

**Susannah Ural Bruce.** *The Harp and the Eagle: Irish American Volunteers and the Union Army 1861-1865.* New York: New York University Press, 2006. xiii + 309 pp. \$22.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-8147-9940-6.



**Walter Kamphoefner, Wolfgang Helbich, eds..** *Germans in the Civil War: The Letters They Wrote Home.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006. xxxiv + 521 pp. \$59.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8078-3044-4.



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Despite the centrality of the myth of the melting pot in American culture and the current popularity of the Civil War, outside of academia most people's knowledge of the contribution of immigrant soldiers from 1861-65 is probably limited to Buster Kilrain in Michael Shaara's *Killer Angels* (1974). Immigrant soldiers received little mention in Ken Burns's famous PBS documentary (1990) and still await their Hollywood equivalent of *Gloria* (1989). Historians have done better; while the field of soldier studies has grown, however, the stories of immigrant soldiers remain underdeveloped. In many ways Ella Lonn's dated *Foreigners in the Confederacy* (1940) and *Foreigners in the Union Army and Navy* (1951) remain the most

popular books about non-native Civil War soldiers.

Stepping into the breach is Susannah Ural Bruce with *The Harp and the Eagle*. Bruce eschews writing a history of a single famous Irish unit or individual for "a broad examination of the way Irish Catholic men and their communities understood this service in the Union Army" (p. 2). The book considers both the home front and the armies themselves, arguing that the crossroads between those two worlds holds the key to understanding why Irish men volunteered to serve and how they, and the Irish community at large, understood their service.

Irish Americans had what Bruce terms a "dual loyalty." Their actions were dictated by how

they would affect Irish communities, not just American ones. Their first loyalty was Ireland, not the United States. While native-born Americans saw the Irish as disloyal when their support for the war declined, Bruce argues that for the Irish it was the war that moved away from them while they remained loyal to their initial goals. Irish support for the Union cause rested on two issues: their desire to protect the United States as a free country to which Irish everywhere could turn, and the opportunity to train Irishmen as soldiers for later conflicts with the British to free their island. Even in the beginning, when Irish interests matched those of the United States, there was tension—the residuals of antebellum distrust and stereotypes of the Irish as wild brutes. Yet in those early months the display of patriotism by the Irish made them popular as some native-born officers appropriated Irish heritage (and its reputation for hard fighting and bravery) for themselves.

Of course this did not last through the four bloody years of the Civil War. Bruce attributed this shift away from support for the war to the high casualties Irish soldiers suffered, the Emancipation Proclamation, and Abraham Lincoln's removal of George McClellan from command (p. 134). With so many Irish dying, it became hard to see the war as a training ground of an army of Irish independence. The Emancipation Proclamation diminished the ideal of America as an Irish utopia, and the removal of McClellan (who Bruce claimed the Irish community saw as a skilled general) reinforced the notion that the immigrants were often not welcome.

*The Harp and the Eagle* covers a broad swath of material in its attempt to review the entire Irish American experience. Still the book suffers from a paucity of sources, something which Bruce acknowledges, noting the high rate of illiteracy among her subjects. Unfortunately this means she often had to rely on material from newspapers read by Irish readers or comments about Irish soldiers by their officers, rather than more direct evi-

dence from the Irishmen in the ranks. Thus the book draws some conclusions through inference rather than demonstrating a clear causal connection with evidence—as when claiming that members of the Irish Brigade reenlisted mainly for cash bounties rather than patriotism without any direct evidence from soldiers' writings (p. 194).

Bruce's admirable goal of examining the crossroads of military life and home front occasionally produces awkward juxtapositions, perhaps illustrating the larger point that sometimes those two worlds moved along different timelines. Thus, one moment a reader hears about Irish support for the war waning as a newspaper editorializes against the draft, and the next the stalwart Irish Brigade is making a charge across a field under heavy fire. Occasionally Bruce seems determined to include as much information as possible even if not fully relevant. For example, she claims that certain events, such as the charge of the non-Irish 140th New York at Gettysburg under Irish Colonel Patrick O'Rourke, had become iconic and had to be discussed (p. 5).

Overall though the book does well with the sources it has. If it oversteps what the evidence can prove, the conclusions it draws are still plausible, pointing the way towards a distinctive analysis of the Irish soldier's Civil War. Bruce set out to understand Irish soldiers' conduct and *The Harp and the Eagle* does give some valuable insight. If the experiences of Irish soldiers were not as different from those of American born soldiers as Bruce believed (after all they too stopped volunteering as quickly once the casualty rates soared), they still deserve examination. While Bruce may not be the only one to have recognized the concept of immigrant soldiers struggling with multiple loyalties, she deserves credit for expressing a previously amorphous idea.

While Bruce's Irishmen left few written sources, *Germans in the Civil War* illustrates the wealth of material left behind by the Union's other large immigrant group. The book is a collection

of fifty-seven German immigrants' writings, edited by Walter Kamphoefner and Wolfgang Helbich. The fascinating sampling ranges from a single letter to extended excerpts from diaries to correspondences occasionally including letters from several members of the same family. The writers are split pretty evenly between civilians (mainly male) and soldiers (privates through captains, a few surgeons, and one sailor). Not surprisingly, most were Northerners, although the editors do include a few Southern voices.

The collection is a remarkable resource for scholars of German immigration or the Civil War. Not only are they translations of documents that reside Germany's archives (making the book itself a convenience), but, with a handful of exceptions, they are directed to distant family unfamiliar with the United States. Thus the writers often felt compelled to explain various matters, from the cause of the Civil War to governmental policies and politics, which their native-born neighbors would almost never do amongst themselves.

In some ways the Germans' story echoes that of Bruce's Irish. In their introduction Kamphoefner and Helbich discuss how the war reinforced immigrants' ethnic identity, which they put before their American one. This meant their goals, and the path to them, did not always correspond to those of their new fellow countrymen. At the same time Germans in the ranks sought recognition from the larger American society. Unfortunately the native-born did not attribute the same fighting skill to the Germans that they did to the Irish. Surprisingly, however, the German soldiers and civilians commented little on the "flying Dutchmen," viewing themselves as the *crème de la crème* of the Union army and largely ignoring native comments. Corporal August Horstmann was one of the few to do so, when he related to his parents that Confederates had high respect for German soldiers, as did their commanding general. Civilians traveled great distances to see his di-

vision, he reported, known as "the flying Dutchmen" (pp. xxxi, 22, 23, 25, 121).

If contemporaries did not consider them as brave as their Irish counterparts, Germans did have the advantage of unquestioned loyalty. While many Germans came to the United States driven by economic forces, Germans also had a political class unique to their community--the revolutionaries of 1848. Even though a small portion of the German population, they had an influence on their fellow countrymen that exceeded their numbers. Regardless of when or why they had come, many immigrants commented on forty-eighters commanding troops or speaking at rallies, and defended them when the rest of the nation questioned their martial skill. The rhetoric of the revolutionaries also seeped into their writings. It is debatable whether or not most Germans recognized the forty-eighters as leaders and voted Republican as they were urged to do (the book notes that recent historiography questions this notion); yet the immigrants were aware of the ideas that the forty-eighters espoused (p. 5). The language of freedom, liberty, and the greatness of the United States frequently filled their passages--as did invectives against the slaveholding South (which were occasionally coupled with comments praising African American soldiers). Civilians as well as soldiers wrote in patriotic prose, yet some comments came from men who declined to enlist. Several admitted to wanting to avoid military service. The editors note that reading these civilian letters expressing patriotism in similar ways as soldiers did, may cause one to doubt how much insight historians should give those words in all letters. However, they dismiss this with the old refrain that war is an occupation of the young not the established, the failure of these armchair patriots to serve was not from a lack of sincerity in their words but a reflection of the years in the working world and the value families placed on them (p.28).

Kamphoefner and Helbich do a good job of presenting their subjects; they provide introductions that cover the soldiers' lives before the war (finishing with blurbs about what happened to the soldiers) as well as descriptions of the soldiers' writing, in terms of the quality of their prose, grammar, and handwriting. Although this is a fascinating volume, historians might be frustrated by some editorial decisions. Kamphoefner and Helbich have chosen to present fragments of documents, rarely reproducing a letter in its entirety and often mentioning other letters they had, but chose not to include at all. They are most concerned with material that covered issues of German identity and place in society, Germany itself, military life, and "immigrant perspectives of war, politics, and slavery" (p. xix). Thus the material presented is self-selected towards the editors' interest. (They make no pretenses, admitting that they intend to, in part, comment on present immigration issues.) Civil War historians might find some of these decisions odd: the reader gets the words of a new father urging his wife to vaccinate their child and people writing updates to their families about their businesses, but only editorial summaries regarding the encounters with iron-clads or an Eastern soldier's thoughts on the military progress in the West. These limitations aside, *Germans in the Civil War* remains an incredible resource while pointing future researchers towards a treasure trove of material on the Civil War.

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