

Civil War Book Review

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The Exile

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Review

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Wheeler, Richard S. *The Exile*. Tom Doherty Associates, \$24.95 ISBN 312878478

Irish rebel:

The life and times of Thomas Francis Meagher

Richard S. Wheeler, only one year after his receipt of the Owen Wister Award for life time achievement in the field of Western Literature and author of 50 western novels, writes this novel about the life of Irish Rebel Thomas Francis Meagher. This fictional autobiography recounts Meagher's short experience as a wealthy Irish rebel, his incarceration, escape, arrival in America, and his early years in Tammany controlled New York City. Also portrayed are Meagher's recruiting efforts and field experience during the Civil War as Brigadier General of the Irish Brigade.

The novel, although based on historical research, widely misses the mark in its descriptions of Civil War battlefield conditions. The author's depiction of the Irish Brigade and Meagher at Manassas, Antietam, Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville show surface understanding of the basic tactics but no understanding of the conditions on the Civil War battlefields or of the men who fought there. According to Wheeler, Meagher has been falsely vilified as an alcoholic who led his men into battle deeply under the influence. Though a work of historical fiction, either the author intentionally disproves his own point or he needed a great deal more research before attempting this book.

Following the war, the author is on much more familiar ground addressing the conditions Meagher encountered during his tenure as Secretary to the Territorial Governor of Montana. The description of a frontier mining town, frontier politics, and vigilante justice are the mainstay of Wheeler's earlier western writings. He attributes Meagher's sudden death in a mysterious drunken accident onboard a steam boat as an example of vigilante justice.

If Thomas Meagher deserves greater credit for his contributions to the Civil War, or a more accessible and balanced account of his career and achievements, these goals will need to be addressed by another author. From an historical point of view, **The Exile** misses a realistic tone for either the Civil War or the Montana mining experience. As a work of historical fiction, the Civil War scenes are unremarkable and flat. Surprisingly the considering his reputation, the western characters and scenes also fall short of expectations.

The main character, Thomas Meagher, remains disconnected and aloof throughout the book, possibly an intentional presentation of a man who considered his time away from Ireland as a forced exile. The author does a credible job of portraying the flaws one might expect in an ambitious man suffering from few talents and hampered by the consistent use of alcohol. The character of Thomas Meagher repeatedly laments that his peers do not understand him or the Irish. One must add that neither does Wheeler. Readers interested in Meagher would be better off reading Robert G. Athearn, *Thomas Francis Meagher: an Irish Revolutionary in America*, (University of Colorado Press).

Nancy L. Zens, Ph.D., Associate Professor of History, teaches both Civil War and American Frontier history. Official reviewer for Longman Publishers, for the new Michl Fellman, Lesley Gordon, Daniel Sutherland textbook This Terrible War: The Civil War and Its Aftermath, 2003.