

Patrick Henry Jones: Irish American, Civil War General, and Gilded Age Politician

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Review

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Dunkelman, Mark H. *Patrick Henry Jones: Irish American, Civil War General, and Gilded Age Politician*. Louisiana State University Press, \$45.00 ISBN 9780807159668

Recovering a Lost Irish American Life

Despite leaving no personal papers, destroyed it seems in a fire after his death, General Patrick Henry Jones has finally got the recognition he deserves in a full-length biography. Mark Dunkelman has done an admirable research effort in trying to piece together the varied life of this very interesting Irish American through public records and bits and pieces from of the papers of Jones's contemporaries. Jones had been born in County Westmeath, Ireland, in 1830, and moved to America with his parents at the age of ten. Breaking the normal pattern for the Irish of living in a large city, the Jones family settled instead in Catteraugus County in western New York. Patrick's family eventually moved to an Irish Catholic settlement in Nebraska but he stayed behind in New York, following a fairly common path for ambitious Irish Catholics in America, to work for a local newspaper. He made some political connections through this effort and was eventually taken under the wing of a local lawyer to study the law.

By 1860 he was able to set his own legal office, but it was the outbreak of the Civil War which made Jones famous. His "Irishness" had helped get him his first break in the paper business, working for an Irish American proprietor, but he had not exploited it as much in his burgeoning legal career. However, it again became useful when he joined the "Irish Rifles" 37th New York Infantry. Elected Captain he was quickly promoted to Major and was popular with the largely New York City Irish soldiers but also with the native-born companies from upstate. Jones, indeed throughout his life, seemed to have a canny ability to appease divided factions. His skill as an organizer and as soldier in the 37th, where he first saw action in the Peninsula in 1862, eventually led to his transfer

to the command of a newly-formed regiment, the 154th New York infantry. Again, he had to display diplomatic skills as the largely Anglo regiment was part of the "German" 11th Corps in the Army of the Potomac. Jones and the 154th emerged, for example, with their reputation intact after the debacle at the Battle of Chancellorsville in 1863, where the Corps, in many people's eyes, were to blame for the massive Federal defeat. Wounded, captured and later paroled, he and his unit were transferred to the western theatre in late 1863. Performing well in the Atlanta campaign, enhanced in particular by the reporting of the Irish-born *New York Herald* correspondent, David Powers Conyngham, Jones by the time of the March to the Sea was an acting Brigadier General (confirmed in 1865). Jones had ultimately reached the heights of his far more famous compatriot, Thomas Francis Meagher of the Irish Brigade.

Like Meagher, Jones parlayed his military record into political positions back in New York City. A strong Republican now, he received the backing of the Reuben Fenton faction in the state, Horace Greely of the *New York Tribune*, and of the Grant administration to gain various positions, most significantly Postmaster of New York City in 1869. Dunkelman covers Jones's military career well but it is the Irish immigrant's life through Reconstruction and the Gilded Age which are the most interesting parts of this biography. Just like his time in the army, Jones had the skill to sail between the various political factions. He, for example, managed to maintain a relationship with Horace Greely and President Grant despite Greely's running against Grant in the 1872 presidential election. He also did not benefit personally from the corruption so rampant in public office during the period. Dunkelman makes a strong case that Jones was indeed an honourable man among many thieves.

His failure to exploit the patronage system to the fullest, however, ended his political career. His friendliness toward all factions meant that he had no real solid base within the political system. He did not have the deep support necessary to overcome two scandals, one around an underling's embezzlement of a large amount of money from the Post Office and the other one from his dealings with the bizarre "kidnapper" of the body of the late Scots-Irish businessman A. T. Stewart. The grave robbers demanded, and perhaps received, \$20,000 to return the remains to Stewart's widow (Jones had been the first person contacted by the grave robbers with their ransom demand). The former destroyed him economically as he was responsible for a large portion of the

losses, and the latter politically because opponents accused him of being in on the plot to steal Stewart's body. He eventually had to rely on his military pension, for which he had to petition to increase to \$20 a month, and so continued legal work for survival. For the rest of his life he moved into smaller and smaller accommodations until his death on Staten Island in 1900.

The lack of personal papers is frustrating here as we cannot really get inside Jones's head to understand the decisions and choices he made throughout his American life. Why, for example, did he choose the path of moderation and honesty when other more lucrative options were available to him? Neither can we understand what explicit influence Jones's Irish identity had on his career. He certainly embraced it publically at various Irish ethnic events and commemorations, though we cannot know whether these displays were personal as well as political. Nonetheless, Dunkelman has done a good job in finally giving Jones his due, countering "his lapse into obscurity" (p.2) both in Ireland and the United States, and he is to be commended for that. Dunkelman is somewhat puzzled by this obscurity considering Jones's military and political record. Again, we must speculate. Perhaps it was because he became a prominent Republican when most Irish Americans remained Democrats, though this political choice did no harm to the memory of Thomas Francis Meagher. More likely it was that in an era of high partisanship his rejection of that (he had been a Democrat and later returned to that after a dalliance with the Greenback-Labor party), meant that he did not have any strong partisans to remember and commemorate him.

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