

"Oh, God, What a Pity!": The Irish Brigade at Fredericksburg and the Creation of Myth

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No event more severely damaged Irish enthusiasm for the Northern war effort than the Battle of Fredericksburg. Northern Irish reacted with horror and outrage to the staggering casualties sustained by the Irish Brigade during its failed assault on Marye's Heights. Of the 1,200 men who made the attack, 545 were killed, wounded, or missing. (1) For many Irish, these grim figures confirmed old suspicion that Northern leaders would waste Irish lives wantonly. It is therefore surprising that the historical record all but ignores the battle's influence on Irish morale. Instead, the literature on Fredericksburg almost uniformly emphasizes the Irish Brigade's gallantry before the stone wall on December 13, 1862, and the tragic irony of its clash with Irish Confederates. How did the Irish Brigade come to occupy such a lofty, and often romantic, place in the history of the battle? And why does the brigade's doomed charge still overshadow the consequences of its destruction on the Heights--namely, Irish disillusionment on the home front? Much of the answer depends upon the postwar writings of brigade veterans David Power Conyngham, Father William Corby, and St. Clair A. Mulholland. Refusing to let history dismiss as meaningless the Irish blood spilled at Fredericksburg, these men forged a body of literature remarkable for its propensity to mythologize Irish participation in the Civil War, North and South.

The facts of the Irish assault at Fredericksburg can be summarized quickly. On the morning of December 13, the Irish Brigade fell in along the bank of the Rappahannock River. The unit consisted of the 63d, 69th, and 88th New York, the 28th Massachusetts, and the 116th Pennsylvania--regiments almost entirely composed of Irish immigrants and men of Irish descent. Brig. Gen. Thomas Francis Meagher, the brigade's commander, addressed his soldiers and then led them into the streets of Fredericksburg. There, withstanding the intense artillery bombardment of the city, the Irish awaited their turn to advance against the Confederate defenses on Marye's Heights, about a half mile distant from town. At about one o'clock, after Maj. Gen. William H. French's division had failed in its assaults, Meagher's men followed Brig. Gen. Samuel K. Zook's brigade and marched across an open field heavily exposed to Confederate batteries. Passing over the shattered remnants of brigades that had preceded them, the Irish advanced to within thirty yards of the stone wall at the base of the heights. Behind the wall, Confederate infantry unleashed a devastating fire into the Irish ranks until the advance stalled completely. At this point, the Irish regiments either lay down or moved back, returning fire as best they could. Vulnerable to enemy bullets during the rest of the afternoon's failed Union assaults, the survivors staggered, or were carried, back to Fredericksburg after nightfall. (2) All told, the brigade suffered casualties of nearly 50 percent.

As the most famous and visible example of Irish arms in the Northern armies, the Irish Brigade's actions and treatment had enormous influence on ethnic morale. Nothing illustrates this connection better than the despair felt by Northern Irish during the latter half of December 1862. Writing to his father the day after Fredericksburg, Capt. William J. Nagle of the 88th New York expressed horror over the brigade's losses: "Oh! It was a terrible day. The destruction of life has been fearful, and nothing gained. ... Irish blood and Irish bones cover that terrible field to-day.... We are slaughtered like sheep, and no result but defeat.... I do not know what disposition will be made of us now in our shattered condition." New York City's Irish American printed Nagle's letter on December 27, 1862. His insistence that the battle brought the Irish "no result but defeat" must have demoralized readers already affected by the carnage. In a letter to his wife dated December 18, Peter Welsh of the 28th Massachusetts likewise emphasized the battle's heavy toll: "you have heard of the battle before this[.T]hank God i came out of it safe[. I]t was a fierce and bloody battle[. O]ur brigade got teribly [sic] cut up[. I]t is so small now that it is not fit to go into any further action unless it is recruited up[. S]o you need not be uneasy now about me for the rest of the fighting will have to be done without our aid." An unidentified officer of the 88th New York wrote the Irish American with a heavy heart; "May the Lord pity and protect the widows and orphans.... It will be a sad, sad Christmas by many an Irish hearthstone in New York, Pennsylvania, and Massachusetts." Letters such as these identified Fredericksburg as an unequivocal disaster for the Irish people, and the message was bitterly received. Before long, grief turned to outrage. In January, editors of the Irish American portrayed Irish troops as the target of "unjust discrimination," abused by nativist leaders both on and off the battlefield.(3)

Confederate accounts of Fredericksburg also emphasized the Irish Brigade's devastating losses. In the first days after the battle, Southerners often drew reports of Federal casualties from Northern newspapers. Taking their cue from the Philadelphia Enquirer, both the Richmond Enquirer and the Charleston Daily Courier erroneously reported that Meagher was severely wounded in the fight. The Richmond paper added, however, that "the Irish Brigade suffered terribly." On December 18, the Daily Richmond Examiner published a report by one of its own correspondents, part of which read: "Between the town and Mr. Marye's house are three fields covered thickly with the dead, who were slaughtered by our sharpshooters and artillery. Here the Irish Brigade crimsoned the ground with their blood and still encumber it with their bodies." Writing in his diary, a Confederate soldier summed up the matter more concisely, noting, "We almost annihilated general Megearks Ireish Brigade."(4)

Instead of praising the brigade's bravery, the Daily Richmond Examiner criticized its conduct during the battle and the preceding occupation of Fredericksburg. In a section entitled "The Irish Brigade," the paper's correspondent turned smug: A citizen who remained here during the

occupation of the enemy, gave me some interesting facts concerning Meagher and his brigade. Meagher had his headquarters in a small wood house near the river, and gave his men full run of the town. They employed their leisure in breaking open shops and storehouses, and rummaging for whiskey, which they found in sufficient quantities to keep them constantly drunk. When the brigade was drawn up on the morning of the 13th, Meagher, just previous to the sally from the town to attack our position, addressed his men in a florid, highfalutin speech. He told them the hill (Marye's) had to be stormed, and that they were the boys to do it; reminded them of the gallant deeds of the sons of Erin on all the celebrated battle-fields, from Waterloo to Williamsburg; and wound up with a glowing apostrophe to the Star-Spangled banner which with the whiskey they had drunk almost carried the brigade off their legs. They responded with three yells, and, the word being given, rushed to the charge. In the course of a half an hour they re-entered the town broken, scattered and whipped. The Confederate bullets had knocked all the whiskey and enthusiasm out of them together.

Unfurling the old stereotype of the drunken and dishonorable Irishman, the Examiner assured its readers that the brigade's assault was anything but glorious. Here Meagher's speech appears silly and the charge a drunken debacle. Although it is difficult to say how many Northern Irish read this or similar accounts, even Confederate Irishmen may have winced at how the paper singled out Meagher's soldiers for criticism and ridicule.(5)

It seems, then, that a common thread running through both Northern and Southern accounts was that the Irish Brigade had gained nothing from Fredericksburg. Its numbers were severely depleted, perhaps eliminating it from future service, and its morale had all but collapsed. Moreover, Confederates identified the brigade as having participated in the much-maligned looting of Fredericksburg homes and businesses. Little suggested that the events of December 13 would be remembered as the brigade's most glorious moment.

These factors help explain why Fredericksburg dealt such a blow to Irish morale. Following so soon after Antietam and the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, Irish lives appeared, more than ever, to have been wasted. In fact, the galling deaths at Fredericksburg persuaded many Irish to view Confederate independence in an increasingly positive light. The New York City draft riot of 1863 and the sharp decline in Irish enlistment in the Union armies provide clear examples of growing disaffection with the war. Meagher was alarmed by the Southern sympathies espoused by his fellow Irish on both sides of the Atlantic and warned that such behavior "will not be forgotten by the jealous exclusionists of this country when the war is over. Nay, it may be difficult hereafter to rouse some of the staunch old friends of the Irish people

... when they remember how, even in the very season when the loyal States were pouring their grain and gold into Ireland to relieve the starving poor, the [Irish] public ... went forth to condemn the action of the national government, and approve the infidelity and usurpation of its enemies."(21)

Conyngham deeply admired Meagher, and his history of the Irish Brigade can be read as an attempt to assuage the general's concerns about how Americans would remember Irish wartime behavior. In particular, his treatment of Fredericksburg would have pleased his old chief, in that it downplayed Irish disaffection. Only twice did Conyngham hint at the outrage following the battle. First, he dismissed complaints about high Irish casualties by charging that such critiques belong to "men who know nothing of war." He added, "Do these men forget that several brigades went in besides the Irish Brigade? and if they had not suffered so badly, it is because they did not so long or so desperately sustain their position.(22) Valor, then, not the army's disdain for Irishmen, was responsible for the considerable casualties. Second, rather than dwell on Irish despair, Conyngham spoke of the larger Northern reaction to the battle: "Burnside's failure, and the disastrous battle of Fredericksburg, had a depressing effect on the country.... The Christmas of 186[2] was a sad one in many a home throughout the North, and full of despondency for the Union cause."(23) The Christmas reference seems particularly striking when compared to sentiments expressed by Irish American newspapers in 1862 that Christmas would be especially sad for Irish families. Here, Conyngham indirectly suggested that they were no more dejected--or in favor of quitting the war--than other Americans.

Instead of construing Fredericksburg as the battle that turned Irish America against the Northern war effort, Conyngham reinterpreted the negative reaction to the fighting. His account of the grand Requiem Mass at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York, held a month after the battle and dedicated to the brigade's fallen, offered little in the way of tragedy. Rather, Conyngham described a kind of spiritual rally, where the various dimensions of Irish culture--Catholicism, politics, and martial service--converged to produce something verging on the sublime: "The coup d'oeil inside the cathedral at the commencement of the services was very striking, and at once marked this as one of the most impressive and solemn religious ceremonies that had taken place here for many years. The dark bier, surrounded by its military escort, the sable vestments of the officiating clergy, the vast congregation uniting their prayers with the service of the altar, and the solemn tones of the organ pealing the Dies Irae--all combined to produce a sensation of awe and devotion to which no heart susceptible of the finer emotions of our nature could be indifferent." As this passage shows, Conyngham focused less on the meaning of the Mass than its grandeur and beauty. His descriptions of the "highly efficient choir of the cathedral" and the "excellent performance of the band"

overshadowed Irish poet John Savage's requiem, which is recorded almost as an afterthought.(24)

Even when explicitly writing about the brigade's losses at Fredericksburg, Conyngham found something positive to say about the subject. Promising the reader an anecdote that demonstrated "how much our race suffered that day, and how dreadfully our poor fellows were cut up," he recounted General Hancock's inspection of the brigade following the battle:

The general has an emphatic way of speaking, a quick eye, and is great on details, regularity, and all the little soldierly et ceteras. Seeing [a] small group together by themselves he shouted, "G--d--you, why don't you close up with your company."

Private (one of the three, saluting)--"General, we're a company." General--"The d--l you are!" looking at them for a moment, his soldierly eye beaming, as he thought of their gallantry and bearing on the field; too full of respect for them ... to inspect them minutely that time.(25)

Here military glory displaces tragedy, and the reader's attention is directed not toward the slain soldiers' families, or the futility of their assault, but to their "gallantry and bearing on the field." This passage therefore encapsulates Conyngham's larger project of drawing attention away from the home front--he portrays the reaction of the "soldierly" Hancock rather than the tears of the grieving Irish mother.

It would be a mistake, however, to dismiss Conyngham's version of Fredericksburg as wholly romantic. Lawrence Frederick Kohl argues that Conyngham "had seen too much of war to want to glorify it," a statement that seems true when one reads his descriptions of "oozing wounds," "cries, moans, groans, and shrieks of agony," and bodies piled upon one another. Yet the words Conyngham used in his account of the Irish at Fredericksburg are nonetheless romantic: "glorious," "gallant," "laudable," "honored," "dashing." At one point, Conyngham explained the apparent paradox: "And this was war--`glorious war'--with all its pomp and parade--all its glittering attractions. If we could see it in its true colors, it is the most horrible curse that God could inflict upon mankind. Never glorious, unless when an oppressed people are contending for the great boon and birthright of liberty." By this logic, the Irish soldier deserved glory because he fought not merely for the Union, but for the standing and reputation of the Irish in America. The oft-abused and downtrodden Irish were fighting to claim their birthright as Americans. Central to Conyngham's history, this idea would resonate throughout later histories of Irish participation in the Civil War.(26)

Conyngham introduced other themes that later brigade writers would develop in their accounts of Fredericksburg. The claim that the Irish Brigade approached closer to the stone wall than any other Federal unit stood as one of the most important. Noting that the "rebel position was unassailable," Conyngham asked in a single, sprawling sentence, "Is there any thing in the records of the greatest efforts of human fortitude and endurance finer than the placing, by the men and officers of the Irish Brigade, those sprigs of evergreen in their hats, and the fact reported by the officer in command of the details for burying the dead under the flag of truce, that nearest to the enemy's breastworks, nearest to that terrible stone wall, from behind which such frightful volleys of death were hurled, nearest to the foe and to his strongholds, were found the men of the Irish Brigade, the men with the green emblem in their hats."(27) This claim found support in a postwar letter written by Col. William R. Brooke of the 53d Pennsylvania to St. Clair Mulholland, commander of the 116th Pennsylvania. Brooke commanded the burial detail nearest the stone wall. His letter, dated January 8, 1881, stated that the dead closest to the Confederate defenses belonged to the Irish Brigade's 69th New York.(28) Although the men of Brig. Gen. Andrew A. Humphreys's division later made their own case for having advanced closest to the stone wall, in 1865 Conyngham may have been unaware that other troops contested the Irish claim.(29) In any case, he left no room for debate, particularly since he regarded the honor as being one of history's "greatest efforts of human fortitude and endurance"-- an honor he wished to reserve for the Irish.

Conyngham also became the first brigade historian to use the account of a correspondent of the London Times who watched the Irish assault from behind Confederate lines. Reminding his reader that the Times, as a British periodical, "cannot be suspected of partiality," he quoted the paper's famous description:

Never at Fontenoy, Albuera, or at Waterloo, was more undaunted courage displayed by the sons of Erin than during those six frantic dashes which they directed against the almost impregnable position of their foe.... After witnessing the gallantry and devotion exhibited by [Meagher's] troops, and viewing the hill-sides for acres strewn with their corpses thick as autumnal leaves, the spectator can remember nothing but their desperate courage.... That any mortal men could have carried the position before which they were wantonly sacrificed, defended as it was, it seems to me idle for a moment to believe. But the bodies which lie in dense masses within forty yards of the muzzles of Colonel Walton's guns are the best evidence what manner of men they were who pressed on to death with the dauntlessness of a race which has gained glory on a thousand battle-fields, and never more richly deserved it than at the foot of Marye's Heights on the 13th day of December, 1862.

Conyngham used this powerful and stirring account as evidence of Irish valor even when not specifically speaking about Fredericksburg. In the preface to his history, for instance, he wrote that throughout the war, "the Irish soldier has won a high reputation; and the greatest detractor of his race, even the London `Times' itself, has not dared to question his bravery as a soldier or his devotion to the flag under which he fought."(30)

Conyngham's admiration of the Times report may in part reflect his love of mythmaking. He later wrote the popular *Lives of the Irish Saints* (1870) and *Lives of the Irish Martyrs* (1873), demonstrating an interest in the ways by which ordinary events and individuals are transformed, in the public imagination, into something greater. Whether consciously or not, this is what Conyngham did throughout his history of the Irish Brigade. The Times report raised the Irish assault to the level of myth by bringing all of Irish military history to bear on the events of December 13. In turn, Conyngham's *The Irish Brigade and Its Campaigns* suggested that it was perhaps the courage (and ordeals) of Fredericksburg that elevated the brigade to a higher level in popular memory. As an examination of later writers will show, his history played a crucial role in mythologizing the Irish assault at Fredericksburg.

Brigade historian Father William Corby built on Conyngham's foundations. Unlike Conyngham, Corby was not a native of Ireland but of Detroit, Michigan, the son of Irish immigrants. Although later the two-time president of the University of Notre Dame and worldwide Assistant General for the Congregation of Holy Cross, Corby is best remembered for his wartime service as a chaplain of the Irish Brigade's 88th New York. Well known and respected beyond his own regiment, he ministered to the brigade in camp and under fire. His most visible and famous moment came at Gettysburg. Directly before the brigade stormed into action on July 2, 1863, Corby performed a general absolution for the unit, an act immortalized after the war by twin statues at Gettysburg and South Bend, Indiana. His memoirs of service, drawn from personal involvement with Catholic soldiers from the Peninsula to Petersburg, highlighted Catholic patriotism and sacrifice during the Civil War. Published in 1893 as *Memoirs of Chaplain Life*, the book was well-received and further shaped public memory of Irish participation in the conflict.(31)

Because Corby had neither kept a wartime diary nor collected letters, he looked to Conyngham's *The Irish Brigade and Its Campaigns* for background information and for a context in which to situate his personal memories. This may seem strange, considering that Corby was present at many of the places and events his fellow historian described second-hand. His reliance on Conyngham's history suggests that Corby held the work in high esteem and considered its reporting both accurate and useful for telling the story he wanted to tell. In fact, very rarely do Corby's accounts deviate from those of

his colleague's. Readers familiar with Conyngham's work can at times find his words repeated, almost verbatim, in Corby's pages.

Conyngham's book dramatically influenced Corby's account of Fredericksburg. Although hoping his history would "show the religious feature that existed in the army" and describe everyday life in the Army of the Potomac, Corby realized the importance of battles to a religious understanding of the war. His preface noted that "In the presence of death, religion gives hope and strength. The Christian soldier realizes that his power comes from the 'God of battles,' not from man." By borrowing and developing the basic tenets of Conyngham's account of Fredericksburg, Corby held up the battle as an important illustration of the Catholic soldier's fortitude in the face of overwhelming opposition. Corby followed his literary predecessor's lead, for instance, in quoting part of the London Times report of Irish gallantry before the stone wall. Moreover, like Conyngham he argued against those who chastised Meagher for ordering the doomed assault: "I have heard many blame Meagher for taking his brigade into this [slaughter] pen; but such persons do not know what they criticise. Gen. Meagher and his brigade simply obeyed the orders of superior officers, and went in at the time and place assigned them."(32)

Yet Corby probed further than Conyngham into the psyche of the soldiers who made the charge, adding a new dimension to the memory of the Irish at Fredericksburg. Conyngham emphasized Irish glory, patriotism, and loyalty to the Union by pointing to Irish casualties and the brigade's proximity to the wall. Corby did the same by shifting his reader's attention to the mind of the Irish soldier before the attack. He introduced an idea absent from Conyngham's history--the notion that the Irish Brigade knew its attack was futile. Drawing on valuable personal experience, he recounted the preparation of Confederate defenses as witnessed by the men of the Irish Brigade:

[T]he Confederates massed on the hills behind the city, on the south of the Rappahannock, built breastworks, and got all their heavy artillery in the best possible positions. To complete their work they had over three weeks. On December 10 ... [o]ne of my men, hearing the rumor, came to me, and said: 'Father, they are going to lead us over in front of those guns which we have seen them placing, unhindered, for the past three weeks.' I answered him: 'Do not trouble yourself; your generals know better than that.' But, to our great surprise, the poor soldier was right.(33)

Although this passage takes Burnside and his advisers to task for their poor strategy and decision-making, it also makes clear that the brigade anticipated its doom. Reporting the brigade's sentiments on the morning of December 13, Corby noted that the unit formed ranks and cheered, after which one soldier darkly noted, "It may be our last cry."(34) Corby's account rings true when compared to the words of Private William McCarter of the 116th Pennsylvania,

who in his memoirs recorded the brigade's feelings in the days before the battle: "Suffice it to say that the almost general feeling among the Union troops was one of gloom and great depression. They saw before them the strong, almost impregnable position of the enemy and knew about his resources behind.... After looking at the Rebel works over the water, one officer remarked, 'No competent, sane commander would attack that place from this side of the river.'" When later describing the brigade's assault on the stone wall, McCarter reiterated that "to my mind and observation, attacking the enemy here with even double our numbers, say 200,000 men, in his almost impregnable position would be simply foolishness and would undoubtedly prove disastrous. I was right."(35)

Corby's insistence that the Irish knew their assault would fail made his account of Fredericksburg all the more powerful and the reported casualties even more tragic and meaningful. As George C. Rable has observed about the Federal troops at Fredericksburg, "Naturally it was far easier for the Confederates to celebrate their fallen heroes because for the Federals the link between courage and victory had been broken. Or had it? Even in defeat such conspicuous valor as the assaults against the stone wall were noteworthy. Indeed, the strength of the Confederate positions and the horrors of the battle made the bravery of so many men all the more impressive."(36) In his account of the Irish Brigade at Fredericksburg, Corby focused on what Rable terms the "link between courage and victory." Knowing they faced death without hope of success, the Irish soldiers' gallantry represented a victory in itself. Indeed, one finds it difficult not to admire McCarter, who joined the assault on Marye's Heights despite being ordered by Meagher to stay behind:(37) "Will I obey the general's instructions or not? ... Will I leave it possible for my comrades in the Irish Brigade to say that I, being one of their number, remained under cover in the rear without filling my place in my regiment on that terrible, bloody 13th day of December 1862, the darkest day in the annals of the Army of the Potomac? No, I shall not, I concluded. I will not be kept back. I must share in the perils of this fight with the boys, be the result life or death, defeat or victory."(38)

As for the destruction the Irish soldier knowingly confronted, Corby defined it in harsh terms. "[T]he place into which Meagher's brigade was sent was simply a slaughter-pen," he wrote, and the Irish advanced "with absolutely no protection for our ranks.... Needless to say, our brigade was cut to pieces." Like Conyngham, Corby mentioned Meagher's order that the brigade put sprigs of boxwood in their caps before the assault. But he interpreted the order as fatalistic: "Gen. Meagher advised every soldier of the brigade to put a sprig of box-wood in his cap, so that he could be identified as a member of the brigade should he fall." Corby then added, as if there were no Irish survivors, "These men were found dead near the cannon's mouth, on Mary's [sic] Heights." These points seemed to follow from Corby's assertion that the Irish knew they would

fall short of the wall. The boxwood served as a means of measuring the brigade's valor by the location of its corpses.(39)

By putting a more human face on the brigade's assault at Fredericksburg, Corby also heightened its achievement. His memory and interpretation of Irish sentiment before the battle, plus first-hand description of the action on December 13 (a Confederate shell mortally wounded an officer some ten feet from where Corby stood in the city streets) bring the battle alive in a way Conyngham's second-hand reporting does not. This is not to say that Corby was as instrumental as Conyngham in creating postwar mythology. Rather, in most regards he followed Conyngham's lead. He steered clear of reporting Irish outrage following the battle, aside from noting that "All of us were sad, very sad." Moreover, a one-sentence acknowledgment of the grand Requiem Mass marked his only reference to Irishmen on the home front. By further developing ideas introduced in *The Irish Brigade and Its Campaigns* but still working within its contours, Corby helped ensure that Fredericksburg would remain at the forefront of any memory of Irish participation in the war. His last words on 1862 were ambiguous but suggestive of the battle's import to that memory: "History records deeds accomplished during 1862 which were features of warfare unknown in this or past generations."(40)

The Irish Brigade's third major historian, St. Clair Mulholland, exceeded Corby in terms of influencing memory of Fredericksburg. Born in Ireland in 1839, Mulholland emigrated with his parents to Philadelphia in 1850. He entered the war in 1862 as a lieutenant colonel of the 116th Pennsylvania, a regiment boasting a strong Irish membership. Mulholland found himself in command of the 116th two months after it joined the Irish Brigade, when the regiment's leader, Col. Dennis Heenan, fell wounded at Fredericksburg. Mulholland was likewise hurt in the battle and wounded three more times before the war ended. In 1864, owing largely to his friendship with Maj. Gen. Winfield Scott Hancock, Mulholland took command of his own brigade. A brevet brigadier and major general after the war, he also received the Congressional Medal of Honor.(41)

From the 1880s on, Mulholland showed an intense interest in preserving the history of the 116th Pennsylvania and the Irish Brigade. A popular speaker at veterans' events, he helped establish monuments in Philadelphia and at Gettysburg and published accounts of wartime events in Northern newspapers. In the 1890s, when an influx of new immigrants from Ireland and southern and eastern Europe ignited a resurgence of nativism, Mulholland vocally defended the immigrant's role in America. Displaying great passion and energy, "[he] took to the newspapers to defend the Irish from charges of desertion during the Civil War and recited casualty lists of Irish and German soldiers to rebut any hint of disloyalty or lack of courage."(42) In the early nineties, Mulholland provided a brief history of the Irish Brigade for inclusion in Corby's *Memoirs of Chaplain*

Life. His most important contribution to the brigade's memory, however, came in 1899 with publication of *The Story of the 116th Regiment, Pennsylvania Volunteers in the War of the Rebellion*. This work would come to stand alongside the histories of Conyngham and Corby as the third, and probably most influential, work of Irish wartime mythology.

Fredericksburg played a major role in Mulholland's history of the 116th, and although he did not shy away from descriptions of ghastly wounds and heaps of bodies, his Irish soldiers glowed with romantic light. At the beginning of his history, Mulholland wrote, "Instinctively one associates an Irishman with dash and courage."⁽⁴³⁾ Nowhere in his history did he try harder to validate this association than in his description of the assault on Marye's Heights. Following Corby's lead, Mulholland suggested that the brigade knew its attack could not succeed. Yet he developed the observation far beyond the point at which Corby stopped, giving the assault an even greater claim to tragedy and romance: "To charge an enemy or enter a battle when one knows that there is no hope of success, requires courage of a much higher order than when the soldier is sustained by the enthusiasm born of hope. It is recorded that a commander once gave to a subordinate the order to 'Go there and die!' The reply was: 'Yes, my General.' When the Union troops, debouching from the town, deployed upon the plain in front of Marye's Heights, every man in the ranks knew that it was not to fight. It was to die." He returned to this theme when describing the heavy casualties the brigade sustained as it marched on the heights. There were "No cheers or wild hurrahs as they moved towards the foe. They were not there to fight, only to die."⁽⁴⁴⁾

While Mulholland's readers might accept the quiet resignation of these troops to die with honor, most would balk at his description of the battle. In one of his stranger passages, Mulholland reversed the old convention--as practiced by Conyngham--of the experienced soldier dispelling boyhood visions of glorious and ordered warfare: "After the readings of boyhood, with heads filled with Napoleon and his marshals, and harrowing tales of gory fields of yore, with what realistic feeling one can see the wild confusion of the storm-swept field, charging cavalry, hurrying artillery, the riderless steeds madly rushing to and fro, their shrill neighing mingling with the groans, shrieks and screams of the wounded. Here there was no disorder. The men were calm, silent, cheerful. The commands of the officers, given in a quiet, subdued voice, were distinctly heard and calmly obeyed, and the regiments manoeuvred without a flaw."⁽⁴⁵⁾

Lest anyone think Mulholland merely chose to emphasize the discipline and morale of the Irish troops, the description that follows departed from nearly every other eyewitness account of the battle: "The destruction of human beings [was] done with order and system. Yet this was terrible enough; the very

absence of confusion and excitement but added to the dreadful intensity of the horror. As for the screams and shrieks, no one ever heard anything of that kind, either on the field or in the hospitals. It may be that soldiers of other nations indulge in cries and yells. The men of the War of 1861 took their punishment without a complaint or murmur."(46)

These lines belong to the world of myth, a place where soldiers are so gallant that to cry out in pain is unacceptable. No other brigade writer portrayed the battle as such, nor do other accounts celebrate the notion of death with "order and system." It is important to consider the reasons behind Mulholland's decision to distort the facts. As a participant in the battle, he must have seen the disorder and heard the screams. An obvious reason for presenting Fredericksburg this way is to further elevate the Irish soldier in the mind of the reader. Here were men so committed to their comrades, leaders, and nation that they would endure horrible wounds and die without so much as a murmur. Yet it seems Mulholland's vision of Fredericksburg reached beyond the Irish alone. After all, in the passage quoted above, he glorified the "men of the War of 1861" at the expense of soldiers "of other nations." The emphasis here is on the valor of all American participants in the war, native or immigrant, North or South. In this sense, his description of the battle fits within the postwar movement of American reconciliation marked by the battlefield reunions Mulholland attended and the monuments he helped erect in the 1880s and 1890s.

Mulholland's praise for the men on both sides of the stone wall at Fredericksburg may therefore belong to what has been termed "the John B. Gordon School" of Civil War history. The writing of Gordon and like-minded others sanitized the war and its personalities, emphasized the courage of soldiers on both sides, and obscured the role that slavery and emancipation played in the war. In this view, the war ultimately strengthened the nation by binding it together to make the "United States" a reality, not just a name.(47) For Mulholland, a reunited nation permitted all white Americans, North and South, to rejoice in the glory of Fredericksburg. "The Union troops failed--so did Leonidas of Sparta," he declared in a passage that reflects the mythological lens through which he viewed the battle, "yet what son of Hellas but shares even to this day in the glory of old Thermopylae, and what American, even to the most remote period of the future, but will share in the glories that cluster around the plain of Fredericksburg?"(48)

By situating immigrants' sacrifice and valor within the greater mythmaking of the Civil War, Mulholland seemed to want to win for them the respect of American natives. Recalling the dead at Fredericksburg, he observed: "What a cosmopolitan crowd these dead and wounded were--Americans from the Atlantic Coast and the Pacific States, from the prairies, from the great valleys of the Mississippi and the Ohio; Irishmen from the banks of the Shannon and Germans from the Rhine and the blue Danube; Frenchmen from the Seine and Italians from the classic Tiber mingled their blood and went down in death together that the cause and that the Union might live."(49) Mulholland saw no difference between the native American and the immigrant--both were men of '61, and both died for a common cause. And although the immigrants' heritage could be traced to the nations of Europe, at Fredericksburg and elsewhere they transcended the martial accomplishments of the Old World. If the postwar conciliatory movement argued that the conflict spurred the rebirth of America, what Gordon termed "a national life more robust, a national union more complete," then, according to Mulholland, it allowed foreigners to be reborn as "complete" Americans.(50)

The idea of immigrants-turned-Americans set up the most important dimension Mulholland introduced to the mythology surrounding the Irish at Fredericksburg--the role of Confederate Irish troops. Neither Conyngham nor Corby mentioned the presence of Irish Georgians under the command of Brig. Gen. Thomas R. R. Cobb, but Mulholland used their place behind the stone wall to advantage. He described the meeting of Northern and Southern Irish as a "pathetic incident":

Though high was the courage of that thin line which charged so boldly across the shot-swept plain, opposed to it were men as fearless and staunch; behind that rude stone breast-work were "bone of their bone, and flesh of their flesh"--the soldiers of Cobb's Brigade were Irish like themselves. On the morning of the battle General Meagher had bade his men to deck their caps with sprigs of evergreen, "to remind them," he said, "of the land of their birth." The symbol was recognized by their countrymen, and "Oh, God, what a pity! Here comes Meagher's fellows!" was the cry in the Confederate ranks.

Mulholland reported that the Confederate Irish did their duty despite reluctance to kill their own countrymen. After they had fired volley after volley at the men with boxwood in their caps, "the Irish Brigade had ceased to exist."(51) This part of Mulholland's account, while not wholly a fiction, suffered from embellished detail. Only a small portion of Cobb's Georgians claimed Irish descent, and his brigade was in no way an ethnic unit. The 24th Georgia, for example, may have had the strongest Irish contingency of those regiments behind the stone wall, but only a few of its companies were predominantly Irish.(52) While it is impossible to know if any of these soldiers really recognized the attacking Irish Brigade by the sprigs of boxwood in their

caps, it seems safe to say that Mulholland could not have heard a Confederate shout, "Oh, God, what a pity! Here comes Meagher's fellows!" The deafening boom of cannons, volleys of musketry, and screams of men would have made it difficult to hear commands, let alone the words of the enemy.

It may be that Mulholland drew the "Oh, God, what a pity!" quotation from John Boyle O'Reilly's poem "At Fredericksburg--Dec. 13, 1862." O'Reilly, an Irish nationalist poet and Fenian, read the work in public at least as early as October 1875.(53) He later included it in a collection he edited, *The Poetry and Song of Ireland*, published in New York in 1889. Steeped in romantic imagery, the poem depicts Irish Georgians at once saddened and proud to face Meagher's Irish troops:

What is it in these who shall now do the storming That makes every Georgian
pring to his feet? "O God! What a pity!" they cry in their cover, As rifles are
readied and bayonets made tight; "'Tis Meagher and his fellows! their caps
have green clover; Tis Greek to Greek now for the rest of the fight!"(54)

Whether or not Mulholland borrowed the quotation from O'Reilly's poem, the idea that Irish Georgians knowingly shot down Irish Northerners is crucial to his message. In the years following Appomattox, and especially during the heyday of "reconciliation,"

Americans increasingly conceived of the war as "The Brothers' War." Loyalty to one's own section or ideological position had transcended other bonds, even that of blood. In fact, part of the mystique surrounding the Civil War soldier is that although he found himself fighting his own brother (metaphorically and, at times, literally), he did not shy away from his duty. Mulholland invoked this theme in describing the clash of Irish Yankees and Confederates at Marye's Heights. In doing so, he made two points. First, it had been as much a Brothers' War for the Irish as for American natives, showing the Irish to be as American as any other participants of the war. Second, he shattered nativist thinking that Irishmen's ethnic bonds and "devotion to the old country" outweighed their loyalty to America.(55) At the stone wall at Fredericksburg, such doubts were put to rest.

Despite his innovations to the Irish story at Fredericksburg, Mulholland's account followed many of the conventions established by Conyngham and Corby. He quoted the *London Times* report of the Irish Brigade's "undaunted courage" on Marye's Heights and noted that the brigade drew nearest to the wall. He claimed, for instance, that one Irish body, "supposed to be that of an officer, was found within fifteen yards of the parapet." Moreover, he deflected attention from Irish outrage at home, merely noting that "It must have been a sad Christmas ... to those at home whose friends had fallen by Marye's Heights." Although an innovative and influential mythmaker, Mulholland worked within the confines of an established tradition. That his romantic descriptions

and sometimes questionable claims popularized--rather than damaged--that tradition demonstrated the strength and durability it had accumulated in the thirty years since Conyngham published his history.(56)

The portrait of Fredericksburg painted by Conyngham, Corby, and Mulholland occasionally benefited from outside support, both Irish and otherwise. In 1887, Second Corps historian Francis A. Walker, determined to blunt claims made by Humphreys's men that they had advanced closest to the stone wall, championed the assaults made by "the men of Kimball, Zook, Meagher, and Caldwell." He emphasized Colonel Brooke's claim that the Irish of the 69th New York, along with the 5th New Hampshire and 53d Pennsylvania, had drawn nearest to the Confederate defenses.(57) Sometimes praise came from unlikely quarters. After the war, Confederate Lt. Gen. James Longstreet reportedly named the Irish assault at Fredericksburg "the handsomest thing in the whole war." Lost Cause mythmaker LaSalle Corbell Pickett also advanced the brigade writers' cause. She included an account of the Irish at Fredericksburg in her 1913 collection of letters supposedly written by her late husband, Maj. Gen. George E. Pickett: "Your Soldier's heart almost stood still as he watched those sons of Erin fearlessly rush to their death. The brilliant assault on Marye's Heights of their Irish Brigade was beyond description. Why, my darling, we forgot they were fighting us, and cheer after cheer at their fearlessness went up all along our lines."(58)

In 1899, an Irish-born reverend named George Whitfield Pepper published his memoirs, which included the reconstruction of an interview he supposedly held with Robert E. Lee in 1865. According to Pepper, when Lee was asked to comment on Irish participation in the recent war, his thoughts turned to Fredericksburg:

Meagher on your side, though not [Irish-born Confederate Gen. Patrick] Cleburne's equal in military genius, rivaled him in bravery and in the affections of his soldiers. The gallant stand which his bold brigade made on the heights of Fredericksburg is well known. Never were men so brave. They ennobled their race by their splendid gallantry on that occasion. Though totally routed, they reaped harvests of glory! Their brilliant though hopeless assaults upon our lines excited the hearty applause of my officers and soldiers, and General Hill exclaimed, `There are those d--green flags again!'(59)

Even if Longstreet's, Pickett's, and Lee's words are not genuine, the published word gave credence to the heroism promoted by Irish Brigade writers. The Lee quotation, in particular, sparked interest. As commander of Confederate forces at Fredericksburg and the South's greatest military hero, his favorable "opinion" of the Irish assault did much to elevate the Irish Brigade's stature.

After surveying the works of Conyngham, Corby, and Mulholland, some readers might reasonably ask whether it is unfair to label Irish courage and patriotism the stuff of myth. After all, the Irish at Fredericksburg were undoubtedly loyal and courageous men, many of whom took part despite believing that the assault would end in disaster.(60) Moreover, many were passionate patriots, fighting for a Union they valued above their own lives. Consider the words of William McCarter, offered as an explanation for his decision to volunteer: "I owed my life to my whole adopted country, not the North nor the South ... but the Union, one and inseparable, its form of government, its institutions, its Stars and Stripes, its noble, generous, intelligent and brave people, ever ready to welcome and to extend the hand of friendship to the down-trodden and oppressed of every clime and people." Sgt. Peter Welsh echoed these sentiments in a letter to his wife's father, living in Ireland: "Here [in America] Irishmen and their descendents have a claim to a stake in the nation and an interest in its prosperity." He added that any Irishman who did not fight would be "[f]alse to his own and his fellow citizens interests."(61)

Brigade historians crafted postwar mythology by attributing these men's courage and patriotism to all Irishmen, in the field and at home. These mythmakers deliberately obscured signs of Irish disillusionment, particularly the sharp drop in Irish enlistment following Fredericksburg. Corby pointed out that Meagher went to New York after the battle "to recruit the brigade" but neither mentioned that the trip was "non-productive" nor admitted to similar recruiting failures in July and August of 1862. In reality, so many Irish homes had "suffered the loss of loved ones ... [that] Irish enthusiasm for service in the American army waned almost to the vanishing point." The decline in volunteers was so pronounced "that at least one state official informed Governor Morgan that a secret organization was at work to stop Irish enlistments." It seems that those Irish sharing the patriotism of McCarter and Welsh were already in the army or dead on the field.(62)

Brigade writers likewise ignored the despair and fading optimism of the Irish press. After the Fredericksburg campaign, the Irish American increasingly turned its attention away from the war and toward Irish nationalism abroad. Although never calling for an end to the war, the editors seemed to conclude that the conflict had no value for Irish America or Ireland. The Irish American's voice in the New York state campaign of 1863 "was a very quiet one," suggesting disillusionment with the political issues and debates at hand. And like other ethnic newspapers, it condemned the Federal government and independent bounty collectors for allegedly recruiting soldiers in Ireland.(63) The editors of the Boston Pilot likewise soured on the war. In the wake of Fredericksburg, they announced: "We did not cause this war, [but] vast numbers of our people have perished in it ... the Irish spirit for the war is dead! ... Our fighters are dead."(64)

Most glaringly, the histories of the Irish Brigade ignored the New York City draft riots of July 1863. The high casualties at Fredericksburg bore directly on the riots because they convinced many working class Irish that the North had singled them out for slaughter. In the weeks following the battle, the Irish American protested the treatment of Irish soldiers. Not only had Northern generals bled the Irish Brigade to the brink of extinction, the editors argued, but the War Department unjustly refused Meagher's men the opportunity to rest and recruit new soldiers to fill the dwindling ranks.(65) Considering that some Maine volunteers received permission to leave the front for this very purpose, it seemed that a sinister brand of anti-Irish prejudice was at work: "Just imagine the condition of some companies on entering the battle field[,] two men to a company commanded by an officer. Can the history of the world show anything to equal it in barbarity and downright butchery?" The newspaper argued that native generals and politicians "are doing all in their power to demoralize the remnant of a magnificent brigade. It is miserable to see this small band of heroes going up boldly for the last time for the slaughter." In March, the Irish American editors again pointed to anti-Irish prejudice when they asserted that "If the Brigade were not so markedly and distinctively Irish, they would not have been treated with the positive injustice and neglect to which they have been exposed."(66) The Irish did not confine their opinions to newspaper editorials alone. One contemporary blackface song, "The Bonny Green Flag," suggested that native Americans valued the Irish only as cannon fodder: "They say that the Irish need not apply, But when soldiers they want, in the front Pat is seen."(67)

Non-Irish observers sometimes drew similar conclusions about the wanton use of Irish troops. Writing after the war, the English war correspondent George Alfred Townsend noted that "[w]hen anything absurd, forlorn, or desperate was to be attempted, the Irish Brigade was called upon." While these words suggested that Union generals relied on the brigade to get the army through tight situations, they also hinted at the darker idea that Irish soldiers were expendable. In a letter home to Texas, Confederate soldier Joseph B. Polley guessed that Federal commanders deliberately selected the Irish Brigade for bloodshed at Fredericksburg: "To assault [Marye's Heights] was a desperate undertaking, and it would seem that the calculating, death-fearing, simon-pure Yankees shrank from it... Foreigners, though, were plentiful in the Federal army, and the loss of a few thousand more or less would break no Yankee hearts; therefore, I imagine, Meagher's Irish Brigade was selected for the sacrifice."(68)

Dissatisfied with the perceived abuse of Irish troops and angry over emancipation, many Irish were ripe for the violence that erupted with the Conscription Act of 1863. Draftees could hire a replacement or pay a commutation fee to avoid service, a possibility out of reach for the poor and ethnic populations of the North. Fearing the act as a Republican plot to kill off

the Democratic Irish and give their jobs to freed slaves, thousands of Irishmen vented rage during rioting in New York City in mid-July.(69) Destroying draft offices and Republican presses, the mobs then turned on blacks, "burning an orphanage for black children and the homes of many blacks and committing unspeakable acts of torture on their black victims."(70)

It took twenty thousand Federal troops to restore order to the city, and most of the whites killed by soldiers and policemen were Irish. (71)

While it is true that brigade accounts were intended as histories of the camp and battlefield rather than of the home front, one is justified in thinking that the riots--and the Irish mobs that participated--would bear mentioning. After all, as Joseph M. Hernon, Jr., has suggested, Fredericksburg and the riots were the two most important Irish events of the Civil War years.(72) Yet the riots are nowhere to be found in works of Conyngham, Corby, and Mulholland, precisely because they disrupted the early-war image of Irishmen swelling Federal ranks in hopes of winning the respect of America. In fact, one might think of Irish mythology in these terms--the desire to freeze in memory the Irish enthusiasm of 1861 while still reaping the glory of Irish fighting through 1865. Brigade writers wanted the best of both worlds.

By skipping over the riots and outrage at home, these writers again seemed to be the ideological allies of Gordon, who argued that "unseemly things which occurred in the great conflict between the States should be forgotten, or at least forgiven." Here Gordon clearly referred to vulgarities exchanged between North and South, but his wish to sanitize memory of the war was surely relevant to the work of Irish war historians. Irish soldiers themselves were not so willing to look beyond the riots. Writing to his wife, Welsh expressed nothing but disdain for those rioting against what he considered a just measure: "[E]very leader and instigator of those riots should be made an example of.... [N]o conscription could be fairer than the one which is about to be enforced[.] It would be impossible to frame it to satisfy every one[.] And those drafted men may never have to fight a battle[.] The successful carrying out of this draft will do more to end the war than the winning of a great victory[;] it will show the south that we have the determination and the power to prosecute the war." Works of Irish mythology, however, remembered little more than the patriotism and sacrifice of men such as Welsh (he was mortally wounded at Spotsylvania in 1864). For his and other Irish soldiers' thoughts on the home front and its troubles, one must look outside the pages of Conyngham's and his colleagues' work.(73)

The distortions of brigade historians would not matter had their efforts to shape public memory been unsuccessful. Yet this was not the case. The body of literature they created, romanticizing Irish love for the Union and Irish sacrifice on battlefields like Fredericksburg, had long-reaching effects. As late as 1966, Hernon complained that popular memory ignored the fact that Irish opinion,

both in American and Ireland, "became increasingly pro-Confederate as the war progressed." Moreover, he argued that Americans had all but forgotten Irish Confederates. "Forty-Eighter" John Mitchel and Maj. Gen. Patrick R. Cleburne, he pointed out, played prominent roles in the Confederacy but were overshadowed by Northern Irish such as Meagher.(74)

This provokes a difficult question. In the aftermath of the war, why did Irish who believed their sons died without purpose, who were disaffected with the Republican party, or who had openly supported or fought for the Confederacy, allow these histories to simplify and often misrepresent the realities of the Irish experience? The postwar movement toward reconciliation no doubt played its part, but Irish Americans also may have embraced brigade mythology because they recognized its usefulness. Not only did it cast Irish Northern soldiers as patriotic Americans, give meaning to Irish deaths once regarded as senseless, and play down Irish "disloyalty" at home, but it also allowed room for heroism by Irish Southerners.(75)

Having examined the creation of brigade mythology, its developments over time, and its possibilities for Irish-America, it is important to look to its legacy in the historical record. The shadow of brigade mythology--created by the works of Conyngham, Corby, and Mulholland--looms over treatments of Fredericksburg, old and new. Second Corps historian Walker undoubtedly romanticized all of Hancock's brigades at Fredericksburg in his 1887 work, but his rhetoric when describing the Irish assault is strikingly similar to that of Irish writers: "But hark, what cheer is that which bursts forth from the rear as they struggle on? It is the Irish Brigade, which Hancock has thrown forward to give a fresh impulse to the waning assault. Here are the three sterling New York regiments ... with them comes the Twenty-eighth Massachusetts ... and another new comrade, the One Hundred and Sixteenth Pennsylvania.... Right gallantly the Irishmen charge over the sheltering ridge, and dash across the bloody spaces strewn with the dead and dying of the brigades that have gone on before." Like brigade histories, Walker's description then turns tragic as he asks, "But how can men live where, a pistol-shot away, four ranks of veteran marksmen, themselves completely sheltered, are pouring forth an unremitting blast of fire? The killed and wounded fall like leaves in autumn, while hundreds of men, brave among the bravest, lie down beneath the storm of lead."(76)

Recent histories are particularly illuminating, in that they show how Irish mythology has become inextricably woven into the facts of the battle. Geoffrey C. Ward's narrative, based on the script for Ken Burns's documentary *The Civil War* (1990), is typical. Describing the Union assault, Ward wrote: "Among the attackers was the Irish Brigade, shouting 'Erin go bragh!' [sic] and waving their green banners. They got within twenty-five paces of the stone wall. The men of the 24th Georgia who shot them down were Irish, too." While reinscribing brigade writers' emphases on the unit's proximity to the wall and its meeting

with Irish Confederates, Ward demonstrated historians' tendency to single out the Irish Brigade from the thousands of Federal troops at Fredericksburg.(77)

These same elements appear in *Civil War journal: The Battles* (1998), a book drawn from the popular documentary series aired on the Arts and Entertainment Channel and the History Channel. Editors William C. Davis, Brian C. Pohanka, and Don Troiani took time to focus on the Irish Brigade in their otherwise vague account of the Union assault at Fredericksburg: "One of the most courageous attacks against the stone wall was made by the Irish Brigade, five regiments of men of Irish descent, many of them Irish immigrants [who had enlisted to show] devotion to the United States.... It was the last act of love many of the men would perform." Tellingly, although the narrative noted that "at least five other brigades suffered even greater casualties" than the Irish Brigade, those units are never named and are quickly forgotten. Only Humphreys's evening attack received attention approaching that awarded the Irish, and here the book emphasized only that wounded Federals tried to warn and hold back Humphreys's men. The editors paid no attention to these troops' claim to having drawn closest to the wall. In another book in the same series, *The Legacies* (1999), Davis, Pohanka, and Troiani again discussed the brigade at Fredericksburg, this time noting that "The Irish advance was so fearless even the Confederates behind the wall applauded and cheered." They also acknowledged the presence of Irish Confederates and added, "The Confederates said after the battle that the bodies closest to the stone wall all had sprigs of boxwood in their hats."(78)

More academic-minded writers, whether inspired by the brigade's bravery or by a sense of obligation, also have shown themselves receptive to the old mythology. In *Fiasco at Fredericksburg* (1961), regarded by most as the best study to date of the disastrous Northern defeat, Vorin E. Whan, Jr., observed that "[Meagher's] Irish regiments had to fight without their regimental flags because the old colors had been sent to New York to be exchanged for new flags.... Since the new flags had not yet arrived, General Meagher told his men to place sprigs of green in their caps to remind them of their homeland and the Irish heritage of bravery." Although Whan did not grant that the Irish fell closest to the wall, his description of the brigade under fire echoed Mulholland's emphasis on the clash between Northern and Southern Irish: "As the line came nearer to the Confederate position, the Irishmen in the ranks of Cobb's Brigade recognized their fellow countrymen; but though it was a distasteful task, they cut down Meagher's boys with as deadly an aim as they had used to repulse the preceding brigades. The Irish Brigade reached the same point as its predecessors and, like them, was stopped short of the stone wall."(79)

Similarly, Daniel E. Sutherland emphasized the Irish Brigade's assault in his 1998 book, *Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville: The Dare Mark Campaign*. "Perhaps

the sternest test the Confederates faced," he wrote, "came from the Irish Brigade of Gen. Thomas F. Meagher, which followed Zook's men into the rush or the wall. All but one of Meagher's regiments having arrived on the field without their distinctive emerald-green battle flags (the flags had been shredded in previous engagements and sent home to be exchanged for new ones), he instructed his sons of Erin to declare their heritage by attaching pieces of evergreen to their caps." Sutherland showed the influence of Mulholland when describing what happened once the Irish reached the point at which Zook's men had faltered: "one of Cobb's Celts recognized the significance of the green sprigs and supposedly called out, 'Oh, God, what a pity! Here comes Meagher's fellows!' A pity, indeed, for with the cause of the Confederacy binding them more surely than ties to the old sod, the Rebels cut down nearly half of their kinsmen."(80)

It would have pleased Conyngham and his colleagues that neither Whan nor Sutherland mentioned the effect Irish casualties had on the ethnic population of the North. As these accounts demonstrate, brigade writers' popularization of the assault ensured that Irish valor and sacrifice at Fredericksburg would not be forgotten. Indeed, by infusing the event with myth, they made it difficult for future generations to ignore or dismiss what was ultimately, as Carol Reardon has said of Pickett's charge, "simply an infantry assault that failed."(81)

It therefore seems strange that some historians should claim, as has Randall M. Miller, that "although roughly 145,000 Irish Catholics served in the Union army, their experience has been largely forgotten."(82) The soldiers of the Irish Brigade have not faded from memory. While it is true that Americans remember less of Irish soldiers serving in non-ethnic units, this is to be expected. It would have been virtually impossible for historians to consider Irish wartime service without focusing on Meagher's men. It was the Irish Brigade, after all, to which the Irish pinned their hopes of winning respect and acceptance from native Americans. And considering brigade writers' influence on later historians, it is no surprise that the brigade plays a more prominent role in the historical record. A look at the brigade's stature over the last two decades suggests that writers were ultimately more successful at preserving a positive memory of Irish wartime service than they had hoped. In the publishing industry, there has been a minor boom of works on the brigade, both commercial and scholarly. Beginning in 1986, Fordham University Press published its "Irish in the Civil War" series, edited by Lawrence Frederick Kohl. Fordham's releases include Conyngham's *The Irish Brigade and Its Campaigns*, Corby's *Memoirs of Chaplain Life: Three Years with the Irish Brigade in the Army of the Potomac*, Mulholland's *The Story of the 116th Regiment, Pennsylvania Volunteers in the War of the Rebellion*, and *Irish Green and Union Blue: The Civil War Letters of Peter Welsh, Color Sergeant, 28th Regiment, Massachusetts Volunteers*. All contain accounts of Fredericksburg, and the reprinting of the mythology tracts of Conyngham, Corby, and Mulholland have

helped ensure that the brigade's memory remains available to new generations of readers. Fredericksburg plays a large role in *My Life in the Irish Brigade: The Civil War Memoirs of Private William McCarter, 116th Pennsylvania* (1996), edited by Kevin E. O'Brien. As the only known memoir by a common soldier of the unit, McCarter's account stands as the most revealing publication of the 1990s concerning the Irish Brigade at Fredericksburg. His first-hand description of the assault on Marye's Heights, during which he received a severe wound, demands attention from any serious scholar of the battle. *A History of the Irish Brigade*, published one year earlier, also connected the Irish war experience to Fredericksburg. The volume, edited by Phillip T. Tucker, contains essays on various aspects of the brigade and its history. The printing of these and other works, available in both academic libraries and commercial bookstores, indicates a continuing reader interest in the Irish Brigade and its engagements.

The brigade's actions at Fredericksburg, particularly its encounter with Irish Confederates, helped inspire Kirk Mitchell's historical novel, *Fredericksburg: A Novel of the Irish at Marye's Heights* (1996). Although the novel does not perpetuate all of the mythology surrounding the Irish at Fredericksburg, Mitchell dramatized the conflicting impulses felt by Irish Confederates as they turned their guns on fellow Irish. He described the 24th Georgia's cheers for the advancing Irish Brigade: "They were applauding the advance of Meagher's brigade, now nearly to the bared posts and rails of the Strattons' fence, green flag tilting forward.... 'Yes, that's Meagher's brigade,' McMillan [the regiment's commander] announced. 'Give it to them, boys!'"(83) On the Northern side, Meagher figures as a prominent character in the novel, and Corby, Mulholland, and Private McCarter have lesser roles.

The Irish Brigade also has done well in today's vigorous Civil War industry, where war-related items--from battlefield relics to computer games--find enthusiasts eager to buy. A frequent subject of modern artwork, the brigade has been painted by well-known artists such as Don Troiani, Rick Reeves, Dale Gallon, and D. J. Neary. Several of these paintings, such as Troiani's "Clear the Way," depict the assault on Marye's Heights. Others show the brigade in camp during the Fredericksburg campaign, snow drifting past its famous green flags. All are available as prints for purchase through magazines and commercial websites. A painting of Meagher and his men graced the cover of *The 2000 Mort Kunstler Civil War Calendar*, suggesting that the glory of the Irish Brigade will live into the new millenium. Of the calendar's twelve paintings, that of the Irish Brigade was one of only two depicting Union subjects. Apparently Meagher's brigade numbers as one of the few Federal units that can compete with the romance of the Lost Cause.

Consumers also can purchase replica Irish Brigade uniforms, flags, and sculpted miniature figurines. In November 1999, toy soldier manufacturer Conte Collectibles released a set of Irish Brigade color-bearers for limited sale. This

followed on the heels of competitor William Britain's limited edition set entitled "Clear the Way," based on Troiani's painting. Frequently advertised in popular magazines, it displays soldiers of the brigade's 28th Massachusetts. One advertisement reads: "Featured here is the six-piece 'Clear the Way' set depicting the valiant charge of the Irish Brigade at the Battle of Fredericksburg on December 13, 1862.... This new range of figures are meticulously detailed down to the belt buckles, buttons, and regimental flags.... Clear the way for the new Britains!" Admirers of Meagher's soldiers can even buy Irish Brigade music. Songwriter and Civil War reenactor David Kincaid markets his album, "The Irish Volunteer," available on both cassette and compact disc. According to its advertisement, the album's songs are "performed with all the nostalgia of the Irish Brigade's fierce and homesick brave fighting men. The lyrics and melodies have been meticulously researched by David Kincaid and arranged as if he was actually there." At times, visitors to eastern Civil War sites find it hard to escape the brigade's memory. Guests of the "Battlefield" Holiday Inn at Gettysburg stay within forty yards of the Irish Brigade Shoppe on one side, where pertinent souvenirs abound, and an "authentic" Irish pub on the other. Not surprisingly, a similar pub in Fredericksburg--appropriately named "The Irish Brigade"--served townspeople and visitors alike until its recent closing.(84)

More significantly, the last few years have also seen an increased interest, largely among Irish Americans and Civil War enthusiasts, in preserving the public memory of Irish soldiers. The monuments recently erected to the Irish Brigade at both the Antietam and Fredericksburg battlefields bear witness to an enthusiasm for post-war battlefield mythology. Indeed, the Fredericksburg monument--located on the south bank of the Rappahannock River--encapsulate most of the romantic elements emphasized by brigade writers. Engraved along with a numerical listing of each regiment's dead, wounded, and missing, are the following words:

WHILE POSTED HERE, IN THE EARLY MORNING OF DEC. 13, 1862, THE MEN OF THE IRISH BRIGADE, PLACED SPRIGS OF BOXWOOD IN THEIR CAPS IN HONOR OF THEIR IRISH HERITAGE. LATER IN THE DAY, THEY TOOK PART IN THE FUTILE ASSAULTS AGAINST CONFEDERATE POSITIONS ON MARYE'S HEIGHTS. AFTER THE BATTLE, THE UNION DEAD CLOSEST TO THE CONFEDERATE POSITIONS WORE SPRIGS OF BOXWOOD IN THEIR CAPS ... TO THE SONS OF ERIN WHO PUT GOD, COUNTRY, AND DUTY BEFORE SELF. WE MUST NEVER FORGET THE SACRIFICES THEY MADE FOR OUR FREEDOM. ERIN GO BRAUGH.

Even without mentioning the role played by Cobb's Irish Georgians, these words demonstrate the extent to which postwar brigade writers influenced future generations.(85)

As Hernon has aptly noted, "Meagher's Irish Brigade, like Pickett's soldiers [was] exalted at a moment of heroic failure."(86) Yet Irish heroism in the face of

overwhelming odds only partially explains today's romantic view of the Irish Civil War soldier. More than postwar comments by Confederate commanders or the verse of Irish poets like John Boyle O'Reilly, the works of Conyngham, Corby, and Mulholland are responsible for today's prevailing image of the Irish in the Civil War. By emphasizing the patriotism and courage of the Irish Brigade at Fredericksburg and cloaking the memory of a disgruntled and possibly dangerous Irish population at home, these writers created a body of literature important to any consideration of how Americans remember the Civil War.

(1.) *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 128 vols. (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1880-1901), ser. 1, vol. 21:129 (hereafter cited as OR).

(2.) Like many Union troops, some Irish soldiers lay pinned below the stone wall throughout the cold night and the following day, exposed to the elements and Confederate fire alike. See Daniel E. Sutherland, *Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville: The Dare Mark Campaign* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 58-59.

(3.) *Irish American*, Dec. 27, 1862; Peter Welsh to Margaret Welsh, Dec. 18, 1862, *Irish Green and Union Blue: The Civil War Letters of Peter Welsh, Color Sergeant 28th Regiment Massachusetts Volunteers*, eds. Lawrence Frederick Kohl and Margaret Richard (New York: Fordham University Press, 1986), 40; quoted in Thomas E. Rice, "Desperate Courage," *Civil War Times Illustrated* 29 (Nov.-Dec. 1990): 70; *Irish American*, Jan. 31, 1863.

(4.) *Richmond Enquirer*, Dec. 19, 1862; *Charleston Daily Courier*, Dec. 23, 1862; *Daily Richmond Examiner*, Dec. 18, 1862; Sutherland, *Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville*, 55.

(5.) "The Irish Brigade," *Daily Richmond Examiner*, Dec. 19, 1862.

(6.) Meagher was tried and sentenced to death for his part in the 1848 Irish rising, but the authorities commuted his sentence to banishment to Tasmania. Escaping in 1852, he fled to New York. For the standard account of Meagher's life, see Robert G. Athearn, *Thomas Francis Meagher: An Irish Revolutionary in America* (New York: Arno Press, 1976).

(7.) D. P. Conyngham, *The Irish Brigade and Its Campaigns* (1867; rpt., New York: Fordham University Press, 1994), xix.

(8.) *Ibid.*, xviii-xxvi. As the editor of the Fordham University Press "Irish in the Civil War" series, Lawrence Frederick Kohl provides the best and most accessible biographical information available about Conyngham, Corby,

Mulholland, and other featured brigade writers. See Kohl's introductory essays in the series.

(9.) Conyngham, *The Irish Brigade and Its Campaigns*, 3, 6, 344.

(10.) *Ibid.*, 10, 9, 8.

(11.) William L. Burton, *Melting Pot Soldiers: The Union's Ethnic Regiments* (Ames: Iowa University Press, 1988), 125.

(12.) Mike Davis, *Prisoners of the American Dream: Politics and Economy in the History of the U.S. Working Class* (New York: Verso, 1986), 21

(13.) Joseph M. Herson, Jr., *Celts, Catholics, and Copperheads: Ireland Views the American Civil War* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1968), 11.

(14.) Conyngham, *The Irish Brigade and Its Campaigns*, xv.

(15.) For Irish motivations for enlisting, see Burton, *Melting Pot Soldiers*, 52-53; Randall M. Miller, "Catholic Religion, Irish Ethnicity, and the Civil War," in *Religion and the American Civil War*, eds. Randall M. Miller, Harry S. Stout, and Charles Reagan Wilson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 263.

(16.) Burton, *Melting Pot Soldiers*, 119-21.

(17.) *Ibid.*, 123.

(18.) Conyngham, *The Irish Brigade and Its Campaigns*, 5-6.

(19.) Burton, *Melting Pot Soldiers*, 152.

(20.) Irish Americans were not alone in their distaste for emancipation. For an overview, see James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1989), 558-63.

(21.) Quoted in Joseph M. Herson, Jr., "The Irish Nationalists and Southern Secession," *Civil War History* 12 (Mar. 1966): 52.

(22.) Conyngham, *The Irish Brigade and Its Campaigns*, 353.

(23.) *Ibid.*, 355.

(24.) *Ibid.*, 357.

(25.) *Ibid.*, 363.

(26.) Ibid., xxii, 346.

(27.) Ibid., 343, 352-53.

(28.) William R. Brooke to St. Clair Mulholland, Jan. 8, 1881, reproduced in William McCarter, *My Life in the Irish Brigade: The Civil War Memoirs of Private William McCarter, 116th Pennsylvania Infantry*, ed. Kevin E. O'Brien (Campbell, Cal.: Savas Publishing, 1996), 224.

(29.) For an overview of Humphreys's men's claim to having drawn closest to the stone wall, see Carol Reardon, "The Forlorn Hope," in *The Fredericksburg Campaign: Decision on the Rappahannock*, ed. Gary W. Gallagher (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), esp. 104-6.

(30.) Conyngham, *The Irish Brigade and Its Campaigns*, 350-52, 9.

(31.) William Corby, C.S.C., *Memoirs of Chaplain Life: Three Years with the Irish Brigade in the Army of the Potomac*, ed. Lawrence Frederick Kohl (New York: Fordham University Press, 1992), xi-xxv.

(32.) Ibid., 6, 132.

(33.) Ibid., 130-31.

(34.) Ibid., 131.

(35.) McCarter, *My Life in the Irish Brigade*, 85, 173.

(36.) George C. Rable, "It is Well That War Is So Terrible: The Carnage at Fredericksburg," in *The Fredericksburg Campaign*, 67.

(37.) As Meagher's adjutant, McCarter was ordered to stay behind and watch over some of the general's personal belongings. See McCarter, *My Life in the Irish Brigade*, 141-42.

(38.) Ibid., 143.

(39.) Corby, *Memoirs of Chaplain Life*, 131-32.

(40.) Ibid., 133, 135, 137.

(41.) St. Clair A. Mulholland, *The Story of the 116th Regiment, Pennsylvania Volunteers in the War of the Rebellion*, ed. Lawrence Frederick Kohl (New York: Fordham University Press, 1996), ix-xxiv.

(42.) Randall M. Miller, "Catholic Religion, Irish Ethnicity, and the Civil War," 285.

(43.) Mulholland, *The Story of the 116th Regiment, Pennsylvania Volunteers*, 13.

(44.) *Ibid.*, 44, 48.

(45.) *Ibid.*, 46.

(46.) *Ibid.*

(47.) Gary W. Gallagher, *Lee and His Generals in War and Memory* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1998), 282.

(48.) Mulholland, *The Story of the 116th Regiment, Pennsylvania Volunteers*, 61-62.

(49.) *Ibid.*, 51.

(50.) John B. Gordon, *Reminiscences of the Civil War* (New York: Scribner's, 1905), 465.

(51.) Mulholland, *The Story of the 116th Regiment, Pennsylvania Volunteers*, 56-57.

(52.) For a book-length study of Irish Confederates, see Kelly J. O'Grady, *Clear the Confederate Way!: The Irish in the Army of Northern Virginia* (Mason City, Iowa: Savas Publishing, 2000).

(53.) Liam Barry, *Selected Poems, Speeches, Dedications and Letters of John Boyle O'Reilly: 1844-1890* (Western Australia: National Gaelic Publications, 1994), 34.

(54.) *Ibid.*, 39-40.

(55.) Conyngham, *The Irish Brigade and Its Campaigns*, xiii.

(56.) Mulholland, *The Story of the 116th Regiment, Pennsylvania Volunteers*, 57-58, 72.

(57.) Francis A. Walker, *History of the Second Army Corps in the Army of the Potomac* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1887), 186-87.

(58.) Longstreet quoted in Patrick Walsh, "The Irish in South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Louisiana and Tennessee," *Journal of the American-Irish Historical Society* 3 (1900): 105; George Pickett to LaSalle Corbell Pickett, Dec. 14, 1862, *The Heart of a Soldier: As Revealed in the Intimate Letters of Genl. George E. Pickett, C.S.A.*, ed. LaSalle Corbell Pickett (New York: Seth Moyle, 1913), 66.

(59.) George Whitfield Pepper, *Under Three Flags: or, The Story of My Life as Preacher, Captain in the Army, Chaplain, Consul, with Speeches and Interviews*, by the Reverend George W. Pepper (Cincinnati: Curtis & Jennings, 1899), 333. pepper's ethnic bias and the strange circumstances of the supposed interview (Pepper claimed to have visited Lee's home, unannounced, as Sherman's army marched north through Richmond) combine to cast serious doubt on the authenticity of the Lee quotation. An examination of major sources reveals no statements by Lee on the Irish Brigade or Generals Cleburne and Meagher. Excerpts from this interview nonetheless have been included in popular and scholarly works, including biographies of Meagher and Cleburne and several treatments of the Irish Brigade at Fredericksburg. See Athearn, Thomas Francis Meagher, 121; Barry, John Boyle O'Reilly, 36; Irving A. Buck, *Cleburne and His Command* (Dayton, Ohio: Morningside Bookshop, 1992), 294; Hennon, *Celts, Catholics, and Copperheads*, 18; Craig L. Symonds, *Stonewall of the West: Patrick Cleburne and the Civil War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1997), 158.

(60.) Thomas Francis Galwey, a member of the Irish 8th Ohio and an eyewitness to the Irish Brigade's assault on Marye's Heights, swelled with pride when describing Irish duty and sacrifice at Fredericksburg. His account suggests the Irish knew they were doomed. See Galwey, *The Valiant Hours*, ed. W. S. Nye (Harrisburg, Penn.: Stackpole Books, 1961), 62.

(61.) McCarter, *My Life in the Irish Brigade*, 221; Peter Welsh to Patrick Prendergast, June 1, 1863, *Irish Green and Union Blue*, 101-2.

(62.) Corby, *Memoirs of Chaplain life*, 135; Athearn, Thomas Francis Meagher, 121; Florence E. Gibson, *The Attitudes of the New York Irish Toward State and National Affairs, 1848-1892* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1951), 144; Burton, *Melting Pot Soldiers*, 123.

(63.) Gibson, *Attitudes of the New York Irish*, 161. For Irish sentiment following Fredericksburg, see *ibid.*, 144-73; *Irish American*, Feb. 13, 1864.

(64.) Conyngham, *The Irish Brigade and Its Campaigns*, xvi.

(65.) *Irish American*, Jan. 31, 1863.

(66.) *Ibid.*, Jan. 17, 1863, Mar. 14, 1863.

(67.) Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 237.

(68.) George Alfred Townsend, *Campaigns of a Non-Combatant and his Romaunt Abroad During the War* (New York: Blelock & Co., 1866), 130; Joseph Benjamin Polley, *A Soldier's Letters to Charming Nellie* (New York: Neale Publishing Co., 1908), 89-90.

(69.) The *New York Daily News* argued that Republicans meant to draft the Democratic Irish to limit their influence over the elections. See the *Daily News*, July 13, 1863.

(70.) Miller, "Catholic Religion, Irish Ethnicity, and the Civil War," 282.

(71.) On the draft riots, see Adrian Cook, *The Armies of the Streets: The New York City Draft Riots of 1863* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1974), and Iver Bernstein, *The New York City Draft Riots: Their Significance for American Society and Politics in the Age of the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

(72.) Herson, *Celts, Catholics, and Copperheads*, 15.

(73.) Gordon, *Reminiscences of the Civil War*, 464; Peter Welsh to Margaret Welsh, July 22, 1863, *Irish Green and Union Blue*, 113-14.

(74.) Herson, "The Irish Nationalists and Southern Secession," 43. Mitchel, an ardent Irish nationalist and political exile, edited the *Richmond Daily Enquirer*. Convinced of the South's right to secede, he criticized Northern Irish for their wish to subjugate the South as Great Britain had Ireland.

(75.) Southern Irish would have found much to welcome in postwar Irish Brigade mythology. For example, O'Reilly's "At Fredericksburg--Dec. 13, 1862" glorified the Irish on both sides of the stone wall. It concluded that Confederate Irish served with honor equal to that of Meagher's troops, bravely defending "the cause of the South." Often met with nativist prejudice before and after the war, Southern Irish may have recognized pro-Irish poems, narratives, and histories as useful counterpoints to anti-foreign editorials and legislation.

(76.) Walker, *History of the Second Army Corps*, 171-72. Walker departs from Irish Brigade writers in noting that Meagher did not participate in the attack against the stone wall. Supposedly owing to a leg ulcer, Meagher could not walk the half-mile to the Confederate works, leaving his command during the early stages of the assault to procure a horse. For Meagher's official account, see OR, 21:240-46.

(77.) Geoffrey C. Ward, *The Civil War: An Illustrated History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990), 171.

(78.) William C. Davis, Brian C. Pohanka, and Don Troiani, *Civil War Journal: The Battles* (Nashville, Tenn.: Rutledge, 1998), 190; William C. Davis, Brian C. Pohanka, and Don Troiani, *Civil War Journal: The Legacies* (Nashville, Tenn.: Rutledge, 1999), 174-75.

(79.) Vorin E. Whan, Jr., *Fiasco at Fredericksburg* (State College: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1961), 87. See Gallagher, "Bibliographic Essay," *The Fredericksburg Campaign*, 229.

(80.) Sutherland, *Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville*, 54-55.

(81.) Carol Reardon, "Pickett's Charge: The Convergence of History and Myth in the Southern Past," *The Third Day at Gettysburg and Beyond*, ed. Gary W. Gallagher (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 85.

(82.) Miller, "Catholic Religion, Irish Ethnicity, and the Civil War," 261.

(83.) Kirk Mitchell, *Fredericksburg: A Novel of the Irish at Marye's Heights* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996), 302-3.

(84.) "Clear the Way," advertisement, *Civil War Times Illustrated* 38 (Aug. 1999): 65; "The Irish Volunteer: Cassette and/or CD with 12 Civil War Songs, by David Kincaid," advertisement, Irish Brigade.Com, <<http://www.irishbrigade.com/memorbilla.html>>.

(85.) Financed by Civil War reenactment units, the four thousand-dollar Fredericksburg monument was dedicated on December 15, 1996. On October 25, 1997, a crowd of about one thousand gathered for the unveiling of the brigade's monument at Antietam's Bloody Lane.

(86.) Hernon, *Celts, Catholics, and Copperheads*, 15.

CRAIG A. WARREN is a Ph.D. candidate in English at the University of Virginia. His dissertation will explore the literary development and legacy of Civil War mythologies.