

***“Their Bloody Red Banner of Rebellion Will Pale Before the
Green, as sure as Heaven”***
by Josh Christopher

On March 17, 1863 the men of the 28th Massachusetts Volunteers commemorated St. Patrick’s Day in historic fashion. The day would prove a perfect illustration of the “combat ferocity and camp life frivolity” for which the 28th Massachusetts, and the rest of the so called “Irish Brigade” of which it was a member, was famous.¹ On this particular St. Patrick’s Day, the regiment’s revelry was destined to be cut short. Before long, news of an up river skirmish reached camp. As the troops hastily prepared to march out to the fray, the color bearer fell in without the regiment’s trademark green flag. Peter Welsh succeeded in locating the missing standard and, as a reward, was from then on afforded the honor of bearing the ensign into battle. Soon after receiving this privilege, Welsh, brimming with pride, would write home to his wife to describe the day’s events and tell her that he would “carry it [the flag] as long as God gives me strength”.² This brief narrative effectively illustrates three motifs that surface repeatedly throughout the wartime recollection of, not only Peter Welsh, but a number of Irish-American soldiers: Irish ethnicity, combat on behalf of their adopted nation, and a deep Catholic faith.

Before launching further into Peter Welsh, the Irish-Americans, and the American Civil War, it is necessary to provide some background information on the political, social and economic status of the nation. In the years prior to the war, the United States as a

¹D. P. Conyngham, *The Irish Brigade and Its Campaigns*. ed. Lawrence Frederick Kohl (New York: Fordham University Press, 1994), xi.

² Peter Welsh to Margaret Welsh, 31 March 1863, *Irish Green and Union Blue: The Civil War Letters of Peter Welsh, Color Sergeant, 28th Regiment Massachusetts Volunteers*, ed. Lawrence Frederick Kohl and Margaret Cosse Richard (New York: Fordham University Press, 1986), 82. (Kohl writes “Peter Welsh tended to run his text together, to take full advantage of scarce pieces of paper, the editor has added extra space to break up his unpunctuated sentences.” (ix) I have retained that formatting.)

whole and the North in particular, had experienced a sizeable surge in immigration. The leading source of that immigration was Ireland. The Irish, fleeing both famine and British persecution, arrived in droves. The vast majority were uneducated and lacked a specific trade; as such they amassed in large urban areas where jobs requiring only unskilled labor were available. The sheer numbers of Irish, and the speed with which they were arriving, gave rise to remarkable shifts in the demographics of the areas where they settled.

The rapid pace of the Irish immigrant population's arrival, growth, and transformation of the preexistent status quo alarmed many native born Americans. The "native" Americans most alarmed by this rapid influx of foreigners were often descendents of Anglo-Saxon "racial" stock and tended to be adherents of Protestant denominations that possessed strong anti-Catholic inclinations. In the mid-nineteenth century, American "nativism", as it came to be called, emerged as a powerful political force that sought to temper the influence of the multitude of immigrants arriving on American soil. While American nativism was hostile to all immigrants, the Irish garnered special distrust and hostility. Nativist animosity toward the Irish was based on a number of factors: the prevailing racial and ethnic stereotypes of the day, economic competition over jobs (the Irish were typically willing to work for less), politics (the Irish opposed abolition and temperance at a time when both were growing popular movements in the North), and lastly, the Catholicism to which the vast majority of the Irish adhered. As Roland asserts:

The appearance of great numbers of Roman Catholics within the previously largely Protestant population stirred deep fears of a threat to republican institutions and created a marked anti-immigrant and virulently anti-Catholic sentiment. As early as 1845 those feelings crystallized politically in the formation of the Native American party, whose

members were called Know-Nothings...The new party gained strength rapidly in response to the rising tide of immigration.³

In short, the Irish were different. White Anglo-Saxon Protestants had enjoyed numerical, cultural, and social dominance of America up to that point in the country's history. The Irish represented a departure from this in almost every way; they seemed to nativists something dissimilar and inherently un-American. Perhaps the nativist sentiment is best captured in the contemporary ad for household help that sought applicants of "any country or color except Irish."⁴

The ideology of the Native American Party, however, was fated to play a secondary role on the national stage to the question of slavery, which was rapidly polarizing the nation. Roland states:

(T)he Native American party also was destined soon to disappear after serving in the North as an important conduit from the other parties into the Republican party. The sectional issue of slavery in the western territories was about to eclipse nativism, anti-Catholicism, and temperance in the appeal to northern voters; the Republicans, as the chief proprietors of the sectional issue, were about to emerge as the main opponents of the Democrats in the North, and hence in the nation.⁵

The Republican Party's stance on the slavery question was more radical and more abolitionist than that of the Democrats. Many northerners who were sympathetic toward the Native American Party had feelings comparable to the Republican Party when it came to slavery. Thus, slavery's primacy on the national level resulted in nativists with anti-Catholic, anti-immigrant, and anti-Irish persuasions being swallowed up within the Republican Party. Both of these facts provided the Irish strong motivations to vote staunchly Democratic. For one, the Irish were conscious of the fact that, on the American

³Charles P. Roland, *An American Iliad: The Story of the Civil War* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2002, 2nd edition), 16.

⁴D. P. Conyngham, *The Irish Brigade and Its Campaigns*. ed. Lawrence Frederick Kohl (New York: Fordham University Press, 1994), xiv.

⁵Roland, 18.

socio-economic ladder, they were near the bottom rung, but that slaves remained one rung further down. In addition, the Irish believed abolition would mean the addition of more unskilled workers into a labor market that already left many in search of steady employment. As a result, the vast majority of Irish-Americans were unsympathetic to the plight of African-American slaves. Secondly, nativism was, to a certain extent, dormant while the nation grappled with slavery and succession; but its power as a political force was not dead. Many who had argued on its behalf resided within the political fold of the Republican Party. This fact was not lost on the Irish who remembered the antebellum persecution of the Know-Nothings and, as a result, remained extremely distrustful of the Republican Party. Therefore, in April of 1861 when a Republican president issued a call for 75,000 troops to put down ““combinations...too powerful to be suppressed by the ordinary course of judicial proceedings””⁶ the Irish seemed an improbable answer to that call. Or, as historian Lawrence Kohl has phrased it, “Irish-Americans at first appeared unlikely materials out of which to build a force to subdue the South.”⁷

However suspect Irish support of the Federal Government may have seemed, when Southern Rebels fired upon Fort Sumter, the Irish did respond to Lincoln’s summons for troops. Their prompt reaction begs the question: why? Why, in light of the pre-war discrimination and hostility they had endured, in the face of their unease with the incumbent Republican administration, and despite the fact that some in the North would have argued that the war was over an issue they did not find overly concerning or offensive (slavery), did Irish-Americans chose to fight for the Union?

⁶Roland, 39.

⁷ *Irish Green and Union Blue: The Civil War Letters of Peter Welsh, Color Sergeant, 28th Regiment Massachusetts Volunteers*, ed. Lawrence Frederick Kohl and Margaret Cosse Richard (New York: Fordham University Press, 1986), 8.

Nativists were most offended by the Catholicism, immigrant background, and ethnicity of their Irish neighbors. These attributes garnered the most attention from nativist politicians and press and raised Know-Nothingism's most vicious enmity. In the eyes of American nativists, these characteristics epitomized everything that was alien, everything that was un-American, about the Irish. One might expect the defamations, slanders, and stereotypes articulated through, prevalent in, and advanced by organizations such as the Native American Party against the Irish to foster withdraw, isolation, or at least indifference on the part of the Irish toward an unreceptive American culture. However, in this paper, I will demonstrate that some Irish-Americans refused to accept the classification of their most significant and distinctive traits as un-American. The war time letters of the soldiers in this study illustrate the importance their authors placed on the characteristics besieged by nativism; as well as their consciousness of the hostility certain elements of their surrounding environment harbored toward them. Ironically, rather than antipathy or segregation, each of the traits in question provoked and provided the Irish motivations to fight on the North's behalf. For instance, the Catholicism of the Irish was called "popery" and looked upon suspiciously by Protestants as a non-Christian sect at worst and a paramount allegiance to a foreign prince at best. Despite this, the Irish expressed an admiration and for Americans' right to freedom of religion and appreciation for the United States as a place where they would be free to practice their faith. Nativist critics classified the Irish as un-American inferiors and used their immigrant status to delegate them to a second class position within society. The Irish responded with a determination to prove they were worthy of American citizenship. Their Irish ethnicity, and the deep commitment and on-going concern for their ancestral homeland that went

with it, was viewed by some nativists as a problematic barrier to full integration into their new nation; in addition some nativists cast the Irish as a racially subordinate group prone to all kinds of vices. Instead, the Irish marched under twin ensigns: green regimental flags of Erin and the stars and stripes of the United States, fighting bravely, and often sacrificing disproportionately, for their adopted homeland. Nativist politics attacked the Irish's Catholicism, immigrant origins, and ethnicity as foreign and un-American; the Irish responded by answering the call to arms in the most bloody and exclusively American conflict in the nation's history.

The spiritual lives and beliefs of Civil War soldiers, and their corresponding consequences, has been a topic long neglected in the field. Pulitzer Prize winning historian James M. McPherson has described Civil War armies as “arguably, the most religious in American history.”⁸ Yet, McPherson has also observed that “because the American Civil War was not a war of religion, historians have tended to overlook the degree to which it was a religious war.”⁹ McPherson is not alone; a number of other scholars seem to share his point of view. Miller, Stout, and Wilson in the introduction to *Religion and the American Civil War* which they collectively edited admit, to a large extent, the motivation for that work came from their realizations that “the religious history of the war has yet to be written” and “the sort of sustained, productive attention that has been paid to religion in the colonial period, the Revolutionary era, and the

⁸ James M. McPherson, *For Cause & Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 63.

⁹James M. McPherson, “Afterword,” in *Religion and the American Civil War* ed. Randall M. Miller et al. (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 409.

modern age is simply not present for the Civil War in American history.”¹⁰ Similarly, historian Steven E. Woodworth remarks:

The marginalized role to which religion has been relegated in modern America has made the vital faith of past generations almost invisible to students of history. Even in a field as widely studied as the Civil War, religion has been the subject of relatively few books.¹¹

Thus, a number of contemporary historians recognize a deficiency in scholarly evaluation of religion’s role and impact on the Civil War, and call for a reevaluation and examination of the field.

The recent publication of works such as *Religion and the American Civil War* (1998) and *While God Is Marching On* (2001) attest to the fact that historians are beginning to respond to the need for much closer examination of the religiosity of the Civil War. However, both of the above works are overwhelmingly focused on Protestants. Miller notes the particular lack of sufficient information on Catholics, Jews, Lutherans, Reformed Protestants and members of all religious groups “outside those British-American mainline denominations whose particular histories too often stand for all.”¹² Woodworth’s offering, to some extent, fills the hole described by Miller as it looks at the religious life of Protestant soldiers of all stripes. Though Woodworth’s study provides much needed insight and exploration it remains, deliberately, confined to the Protestant experience. He states: “First of all, this is not an encyclopedia of unusual religious groups or practices... There were, of course, a fair number of Catholics, some Jews, and even a

¹⁰Randall M. Miller et al, “Introduction,” in *Religion and the American Civil War* ed. Randall M. Miller et al. (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 3.

¹¹ Steven E. Woodworth, *While God is Marching On: The Religious World of Civil War Soldiers* (University Press of Kansas, 2001), ix.

¹² Randall M. Miller, “Catholic Religion, Irish Ethnicity, and the Civil War,” in *Religion and the American Civil War* ed. Randall M. Miller et al. (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 262.

few avowed atheists in the ranks, but their numbers together constituted a small minority of the soldiers, and their beliefs and practices play little role in these pages.”¹³

Numerically speaking Woodworth is, of course, absolutely correct. The vast majority of soldiers, on both sides, came from Protestant backgrounds. However, the importance the vast majority of Civil War soldiers ascribed their respective faith did not diminish simply because that faith happen not to descend from a Protestant Christian tradition. The Catholic and Jewish soldiers who fought in the Civil War were no less sincere in the practice of their faith than their Protestant comrades. For Irish-Americans in particular, the devout practice of their faith was a cause in which they heavily invested themselves. Catholicism was a meaningful and vibrant part of the letters they wrote home, their experience of camp life, and the way in which they viewed the battlefield’s highest cost. *While God is Marching On* references a single Catholic soldier whom Woodworth describes as “expressing his faith in Christian terms” but who, apparently, seems to the author too “fatalistic” to really be described as Christian. The Catholic soldier to whom Woodworth affixed that description is Peter Welsh.

Hence, what of that “fair number” of Catholic soldiers Woodworth merely brushes over in his book’s introduction? Their faith, and the role it played in their lives as soldiers in the Union army, can in no way be encapsulated by the term “fatalism”. The soldiers in this study placed great importance on their Catholicism and strove to live it out as faithfully as possible. The large role faith played in their lives can be seen in the numerous references to God, the church, clerics, the Sacraments, and so on, contained in their letters. The letters also reflect a consciousness that their Catholicism was not

¹³Woodworth, ix.

acceptable to everyone in their new country. Evidence of this can be seen in organized pre-war movements such as the “Protestant Crusade ” of “No-Popery” or the Protestant chaplain who described Catholicism as “papist, Romish, mummery.”¹⁴ This type of Anti-Catholic intolerance and discrimination helped convince Irish-Americans of the good and necessity of nations, like America, where liberties such as the freedom of religion were protected.

Concerning Catholicism, before arguing that defending the ability to practice it freely was an important motivating factor for Irish-American enlistment, it is necessary first to prove Catholicism was genuinely important in the lives of the soldiers who adhered to it. If the soldiers did not make frequent references to their faith in their correspondence, it would become extremely arduous to demonstrate, not only that the ability to practice their Catholicism freely helped spur them on to fight on the Northern behalf, but also that their faith truly did possess greater depth and significance in their lives than Woodworth’s fatalistic moniker. Fortunately, the soldiers make frequent mention of their faith. Those references indicate that their faith was in fact important to them and, as a result of which, they felt an obligation to answer the call to preserve and defend the nation, and the rights it promised its citizens, from fragmentation and failure.

Probably the most definitively Catholic forms of devotion and piety are the Sacraments. The Catholic Church has seven Sacraments: Baptism, Reconciliation/confession, Eucharist/communion, Confirmation, Marriage, Anointing of the Sick, and Holy Orders. Of the seven Sacraments most are received only once. However, regular frequenting of Reconciliation and the Eucharist are encouraged and

¹⁴ D. P. Conyngham, *The Irish Brigade and Its Campaigns*. ed. Lawrence Frederick Kohl (New York: Fordham University Press, 1994), xiii. Woodworth, 56.

expected of all faithful Catholics. The clearest substantiation of the fact that Catholicism was important to the soldiers in this study is the fact that they make regular mention of the Sacraments. The letters contain frequent anecdotes about attending mass, where Catholics could avail themselves of the Eucharist, and receiving absolution, the end result of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. It seems that the letters the family, usually the wife, wrote from home to the soldier often expressed concern about the soldier's spiritual, as well as physical, welfare. Specifically, family members worried, like good Catholics, about the soul of the loved one and whether or not it was in a state of grace. Thus, while reception of the Sacraments was important to the soldier, it was also a way of easing the apprehension of worried family. It assured the family that if the unthinkable should happen their loved one was spiritually prepared. For instance, Patrick Guiney wrote home to his wife Jeannette, whom he frequently referred to as Jennie, "I went to Communion last Saturday morning. This will be pleasant news for you — a good precaution for me."¹⁵ Peter Welsh as well wrote home to his wife Margaret to assure her: "Dear wife i can relieve your anxiety about me going to confession i was to confession last night and received holy Communion to day thank God for his goodness in allowing me to aproach his holy sacrements once more."¹⁶ Guiney addressed another letter to his wife in which he retold the events directly prior to his involvement in a battle:

We turned out in line of battle – and as soon as we had completed the formation of the line Father Scully came over to me and made a very appropriate address to my company , after which we all made an act of contrition, bent on one knee, and received absolution

¹⁵ Patrick Guiney to Jeannette Guiney, 3 April 1862, *Commanding Boston's Irish Ninth: The Civil War Letters of Colonel Patrick R. Guiney, Ninth Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry*, ed. Christian G. Samito (New York: Fordham University Press, 1998), 88.

¹⁶ Peter Welsh to Margaret Welsh, 22 February, 1863, *Irish Green and Union Blue: The Civil War Letters of Peter Welsh, Color Sergeant, 28th Regiment Massachusetts Volunteers*, ed. Lawrence Frederick Kohl and Margaret Cosse Richard (New York: Fordham University Press, 1986), 73.

from him. He then went on to other companies with the same result. His coming to my company first was gratifying to me.¹⁷

For the contemporary reader of these letters, Welsh and Guiney's references to the Sacraments, their response to the concern of their family members about their reception of them, and the high esteem in which they themselves held the Sacraments, communicates in a tangible and quantifiable way the importance of their faith in their lives.

While direct references to the Sacraments provide powerful illustrations of the importance of Catholicism in the lives of the soldiers in question, the Sacraments of Reconciliation and Eucharist necessitate the presence of a priest. Thus, references in the letters discussing the chaplains of the Irish-American regiments are also important as they provide an indirect reference to the Sacraments. Allusions to the priests who ministered to the men as well as anxiety over their continued presence, and concern for the priest's well-being, are numerous in the letters. For instance, Welsh writes "There is one thing I am very sorry for that our chaplain is not with us he went home sick but we expect him or another in his place here very soon."¹⁸ Guiney wrote home to his wife in the spring of 1862: "Father Scully is well and living in a little tent that would scarcely shelter a primitive hermit. I wish I had the power I would not allow a priest to live in such a manner when I could better him."¹⁹ Shortly after he enlisted Peter Welsh's regiment

¹⁷Patrick Guiney to Jeannette Guiney, 31 July, 1861, *Commanding Boston's Irish Ninth: The Civil War Letters of Colonel Patrick R. Guiney, Ninth Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry*, ed. Christian G. Samito (New York: Fordham University Press, 1998), 29.

¹⁸Peter Welsh to Margaret Welsh, 11 October, 1862, *Irish Green and Union Blue: The Civil War Letters of Peter Welsh, Color Sergeant, 28th Regiment Massachusetts Volunteers*, ed. Lawrence Frederick Kohl and Margaret Cosse Richard (New York: Fordham University Press, 1986), 21.

¹⁹Patrick Guiney to Jeannette Guiney, 2 April, 1862, *Commanding Boston's Irish Ninth: The Civil War Letters of Colonel Patrick R. Guiney, Ninth Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry*, ed. Christian G. Samito (New York: Fordham University Press, 1998), 87.

joined the “Irish Brigade”. Soon after this merger Peter wrote home to tell how much the new arraignment pleased him. In his letter prior to the unification of the regiments Peter had expressed a great deal of distress over the fact that that his regiment did not have a chaplain of its own. As a result, it had to rely on the ability of chaplains from other regiments to come by and minister to Welsh and his comrades. In the winter of 1862 Peter penned happily to Margaret: “There is another advantage we have since we joined this brigade there is three priests with the brigade so the [that] we have frequent oppertunitys of going to mass and evening prayer.”²⁰ These, and the many other references to the Catholic chaplains in the soldier’s letters, provide further indication that their faith, and the ability to practice it fully through access to the Sacraments, was imperative in their lives.

Yet another recurrent religious theme in the soldier’s letters is the almost countless number of side comments and anecdotes of a spiritual nature. One would be hard pressed to locate a letter that does not make some mention of God or conclude with the letter writer asking God’s blessing upon the person to whom he is writing. The vast majority of these of remarks are of a very impartial, generically Christian type. It is not difficult to imagine words like “my dear wife i must now conclude by wishing heave[n]’s choisest blessings on you” appearing in the letters home of a Protestant soldier.²¹ Remarks, such as the above, convey the similarities of the Christian Civil War soldier across denominational lines and help illustrate that, at their core, the faiths really were

²⁰Peter Welsh to Margaret Welsh, 4 December, 1862, *Irish Green and Union Blue: The Civil War Letters of Peter Welsh, Color Sergeant, 28th Regiment Massachusetts Volunteers*, ed. Lawrence Frederick Kohl and Margaret Cosse Richard (New York: Fordham University Press, 1986), 35.

²¹Peter Welsh to Margaret Welsh, 31 December, 1863, *Irish Green and Union Blue: The Civil War Letters of Peter Welsh, Color Sergeant, 28th Regiment Massachusetts Volunteers*, ed. Lawrence Frederick Kohl and Margaret Cosse Richard (New York: Fordham University Press, 1986), 140.

more alike than different. The Catholic faith of Irish-Americans can not justly be termed “fatalistic” without that term being applied to many other Protestant soldiers who make similar comments or express their faith in similar ways.

That being said, there remains a large number of comments in the letters that display a distinctly Catholic form of piety, belief, or practice that separated them from their Protestant brethren. Dedication to the Virgin Mary is a classic Catholic devotion. Guiney’s correspondence with his wife exhibits this type of religious devotion, he writes: “Good bye love and may God protect you and my child. May Mary [Guiney has made a cross after Mary’s name] ever blessed, to whom I have often appealed but never in vain, watch over you both.”²² Continuing to pray for a loved one or friend even after they have passed on is another characteristically Catholic practice divergent from most Protestant denominations. Guiney wrote home and shared the following imaginary comfort concerning his infant daughter with his wife: “If I should fall upon these Southern plains, if I had a moment for reflection, that moment would be embittered at the thought of my careless life, but in whatever pain, how I would smile at the thought of my pious intelligent little angel clasping her hands in prayer for me when I am gone.”²³ Thus, while some of the comments in the letters are of a general Christian nature, an attachment to their distinct Catholic faith is displayed through such comments as well.

Catholicism, so important in the lives of Welsh and Guiney, was also a large part of what, in the eyes of nativists, so inherently set them apart from their fellow Americans.

²² Patrick Guiney to Jeannette Guiney, 21 August, 1861, *Commanding Boston’s Irish Ninth: The Civil War Letters of Colonel Patrick R. Guiney, Ninth Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry*, ed. Christian G. Samito (New York: Fordham University Press, 1998), 44.

²³ Patrick Guiney to Jeannette Guiney, 24 July, 1861, *Commanding Boston’s Irish Ninth: The Civil War Letters of Colonel Patrick R. Guiney, Ninth Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry*, ed. Christian G. Samito (New York: Fordham University Press, 1998), 24.

It is ironic that an attribute labeled so foreign, so “un-American”, by so many could provide any cause or motivation for men like Guiney and Welsh to fight on the United State’s behalf. However, that is exactly what happened. Peter recorded an illustration of this when he wrote to Margaret:

In the first place rebellion without a just cause is a crime of the greatest magnitude we have St. Paul for authority he says that he who unjustly rebels against the will of God and draws upon himself eternal damnation did the rebels have a just cause, no although the fanatics of the north were the aggressors by their party platforms and agitation yet no man of sound judgement will say that was a sufficient cause for armed rebellion for a decision of this question you have only to refer to the political doctrine of Arch Bishop Hughes one whose abilitys as a statesman as well as an eclisatic are second to none in this land.²⁴

Peter Welsh found in his Catholicism both bible passages, which he would have shared with his Protestant comrades, and ecclesiastical opinion, which was unique to him as a Catholic, that motivated and encouraged his participation in the Northern war effort. His view of the Southern cause as an unjust rebellion created for him a pseudo religious obligation to aid in putting down that uprising. Thus, far from having the foreign and alienating effect pre-war nativist propaganda claimed. Welsh’s Catholicism was a crucial component that drew him into the principal conflict to preserve the United States.

A similar outlook can be observed in the letters of Patrick Guiney. He too wrote a letter home to his wife that articulated his view of who was to blame for the war and the cause for which he fought: “O! Jennie, how much less we ought to hate our enemies and how much more ought we to love our God. Nature is a Divine protest against War. But the curse be upon those who provoke it – not upon those who battle for Right, Liberty

²⁴Peter Welsh to Margaret Welsh, 3 February 1863, *Irish Green and Union Blue*, ed. Lawrence F. Kohl and Margaret C. Richard (New York: Fordham University Press, 1986), 65.

and Natural existence.”²⁵ Guiney too laid the blame for the war squarely on the Southern side. His faith played a role in his coming to the conclusion that the Confederate war effort was unjust and thus deserving of God’s curse. Guiney also remarked that “any man who acted to weaken the government ‘will have committed a crime for which a life of penance cannot expiate.’”²⁶ The word “penance” has distinctively Catholic ramifications; Catholics are given a penance to perform by a priest to prove their contrition after receiving the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Here too then we can see an example of how his faith framed the language he used to describe politics of the Civil War and which side was right, meaning, which side God was on. Thus, for Guiney as well as Welsh, faith colored the lens of how they viewed what was just and righteous in the world around them. For both that faith drew them into combat on the North’s behalf. It did not isolate them or leave them completely disinterested, or even hostile, to the “American way” in the manner in which Know-Nothing ideology envisioned.

Nor were Welsh and Guiney oblivious to the hostility and prejudice that flourished within some elements of the contemporary climate that surrounded them. The letters of each display a consciousness of the anti-Catholicism that existed in some areas. In writing home to his wife, who was considering a move out west to live with her brother, Guiney confessed: “I think the step may be a good one. The West cannot be worse than the east for one of my age, race, and creed.”²⁷ Peter Welsh, in his discussion

²⁵Patrick Guiney to Jeannette Guiney, 20 May, 1862, *Commanding Boston’s Irish Ninth: The Civil War Letters of Colonel Patrick R. Guiney, Ninth Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry*, ed. Christian G. Samito (New York: Fordham University Press, 1998), 103.

²⁶*Commanding Boston’s Irish Ninth: The Civil War Letters of Colonel Patrick R. Guiney, Ninth Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry*, ed. Christian G. Samito (New York: Fordham University Press, 1998), xxxi.

²⁷Patrick Guiney to Jeannette Guiney, 31 July, 1861, *Commanding Boston’s Irish Ninth: The Civil War Letters of Colonel Patrick R. Guiney, Ninth Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry*, ed. Christian G. Samito (New York: Fordham University Press, 1998), 29.

of the New York Draft Riots, wrote a letter home to his wife lamenting: “I am very sorry that the Irish men of New York took so large a part in them disgracefull riots God help the Irish They are so easily led into such snares which gives their enemys an oppertunity to malign and abuse them.”²⁸ Welsh and Guiney were well aware of the bias and prejudices others attached to them on account of their faith. This understanding provided faith based motivations for both men to take up arms on behalf of the Federal government.

In addition to being cognizance of the anti-Catholic climate around them in America, the letters of the two men often reflect on the oppressed and subjugated status of Ireland. In the summer of 1863 Welsh wrote to his father-in-law, who still lived in Ireland, and provided his summation of the consequences of English rule on the Church there: “seven centuries of persecution Churches Convents and Monesteries plundered and destroyed”.²⁹ The religious restriction and persecution of Irish Catholics in Ireland greatly colored Welsh’s viewpoint with regard to religion and religious freedom in America. An excellent articulation of that point of view is found his letter of February 3rd, 1863 in which he penned:

One of the most important yes the most important of all rights enjoyed by the citizen of a free nation is the liberty of concience free alters is an invaluable boon and where on earth except that fountain of religion Rome can any one point out to me a spot where the Church enjoys such freedoms as in the United States not even in Catholic France for there the religious press is bridled and her first Bishops are silenced not in that most Catholic of Catholic nations Austria for there the church is hampered by tenporal laws But i must stop for want of space i might write for a week on the subject before me and not do it half justice *But there is yet something in this land worth fighting for*³⁰

²⁸Peter Welsh to Margaret Welsh, 2 August, 1863, *Irish Green and Union Blue: The Civil War Letters of Peter Welsh, Color Sergeant, 28th Regiment Massachusetts Volunteers*, ed. Lawrence Frederick Kohl and Margaret Cosse Richard (New York: Fordham University Press, 1986), 115.

²⁹Peter Welsh to Patrick Prendergast, 1 June 1863, *Irish Green and Union Blue*, ed. Lawrence F. Kohl and Margaret C. Richard (New York: Fordham University Press, 1986), 100.

³⁰Peter Welsh to Margaret Welsh, 3 February 1863, *Irish Green and Union Blue*, ed. Lawrence F. Kohl and Margaret C. Richard (New York: Fordham University Press, 1986), 67. Emphasis added.

Irrespective of whatever prejudice and discrimination Welsh had endured in his adopted county on account of his faith, he remained inherently optimistic. No matter how bad things were in the United States, Peter was convinced there was no place, outside of Rome, where a Catholic was better able to live out the faith he held so dear. For Welsh that fact created an obligation. As the writings of St. Paul and Arch-Bishop Hughes had provided Welsh with one sort of religious motivation to fight, the right to freedom of religion, or “liberty of conscience” as Welsh put it, created another impetus. In Welsh’s eyes, the future promise of completely unfettered liberty of religious profession and practice, as stated in the Constitution, made up for the present’s shortcomings. To Welsh, this promise was the “something in this land worth fighting for”.³¹

Welsh’s letters carry an understanding that although the reward of that promise was invaluable, its cost was not cheap. Welsh viewed the Southern rebellion as an attack on freedom and liberty of all kinds, including freedom of religion. To Welsh, any man who valued those freedoms had an obligation to not permit the country that guaranteed them to fail. He was thus compelled, by the importance of Catholicism in his own life as well as the festering wound of English persecution, to strike back on behalf of freedom.

Peter explained to Margaret:

All men who love free government and equal laws are watching this crisis to see if a republic can sustain itself in such a case if it fail then the hopes of millions fall and the desighns and wishes of all tyrants will suceed the old cry will be sent from the aristocrats of Europe that such is the common end of all republics the blatent croakers of the devine right of kings will shout forth their joy.³²

In fighting for the preservation of the Union, Welsh envisioned himself as a champion for the preservation of liberty, particularly freedom of religion. The cost of the promise was

³¹Peter Welsh to Margaret Welsh, 3 February 1863, *Irish Green and Union Blue*, ed. Lawrence F. Kohl and Margaret C. Richard (New York: Fordham University Press, 1986), 67.

³²Peter Welsh to Margaret Welsh, 3 February 1863, *Irish Green and Union Blue*, ed. Lawrence F. Kohl and Margaret C. Richard (New York: Fordham University Press, 1986), 65-66.

great, but to Welsh any man unwilling to fight for on its behalf was unworthy of attaining it. Catholicism, and the importance and primacy of place it held in the lives of Irish-Americans such as Peter Welsh, did not irrevocably mark them as un-American as critics attested. Rather it spurred them on in pursuit of goal long desired and seldom attained: true freedom of religious profession and practice.

It is clear that freedom of all sorts, but religious in particular, was an important contributor in Peter Welsh's motivation to fight in the Civil War. The strong anti-Catholicism that had taken root in England, and then branched out and found expression in Anglo-Saxon Protestant political organizations such as the Know-Nothings served only to strengthen the resolve of Irish-Americans such as Peter Welsh in the need for religious freedom.

Welsh's wife Margaret never fully embraced the Northern war effort, or completely understood what compelled her husband to enlist in the Federal cause. Throughout the war her letters to Peter, judging from his responses, continued to make occasional insinuations that the fight was between Americans, and as such was one that he did not belong involved in. This viewpoint troubled and upset Peter greatly. For this reason a handful of his longer letters that contain lengthy and eloquent attempts to justify his actions to his wife and family.

The immigrant status of the vast majority of Irish-Americans was another issue that raised the ire and suspicion of native born Americans. The political party that came to be known as the "Know-Nothings" traced their roots back to a secret society first gathered, in 1849, under the name: the Order of the Star Spangled Banner. With time the Order evolved and expanded, but it never completely severed itself from the clandestine

rituals and trappings of its secret society past. Historian Mark Massa describes the Order's main objectives and organizational structure as follows:

The ritual of the Order likewise provided for two distinct degrees of membership: the First Degree, in which the initiate had to prove he was born in the United States, that both his parents were Protestant, and that he was not married to a Roman Catholic, and then to swear to use his influence and vote for "native-born American citizens for all offices or honor" and "the exclusion of all foreigners, and Roman Catholics in particular." Second Degree initiates were called to bring the Order's loyalties into the public by running for political office, in which they pledged "when elected or appointed to any official station...[to] remove all foreigners, aliens, and Catholics from office."³³

The oaths taken by members of the Order during their initiation ritual, as detailed above, provide excellent insight into how American nativists viewed immigrants. Know-Nothingism opposed not only the initial advancement and election of foreign-born, or Catholic, politicians, but also their continued holding of office. The fact that Know-Nothings, who presented themselves as champions of democracy against the sort of tyrannical powers enjoyed by the authoritarian head of the Papal States, were expected to actively remove democratically elected officials gives some indication of the depth of their distrust of immigrants. The Know-Nothings also labored in a number of the areas where they had achieved political prominence to extend the minimum time requirement for the naturalization of foreigners.³⁴ The determination and commitment required on behalf of the nativists to coordinate such deliberate and large scale efforts to limit immigrant political enfranchisement is further indication of their inherent underlying perception of immigrants as un-American and undeserving of citizenship.

Irish-Americans, usually both Catholic and immigrant, were viewed as doubly un-American and thus, in the eyes of their nativist detractors, twice as undeserving of

³³ Mark S. Massa, S.J., *Anti-Catholicism in America: The Last Acceptable Prejudice* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2003), 28.

³⁴ Michael F. Holt, *Political Parties and American Political Development: from the Age of Jackson to the Age of Lincoln* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), 117.

citizenship. The Irish-Americans in this study, however, refused to merely accept their nativist classification. Instead they sought an opportunity to prove themselves worthy of the citizenship their political opponents sought to deny them, to demonstrate their dedication to the nation. The Civil War provided exactly the type of opportunity they were looking for. In addition to exhibiting a desire to prove themselves as American citizens, Guiney and Welsh's letters reveal that they themselves really were American citizens. By this is meant that their letters show active engagement with contemporary American political issues, discussions of individual political leaders, independent thinking, and sometimes even opinions quite different from the majority of their countrymen. Lastly, in addition to providing opportunities to prove their worth as citizens, their letters also demonstrate that the war, for them, meant an opportunity to repay a debt they felt they owed the United States. The fact that America provided Irish immigrants a place to flee starvation, poverty, and oppression in their time of need was well established in the minds of the letter writers, and other Irish-Americans. The debt owed by Irish-American to the United States, by their own admission, was beyond anything they could ever repay. However, they recognized that in the Civil War, America herself was in a time of need, and they, Irish-Americans, could demonstrate their gratitude by answering the call to her defense.

As already stated, Margaret Welsh did not approve of her husband's involvement in the war. Interestingly, her view of the situation appears to not have been that different from American nativists. She seemed to have viewed the war as the result of "native" American's problems and thus needed to be fought over and settled by "native"

Americans. Welsh responded to the viewpoint of both his wife and the nativists in a critique he penned Margaret in February of 1863:

You may say what is it to me let them fight it out between themselves this i know is said by many but who are they! this is my country as much as the man that was born on the soil and so it is with every man who comes to this country and becomes a citizen this being the case i have as much interest in the maintenance of the government and laws and the integrity of the nation as any other man.³⁵

When Peter says “let them fight it out between themselves,” the “it” refers to the war or the conflict between the North and the South and “themselves” refers to, presumably, native born Americans. Peter’s reply confronts directly the notion that he, as an immigrant, had no rightful place in the conflict. Instead of his foreign birth alienating or detaching him from involvement or concern with the war, as the nativists would have charged, it instead provided Peter a motivation and a desire to prove himself in his country’s defense in which he had just as much invested as any man of native birth.

References to participation in the Civil War as some sort of a refiner’s fire testing the worth of Irish immigrants as American citizens can be found in Guiney’s letters as well. On June 24th, 1861 Guiney’s regiment, which had originally been a branch of the state militia and only days before was mustered into the active service of United States Army, marched ceremoniously through the streets of Boston. When they reached the State House Massachusetts Governor John A. Andrew addressed the majority Irish immigrant soldiers. The Governor “declared that the nation knew no distinction ‘between its native-born citizens and those born in other countries.’”³⁶ Whether intended or not the

³⁵Peter Welsh to Margaret Welsh, 3 February 1863, *Irish Green and Union Blue*, ed. Lawrence F. Kohl and Margaret C. Richard (New York: Fordham University Press, 1986), 65.

³⁶ *Commanding Boston’s Irish Ninth: The Civil War Letters of Colonel Patrick R. Guiney, Ninth Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry*, ed. Christian G. Samito (New York: Fordham University Press, 1998), 7 (editor’s note).

symbolism in this event is striking, in 1854, less than seven years prior to Governor Andrew's speech, Know-Nothings had captured the Massachusetts statehouse and nearly taken every seat in that state's legislature.³⁷ What had changed in such a short span of time? The only significant change, and thus plausible answer, was the advent of the war. The Irish's response to the call to duty in that war, at least in Massachusetts, seems to have had an effect on the way in which their value as citizens was measured.

Welsh's letters speak frequently of America as a refuge and blessing to the Irish at a time when they needed it most. In the winter of 1863 Peter wrote a letter home to his wife in which he described the mass immigration of the Irish to their American refuge:

A great naion i fancy I hear you say what better off are we here then we were at home we always had enough to eat and respectable raiment at home and good oppertunitys for enjoyment that being true in your case does not it so for others how many thousands are there in this country who saw nothing but oppression and misery at home who are now in comfort or if not in comfort in nine cases out of ten it is their own fault what would be the condition to day of hundreds of thousands of the sons and daughters of poor oppressed old erin if they had not a free land like this to emigrate to famine and misery staring them in the face and that famine not the result of any extraordinary falure in the products of the soil but the result of tyrannical laws and damnable opression ³⁸

Above, Welsh recalls the great need of the Irish people and America's supplying aid and salvation at a time when they had no where else to turn. For Peter, this fact alone necessitated Irish support of the Northern government in the war. Interestingly, Welsh, did not characterize what the Irish owed on an individual basis. Peter tells his wife "that [the ability to be happy and have enough to eat in Ireland] being true in your case does not make it so for others". It is almost as if Welsh is gently scolding Margaret and invoking the idea that the Irish people as a collective whole were obliged to aid the Federalist cause. Nor is this idea entirely restricted to Welsh. Guiney reported an incident

³⁷ Holt, 114.

³⁸ Peter Welsh to Margaret Welsh, 3 February 1863, *Irish Green and Union Blue*, ed. Lawrence F. Kohl and Margaret C. Richard (New York: Fordham University Press, 1986), 66.

where his regiment was besieging a town that was, at least partially, being defended by Irish Confederates:

We understand from deserters that there are some Irish troops inside the batteries and that the sight of our Green flag has created some commotion among them. I hope they will act as the Irish Battalion did in the Rebel service at Winchester -- *or better still come boldly over where they belong*. But perhaps I ought not to expect so much, as many of them doubtless have families in the South. Well if the Green flag does not affect them and quiet their rebellious emotions -- steel may.³⁹

Here Guiney articulates a view similar to Welsh's. To him it seems the debt the Irish owed was inherently tied up with the character and nature of the North. Thus, both Guiney and Welsh imply that the Irish owed the North a great debt of gratitude; a debt that could only be repaid by the Irish collectively, as a people, coming to the defense of America in her darkest hour.

Welsh also penned a letter to his father-in-law in Ireland in which he articulated his views on the role and responsibilities the Irish should play in the American Civil War.

Peter wrote:

The question has often been asked and not a few foolishly adhere to the idea [:] What have foreign born citizens to do with this war they will say The agitation of the question which brought on this war originated and was kept up by a party composed almost wholly of native born citizens They were the cause of the war and let them fight it out Silly argument If you and i and a third party are joint owners of a piece of property and you and him differ about the course to to [sic] be pursued in the management of that property he becomes exasperated and undertakes to destroy it rather than that you should manage it according to your own conception of what was best Am i to stand by with folded arms and see him accomplish his desighns without raising a hand in defence of my own rights I should be false to both your interests and my own if i would And so is the foreign born citizen who holds himself aloof from this struggle False to his own and his fellow citizens interests for he would allow the third party to destroy his government and deprive himself and his fellow men of their rights and libertys And this is especialy true of Irishmen America is Irlands refuge Irlands last hope destroy this republic and her hopes are blasted⁴⁰

³⁹ Patrick Guiney to Jeannette Guiney, 8 April 1862, *Commanding Boston's Irish Ninth: The Civil War Letters of Colonel Patrick R. Guiney, Ninth Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry*, ed. Christian G. Samito (New York: Fordham University Press, 1998), 91 (emphasis added).

⁴⁰ Peter Welsh to Patrick Prendergast, 1 June 1863, *Irish Green and Union Blue*, ed. Lawrence F. Kohl and Margaret C. Richard (New York: Fordham University Press, 1986), 65

The ideas Peter expresses here are very helpful in understanding the manner in which he saw his role, and the role of Irish-Americans, in the Civil War. Yes, the Irish owed a debt to America for the sanctuary she had provided in their time of need. Yes, the Irish had to prove to doubters that they were worthy of American citizenship despite its high cost. Yet, those two facets of the situation were focused on the past, in the case of what the Irish owed, and the present, with respect to what the Irish had to prove. The thoughts and contentions Peter expressed above to his father-in-law were resolutely fixated on the future. Welsh's motivations for fighting cannot simply be encapsulated in some altruistic notion of his desire to repay a debt or prove himself. True, those were both enormous factors in his thinking process and the manner in which he viewed the country, the war and his place within it. Be that as it may, there existed an element of his thought, which is displayed in the letter he wrote his father-in-law that was focused on himself as an American. A focus on a future time when he and his people would be indebted to no one and when their status and prestige would be out of the touch of discriminatory nativists who challenged their roots and origins; a time when they would be free to enjoy the liberties of their new land and participate as full and unrestricted citizens.

The letters of Welsh and Guiney contain suggestions that this transformation process from Irish immigrants to Irish-American citizens was already underway. At times each man expresses political or social ideas divergent from the majority that surrounded them. The political independence of the two letters writers presents a challenge to the view of immigrants by nativists, Holt records: "Politically, immigrants seemed to pervert the democratic process by voting in blocs that were easily manipulated by ward bosses

and party wire pullers.”⁴¹ Nativist bias about the inability of immigrants to think freely or exercise political independence did not directly engender the sort of ironic motivation among Irish-Americans to fight on the North’s behalf in the same way that other characteristics or aspect of Irish-Americans, against which nativists were prejudice, did. However, it does provide an example of a way in which another nativists stereotype was less than accurate. Moreover it is an indication for us of the way in which Irish-Americans in this period valued political autonomy, free speech, and all the other rights enjoyed by American citizens. In short, in the analogy of the three owners of land Peter Welsh used in his letter to his father-in-law, politically independent free thinking was one stake Irish-Americans held in that triune ownership that they discovered along their metamorphosis from immigrant to citizen. Along that way they discovered a real appreciation for that ability and they refused to sit idly by why the “other two owners” destroyed it.

For instance, the Irish were collectively known for harboring hostility toward African-Americans and for their opposition to abolition, mostly for the economic reasons discussed above. Peter Welsh’s letters indicate that he was fully aware of the opinion of the vast majority of his countrymen, he wrote home to Margaret in February of 1863:

The feeling against niggers is intently strong in this army as is plainly to be seen wherever and whenever they meet them They are looked upon as the principal cause of this war and this feeling is especialy strong in the Irish regiments This however is not wholly true for there is numerous circumstances conected with this war which go to prove that had slavery not existed the promoters and instagaters of this war would have seised on some other question and used it as a bone of contention by which they could keep up agitation and distract the minds of people both north and south untill it would finely result in civel war ⁴²

⁴¹ Holt, 76.

⁴² Peter Welsh to Margaret Welsh, ca. February 1863, *Irish Green and Union Blue*, ed. Lawrence F. Kohl and Margaret C. Richard (New York: Fordham University Press, 1986), 62.

Here Peter shows, not only divergence from the majority, but also remarkable thoughtfulness and consideration of a delicate topic. Peter again displayed independent thinking and the ability to separate his political views from the greater part of his Irish compatriots regarding the question of slavery and blacks when he said: “if slavery is in the way of a proper administration of the laws and the integrity and perpetuity of this nation then i say away with both slaves and slavery sweep both from the land forever rather than destroy the freedom and prosperity of a great naion such as this be destroyed.”⁴³

Nor was Welsh the only Irish-American who displayed a move toward the full enjoyment and implementation of his political rights as an American citizen by dissenting from the mainstream views of his fellow immigrants. Patrick Guiney changed his political affiliation over the course of the war, from Democrat to Republican. This shift was akin to blasphemy for many Irish-Americans and Guiney records some of the criticism and hostility he endured as a result. The attempted coup on behalf of officers serving underneath him, a faction sought to prevent Guiney’s promotion to colonel, likely stemmed in part from his divergent political views.⁴⁴ Guiney’s place as a high ranking officer also enabled him to come into contact with prominent politicians, generals, and other figures. He frequently wrote home to his wife and freely expressed his opinion concerning contemporary issues and figures. An illustration of this fact, as well as his

⁴³ Peter Welsh to Margaret Welsh, 3 February 1863, *Irish Green and Union Blue*, ed. Lawrence F. Kohl and Margaret C. Richard (New York: Fordham University Press, 1986), 66.

⁴⁴ *Commanding Boston’s Irish Ninth: The Civil War Letters of Colonel Patrick R. Guiney, Ninth Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry*, ed. Christian G. Samito (New York: Fordham University Press, 1998), 119.

independent thinking, can be seen in the treatment of General George McClellan in his correspondence with his wife. McClellan was widely popular with men in the army, particularly the Irish. Guiney however was rather critical of the Commander of the Army of the Potomac, he wrote to his wife:

I have no doubt it is asked in the North, why is the Battle not fought and won by this time. I do not wonder that this question is asked. Even here we ask it. Well, what is the reason? Let me explain...*I thought then that Genius did not direct the Army of the Potomac and I think so now, and have more evidence to the fact.*⁴⁵

The “lack of genius” in command of the Army of the Potomac refers to McClellan. Guiney’s criticism of the General, particularly as early in the war effort as he is voicing it, would have been unlikely among most Irish-American soldiers. Thus, the letters of Guiney, as well as Welsh, illustrate departures from the main-stream opinion of their Irish compatriots. The independent thinking of both men in this way indicates a move and desire to shift away from their immigrant political status and embrace the full freedoms of American citizens. The willingness and ability of the two men to depart from the opinion of the majority, poses a significant challenge to the nativist presumption that immigrant voted unthinkingly in monolithic blocks.

Another location, other than their letters, one might look to see the ways in which Irish-Americans visualized and expressed issues like the relationship between their immigrant status, nativist anti-foreign bias, and the Civil War is the Boston based newspaper *The Pilot*. Patrick Donahoe took over ownership of the failing newspaper of the Boston diocese in 1834. He soon renamed it *The Pilot* and added political and Irish

⁴⁵ Patrick Guiney to Jeannette Guiney, 12 April 1862, *Commanding Boston’s Irish Ninth: The Civil War Letters of Colonel Patrick R. Guiney, Ninth Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry*, ed. Christian G. Samito (New York: Fordham University Press, 1998), 92 (emphasis added, underline in original).

news to its religious concentration.⁴⁶ The new formula was a recipe for success and subscriptions to the newspaper grew significantly. *The Pilot* was extremely popular as source of Irish-American thought and opinion and the Irish-American soldiers in particular often asked their loved ones to send them the latest copies. Two soldiers who were avid readers, as well as requestors, of *The Pilot* were Patrick Guiney and Peter Welsh. For this reason it is a fair assumption that the thoughts and opinion expressed in *The Pilot* bore at least some conformity to Welsh's and Guiney's own views. *The Pilot* was in no way silent when it came to the role of Irish-Americans in the Civil War. It urged Irish readers to take hold of the opportunity to prove themselves worthy of American citizenship and silence their Know-Nothing detractors. Or, as *The Pilot* put it prove that: "although the Celts might be hyphenated Americans in name, they were one hundred percent Americans in deed."⁴⁷ *The Pilot* as well had its eyes on future days when Irish-Americans were no longer buried in a debt gratitude toward their adopted country and when they no longer were obligated to prove themselves under the fire of combat while nativists viewed them suspiciously; a day when "future generations of Irish-Americans could proudly say that 'we too are Americans, and our fathers bled and died to establish this country'."⁴⁸

There were a number of ways in which the nativist assumptions and stereotypes, ironically, spurred on Irish-Americans during the Civil War. Efforts to politically

⁴⁶ *Commanding Boston's Irish Ninth: The Civil War Letters of Colonel Patrick R. Guiney, Ninth Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry*, ed. Christian G. Samito (New York: Fordham University Press, 1998), 3 (footnote 1).

⁴⁷ As quoted in: *Irish Green and Union Blue*, ed. Lawrence F. Kohl and Margaret C. Richard (New York: Fordham University Press, 1986), 10.

⁴⁸ As quoted in: *The Irish Brigade and Its Campaigns*. ed. Lawrence Frederick Kohl (New York: Fordham University Press, 1994), xv.

disenfranchise them and maintain the public perception of them as inherently foreign and un-American were met with Irish enlistment to perverse the Union, repay their debt to America, and prove they were worthy of citizenship. Also, the letters of Welsh and Guiney demonstrate an ability to distance themselves from the opinions and views of their countryman, again contrary to the views of American Know-Nothingism of immigrants as unthinking voting blocs under the control of individuals.

A third characteristic of Irish-Americans targeted by American nativists was their Irish ethnicity. Kohl states: “The Know-Nothings attacked the Irish for their poverty, their religion, their democratic politics, their intemperance, their criminality, their devotion to the old country and their attempts to sow discord between the United States and Britain.”⁴⁹ The attacks on the Irish as a result of their religion and their immigrant status have already been dealt with at some length. The nativist view of the Irish as an ethnicity characterized Irish-Americans as poor, drunken, criminals, fixated on Ireland and hatred of England. This view was the result of the classification of the Irish as some sort of a border line sub-human race, distinct and inferior to the Anglo-Saxon, Northern European ethnicity. Hinton Helper, in his book *The Impending Crisis of the South* published in 1857, described the Irish as “a more brutal race and lower civilization than the negro...The Irish are coarse-grained, revengeful, unintellectual, with very few of the finer instincts of humanity.” He went on to predict a fusion of Irishmen and Negroes which would be of great service to the Irish and improve their character.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ D. P. Conyngham, *The Irish Brigade and Its Campaigns*. ed. Lawrence Frederick Kohl (New York: Fordham University Press, 1994), xiii.

⁵⁰ Joseph M. Hennon, Jr., *Celts, Catholics, and Copperheads: Ireland views the American Civil War* (Ohio State University Press, 1968), 65.

Ironically, despite all of the hatred, fear, and racism directed toward the Irish as a collective people in the antebellum years, Irish ethnicity, and the Irish's strong attachment to it, proved a powerful weapon in the North war effort. Love of Ireland, and its inseparable counterpart hatred of England, was abundant among Irish-American soldiers in Civil War. However, this attachment to their native land was not mutually exclusive from commitment to their adopted land among Irish-Americans. Many Irish-Americans soldiers in the army, including Peter Welsh, came to identify the cause for Ireland's freedom with the Northern war effort and the Southern rebellion with British tyranny and oppression. This projection of the Civil War of the old country onto the Civil War of the adopted country inflamed Irish passion and harnessed Northern Celtic muscle in the Federalist cause. Based on the battle outcomes and combat experience of Irish-American soldiers it appears the strength of that Irish muscle was a force to be reckoned with throughout the course of the conflict. Finally, the strong identification of Irish-Americans with their ethnic background helped bring about the organization of Irish-Americans in units together. The grouping of Irish-Americans together in turn boosted moral and commitment to the regiment among individual soldiers. It galvanized the fighting willingness and capability of Irish-Americans to an extent equal to or greater than any regiment composed of "native" Americans. Thus, despite nativist stereotypes of the Irish as a racially unfit un-American group that were over attached to their homeland, Irish-American's commitment to their Irish ethnicity enlivened their fighting and commitment to the struggle to preserve the Union.

One of the most frequently mentioned, and symbolically important, reminders to the soldiers in Irish-American regiments of their ancestry were the green regimental flags

of Ireland they carried into battle with them. As already mentioned, Peter Welsh viewed it as great honor to serve as his regiment's color bearer. Welsh wrote to his father-in-law: "i am color sergeant of my regiment i cary the green flag of Erin all the Irish regiments cary the green flag as well as the national flag...i feel proud to bear Ireland's pride an glory and it shall never kiss the dust while I have strenght to hold it."⁵¹ However, something more was happening here than Peter simply being proud of this Irish roots. Without a doubt he was proud of his heritage but his pride in his ancestry, as well as the pride of his comrades in arms, was not being manifested in an explicitly Irish cause. True, the 28th Massachusetts carried a green flag of Ireland, but they marched primarily under the stars and stripes of the United States. The Irish pride and ethnicity of Welsh and his companions was being projected on an American cause and provided them with a reason to fight on America's behalf.

The method by which an Irish cause came to be projected on an American battle can be traced back to Irish-American's love of their ethnicity and homeland. Peter Welsh's letters are filled with angry references to England and the oppressed status of Ireland. He loved his country of origin very much and strongly identified with her quest for freedom, a quest he saw partly fulfilled in the freedoms enjoyed by Americans. Welsh also strongly connected the Northern cause in the American Civil War with the struggle for freedom and liberty and thus with Ireland. In turn he related the Confederate war effort to oppression, tyranny, and naturally, England. He wrote home to his wife in February of 1863 and said:

George Washington warned his country to beware of foreighn influence they have been warned many times since to beware and especialy of the hipocritical intrieuing of that

⁵¹ Peter Welsh to Patrick Prendergast, 1 June 1863, *Irish Green and Union Blue*, ed. Lawrence F. Kohl and Margaret C. Richard (New York: Fordham University Press, 1986), 103-104.

acursed harlot of nations England but the warnings were only laughed at It was in England that the agitation of the slavery question was first comenced and thousands of pounds contributed to keep it up and for what was it for the benefit of the negro her conduct towards this country since the comencment of this war answers that plainly her whole course of action has been in aid of rebels just as far as she could without comiting herself to a war with this goverment her object is and has been for years to divide this country and thereby destory its power and greatness all monarchical powers hate republics but that perfedious tyrant hipocrite cut throat murderess and base usurper of both church and state hates this country for two reasons first for her liberal government and laws and second because America was out riviling her both in power and comerce and manufacture ⁵²

While one might debate the historical accuracy of some Welsh's accusations, such as his assertion that England developed the abolition movement solely with the intent of injuring and dividing the United States, there can be no doubting the passion or sincerity of his opinions. One need only look at the sting of venomous slanders and slurs Welsh aims at England to grasp the genuineness of his conviction. The sheer hatred in his words is almost palpable. Moreover, Welsh considered fighting Confederate Rebels akin to fighting the English. That he did so is clear from the letter he wrote his father-in-law: "When we are fighting for America we are fighting in the interest of Irland striking a double blow cutting with a two edged sword For while we strike in defence of the rights of Irishmen here we are striking a blow at Irlands enemy and opressor England."⁵³ When one considers that the Federal army was permitted to tap into the type of emotion expressed by Welsh and channel it against the South there can be no doubt that the strong link between Irish-Americans and their Irish ethnicity was a blessing to the Northern War effort, not the hindrance nativists claimed.

⁵² Peter Welsh to Margaret Welsh, ca. February 1863, *Irish Green and Union Blue*, ed. Lawrence F. Kohl and Margaret C. Richard (New York: Fordham University Press, 1986), 62.

⁵³ Peter Welsh to Patrick Prendergast, 1 June 1863, *Irish Green and Union Blue*, ed. Lawrence F. Kohl and Margaret C. Richard (New York: Fordham University Press, 1986), 102.

Irish-Americans were typically organized into military units based on ethnicity. Thus, the five regiments which made up the “Irish Brigade”, the 63rd, 69th, and 88th New York, 28th Massachusetts, and the 116th Pennsylvania, as well as other units such as Guiney’s Ninth Massachusetts Volunteers, were overwhelmingly composed of Irish-Americans. However unjust and racist the nativist characterization of the Irish as drunken, brawling, criminal element may have been in civilian life, in combat some aspects of that reputation seem to touch on the truth. The combat repute of the six regiments named above was impeccable; several even earned the prestigious right of having the moniker “Fighting” precede their regiment’s name.

Patrick Guiney’s letters discuss the fighting reputation of his and other Irish-American regiments. He wrote home to his wife in the summer of 1861:

Dear Jennie -- I suppose you will have heard enough about the Battle of Bull Run. I think I gave you my opinion of it. The Yankees feel sore over it. The 79th New-York and the 69th – one Scotch and the other Irish, did the best fighting. Many of the natives ran and no mistake. I will tell you a good joke. Our Regmt. was set to work doing a job which they did not well understand. An Army officer (native) rode up, and addressing Capt. Fitzgerald said—‘It is strange that when your countrymen undertake to do anything they do it wrong.’ ‘There is one thing about it,’ says the Capt. in reply, ‘They stand their ground in a fight – they don’t run.’ This hit a sore spot and he immediately, and in high dudgeon and in peals of Irish laughter, spurred his horse and left.”⁵⁴

In the battle described above it appears the Irish ethnicity of the 69th New York provided a bond that helped hold Irish-Americans together. Contrasted with the fleeing natives, one could argue that despite the racism and intolerance of Know-Nothingism, Irish ethnicity was combat blessing that made a man a better fighter. Nor is this the only instance in Guiney’s letters that provides evidence of the bravely and toughness of the

⁵⁴ Patrick Guiney to Jeannette Guiney, 31 July 1861, *Commanding Boston’s Irish Ninth: The Civil War Letters of Colonel Patrick R. Guiney, Ninth Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry*, ed. Christian G. Samito (New York: Fordham University Press, 1998), 30.

Irish regiments. Guiney's own regiment, the Ninth, was also known for heroism on the battlefield. When a Pennsylvanian in the Sixty-second asked how the Union forces would be able to take Richmond another replied: "Why, the Sixty-second will fire, and the Ninth will charge!"⁵⁵ Guiney's regiment was also one the Irish-American units whose fighting reputation was well known and celebrated fact, the press referred to it as "the Fighting Ninth".

Nor was the fighting reputation of the Irish-Americans a self exaggeration. A number of secondly sources, military historians and static's attest to the fact that Irish-American bravery in the Civil War was no mere boast. Concerning the Irish Brigade William F. Fox, a nineteenth-century authority on the fighting capabilities of Civil War units, states:

[it was] Perhaps the best known of any brigade organization, it having made an unusual reputation for dash and gallantry. The remarkable precision of it evolution under fire, its desperate attack on the the impregnable wall at Maryne's heights, its never failing promptness on every field and its long continuous service, made it a name inseparable for the history of war."⁵⁶

Kohl, in the introduction to his edition of Conyngham's *Irish Brigade and its Campaigns*, described the massive losses and sacrifices of Irish-American as follows:

The brigade's fighting reputation was well deserved. It served in the Northern army that sustained the most casualties (Potomac), the corps that suffered the most casualties (2nd), and the division that experienced the greatest losses in that corps (1st). The brigade itself sustained more than 4,000 casualties during the course of the war despite the fact that it never put as many as 3,000 men in the field at any time. All five of its regiments (63rd, 69th, and 88th New York; 28th Massachusetts and the 116th Pennsylvania) were on Fox's list of the 300 Union regiments that sustained the heaviest losses in battle. And two of

⁵⁵ *Commanding Boston's Irish Ninth: The Civil War Letters of Colonel Patrick R. Guiney, Ninth Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry*, ed. Christian G. Samito (New York: Fordham University Press, 1998), 105 (editor's note).

⁵⁶ As cited in: John Mahon, *New York's Fighting Sixty-Ninth: A Regimental History of Service in the Civil War's Irish Brigade and the Great War's Rainbow Division* (Jefferson, North Carolina and London: McFarland & Company Inc., 2004), 87.

them, the 69th New York and 28th Massachusetts, ranked among the top ten out of more than 2,000 Northern regiments in the number of combat deaths.⁵⁷

Despite nativist claims that as Irish-Americans their background inherently orientated them in a way that was un-American, during the Civil War patriotic Irish-Americans earned a reputation for fighting harder and sacrificing greater for the preservation of the Union and the States, than their supposedly more American native-born comrades in arms. This was especially true for those who fought in military units comprised entirely of Irish-Americans, that variable bolstered, not lessened their commitment to the cause. Patrick Guiney wrote home and promised his wife “their bloody red Banner of Rebellion will pale before the Green, as sure as heaven” he, and his Irish-American compatriots, made good on that promise, to a disproportionate extent.⁵⁸

By definition the American Civil War is the most American war in history. It was fought virtually exclusively by Americans, on American soil, and arose as a result of disputes over the American Constitution. The North and the South fought over succession, slavery, and the future direction of the country. In the antebellum era the Irish encountered opposition from nativist Know-Nothingism on account of their Catholic faith, immigrant status, and Irish ethnicity. Nativists attacked each in a different way as un-American and unwelcome. During the war men like Peter Welsh and Patrick Guiney, fought and died on behalf of the Union cause. Their letters attest to the fact that their motivations for doing so took root in their Catholic faith, immigrant status, and Irish ethnicity. Peter Welsh died as a result of wounds sustained at the battle of Spotsylvania.

⁵⁷D. P. Conyngham, *The Irish Brigade and Its Campaigns*. ed. Lawrence Frederick Kohl (New York: Fordham University Press, 1994), x.

⁵⁸Patrick Guiney to Jeannette Guiney, 1 October 1861, *Commanding Boston's Irish Ninth: The Civil War Letters of Colonel Patrick R. Guiney, Ninth Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry*, ed. Christian G. Samito (New York: Fordham University Press, 1998), 53.

Patrick Guiney survived the war, but only after enduring injuries that resulted in the loss of an eye and permanent physical disfigurement. These types of sacrifices sustained in the most American of American conflicts renders illogical accusations that the Irish, either as a people or in their most distinct attributes, were inherently un-American. Thus, if the Civil War was fought over the future of the American experiment it can rightly be said that Welsh and Guiney were fighting an additional war for the unfettered ability to help shape that future.

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