

Cwbr Author Interview: Becoming American Under Fire: Irish Americans, African Americans, And The Politics Of Citizenship During The Civil War

Christian G. Samito

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Samito, Christian G. (2010) "Cwbr Author Interview: Becoming American Under Fire: Irish Americans, African Americans, And The Politics Of Citizenship During The Civil War," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 12 : Iss. 2 .

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol12/iss2/24>

Interview

CWBR AUTHOR INTERVIEW BECOMING AMERICAN UNDER FIRE: IRISH AMERICANS, AFRICAN AMERICANS, AND THE POLITICS OF CITIZENSHIP DURING THE CIVIL WAR

Samito, Christian G.

Spring 2010

Interview with Christian G. Samito, who teaches at Boston College

Interviewed by Nathan Buman

CWBR: I'm here today with Professor Christian G. Samito, author of *Becoming American Under Fire: Irish Americans, African Americans, and the Politics of Citizenship during the Civil War Era*. Professor Samito, thank you for joining me.

Christian G. Samito (CS): My pleasure.

CWBR: How did you decide to focus this study on African Americans and Irish Americans?

CS: Well I think that they are two interesting groups because in the 1850s they really are at the heart of the debate regarding national citizenship and who are the American people. African Americans are excluded completely from national citizenship by the Dred Scott decision. And with Irish Americans, Irish immigrants are able to naturalize but there's some real question as to what that means in the law because national citizenship is so vaguely defined in the 1850s. And then the other issue is nativism; there's a lot of people who are native-born Americans who question whether Irish immigrants can fully integrate and become a part of the American people. So the Irish Americans and the African Americans are two separate populations but I think they are at the heart of this debate in the 1850s as to who comprises the American people and things like that. They both have interesting wartime experiences with some similarities, not

all that many, but there is still some interesting issues. For instance, two groups of people now realizing an American allegiance, they're strengthening an American allegiance, and then both groups are at the heart of the redefinition of citizenship that takes place after the Civil War. And they're not necessarily working in conjunction, but their activism together helps to redefine national citizenship: African Americans in terms of some issues, Irish Americans in terms of other issues. When you look at the aggregate it's a new definition of American citizenship that comes out of the early years of Reconstruction and African Americans and Irish Americans are right at the heart of that and it makes a lot of sense to look at them together during this time period.

CWBR: With that in mind, would you consider the American Civil War as a watershed for citizenship and, as some scholars have suggested, the second American Revolution?

CS: I definitely think it's a watershed for the history of American citizenship. I mean the bottom line is in the 1850s, and even preceding that all through the pre-Civil War period, national citizenship was very vaguely defined and the fact of the matter is that most rights and privileges that we today associate with national citizenship were governed by the state. And their decisions were based on a lot of different issues such as race and whether one was a native-born citizen or a naturalized citizen or things like that. From the Civil War moment comes a completely different concept of national citizenship. It's more important, rights start to be associated with it, there really becomes no distinction between being a naturalized citizen and a native-born citizen, save the constitutional one that you have to have been born in the United States to run for President and therefore Vice President. As far as the Civil War being a second American Revolution, I think that's a little bit more complicated of an issue. I certainly think that the Civil War is critically important in American history. It affects just about every facet of American life and government in some way and the American people really make critical choices during this time period that help create the United States that we know today. I think, in some respect, the choices go back and affirm the principle of the first American Revolution and bring to fruition some of the ideals of the founders that still took some time to come to fruition. But yeah I do think that was a huge break in some respect certainly in citizenship. The developments in citizenship were a revolutionary moment so yeah it's a critically important watershed event in American history.

CWBR: You mention the Irish American apathy to the plight of the African American on a personal level. What were Irish Americans saying about slavery in the 1850s?

CS: Well frankly, some Irish American leaders were apologists for slavery. When you look at some of their writings especially Mitchell and people like that, some were apologists for slavery. Other Irish American leaders turned a blind eye to it and I think it's a complicated nuanced history. A lot of Irish Americans in northern cities were on the very low rungs of the socioeconomic ladder and the idea of emancipating slaves who might then come north and compete for jobs was a scary prospect for them. And so you had a lot of animosity between much of the Irish American community and much of the African American community in the urban North in a sense of competition both for jobs and also jostling on the low rungs of the social ladder. And some of the ethnic leaders were making apologies for slavery so there certainly wasn't a large abolitionist component among Irish Americans. Interestingly though, abolition was somewhat popular in Ireland and you can look at Irish leaders like O'Connell who did urge abolition of slavery and urged for greater human rights, including for blacks held in bondage.

CWBR: Given the tradition of symbolic Irish nationalist leaders like, in the twentieth century, Patrick Henry Pearse and Michael Collins in Irish history, how important were military leaders like Thomas Meagher and Peter Welsh to the fight for and attainment of citizenship?

CS: I think they were very important. When you look at Thomas Meagher and you look at figures such as Corcoran they really place their Civil War service and the Civil War service of Irish Americans at the heart of this new call that they belong in the American people. And one of the elements of nativism was this idea that Irish immigrants would not be able to embrace the ideals of the American republic. And early on, as soon as the war starts and Irish Americans start enlisting, you see speeches from Thomas Francis Meagher, a book published by Corcoran, letters home from people like Guiney (Patrick Robert Guiney) talking about the idea that this military service on the part of Irish Americans was vanquishing nativism and that proving that Irish Americans can still respect and embrace their ethnic identity but also be good American citizens and embrace the values of the republic. And, in fact, that Irish Americans wanted to get those values in place in Ireland as well basically, not that we're as Irish Americans rejecting the values of American republicanism, but as Irish Americans we want to see those values in place in Ireland as well. Now it's

interesting that you bring up Peter Welsh because he wasn't an ethnic leader; he was a carpenter living in New York who enlisted in a Massachusetts regiment. What's fascinating with him is that you see in some letters home, and letters to his father-in-law where he is justifying his decision to enlist, he's making some of the same arguments that the ethnic leaders are and he really seems to have embraced this idea that he's serving, not only to help Ireland, and he's serving, not only because the Union is a refuge for Irish immigrants, but also because the Union has to survive for republicanism worldwide to survive including hope for Ireland. So it's a very nuanced situation where Irish Americans are placing their service, saying hey by defending the Union we're also helping Ireland but we're also affirming our citizenship status here in the United States and we're also vanquishing nativism by showing that, yes we may be Irish and we may be Catholic, but we can also be good American citizens and defenders of American values and American constitutionalism. The military service really does lie at the heart of the Irish American argument that helps diminish nativism in the years following the Civil War.

CWBR: Turning attention to the African American experience, Richard Slotkin has recently written about the racial violence that resulted from the enlistment of African American soldiers. After this enlistment, what role did race play in the war, especially at places like Fort Pillow and the battle of the Crater at Petersburg and how did African American soldiers change the war psychologically and ideologically?

CS: Well I think the African American experience really involves fighting on two fronts. One is the military battlefield and then the other is the battle for equal rights and again, as soon as they're enlisting, African Americans are making the call for equal rights. As far as combat performance there are moments showing that African Americans are equal in manhood and in combat abilities. We see that it is probably most popularly depicted in the assault of fort Wagner in the movie *Glory*, in battles like Olustee in Florida and places like that so it really contradicts this idea that African Americans are children or are somehow inferior. Against them, however, you see a lot of prejudice you see some prejudice in the American, in the Union army, you see some atrocities committed, such as your reference at Fort Pillow; you also have issues though where blacks contest unequal treatment. The first civil rights victory won by black leadership and black protests is the unequal pay controversy which involves African American soldiers being paid less than their white counterparts and many blacks refused to accept any pay if it's going to be unequal to that of

whites. Massachusetts, for its regiments, the Massachusetts state house the legislature in Boston decides to appropriate money from the state to equalize pay and members of the 54th and 55th Massachusetts say: no we're not going to accept state pay because that's acknowledging a distinction, and so blacks lead a protest; sometimes it turns violent and involves some mutinies, a lot of discontent among the African American core, and it reaches the ears of Congress and eventually Congress comes around to equalize pay for African American soldiers. And in other instances African American soldiers claim equality and say: we are no longer slaves, we are now freemen; we are fighting in the Union. And that certainly percolates in the Reconstruction experience where now you have tens of thousands of black veterans who have experienced military service who have helped fight, not just for the Union, but also for the death of slavery, certainly a very powerful position, and it really leads into the call for equal rights and really defines citizenship. And African Americans say: we don't just want freedom in name only, we want a freedom that actually means something, an enduring freedom with rights and the ability to participate in the economic life of the nation and the right to vote in elections and participate in the decision-making process of the republic.

CWBR: Do you think then that we can find origins of the civil rights movement in the Civil War? You alluded to the unequal pay protest. Would you suggest that some of those challenges and moments where they stood up for themselves played a role in sort of the early foundations of the civil rights movement following the war?

CS: Definitely, I think it operates on two levels, one is the theoretical level. A lot of the arguments of the second civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s mirror the arguments that were made in the 1860s and 1870s so I think on a theoretical level certainly. I think in terms of legal change a lot of the second civil rights movement was trying to get practical enjoyment of the rights won during the 1860s. And then I also think on a personal level that African Americans held a candle against the darkness of Jim Crow and what I mean by that is African Americans in the 1890s and 1900s remembered the potential that took place during the 1860s and remembered the successes that took place in the 1860s where you had black legislators and black judges. One of the justices on the South Carolina Supreme Court was African American. You had African Americans serving in Congress and I think that the memory of that continued on over the decades. And then, of course, the other thing that's interesting there's another parallel that both civil rights movements really come out of the wartime

experience. I mean when you look at the civil rights movement of the 1900s really turns into a mass movement coming out of World War II and the Korean War and the civil rights movement of the 1860s is coming obviously after the Civil War and black military participation there and so I think that there's a parallel: two civil rights movements that really are sparked by black participation in war.

CWBR: On Pages 112-113, you discuss Charles G. Halpine who became a leader in showing the democratic and Americanizing principles of the army to the Irish American community, even writing a song that the Grand Army of the Republic later adopted in the 1880s. Was the army as an avenue to citizenship, in Halpine's eyes, exclusive to white Americans?

CS: He was certainly a war Democrat and a lot of the war Democrats still didn't have a very egalitarian sense of African American inclusion. And a lot of the war Democrats certainly weren't fighting for emancipation and for African Americans. Having said that, it is interesting that you do find some Irish Americans undergoing conversions to become true Republicans. Patrick Robert Guiney is an Irish-born Colonel who starts off the war as a Democrat when he enlists but he becomes a Republican and he really does become a Republican. In his letters to his wife you see that he really has some respect for African Americans in promoting abolition. And you see sometimes in early regimentals written by Irish Americans sometimes laughing a little bit at slaves they encounter in the South but also feeling bad for their experience and saying that emancipation was right and that no man should be in bondage. And you even had some, its fascinating, you actually had some Irish Americans come around to want to serve as officers in the United States Colored Troops, which was the name of the corps of the African American soldiers, and certainly some of them wanted to have commissions and get out of the ranks in their regiments and have an officers commission. But when you look at some of them, some of the letters and petitions, where they're saying: you know we would like to participate, they want to participate to help African Americans and after the war you actually see some moment of fluctuation where some Irish Americans do start to embrace the Republican agenda of broader human rights including for African Americans. I mean not to put too broad of a stroke on it, and say that masses of Irish Americans are suddenly embracing the idea of equal rights for African Americans, but there's certainly some fluctuation in Irish American hostility to the Republican agenda.

CWBR: After the war, what role did Irish American citizenship play in the development of international naturalization and citizenship protocols?

CS: Well what happens is you have this situation where Britain adheres to a doctrine called perpetual allegiance and under perpetual allegiance if you're born a subject of Britain no act that you do can change the allegiance, that you're always a subject to the Crown. So, in other words, if you were born in Ireland and you travel to the United States and you naturalize in the United States, when you go back to Britain, Britain would look at you as a British subject not an American naturalized citizen. What happens is the Irish nationalist movement, the Fenian Brotherhood, starts agitating after the Civil War. Some Fenians go to Ireland, other Fenians invade Canada, and Britain starts making arrests and charging people as British subjects and some of them are not only Union war veterans but naturalized American citizens. Well this creates widespread protests in the United States and what's interesting is that it's not just protest by Irish Americans but native-born Americans also join in. And they call, in these protests and petitions to Congress; they call for the United States to defend American citizenship rights and the idea of expatriation rights. And what expatriation rights were is the right to change your allegiance; its the right to immigrate and if you can find a country that will naturalize you, you can change your allegiance. And in these waves of agitation, these mass meetings all across the country, in cities like Boston and New York and small towns, both Congress and the state department are pressured to pressure Britain to change its policy. And eventually Britain does just that, eventually after tensions are very high and it's in the context of other tensions, the Alabama claims and things like that, Britain agrees to move away from the doctrine of perpetual allegiance and to honor expatriation rights and naturalization. So it actually does have a tremendous impact in international affairs where Britain abandons its centuries-old policy on naturalization and whether subjects could naturalize abroad.

CWBR: After the war, in the years following the conflict, how did Irish and African American experiences with the struggle for citizenship differ?

CS: Well I think on the biggest level African Americans are, in an initial matter, asking to be able to become citizens whereas naturalization was always open to Irish Americans. African Americans are more concerned with gaining some level of rights and equality with whites; Irish Americans are more concerned with some of the identity aspects of citizenship, of being able to

belong in the United States, and eliminating nativism and then they're more concerned with issues like this: being protected by the United States as naturalized citizens when they go abroad. So Irish Americans aren't as concerned about parsing out the actual elements of citizenship or what rights are included in national citizenship, African Americans are because African Americans are calling for national citizenship that means something because they realize eventually the Republicans realize if you continue to let citizenship rights remain the province of the states some states are going to discriminate against blacks and not give equal rights. So you get a moment where national citizenship starts to take primacy with the Civil Rights Act of 1866 and in the Civil Rights Act of 1866 it's defined that anyone born in the United States, whether black or white, is a national citizen and as a national citizen they're entitled to certain rights and then it progresses from there you get the Fourteenth Amendment and things like that. So African Americans are more concerned with the actual definition of what rights are included in national citizenship, you know, A: that they are national citizens and B: what that includes. Irish Americans are more concerned with equalizing naturalized citizenship and more concerned with being protected when they go abroad as naturalized citizens.

CWBR: Did the federal government fail, then, to follow through on civil rights following the Civil War? Why do we see the backlash, especially against African Americans, during and after Reconstruction?

CS: Well you know that question really is: what caused the death of Reconstruction and I think it's a number of things. I think a little bit is naivety and what I mean by that is thinking that southerners would not have as much of a backlash as they had to the idea of equal rights for blacks. I think part of it is that the army demobilizes very quickly so you don't have a lot of troops in the South to be able to put down the Ku Klux Klan. A lot of the branch of the armed services that would be best-suited for fighting the Klan, the Cavalry, isn't really stationed in the South; it's stationed now in the western frontier in the last wave of the wars against the Native Americans. And I think a lot of it is simply exhaustion. By the 1870s we have a United States that dealt with the tensions of the 1850s, the bloodshed and destruction of the Civil War, the turmoil of Reconstruction during the second half of the 1860s, and by the early 1870s, they think a lot of northerners, even some Republicans, the liberal Republicans, are simply getting exhausted and saying: we've given blacks national citizenship, we've given them the right to vote, they need to start being able to defend themselves. And there was an unwillingness to go through expanding the army

and paying for an expansion in the army and things like that to really combat the realities that were going on in the South and the violence of southern white racism. And I think what it really was, was a sense of exhaustion that grew in the North to finally start turning a blind eye to what was going on in the South. They also had other turmoil, you have to remember, as the 1870s go on, labor starts to become the big issue. If the 1860s are defined by issues of race, I think the 1870s are defined by issues of labor and strikes and violence like that and fear of socialism. Concerns like that start to take more and more center stage and the race issue starts to diminish. And certainly a lot of Republicans who are still very passionate about the issue, but they're eventually going to lose out and become subsumed and then eventually you get the rise of Jim Crow and by the turn of the century the promise of those laws and the promise of all that legal change they're still on the books but not being able to be enjoyed and practiced by the African Americans.

CWBR: Professor Samito, thank you so much for joining me and discussing your most recent book, *Becoming American under Fire: Irish Americans, African Americans, and the Politics of Citizenship during the Civil War Era*.

CS: My pleasure; thanks so much for having me.