

February 2015

DÚCAS

Irish American Cultural Institute Newsletter



Welcome to the latest edition of the IACI e-news. Founded in 1962, the IACI is the leading Irish American cultural organization. The IACI is a federally recognized 501(c)(3) not-for-profit national organization devoted to promoting an intelligent appreciation of Ireland and the role and contributions of the Irish in America.

Sincerely,
Carol Buck
Irish American Cultural Institute



Nine Famous Irishmen

By Raymond Aumack

This story is well known and I would be surprised if many readers have not already seen in one place or another. In fact, another author published the tale in Ducas several years ago. I had hoped to present it the way I heard it myself. However, when I started to dig into the lives of these Irish heroes, I learned things that were either overlooked or never considered by those who passed on the oral tradition.

We want heroes. We need heroes. However, when we start fabricating the lives of the people we admire, it tarnishes their image and has a negative impact on our credibility.

My mother used to sing “God Save Ireland” and “The Wearing of the Green” as lullabies when I was a child. So I grew up hearing about heroes and praying that I would become one myself. It wasn’t long before I learned that war and rebellion were dangerous sports and I turned my attention to the safer sports of America, like football, baseball, track, and basketball.

That never dimmed my admiration of the heroes of my heritage and the courage the heroes demonstrated doing what they had to do.

In one of the many Irish disorders, this one in 1848, in an attack on the Ballingarry Barracks in Tipperary, the following nine young men, still in their teens, were captured and accused of treason against her majesty, Queen Victoria, and according to the legend, were sentenced to death: John Mitchell, Morris Lyene, Pat Donahue, Thomas McGee, Charles Gavin Duffy. Thomas Meagher, Richard O’Gorman, Terrence McManus, and Michael Ireland.

Before passing sentence, the judge asked if there was anything that 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 enough to get caught.”

It turns out that Meagher never said these things. What he did say is preserved in the transcript of their trial. It was far more poignant and patriotic than the sophomoric response that is reported.

Thereupon, according to the Legend, the indignant judge sentenced them all to be hanged by the neck until dead, and drawn and quartered. Passionate protest from all over the world forced Queen Victoria to commute the sentence to transportation for life in far, wild Australia. The Queen’s Record of the rest of the transported Irishmen:

1. Thomas Francis Meagher: Governor of Montana
2. Terrance McManus: Brigadier General, U.S. Army
3. Patrick Donahue: Brigadier General U.S. Army
4. Morris Leyne: Attorney General of Australia
5. Michael Ireland: Successor to Michael Ireland
6. Richard O’Gorman: Gov. General Newfoundland
7. Thomas D’Archy McGee: Member of Parliament, Montreal, Minister of Agriculture and President of Council Dominion of Canada
8. John Mitchell: Prominent New York Politician father of John Purroy Mitchell, Mayor of New York at the outbreak of World War I.
9. Charles Duffy. Prime Minister of Australia.

Nine Famous Irishmen

By Raymond Aumack

The story starts: In 1874, while preparing for an official visit from the Prime Minister of Australia, her Minister of Protocol astounded Queen Victoria with the report that the Sir Charles Gavan Duffy, who had been elected Prime Minister of Australia, was the same Charles Gavan Duffy who had been transported 25 years before. On the Queen's demand, the records of the rest of the transported men were revealed and this is what was uncovered.

Unfortunately, the legend does not match the facts of history. Many of these legends are the result of oral history and oral history always yields to exaggeration. This does not diminish the lives of these men. It was their love for Ireland that got them in trouble. It was their native intelligence and restless Irish energy that helped them achieve the dramatic things in their lives such as the quest to right wrongs, improve the conditions of life, improve life for Irish immigrants especially in New York, and become leaders in Australia, the US, and Canada. The social status of the Irish in New York at the time was lower than the claws on the rats that freely roamed the streets. Maybe they also achieved fame in Australia and Newfoundland. We just don't know for sure.

First of all, they weren't sentenced to death nor were they sentenced to be drawn and quartered. They were sentenced to be banished.

There was never an international outcry.

It is quite likely that Queen Victoria never even knew of the episode and it is unlikely that she would have asked for the records.

It doesn't diminish the credibility of the story-tellers either. In Ireland, the average person did not especially understand the politics of the world. If someone was successful in Australia, they did not know that Australia was not even a nation at that time. Charles Gavin Duffy was not the prime minister of Australia. He was the prime minister of the Victoria Province of the continent of Australia, a very significant achievement. For the average person in the streets and fields of Ireland though, Australia was Australia.

So the achievements of our nine famous Irishmen are not that far off the mark and getting the story corrected benefits the memory of what they accomplished.

Thomas Francis Meagher was Acting Governor of the territory of Montana. He escaped from Australia and came to the United States, settling in New York City. There he worked as a journalist and became an attorney. He joined the Army in the Civil War and rose to the rank of Brigadier General. He recruited, formed, and led the Irish Brigade. After the war, he became the acting Governor of the Montana territory. He came to an unfortunate end by falling off of a river boat on the swift flowing Missouri river and drowned. The reports from time indicated that there was considerable drink taken.

Patrick Donahue was also reported to be a Brigadier General in the United States Army and this is supported by reports from his letters from the U.S. back to Tipperary. If that is true, I haven't been able to confirm it either from the resources of history, the Internet, and the Encyclopedia of Ireland. I have read the reports of others who have found nothing except that he is listed among the nine. He is not listed among the Generals of the Civil War.

Richard O'Gorman was reputed to be Governor General of Newfoundland. There appears to be no historical data to confirm this. This doesn't mean that it was not so. I just means that I couldn't find it among the most obvious sources. Morris Lyene was said to be the Attorney General of Australia. Australia wasn't a country until 1901. He could have been Attorney General of one of the provinces and I have seen articles that indicate that he may have been Attorney General of New South Wales. If this is so, that position was pretty important.

Michael Ireland is reputed to have succeeded Morris Lyene as Attorney General of Australia. Since Australia wasn't a country until 190 he probably succeeded Michael Lyene as Attorney General of New South Wales.

Terence Bellew McManus like his colleagues was a Young Irelander. He was a shipping agent and was involved in uprising in Tipperary. In 1848 he was transported to Tasmania (Van Diemen's Land). He escaped in 1851 but died in poverty in California in 1861. He was buried in Dublin with one of the largest funerals that Ireland had seen up to that time.

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Nine Famous Irishmen (*continued*)

John Mitchell became a visible New York politician. He lobbied for the causes of the South and supported slavery in New York which was a free state. He could not have been very popular there. His grandson, John Purroy Mitchell, became Mayor of New York at the outbreak of WW I. In many of the documents John Purroy Mitchell is listed as his son. John Purroy Mitchell was regarded as one of the better mayors of New York. However, he lost his next election to the Tammany crowd. After his capture and trial John, the elder, was transported with a 14 year sentence, first to Bermuda and then to Tasmania escaping to New York in 1857. It was from New York that he returned to Ireland in 1874 and was twice elected MP of Tipperary, though the British refused to seat him because he was a felon.

Thomas D'Arcy McGee never stood for trial. He escaped to America dressed as a priest and became a prominent journalist for the Boston Pilot, a Catholic newspaper. He continued writing poetry and history. He had the curse or the blessing of alienating some very powerful people including New York's Archbishop Hughes. He moved to Canada where he became active in Ontario politics and served as a member of the Canadian Parliament, Minister of Agriculture, and as President of the Dominion Council. He became one of the fathers who drafted the Federation of Canadian Provinces. His denunciations of separatism were unpopular and resulted in his assassination in Ottawa in 1868 in the doorway of his home. He was reported to have become Prime Minister of Canada. That is an exaggeration. However, it does not diminish his achievement, the contribution he made to Canada, or his importance as a political leader. His fame in Canada would be equivalent to that of the framers of the American Constitution or the Articles of Confederation.

Charles Gavan Duffy was elected Prime Minister of the Victoria Province and it was himself who was to be presented to Queen Victoria. He was a journalist and edited the Belfast Vindicator. He voluntarily emigrated to Australia where he became Prime Minister of Victoria and later speaker of its parliament. These are positions of genuine authority and the fact that he was elected to them indicates the power of his presence there. He later returned to Ireland and wrote the History of Young Ireland. Duffy got away with the crime of terrorism. He was indicted several times but no jury ever convicted him. He was however, very involved in the insurrection in County Tipperary with the other men on this list and was very likely their leader. He was not among those arrested.

This is one story that is not a national embarrassment. The story is told from an oral tradition and all the embellishments are appropriate. It is obvious that there was no real intention to deceive the listeners. Stories are usually better than real life. In this case the truth does not diminish the achievements of most of these men. And for the most part, they stand up well to the scrutiny of history. The mythologized version is often far more exciting than the truth. In this case, the demythologized version holds up well.

We celebrate St. Patrick as the heirs of his heritage. Surely these nine Irishmen achieved because they were as daring as himself. May we all be faith-filled, courageous, and trust the lord to lead us to our destiny.

We honor St. Patrick as the patron of the country and the apostle of Irish Catholicism. Catholicism has had a bad time in Ireland in the last two decades not because of the British or anyone else. We have had some strange and amadon-like internal behaviors that have interrupted the practice of faith on the part of many to whom we have given our trust. It is a tribute to St. Patrick that our faith is resilient and the Church and the practice of faith are becoming renewed. May this renewal continue into eternity! We bend our knees in humble prayer and then raise our pints in joyful salute.

Happy St. Patrick's Day.....Ray