

John Dooley's Civil War: An Irish American's Journey in the First Virginia Infantry Regiment.

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Review

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Curran, Robert Emmett (ed.) *John Dooley's Civil War: An Irish American's Journey in the First Virginia Infantry Regiment..* University of Tennessee Press, \$59.00 ISBN 978-1-57233-822-7

Re-examining Irish America through John Dooley

Georgetown Emeritus Professor, R. Emmet Curran, has performed a masterful editing job in pulling together the various writings of Confederate Virginian John Dooley into a lucid narrative. Dooley, the son of an Irish immigrant milliner in Richmond, was studying at Georgetown University when Virginia seceded, but he only joined the Confederate army in 1862. He had been considered too sickly and slight to serve in 1861 and stayed in Richmond, but the threat to his native city posed by General George McClellan's forces on the Peninsula in the summer of that year brought him into the militia. Having coped with local service he decided to join his many friends in the 1st Virginia Infantry Regiment. Eventually elected to officer status in Company C, the Irish American Montgomery Guards, once commanded by his father, Dooley saw action in the Army of Northern Virginia from the battle of Second Manassas to Gettysburg. Participating in "Pickett's Charge" with his regiment, Dooley received a serious wound and was captured. He spent most of the rest of the war a prisoner on Johnson's Island, Ohio.

Dooley has left interesting accounts of his soldierly life and a much shorter version of his diary had been published by another Georgetown University academic in 1945 (Joseph T. Durkin, ed., *John Dooley, Confederate Soldier: His War Journal*, Georgetown University Press). Curran, however, discovered numerous versions and other writings in the Georgetown archives. John Dooley, it seems, revised his journal on a number of occasions and through Curran's fine detective work we can see the clash of reality between the war itself and the struggle to interpret it after it had ended. In the description of the 1862 Maryland campaign, for example, (given a full chapter in this edition) Curran found that

while Dooley's "War Diary" ran to only ten pages in manuscript on the subject, another document entitled "The Maryland Campaign" was fifty pages long. As a result one can observe Dooley adding more information to the work he completed during the campaign. Many of these additions enhance Dooley's original record. His description of an artillery attack in his original diary, for example, expanded to analyze what he felt rather than just what he saw and did. "*I tell you: I was frightened! For these balls (round shot), not content with making the ordinary scare, bounding over and above and around and among us, go crashing into the crags on our left splintering into a thousand pieces*" was how he remembered the difference between an ordinary enemy assault and one involving cannon (40).

Political feelings could be added too, often reflecting his opinions of post-war reconstruction than what he actually thought when he was a soldier. In his description of the battle of Fredericksburg, for example, in a later reminiscence he adds a diatribe against the "brave but doomed foreigners," in the Union army, particularly General Thomas Francis Meagher's Irish Brigade (107). Sympathetic to their plight from his belief that they were, in large part, forced to sign up for economic reasons, he nonetheless blames them for the ultimate Confederate defeat. Dooley thus bought into the one of the main "Lost Cause" arguments that the South only lost because it was outnumbered by large northern armies filled up with immigrants. Here Dooley reflected just how Virginian he was.

Yet, he remained an Irish American and a devout Catholic. His writings are filled with Catholic apologetics and provide good insight into the social activities of a bourgeois Irish-American family in the Old South. He and his kin moved in close-knit Catholic circles and his connections to clergy, laity, and fellow Georgetown students, stood him in good stead while serving as a soldier throughout the South and as a prisoner in the North. Indeed, the most interesting aspects of this book are his descriptions of prison life as well as his exchange toward the end of the war. In the former he provides good insight into the life of a Confederate officer in a Union prison. Johnson's Island was not the worst place to be incarcerated. Indeed, it may have been the best in the northern states, but food shortages and the harsh winters took their toll. Nevertheless, the prisoners found time to read, take language classes, play sports, and perform amateur dramatics, akin to scenes we may be familiar with from World War II POW camps. His exchange and release in March 1865 meant the war was almost over for him at that stage. Yet, after the fall of Richmond and Lee's surrender at

Appomattox in April, Dooley managed to escape capture. He therefore was able to go on an odyssey, which Curran entitles appropriately, "In search of the CSA," to reconnect with the remaining Confederate government and military forces in the Carolinas. As a result, one gets a fascinating view of the desperate hope still remaining that the new nation could survive, along with the reality of the "confusion and panic," as Dooley described it, of the crumbling Confederate state.

Dooley ultimately accepted the Confederacy's doom in early May and went back to an occupied Richmond. He eventually took the oath of allegiance and, while becoming a critic of reconstruction did not, like his brother James, take an active part in politics. The war, and particularly his imprisonment where he had plenty of time to read, imbued him with a sense of clerical vocation. He returned to Georgetown University, but this time as a seminarian. He died in 1873 from tuberculosis, probably picked up during the war, before he could become a full member of the Society of Jesus. His writings remain, however, and thanks to this new edition of them, those interested in Irish America, prisoner of war life, and the collapse of the Confederacy will find much of use here. Curran's editing is a role model for future efforts to pull together disparate writings from different time periods into a coherent whole.

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