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Paul R. Wylie. *The Irish General: Thomas Francis Meagher.* Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2007. xi + 404 pp. $29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8061-3847-3.

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"Meagher of the Sword": Thomas Francis Meagher in Ireland and America

As an Irish nationalist and ethnic leader in the United States, Union general during the Civil War, and postwar territorial governor in Montana, Thomas Francis Meagher left his mark on both sides of the Atlantic during his short life. Born in Waterford, Ireland, in 1823, and educated by English Jesuits, Meagher early on established his reputation as an impassioned Irish nationalist. The British banished him to Van Diemen's Land (Tasmania) after he helped to lead a failed uprising in Ireland in 1848. He escaped and arrived in New York City in the spring of 1852, where thousands of cheering Irish Americans greeted their newest hero. Meagher found a way to blend his fame, oratorical skills, and livelihood by commencing a lecture tour that took him through New England, the Mid-Atlantic states, and the Deep South within one year of his arrival. Meagher gained admission to the New York bar in September 1855, and he founded the *Irish News* the following year. He rejected abolitionism and strongly endorsed Democrat James Buchanan's candidacy for president.

Just before the shelling of Fort Sumter, Meagher declared his sympathy for the South. His stance completely changed once hostilities erupted, however, and he admitted to a friend that he felt compelled to fight for the Republic that had taken him in as a refugee. Even though he joined the Irish American 69th New York State Militia (NYSM), he revealed a continuing attentiveness to Irish nationalism: Meagher hoped that the experience Irish American troops would receive during the war might assist Ireland's future liberation. His regiment fought at the battle of the First Bull Run, where it suffered heavy casualties and lost its colonel, Michael Corcoran, to capture. Within weeks, the regiment began recruiting to fight again as the core of an entire Irish American brigade that Meagher organized. Meagher commanded this Irish brigade through some of its fiercest fighting during the war, including the Seven Days battles, Antietam, and Fredericksburg. After the war, Meagher served as postwar governor of Montana Territory, where he died by drowning on July 1, 1867.

With his book, *The Irish General*, Paul R. Wylie provides a deeply detailed account of Meagher's life, based on impressive archival research. Unfortunately, however, Wylie rarely takes the opportunity to connect the facts of Meagher's life to broader historical themes. Excising some of the detail and using this space to provide more analysis would have made Wylie's narrative shorter and strengthened his book as a whole by allowing him to engage with some of the interesting questions raised in Meagher's life. For instance, Meagher quickly transformed from a Southern sympathizer to an ardent Union Civil War officer, but Wylie provides little discussion about how this conversion took place. Moreover, in light of prewar nativism, Irish Americans' commitment to the Union remained uncertain. Wylie could have examined how Meagher considered and resolved all of these issues as an individual, and then could have linked that personal story to a deeper understanding of the Irish American community in the North in 1861.

Wylie also could have examined how Meagher, as an ethnic spokesman, interpreted Irish American service for the Union. A revolutionary who had previously focused on the liberation movement for his native land, Meagher, during the Civil War, came to embrace both sides of his identity, at once Irish and American. From his position as one of its prominent spokesmen, Meagher energetically urged members of Irish America to defend the Union, and he asserted to all Americans that this participation solidified Irish American status within the Republic and vanquished nativism. Meagher's addresses comprised something more than simple recruiting speeches: they helped define an American identity for the Irish in the United States, and they explained to all Americans how the Irish

Americans fit into American society. In the course of his speeches, Meagher also placed the Civil War in its international context. For example, at a Union rally on September 14, 1861, in Bridgeport, Connecticut, Meagher emphasized that should the flame of the United States extinguish, so also would that of republicanism worldwide, including for Ireland.[1]

Meagher started the war as a pro-Southern Democrat devoted to Irish nationalism, but he came to articulate with eloquence how Irish American service earned that community inclusion within the United States. Not only did Irish Americans fight and die for the Union, Meagher argued, but they also tangibly affirmed their naturalization as U.S. citizens by showing loyalty to its republican ideals. Moreover, while Irish Americans continued to maintain their ethnic culture and devotion to Irish liberation, under the leadership of Meagher and others, they increasingly placed this ethnic culture within an American context, and emphasized an American allegiance alongside support for Irish nationalism.

Meagher's wartime conversion to the Republican Party is another issue Wylie could have examined more deeply. Despite party fluidity during the Civil War, many Irish Americans remained loyal to the Democratic Party. In contrast, Meagher and some other Irish Americans eventually became active supporters of Republicans. By October 1863, Meagher wrote to another Irish American who faced opposition for his new Republican allegiance, Colonel Patrick Guiney of the 9th Massachusetts Infantry Regiment, to condemn Irish Americans who blindly followed the Democratic Party. Meagher expressed his intense personal frustration: "To their own discredit and degradation, they [Irish Americans] have suffered themselves to be bamboozled into being obstinate herds in the political field." He continued: "Democrats they profess themselves to be from the start–the instant the baggage-smashers and cut-throat lodging-house-keepers lay hands on them–and Democrats they remain until the day of their deaths, miserably and repulsively regardless of the conflicting meanings that name acquires through the progressive workings of the great world about them," members of a party "which under the captivating pretexts of the States-Rights, Habeas Corpus, and the popular claims and rights of the kind, would cripple the national power."[2]

Meagher's outspoken support for Republicans seriously damaged his position within the Irish American community. Of Meagher's political stance, the New York *Irish-American* newspaper lamented, "between him and the people who loved and trusted him once he has opened a gulf he never can bridge over." Another edition of the same newspaper declared, "in General Meagher's fall from the high position he once held in the esteem and affection of his countrymen, we see only a subject for regret; our indignation at his unprovoked attack upon our people has long since subsided into contempt, and we have no desire to add a deeper tint to an act that has gone so far to darken the record of a life, of which the promise was once so fair."[3] Wylie could have taken the opportunity to examine more deeply Meagher's own political evolution, as well as link his individual story to a broader examination about the wartime Irish American community in the North.

Wylie's deeply detailed (and well-illustrated) book restores attention to a long-neglected Civil War officer and ethnic leader, and for that, the author should be applauded. Hopefully, Wylie's effort will spawn additional research into Meagher's life as well as other aspects of the Irish American community during the era of the Civil War and Reconstruction.

Notes

[1]. *New York Times*, September 16, 1861.

[2]. Thomas F. Meagher to Patrick R. Guiney, New York, October 7, 1863, in Christian G. Samito, *Commanding Boston's Irish Ninth: The Civil War Letters of Colonel Patrick R. Guiney, Ninth Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1998), 225-227.

[3]. Thomas F. Meagher to the Union Committee of Ohio, New York, September 23, 1863, *The Irish-American*, October 3, 1863. See also *The Irish-American*, October 3, 1863; *The Irish-American*, October 13, 1864; *The Irish-American*, October 15, 1864; and *The Irish-American*, November 12, 1864.

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