 1862, (copy), Governor Andrew Letters, MSL.
34. Bowen, *Massachusetts in the War*, pp. 932-33.
35. A. G. Browne, Jr., to Maj. Gen. Benjamin Butler, Boston, September 23, 1861, in *War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (Washington, 1902), Series 3, vol. I:819.
36. Thomas Francis Meagher to B. S. Treanor, New York, September 5, 1861, (copy), enclosed in B. S. Treanor to Governor Andrew, Boston, September 11, 1861, 28th Massachusetts Infantry File, MSL. Hereafter cited as 28th Inf. File.
37. *Boston Pilot*, October 5, 1861.
38. W. F. Lyons, *Brigadier-General Thomas Francis Meagher: His Political and Military Career* (New York, 1870), pp. 87-88, claims that Meagher was personally responsible for raising the second Irish regiment in Massachusetts. This is an exaggeration.
39. Patrick Donahoe to Governor Andrew, Boston, September 9, 1861, Andrew Papers, MHS.
40. B. S. Treanor to Governor Andrew, no date, 28th Inf. File, MSL.
41. Lonn, *Foreigners in the Union Army*, pp. 119-20.

42. Francis Parker to Governor Andrew, Boston, September 21, 1861, Andrew Papers, MHS; Patrick Donahoe to Governor Andrew, Boston, September 23, 1861, Andrew Papers, MHS.
43. See Donahoe to Governor Andrew, Boston, September 23, 1861, Andrew Papers, MHS.
44. *Boston Pilot*, November 30, 1861.
45. William Schouler to Governor Andrew, Boston, October 30, 1861, Andrew Papers, MHS. Mathew, or Matthew, Murphy, remains something of a mystery. See Lonn, *Foreigners in the Union Army*, p. 224.
46. William Schouler to Lt. Col. Henry Lee, Boston, October 25, 1861, 28th Inf. File, MSL, and Schouler to Governor Andrew, Boston, November 4, 1861, 28th Inf. File, MSL.
47. William Schouler to Maj. George C. Strong, Boston, November 9, 1861, 28th Inf. File, MSL.
48. *New York Tribune*, January 14, 1862; Lonn, *Foreigners in the Union Army*, p. 121.
49. Capt. John Riley to Governor Andrew, Newport News, July 24, 1862, 28th Inf. File, MSL.
50. Charles S. Sanborn to William Schouler, Hilton Head, April 3, 1862, 28th Inf. File, MSL.
51. William Schouler to Governor Andrew, Boston, May 19, 1862, 28th Inf. File, MSL; Bowen, *Massachusetts in the War*, p. 419.
52. Benjamin F. Weeks to Lieutenant Colonel Ritchie, Fredericksburg, August 8, 1862, 28th Inf. File, MSL.
53. Brig. Gen. Isaac I. Stevens to Governor Andrew, Newport News, August 2, 1862, 28th Inf. File, MSL. Stevens urged the appointment of his son to command the 28th in a letter to Andrew, Newport News, July 26, 1862, 28th Inf. File, MSL.
54. Patrick Donahoe to Governor Andrew, Boston, September 13, 1862, 28th Inf. File, MSL.
55. Lonn, *Foreigners in the Union Army*, p. 224.
56. Petition to Governor Andrew, Antietam, October 1, 1862, 28th Inf. File, MSL.
57. Col. Richard Byrnes to Governor Andrew, Fredericksburg, November 22, 1862, 28th Inf. File, MSL. See also a similar request after the Battle of Fredericksburg, Byrnes to Andrew, Falmouth, December 17, 1862, 28th Inf. File, MSL.
58. Bowen, *Massachusetts in the War*, p. 434.
59. Unsigned letter, Washington, June 6, 1861, Andrew Papers, MHS. This correspondent may have been A. G. Browne, Jr., the governor's military secretary.
60. See the correspondence of George D. Wells, starting August 1, 1861, in the Andrew Papers, MHS.
61. William B. Skelton, "Officers and Politicians: The Origin of Army Politics in the United States Before the Civil War," in Peter Karsten (ed) *The Military in America* (New York, 1980), pp. 89-110.
62. *Ibid.*, p. 95.

63. Russell's *Times* column of September 9, 1861 is reprinted in the *Washington Evening Star*, October 5, 1861.
64. R. Laurence Moore, "Insiders and Outsiders in American Historical Narrative and American History," *American Historical Review*, LXXXVII (April 1982): 390-412.
65. Lonn, *Foreigners in the Union Army*, pp. 146-50.