

Shades Of Green: Irish Regiments, American Soldiers, And Local Communities In The Civil War Era

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Review

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Keating, Ryan W. *Shades of Green: Irish Regiments, American Soldiers, and Local Communities in the Civil War Era.* Fordham University Press, \$39.93
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Irish Unionism

Author Ryan Keating, Assistant Professor of History at California State University, San Bernardino has made a significant contribution to the study of Irish soldiers in the Civil War. *Shades of Green* does not look at units like the 69th New York or the Irish Brigades of Boston or Philadelphia. Instead it focuses on one unit from Connecticut--the Ninth Connecticut, and two from America's Midwest--the 23rd Illinois and the 17th Wisconsin. These units were not made up of newly immigrated Irish people, but of families that had been in America long enough to consider themselves "assimilated. " Although these three units were self-proclaimed Irish units and were primarily made up of immigrants, they were not totally Irish. Keating stresses that, "it is vital to understand the ethnic composition of these regiments in order to see the similarities and differences among the soldiers' experiences. "

Mainly Democrats, Irish soldiers were motivated to join the Union cause for many reasons including patriotism, and their strong commitment to inclusion while helping subvert the disturbing nativist trend endemic in America. The local communities of Irish in the Midwest had much in common with those on the East Coast. However, these units were not members of the often-studied New York Irish Brigade or members of the Army of the Potomac. Again and again Keating stresses the diversity of the Irish/American experience as he examines the soldiers, their families, and the places from which they came, especially the smaller cities throughout Illinois and Wisconsin. The liberty denied these Irish men and women in their native land showed signs of becoming a reality in their adopted country, America. Fighting for the continuation of this momentum was a powerful incentive for Union support, and volunteers to these units saw the

commitment of the Irish worth emulating. The efforts of James Mulligan in Chicago, Thomas Cahill of New Haven, and a variety of working-class, property-owning Irish Unionists in Wisconsin created units with a primarily Irish identity, and they were eager to prove that they would fight as bravely and with as much vigor as any Eastern unit such as the 69th New York.

By 1863, the war had gone on for two years with no predetermined end in sight. The New York Draft Riots, in July 1863, have been seen by many as the turning point in Irish support of the war, claiming that interest waned after such a violent disturbance. Author Keating examines this issue specifically, explaining and showing with personal and numerical information that, publically at least, the men from Illinois, Connecticut, and Wisconsin did not support a violent response to federal policy. The people on the home front of these units wrote to their soldiers again and again, stressing their support of the Union effort. Collectively the Draft Riots were seen as more of a knee-jerk reaction of "a certain class" of New York City Irish to what might be perceived as an infringement of "rights" that were new to them in the first place. "As New York burned, the men of the Ninth Connecticut, 23rd Illinois, and 17th Wisconsin continued to bleed . . ." The Emancipation Proclamation and the insidious taint of Copperheadism were debated within the ranks, but again, it was the support of the home front that helped the Irish Democrat soldiers stay focused on winning the war. Workplace competition was a real concern, but one that would have to wait until the problem at hand had been dealt with. And, when the war finally ended, the soldiers from these units came home again, took care of those who needed help, and forged ahead in pursuit of the economic opportunities and social advancement for which they had fought.

The Irish are one of the most written-about ethnic groups in the Civil War. The myths and memories of those who marched under a banner of green as well as the stars and stripes are endlessly interesting. As I read this excellent book, I thought about the time in our history when Ireland was considered to be a "s___hole," and her men and women were not welcomed to American shores. Ryan Keating's rich contribution to this genre is valuable because of its focus on Irish units in the western theater of the war, and his examination of the home front solidarity of a more established working class culture than that of new immigrant. He has given us another valuable piece of the American puzzle.

Meg Groeling received her MA in Military History, with a Civil War emphasis, in 2016, from American Public University. Savas Beatie published her

first book, The Aftermath of Battle: The Burial of the Civil War Dead, in the fall of 2015, and she has written First Fallen: the Life of Colonel Elmer Ellsworth, which Southern Illinois Press has contracted for publication sometime within the next two years. She is a regular contributor to the blog Emerging Civil War.