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Tales of a Tasmanian Leprechaun
by Jeffrey W. Wilson MD

Introduction

July, 2000 found Sandra and myself traveling south from Glacier National Park toward Dillon, Montana on our way to Five Rivers Fly Fishing Lodge. We stopped in Helena to visit the state capitol. Walking toward the entrance we were impressed by the statue of a military man on horseback, arm raised holding a sword over his head. The base of the monument has inscriptions on all four sides. The South panel reads: "Irish patriot and orator; born in the city of Waterford, Ireland, August 3, 1823; sent to Paris in 1848 by the Irish confederation and the citizens of Dublin to present an address of congratulation to the French people on the establishment of the second republic; indicted and tried at Clonmel, Ireland, September, 1848, for active participation in the Irish insurrectionary movement against English rule, and sentenced to be hanged, drawn, and quartered; sentence commuted to transportation for life to the convict colony of Van Dieman's Land." What is this fellow doing here?

The North panel helps explain: "American soldier and statesman; brigadier general, United States army; raised and organized the Irish brigade in the Army of the Potomac, and personally commanded it in the battles of Fair Oaks, Mechanicsville, Gaines' Mill, White Oaks Swamp, Malvern Hill, Fredericksburg, Antietam, and Chancellorsville; appointed to the command of the Etowah district as acting major general in November, 1864; acting governor of Montana from September, 1865, to July 1, 1867, when he drowned at Fort Benton, Montana." How do you get from Van Dieman's Land—later and now known as Tasmania---to Montana?

The West panel reads "In Ireland, in America, he invited no man to danger he was not ready to share. Never forget this: he gave all, lost all for the land of his birth. He risked all for the land of his adoption, was her true and loyal soldier, and in the end died in her service."

The East panel simply reads: "Erected to the memory of Meagher by his friends and admirers in America."

These panels were our introduction to Thomas Francis Meagher. The following paper attempts to answer the unforgettable questions uttered by Ross Perot's running mate Admiral James Stockdale—"Who am I? What am I doing here?"

From Ireland to Tasmania

Thomas Francis Meagher was born August 3, 1823 in Waterford, Ireland—a port town. His father was a prosperous merchant in Waterford.

At age 11 Meagher left home to study in a Jesuit College at Clongowes for 6 years. He then completed studies at Stonyhurst College in England. His oratorical skills first became evident in the School of Rhetoric. A Rev. William Johnson was his instructor who as a devoted Englishman could not tolerate the Irish accent. "Meagher," he used to say, "that's a horrible brogue you have got... that frightful brogue of yours will never do for Shakespeare."

Meagher returned home to Ireland in 1843. It was a time of great unrest with the Repeal Association led by John O'Connell protesting restrictions of British rule. Meagher and the younger Irish revolutionaries initially associated with the Repeal Association. His early speeches resulted in his designation as "the orator" of the national party. The policy of the organization is summarized in parts of this speech:

“We have pledged ourselves never to accept the Union—to accept the Union upon no terms—nor any modification of the Union. It ill becomes a country like ours...so distinguished and respectable, to serve as the subaltern of England, qualified as she is to take up an eminent position, and stand erect in the face of Europe.”

Remember these words when Meagher begins his role commanding Union forces in our Civil War. It is no surprise that his initial sentiments were with the South.

The young revolutionaries were impatient with the peaceful and diplomatic efforts of O’Connell and the Repeal Association. The call for more immediate and forceful action is demonstrated in Meagher’s most famous speech delivered July 28, 1846 at Conciliation Hall, Dublin.

Excerpts from Meagher’s “Sword Speech”

“My lord, to assist the people of Ireland...I came to this hall. I came to repeal the Act of Union—I came for nothing else...In the exercise...I have differed from Mr. O’Connell. I cast my vote in favor of the peaceful policy of this Association. It is the only policy we can adopt. If that policy be pursued with truth, with courage, with fixed determination of purpose, I firmly believe it will succeed...But, my lord, I do not abhor the use of arms in the vindication of national rights. There are times when arms alone suffice, and when political ameliorations call for a drop of blood...

Abhor the sword—stigmatise the sword? No, my lord, for, in the passes of Tyrol, it cut to pieces the banner of the Bavarian, and, through those cragged passes, struck a path to fame for the peasant insurrectionist of Inspruck!

Abhor the sword—stigmatise the sword? No, my lord, for, at its blow, a giant nation started from the waters of the Atlantic, and by its redeeming magic, and in the quivering of its crimson light, the crippled Colony sprang into the attitude of a proud Republic—prosperous, limitless, and invincible!

Abhor the sword—stigmatise the sword? No, my lord, for it swept the Dutch marauders out of the fine old towns of Belgium—scourged them back to their own phlegmatic swamps—and knocked their flag and sceptre, their laws and bayonets into the sluggish waters of the Scheldt.

My lord, I learned that it was the right of a nation to govern herself...”

John O’Connell interrupted the speech in protest. “The sentiments Mr. Meagher avowed were opposed to those of the founder of the Association, and therefore the Association must cease to exist, or Mr. Meagher must cease to be a member of it.”

This resulted in secession of the young Irish revolutionaries from the Repeal Association and formation of the Irish Confederation. There was continuing unrest and discontent with British rule. In March 1848 the Council of the Irish Confederation met to adopt an address of congratulation to the French people honoring the revolution and establishment of the new republic. Meagher and several friends were sent to France to deliver the speech. They returned home with renewed vigor to hopefully mimic a popular uprising in Ireland. *Have you*

ever tried to urge people to action in a coordinated effort with a defined simultaneous onset? While trying to coordinate such an effort Meagher and several friends were arrested in July for “exciting people to rise in rebellion.” They were tried for treason and sentenced to be hanged, drawn, and quartered Oct 23, 1849.

What sort of men were these? Young, brash, patriotic. Since the Sword Speech, Meagher was known as “Meagher of the Sword” (hence, the especially apropos monument in Helena; Meagher on horseback with sword raised overhead in his right hand). Before passing sentence, the judge asked if there was anything anyone wished to say. Meagher, speaking for all, said: “My lord, this is our first offense, but not our last. If you will be easy with us this once, we promise, on our word as gentlemen, to try to do better next time. And next time—sure we won’t be fools to get caught.” The infuriated judge passed the sentence mentioned above. However, popular protests in Ireland, England, France, and even the U.S. prompted Queen Victoria to commute the sentence to transportation for life to Van Dieman’s Land.

Meagher’s compatriots in crime were no slouches. In 1874 Queen Victoria was astounded to learn that one of those convicted with Meagher was now Sir Charles Duffy who had been elected Premier of the colony of Victoria, Australia and was the same Charles Duffy transported 25 years before. She asked that the records of the others be uncovered. Here is what they found:

Thomas Francis Meagher—Brigadier General, US Army; Governor of Montana
Terrence McManus—Brigadier General, US Army
Patrick Donahue--Brigadier General, US Army
Richard O’Gorman--Governor General of Newfoundland
Morris Lyene---Attorney General of Australia
Michael Ireland---succeeded Lyene
Thomas D’Arcy McGee—Member of Parliament, Montreal
Minister of Agriculture and President Council, Dominion of
Canada
John Mitchell—prominent New York politician
father of John Purroy Mitchell, Mayor of NYC at outbreak of WWI.

Island Days

Meagher last saw his native Ireland the morning of July 10, 1849 as he and fellow political prisoners William Smith O’Brien, Terence McManus, and Patrick Donahue began the transport to Van Dieman’s Land. They arrived at Hobart Town harbor on October 28th. The reception to the new land and the conditions of exile were surprising. In a letter December 1, 1849 to a friend in Dublin, Meagher commented on “a kindly feeling towards us; and...felt a few warm whispers of the old Irish heart floating through the air.” The prisoners were greeted by Mr. William. E. Nairn the assistant comptroller of convicts. He had been given instructions to grant the men ‘tickets of leave’ contingent on a report of good conduct during the voyage and a pledge as men of honor not to make use of limited freedom to escape from the island. Each man was assigned to separate districts: Campbelltown to M; Hobart Town to Donahue, and New Norfolk to McManus. O’Brien would not make the pledge and was assigned to Marie Island.

Each district was the size of a country parish at home. M's district was 30 to 35 miles long and 10 to 15 miles wide. The intent of separate districts was quickly lost—"Within the last five weeks, however, we discovered a point common to our three respective districts, at which, without a breach of the regulation prohibiting any two or more of us from residing together, we can meet from time to time... Monday is usually our day of meeting, and eleven, or thereabouts, the hour at which we emerge from three different quarters of the bush..." They met regularly in a log hut. In spite of the lax security and the chance for companionship they found the life in Australia intolerable. John Mitchel arrived separately in April 1850 and referred to their existence as "a kind of syncope or trance... somnambulistic." The young Irish patriots suffered petty persecutions by the local authorities. McManus had his parole revoked by an arbitrary order of the Governor. When he was released from custody by order of their Supreme Court he did not accept a new ticket of leave and with help of friends obtained passage on a vessel to San Francisco; the first to escape from his exile. When O'Brien's health failed he was brought from Marie Island to New Norfolk. Meagher went beyond his borders to visit him and was confined as a prisoner in his own home as punishment.

Shortly after McManus' escape M married a Miss Bennett the daughter of a farmer resident of New Norfolk district (Feb 22, 1851). They settled in a cottage on the shore of Lake Sorell. It was a situation many would find idyllic but Meagher remained restless. On Dec 27, 1851 after slightly more than 2 years in exile, Meagher wrote a letter to his friend Duffy :

"...I am determined to withdraw my parole—throw up my 'ticket of leave'—and afterwards attempt my escape...I seek some land in which a useful and honorable career will be ope[n] to me, and where, free from the galling restrictions which beset and hamper me at every step...with His aid and blessing, I shall have the delight of writing my next letter to you under the shadow and protection of the flag of Washington."

Would he seek this same refuge today?

Escape to America

A few days after Meagher's arrival in New York he outlined his escape in a letter to the editor of the New York Daily Times:

"In the month of April, 1851, I was called upon to renew my parole. I did so in writing, and in the following words: 'I hereby pledge my word of honor not to leave the colony so long as I hold a ticket of leave.' Towards the end of December, the same year, I came to the determination of attempting my escape. Accordingly, on the 3d of January last, I sent the following letter to the Police Magistrate of the district in which I reside: 'Sir:--Circumstances of a recent occurrence urge upon me the necessity of resigning my ticket of leave, and consequently withdrawing my parole. I write this letter, therefore, respectfully to apprise you, that after 12 o'clock tomorrow noon, I shall no longer consider myself bound by the obligation which that parole imposes. In the meantime, however, should you conceive it your duty to take me into custody, I shall, as a matter of course, regard myself as wholly absolved from the restraint which my word of honor to your Government at present inflicts.'

The Police Magistrate received this letter at 11 o'clock the same morning:--I remained in my cottage, at Lake Sorell, until 7 o'clock that evening. A few minutes after that hour, four of my friends arrived on horseback, and communicated to me the intelligence that the police were coming to arrest me. I went out with them into the bush and remained there, about 300 yards from the cottage, until my servant brought the news that the police had arrived, and were sitting in the kitchen. We mounted our horses immediately, and rode down to the cottage. One hundred yards from it my friends drew up. I rode on until I came close to the stable, which was within pistol shot of the kitchen door. I drew up there and asked the servant to go in and tell the police I was waiting for them. He did so. Two or three minutes elapsed. The police appeared. The moment they appeared I rose in my stirrups, and called out that I was the prisoner they came to arrest, and I defied them to do so. This challenge was echoed by my friends with loud and hearty cheers, in the midst of which I struck spurs to my horse, and dashed into the wood, in direction of the coast. Accompanied by my generous and courageous-hearted friends, I reached the seashore on Monday afternoon, at a point where a boat was in readiness to receive me. I jumped from my horse, got into the boat, put off to sea, and beat about there for a few days, until the ship came up, which, thank God! bore me at last, to a free and hospitable land."

The boat belonged to two poor fishermen engaged by Meagher's friends to transport him to one of the uninhabited islands between Van Dieman's Land and the great island of Australia. It was a journey of 40 miles through a rough sea. The ship—the Elizabeth Thompson was to arrive the next morning. However, after three days of waiting, the fishermen were obliged to return to the main land. Meagher subsisted on sea-birds eggs and shellfish for 10 days when his lonely vigil was interrupted by the firing of a gun as the ship dropped anchor in preparation of taking Meagher on board. The ship went via Cape Horn on its way to London. Meagher subsequently took passage on the American brig Acorn arriving in New York May 26, 1852. His escape had taken a little over 5 months.

Meagher in America prior to the Civil War

Meagher was enthusiastically received in New York. The Irish community was large and included compatriots from the Irish Confederation including Richard Gorman, John Dillon, and Thomas Reilly. Meagher's oratorical skills helped him secure income on the lecture circuit. A continual theme in his talks was the hope to see Ireland free of British rule. It was a common and persistent sentiment of his fellow exiled countrymen.

"There is within me an ambition that cannot be appeased. I desire to have a country which shall work out a fortune of her own, and depend no longer for subsistence on the charity of other nations. I desire to have a country which I can point to with exultation—whose prosperity shall be my life—"

When Meagher's safe arrival was announced in Australia, his wife as previously planned took passage for Europe. She arrived in Waterford for a grand welcome by her father-in-law and Meagher's neighbors and friends. From Waterford Mrs. Meagher and the senior Meagher came to America for a reunion with Thomas. The summer and fall were spent traveling together but as winter approached, Mrs. Meagher's health weakened and while Thomas traveled to California on a lecture tour, his father and wife returned to Waterford. Mrs. Meagher unexpectedly contracted a febrile illness and died May 9, 1854 at the age of 22. She

died shortly after giving birth to an infant son who died at 4 months of age—never seen by his father.

In December 1853 Meagher helped John Mitchel found a weekly journal called “The Citizen.” This was directed to Irishmen in America who “... refuse to believe to be ‘loyal’ to the Sovereign of Great Britain or ... can endure the thought of accepting defeat which has driven them from the land of the fathers.” Revolutionary fervor persisted.

Meagher also studied law in the office of Judge Emmet but after being admitted to the bar, seems to have lost interest in the profession and never practiced it to any extent.

In the spring of 1856 Meagher married Miss Elizabeth Townsend from a prominent NY family. They had no children. She accepted the Catholic faith and was a great companion during their 11 yrs of marriage. She was active in social projects in NY and later in Montana. She died July 6, 1906 and her obituary printed in the transactions of The Historical Society of Montana mentioned that her great grandfather made the chain that stretched across the Hudson during the revolution to prevent the British from ascending the river from West Point. Her grandfather was the first man in the country to make steel rails. She attended her husband during the Civil War and was with him at the first battle of Bull Run nursing him back to health when he was given up for dead after the battle. Quite a little woman!

In the same year 1856 Meagher started a newspaper called the “Irish News”. His writing talents were appreciated, and in 1858 he had an arrangement with the publishers of Harper’s Magazine to travel through Central America and write articles on his observations. The series of articles entitled “Holidays in Costa Rica, Illustrated” resulted.

This time prior to his Civil War service was spent as a lecturer, newspaperman, newlywed, lawyer, and writer. His strong Irish associations included membership in the Fenian Brotherhood. Meagher was impressed at the 1861 St. Patrick’s Day parade when the First Regiment of the Phoenix Brigade marched under the “Green Flag”. Even prior to the outbreak of America’s Civil War, Meagher considered the formation of a second regiment of the Phoenix Brigade.

Civil War Years

Meagher initially sympathized with the South. In response to his father-in-law’s (an ardent Republican) characterization of the Southerners as a “set of rebels”, Meagher said “ You cannot call eight millions of white freemen ‘rebels,’ sir;--you may call them ‘revolutionists’ if you will.” What caused a 180 degree reversal in his sentiments such that he fought for the Union? The firing on Fort Sumter April 12, 1861. When asked about his support of the South and the sudden change, Meagher stated “Yes! I did mean it---[but now] looking at every aspect of the question, I do not see what better course I could take. The Republic, that gave us an asylum and an honorable career,--that is the mainstay of human freedom, the world over—is threatened with disruption. It is the duty of every liberty-loving citizen to prevent such a calamity at all hazards. Above all is it the duty of us Irish citizens, who aspire to establish a similar form of government in our native land. It is not only our duty to America, but also to Ireland.”

This sentiment persisted for Meagher and members of the 69th Regiment of the Irish Brigade which he would command. James M. McPherson points out in his book Battle Cry of Freedom: “To augment the loyalty of the North’s large foreign-born population, Lincoln also rewarded ethnic leaders with generalships—Carl Schurz, Franz Sigel, Thomas Meagher, and numerous others.” This is from Chapter 10 entitled “Amateurs Go to War”. It was so true.

M and others would soon learn that this was not going to be a ninety days' war as first anticipated, and when it came to actual battle they were indeed amateurs.

Prior to being tested in battle, the Irish Brigade was assigned to the construction of a fort in Northern Virginia. Fort Corcoran was built on a hill commanding the road westward going toward Fairfax Court House. They were composed of 1300 Irishmen recruited in one week in New York City. They were initially under the command of Colonel Corcoran who led them into their first actual battle July 18, 1861 at Bull Run. Meagher was a captain at the time of the battle. His actions were noted by his fellow officers—partly in response to some unfavorable innuendoes reported regarding Meagher's efforts by a correspondent of the London Times named Russell (the Brits were still unhappy with the young Irish revolutionaries). The first hand report submitted by fellow officers at the battle follows: "Riding coolly and deliberately along the line, in front of the enemy's batteries, from which a tempest of ball and shell swept the field, whilst in the act of delivering the Colonel's order to prepare to charge, Captain Meagher's horse was torn to pieces by a cannon shot. From that out he took his place with his company ... on foot, advanced upon enemy's batteries, cheered and inspired the men as they rushed upon the works, and in the face of the deadliest fire, with his head uncovered, stood his ground, waved his sword, rallied the 69th in the name of Ireland, when the regiment was twice repulsed, and was among the last, if ..not the very last, to leave the fatal spot where so many of his honest-hearted countrymen were slain." Meagher was injured and knocked unconscious on the field of battle. He was rescued by a private of the US Cavalry named Joseph P. McCoy. He pulled Meagher up on his horse and delivered him safely several hundred yards beyond the enemy's batteries. Colonel Corcoran had been injured and taken prisoner subsequently going to Charleston as a POW. On August 3, 1861 the 69th was discharged from the service of the US.

Meagher corresponded with the War Department proposing to reinstate the 69th. The response from the War Department follows: "Sir—The regiments of infantry known as the Sixty-ninth infantry, which you offer, is accepted for three years or during the war, provided you have it ready for marching orders in thirty days." Meagher accepted this challenge and was designated Brigadier-General; truly leading the Irish Brigade.

Meagher's first action was leading the Irish Brigade in the Battle of Fair Oaks May, 1862. The 69th was next engaged in the Seven Days Battles at Mechanicsville June 26, Gaines' Mill June 27, White Oak Swamp June 30, and Malvern Hill July 1, 1862. Following these battles Meagher returned to New York to recruit for the depleted ranks of the Irish Brigade which had started 3000 strong. They next engaged the enemy at Antietam (Sharpsburg) Maryland Sept 17, 1862. General McClellan's Official Report of the battle noted: "The Irish Brigade sustained its well-earned reputation. After suffering terribly in officers and men, and strewing the ground with their enemies ... and their commander, General M, disabled by the fall of his horse, shot under him, this brigade was ordered to give place to General Caldwell's brigade." Another officer Capt Edward Field records: "The rebels seemed to have a special spite against the green flag, and five color-bearers were shot down successively in a short time. As the last man fell even these Irishmen hesitated a moment to assume a task synonymous with death. 'Big Gleason' Captain of the 63rd, six feet seven, sprang forward and snatched it up. In a few minutes a bullet struck the staff, shattering it to pieces; Gleason tore the flag from the broken staff, wrapped it around his body, putting his sword-belt over it, and went through the rest of that fight untouched." Remember the importance of the flag and colors for the Irish fighters.

The battle of Fredericksburg was the most disastrous fighting the Irish Brigade would experience. The Irish Brigade was part of the Union forces sent toward Marye's Heights. In the Battle Cry of Freedom McPherson describes the scene: "Channeled by ravines, a marsh, and a drainage ditch toward a sunken road fronted by a half-mile long stone fence... Behind the fence stood four ranks of Georgians and North Carolinians loading and shooting so fast that their firing achieved the effect of machine guns. Fourteen brigades of Yankees surged forward." A newspaper reporter recorded: "It can hardly be in human nature for men to show more valor or generals to manifest less judgment." There were 13,000 Union casualties. The day before the battle Col Alexander , Chief of Artillery to General Longstreet, in observing the setting which would leave the Union forces so open to close range rifle fire stated "We will comb it as with a fine-tooth comb. A chicken could not live on that field when we open fire." He was right. On the night of Dec 13, 1862, in this small space the killed and wounded of the Union Army averaged a thousand to the acre, and one out of every twenty was a soldier of the Irish Brigade (they entered battle with slightly more than 1300 soldiers and suffered over 500 fatalities).

It was of note that the Irish Brigade went into battle without their Green Flags. The tattered remnants carried on every battlefield from Fair Oaks to Antietam had been sent to New York to be saved and replaced with a new set of colors. These were not available at the time of what promised and subsequently proved to be the bloodiest battle for the Irish Brigade. Meagher was resolved that the men would carry the colors of their fatherland. That Saturday morning with the troops at parade rest prior to battle Meagher ordered that a sprig of evergreen (boxwood) be placed in each soldier and officer's cap. They would wear green into the fray.

On the very Saturday that such bloody losses were suffered by the Irish Brigade, the new colors arrived from New York. On December 15th—the following Monday a ceremony for reception of the colors was held in the little Theatre of Fredericksburg. Bruce Catton in Glory Road writes: "Meagher was famous for his parties. The whole II Corps remembered a fabulous banquet the Irish Brigade had thrown in ruined Fredericksburg on the 15th of December... Meagher's brigade had just received three new regimental flags, purest green silk made up by the ladies of New York... they had taken over some half-wrecked hall and had invited in everybody who was anybody in the II Corps. Long tables had been set up amid the wreckage, loaded with chicken and cold turkey and ham, and good things to drink had been circulating liberally, and when the flags were presented to the Irish regiments there had been a great deal of oratory. In the end everybody had such a good time and cheered so loudly that even Burnside's moribund headquarters on the far side of the river had caught on and had sent staff officers over with frantic orders: stop the party and send everybody home, or the Rebels will take notice of all this noise and open a new bombardment." Meagher honored one of the guests Brigadier General Alfred Sully who commanded the First Brigade, Second Division, Second Army Corps with a toast which gave some insight into frustrations Meagher was beginning to feel with the politics of wartime:

"I have the honor, the pride, and the pleasure to ask you to drink to the health of my esteemed friend on my left,—General Alfred Sully: and I want you to understand, gentlemen, that he is not one of your 'Political Generals,' but a brave and accomplished soldier—who attracted his 'star' from the firmament of glory—by the electricity of his sword!" That very night the Union forces evacuated Fredericksburg.

Meagher last commanded the Irish Brigade at Chancellorsville May 2-6, 1863. His troops were diminished to less than half their full number and correspondence with the War Department was frustrated by politics. They would not allow him to withdraw and recruit up to full strength. Consequently Meagher resigned command and returned to New York May 29, 1863.

Post Civil War—On the Road to Montana

Meagher became active in the Fenian Brotherhood after returning to New York. He observed strained relations between England and the U.S. partly from the seizure of a British blockade runner the steamship Circassian. Meagher envisioned a war with England and proposed “to raise a body of Irish troops for service in Ireland.” The exiled Irish patriots still dreamed of returning with skill and force to end British rule in Ireland.

In the autumn of 1864, President Lincoln appointed Brigadier-General Meagher to an important position in the Provisional Division of the Army of Tennessee head quartered in the Etowah District Chattanooga. It was anticipated that Meagher would command a strong force of veterans composed of detachments from the 15th and 17th Army Corps for the purpose of joining General Sherman in his “march to the sea”. Meagher had no liking for this method of warfare and instead resigned and returned to New York. At his reception on return to NY, he eulogized the soldiers of the Irish Brigade and noted: “In moments of excitement they never gave way to the excesses which for the most part disfigure and shamefully blot the records of the grandest victories. The houses, cattle, gardens, corn-fields and other property of insurgents families, who had abandoned them to the mercy of the nation, as well as all the goods and chattels belonging to families who stood their ground, were respected by the men of the Irish Brigade, who went out from here to fight and put down the armed enemies of the Republic, and not to cast naked and breadless on the world, the women and children and aged fathers of the delinquent States.”

Two months later President Lincoln was assassinated. In July 1865 President Andrew Johnson offered the Secretaryship of the Territory of Montana to Meagher. He accepted and was on his way westward.

Meagher in Big Sky Country

Meagher arrived October, 1865 to begin his duties as Secretary of the territory of Montana. However, barely a week after his arrival in the territory, Governor Sidney Edgerton abruptly resigned and returned to Ohio leaving Meagher in charge. For someone with a natural aversion to politics he found himself in a “treacherous tangle”. “Meagher owed his job to Johnson, like himself a unionist Democrat, but he also had to deal with a Congress run by radical Republicans battling with the president while at home he ruled over an electorate swollen by Southern Democrats who had fled to the gold fields as the war wound down. Meagher, quickly labeled the “Acting One,” had to choose sides. The Democratic majority wanted both a statehood convention and a legislative session, and after some hesitation Meagher called for both to meet in Virginia City, though so confused was the situation that it was uncertain whether he had the authority. In this, he earned the bitter opposition of the Republicans, some of whom feared that the *vox populi* would be spoken with a distinct Confederate drawl.” The legislators met from March 5 to April 13, 1866. This became known as the “bogus legislature”; one of the strangest episodes of early Montana history. The work they did was not as controversial and cantankerous as the participants. While they defined legislative and judicial districts, amended the license law, specified the

duties of several territorial and county officials, and asked Congress to oppose a bill to sell mineral lands, partisan politics provided fertile ground for personal attacks. The Republicans referred to their acting governor as “impetuous, short-tempered, truculent, noisy, brash, verbose, and belligerent.” They felt his ego barely fit under the Big Sky and the Republicans felt he was usurping power for his personal glory. They especially focused on his personal habits...”a drunken madman consorting with prostitutes and wallowing his days away in his room...the man at the helm of government was a disgrace and a blight.” An article by Elliott West appears in the Winter 1985 issue of Montana the Magazine of Western History (Vol 35; Number 1) entitled “Thomas Francis Meagher’s Bar Bill” which was discovered from the time of the legislature meeting and for those times was described as “heroic” at \$434.75 for the 38 days. In a less biased analysis it was felt that this was politics as usual in the harder drinking West. Of interest, after significant partisan angst the political turmoil of 1866 was moot when almost 1 year later, Congress passed a law nullifying all acts passed during the session. The convention had drafted a constitution but it was never submitted to a vote and subsequently lost.

In contrast to the political frustrations Meagher found enjoyment and amazement in the magnificent land of Montana. He traveled throughout the state on horseback and wrote a series of papers entitled “Rides through Montana” for Harper’s Magazine. His last action involved riding through the state to raise an army in anticipation of an Indian war.

The Death of Thomas Francis Meagher

Since as fellow member Frank Buhler reports—“Everyone loves a Mystery” you may choose your own version of Meagher’s death. We know for certain that he disappeared July 1, 1867 last seen alive on board the steamboat G A Thompson docked at Fort Benton on the Missouri River. His body was never found.

- A. Meagher was at Fort Benton awaiting a shipment of arms from the government in preparation for his resistance to the rumored Indian uprising. He had ridden thirty miles on that very hot day. That evening he drank excessively, became intoxicated and fell off the boat drowning in the swift current of the Missouri River at night.
- B. Meagher dined that night at Fort Benton with Major Eastman. This account of his tragic death is given by Meagher’s friend Colonel W.F. Sanders who was at Fort Benton at that time. General Meagher returned from the fort around dusk. A loud conversation was overheard in which Meagher was loudly demanding a revolver to defend himself against the citizens of Fort Benton. He was felt to be deranged and paranoid stating that they were hostile to him. He was induced to retire to his berth on the starboard side of the boat next to the bank “and in the hope he would sleep we all went ashore, seeking to allay his anxiety by the promise of getting him a revolver. I cannot say that any one remained in his stateroom with him.” It was felt that in his hallucinatory state Meagher fell into the Missouri River and drowned.
- C. Meagher had been ailing for three days with a severe case of diarrhea. He went ashore to a trading post where he was given a seat in the back room. He frequently had to hasten to the woods or brush in the rear when diarrhea struck. Treatments were inadequate and the proprietor gave Meagher a glass of blackberry wine. Remember the severity of diarrheal illnesses –as James I. Robertson, Jr. points out in Soldiers Blue and Gray “A greater number of soldiers died of diarrhea-type illnesses than fell in

combat.” He returned to the boat at nightfall. The sentry’s account follows: “While on duty during the night, pacing the deck, I heard a noise stern-ward; and looking in that direction I saw somebody moving in white clothing toward the left rear of the stern, where I knew the temporary accommodation place of the vessel was. Of course I about faced and marched the other way, thinking some one of the officers had a ‘short call,’ and re-pacing my round about mid-way, I heard a shout and then a splash—that was all. I shouted ‘man overboard.’ In a moment the deck was alive; floating life buoys were flung out—boats and lights on the water.” All to no avail; the Missouri River at Benton has a current of nine miles per hour in ordinary times and it was swelled with recent rains.

- D. Meagher clashed with several groups. An Associate Justice Munson had a man named James Daniels sentenced to prison for manslaughter—a “grievously unjust charge” according to Meagher who felt he was a man of excellent character. Meagher pardoned Daniels and Justice Munson ordered him rearrested. Before that could occur, however, Daniels was hanged by vigilantes. This was an active group in Montana and they despised Meagher and his attempts to govern. After Meagher arrived in Fort Benton and returned from dinner in an intoxicated state, vigilantes boarded the boat in the middle of the night and threw Meagher overboard to drown.
- E. Meagher is still alive and living in Graceland with Elvis---take your pick.

Conclusion

The last correspondence from Thomas Francis Meagher was a response to an invitation from the Fenian Brotherhood of San Francisco to attend a reunion of the Irish Nationalists. It is addressed from Virginia City, Montana June 7, 1867. This was less than one month before his death and the likelihood of being relieved from his politically frustrating position only a few weeks after his death makes considerations of suicide unlikely.

“Sir, . . . I fear greatly that I cannot be with you. Governor Smith won’t be here till the middle of July, and it is uncertain when Secretary Tufts will arrive. I can’t leave till either comes, the organic act not providing for any one taking my place in their absence; hence I am detained here, much to my vexation. ‘God speed the Irish nation to liberty and power!’

Thomas Francis Meagher
Secretary and Acting-Governor”

Thomas Francis Meagher—Who am I?

First and foremost a loyal Irishman.
---What am I doing here?
My duty to Ireland and to my adopted land.

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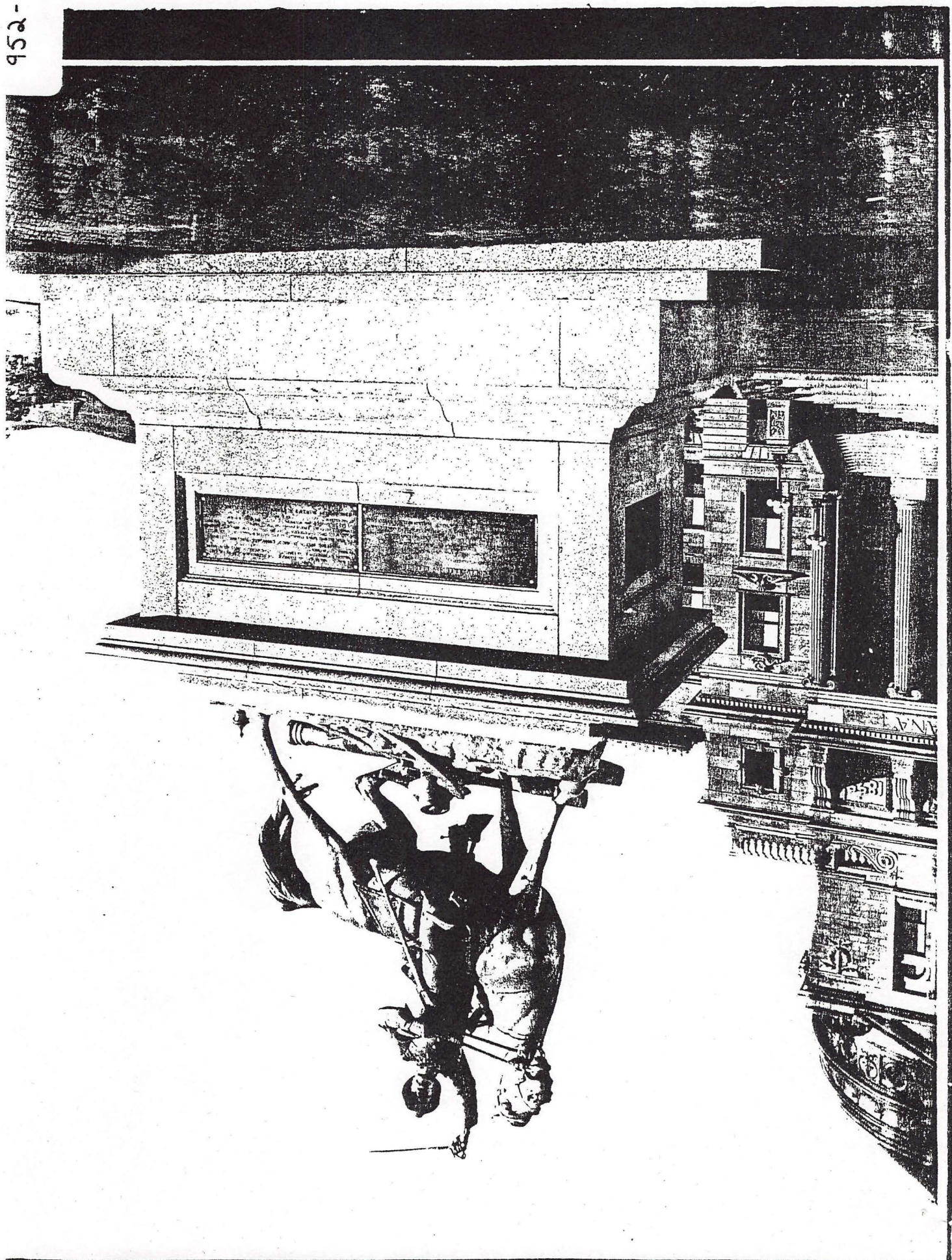
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*Report of Brig. Gen. Thomas Francis
Meagher, U. S. Army,
Commanding Second Brigade, of the
Battle of Antietam.*



(Click on image for bio)

**HDQRS.(IRISH BRIG.) 2D BRIG., SUMNER'S CORPS,
HANCOCK'S DIVISION, ARMY OF THE POTOMAC,
In Camp on Bolivar Heights, Va., September 30, 1862.**

Captain HANCOCK,
Assistant Adjutant-General, Division Headquarters.

CAPTAIN: I have the honor to submit the following statement of the part which the brigade under my command performed in the battle of the Antietam:

Being encamped 1 mile outside Frederick City, on this side, on the morning of the 14th of September the brigade received orders immediately to proceed to the support of General Hooker, who was at the time hotly engaged in the passes of the South Mountain with the enemy. Being halted for an hour or so, owing to the favorable reports from the headquarters of General Hooker, the brigade had an hour or so to take rest and refreshment, the first opportunity they had of doing so after a rapid and exhausting march over the rocky hills and through the tangled woods from their encampment outside Frederick City.

The Irish Brigade had the honor of leading the pursuit of the rebels from South Mountain through Boonsborough and Keedysville. Along this road and through these villages, in this pursuit, the brigade passed with the utmost alacrity and enthusiasm, Major-General Richardson, commanding the division, riding prominently at the head of the column and directing all its movements.

Early in the afternoon the enemy were discovered in full force, drawn up in line of battle on the heights near Sharpsburg and overlooking the Antietam. The brigade was halted and deployed in line of battle to the right and left of the Sharpsburg turnpike, the Eighty-eighth and Sixty-third Regiments New York Volunteers being on the left of the road and the Sixty-ninth New York Volunteers and the Twenty-ninth

Massachusetts Volunteers being on the right.

Whilst in this position, though greatly protected by the hill on the slope of which they lay, the regiments forming the right of my command were constantly annoyed by the well-directed artillery of the enemy. The Eighty-eighth and Sixty-third Regiments were also annoyed in a similar way, and the brigade lost several good men even in this comparatively safe position. In this position, however, we remained until the morning of the 17th, when, the men having breakfasted, a sudden order came for the brigade to fall in under arms, and take up the line of march, which Major-General Richardson would indicate. Filing by the right and proceeding at a rapid pace, the brigade crossed the ford of the Antietam a mile or so to the right of the bivouac of that morning, and as hastily, in compact order, following the lead of Major-General Richardson, who conducted the brigade to the field of battle, under cover of the rising ground and depressions which intervened between us and the enemy, we arrived at a cornfield, where Major-General Richardson ordered that everything but cartouch-boxes should be thrown off. The men of the Irish Brigade instantly obeyed this order with a heartiness and enthusiasm which it was rare to expect from men who had been wearied and worn by the unremitting labors of a nine months' campaign.

Deploying from column into line of battle on the edge of this cornfield, they marched through it steadily and displayed themselves in admirable regularity at the fence, a few hundred paces from which the enemy were drawn up in close column, exhibiting a double front, with their battle-flags defiantly displayed. Crossing this fence, which was a work slow and embarrassed, owing to the pioneer corps of the several regiments of the brigade having been reduced by their previous labors on the Peninsula, I had the misfortune to lose the services of many good officers and brave men.

Lieut. James E. Mackey, of the Sixty-third New York Volunteers, whom I had appointed on my staff in place of Lieut. Temple Emmert, whose death from typhoid fever the whole brigade affectionately and sincerely deplore, fell while the brigade was deploying into line of battle at this fence.

The enemy's column, with their battle-flag advanced and defiantly flying in front, was at this time within 300 paces of our line. A clover field of about two acres interposed. Then came the plowed field in which this column of the enemy was drawn up, and from which from their double front they had delivered and sustained a fire before which Sedgwick's forces on the right and French's on the left were reported at the time momentarily to have given way. The fact is, owing to some reason which as yet has not been explained, the Irish Brigade had to occupy and hold a gap in the line of the Union army, which the enemy perceiving had flung a formidable column to break through, and so take the two divisions last named on their flank and rear. This movement was suddenly checked by the impetuous advance of the Irish Brigade, which in a great measure filling up the gap through which the rebel column was descending to the rear of the Federal lines, drew up in line of battle within 50 paces of the enemy, the Sixty-ninth and Twenty-ninth being on the right of the line, and the Sixty-third and Eighty-eighth Regiments on the left. On coming into this close and fatal contact with the enemy, the officers and men of the brigade waved their swords and hats and gave the heartiest cheers for their general, George B. McClellan, and the Army of the Potomac. Never were men in higher spirits. Never did men with such alacrity and generosity of heart press forward and encounter the perils of the battle-field.

My orders were, that, after the first and second volleys delivered in line of battle

by the brigade, the brigade should charge with fixed bayonets on the enemy. Seated on my horse, close to the Sixty-ninth Regiment, I permitted them to deliver their five or six volleys, and then personally ordered them to charge upon the rebel columns, while at the very same moment I ordered Captain Miller, assistant adjutant-general of the brigade, and Lieutenant Gosson, first aide on my staff, to bring up the Eighty-eighth and Sixty-third immediately to the charge. It was my design, under the general orders I received, to push the enemy on both their fronts as they displayed themselves to us, and, relying on the impetuosity and recklessness of Irish soldiers in a charge, felt confident that before such a charge the rebel column would give way and be dispersed.

Advancing on the right and left obliquely from the center, the brigade poured in an effective and powerful fire upon the column, which it was their special duty to dislodge. Despite a fire of musketry, which literally cut lanes through our approaching line, the brigade advanced under my personal command within 30 paces of the enemy, and at this point, Lieut. Col. James Kelly having been shot through the face and Capt. Felix Duffy having fallen dead in front of his command, the regiment halted. At the same time Lieutenant-Colonel Fowler and Maj. Richard Bentley, of the Sixty-third, on the left of our line, having been <ar27_295> seriously wounded and compelled to retire to the rear, the charge of bayonets I had ordered on the left was arrested, and thus the brigade, instead of advancing and dispersing the column with the bayonet, stood and delivered its fire, persistently and effectually maintaining every inch of the ground they occupied, until Brigadier-General Caldwell, bringing up his brigade, enabled my brigade, after having been reduced to 500 men, to retire to the second line of defense.

Of other transactions on the battle-field in connection with the Irish Brigade I will not presume to speak. My horse having been shot under me as the engagement was about ending, and from the shock which I myself sustained, I was obliged to be carried off the field. It was my good fortune, however, to be able to resume my command early next morning.

For what occurred subsequently to my being carried away from the field I refer you, with proud confidence, not alone to my regimental officers, who remained on the field, but also to many eye-witnesses of superior rank who noticed the opportune action of the Irish Brigade on that day. But I cannot close this communication without specially mentioning the names of Capt. Felix Duffy, of the Sixty-ninth; Captains Clooney and Joyce, of the Eighty-eighth, who, after distinguishing themselves by unremitting assiduity in the discharge of their duties in their commands throughout a very long and very exhausting campaign, fell with their feet to the rebels, with a glow of loyalty and true soldiership upon their dying features.

I have the honor to be, captain, yours truly and respectfully,
THOMAS FRANCIS MEAGHER,
Brigadier-General, Commanding the Irish Brigade.

RETURN TO ANTIETAM ORDER OF BATTLE (AOP) PAGE