



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on March 17, 2009

Musings on St. Patrick's Day

We all know that the great wave of Irish migration started with the famine of the 1840s that, through a combination of death and emigration, reduced the population of Ireland by half in but a few years. But did you know that nine of the signers of our Declaration of Independence in 1776 were of Irish ancestry and four of them were born in Ireland? As schoolchildren we learned of the heroic assistance the colonial rebels in our War for Independence received from Lafayette and Pulaski, neither of whom was likely to be mistaken for a gentleman from County Cork. But did you know that 20 generals in our Revolutionary Army were of Irish extraction? As President Ronald Reagan, the great McGipper noted in a speech he gave in Galway, Ireland, years ago, "On Washington's personal staff were Generals Moylan and Fitzgerald. And on the high seas, Commodore John Barry, considered by many the father of the United States Navy, was born in County Wexford." The Irish were also well represented in the ranks of enlisted men, as the flame of liberty consumed a portion of the vaunted British empire.



"And I imagine the British weren't surprised to see just who was fanning the flames," Reagan said with apparent satisfaction. "Sir Henry Clinton wrote home to London that, 'the emigrants from Ireland are our most serious opponents.'"

And indeed, why wouldn't they be after more than a century of British oppression on the Emerald Isle, where a popular saying had it that "Cromwell read his Bible while he quartered [slaughtered] infants at their mothers' breasts." Even allowing for some exaggeration (Was Cromwell really reading his Bible?) on the part of the Irish, it is clear that Cromwell was not a very nice fellow.

Queen Victoria was a bit kinder, though her generosity was kept in check when it came to the poor, starving Irish. Another Irish-American who would become president, Sen. John F. Kennedy, was quite magnanimous in recalling the benevolence of that fair queen in a 1957 speech he delivered at Irish Institute in New York. "For example," Kennedy mentioned. "on February 19, 1847, it was announced in the House of Commons that 15,000 persons were dying of starvation in Ireland every day; and Queen Victoria was so moved by this pitiful news that to the Society for Irish Relief, she contributed five pounds.



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Perhaps we should not be too quick to condemn the good queen, however — for in those days the English pound was no doubt worth more than it is today.” Kennedy went on to speak of some of the heroes of Irish history, including the legendary Owen Roe O’Neill, who did a splendid job killing Brits by the bushel, leaving 3,300 dead (compared to 70 vanquished Irish rebels) in the battle at Benburb in 1646. But the Irish fell into fighting among themselves, as they so often have done (“The Irish,” said Samuel Johnson, “are a fair people — they never speak well of one another”), and O’Neill took ill and died, though many believe the cause of death was a poison nail some treacherous agent of the heathen crown slipped into the brave man’s shoe.

“Did they dare, did they dare slay Owen Roe O’Neill?” asked the Irish poet Thomas Osborne Davis in the 19th century.

“Yes, they slew with poison him they feared to meet with steel.”

“May God wither up their hearts! May their blood cease to flow!

May they walk in living death who poisoned Owen Roe.”

The fact that those lines were written nearly two centuries after the event should not mislead you to believe that the Irish are a people who hold grudges. Rather, their grudges hold the Irish, as is true of many peoples. There is, however, a disease known in some circles as “Irish Alzheimer’s,” which is a forgetting of everything but one’s grudges. There seems to be a lot of it going around.

But it has not been for their grudges, nor even for their own freedom only, that the Irish have fought. As Kennedy noted in that 1957 speech:

Throughout the history of that tiny island, its exiles and emigrants have fought notably, with sword and pen, for freedom in other parts of the globe. Particularly noted were the “Wild Geese” — the officers and soldiers forced to flee their native Ireland after the Battle of the Boyne. Fighting for the French, they broke the ranks of the English at Fontenoy. Fighting for the Spanish, they turned the tide of battle against the Germans at Melazzo. And fighting for the American Union Army, they bore the brunt of the slaughter at Fredericksburg.

Three years later, as a candidate for president in the 1960 election, Kennedy spoke in Texas to a gathering of the Greater Houston Ministerial Association about concerns many Protestants had over the prospect of having a Catholic in the White House. Fresh from a visit to the Alamo, the senator mentioned a few of the Irish and other ethnic names of the men who fought and died there.

“For side by side with Bowie and Crockett died Fuentes and McCafferty and Bailey and Bedillio and Carey — but no one knows whether they were Catholic or not. For there was no religious test there.”

Americans of Irish heritage have fought side by side with their countrymen of varied nationalities throughout our history, including both World Wars, Korea, and Vietnam. No doubt some of those now serving in Iraq in Afghanistan will one day tell in story or song tales of wars entered in haste and repented at leisure. As GK Chesterton wrote:

For the great Gaels of Ireland
Are the race that God made mad.
For all their wars are merry
And all their songs are sad.



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