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The Saint Patrick's Battalion: Loyalty, Nativism, and Identity in the Nineteenth Century and Today

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Abstract
Two decades before the Irish Brigade covered itself with glory, an earlier unit of Irish immigrants had won renown for its service during the Mexican American War. Calling themselves the Saint Patrick's Battalion, these men marched under a flag of brilliant emerald decorated with Irish motifs: a harp, a shamrock, and the image of Saint Patrick [*excerpt*].

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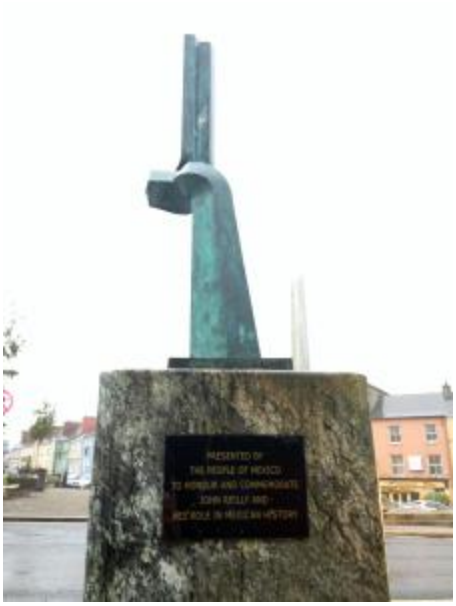
The Saint Patrick's Battalion: Loyalty, Nativism, and Identity in the Nineteenth Century and Today

December 11, 2015

By Kevin Lavery '16

Two decades before the Irish Brigade covered itself with glory, an earlier unit of Irish immigrants had won renown for its service during the Mexican American War. Calling themselves the Saint Patrick's Battalion, these men marched under a flag of brilliant emerald decorated with Irish motifs: a harp, a shamrock, and the image of Saint Patrick.



Although surprising to American sensibilities, the people of Mexico gave this monument to Clifden, Co. Galway, in honor of John Riley (or Reilly) for his service as commander of the Saint Patrick's Battalion. Photograph by the author.

Unlike the Irish Brigade, however, the Saint Patrick's Battalion fought *against* the U.S. Army. Led by the disgruntled Irish immigrant John Riley, this elite battalion was comprised of roughly two hundred Irish-American deserters who pledged their loyalty to General Santa Anna and the Mexican government. When *Los San Patricios* were defeated and captured by U.S. forces, fifty-seven deserters were sentenced to hang for their crime.

In American memory, Riley is a traitor, a deserter, and a mercenary. But this summer while exploring County Galway, Ireland, I stumbled upon a monument to his memory given to his hometown by Mexico in recognition of his service. The experience delivered to me some perspective. To pass judgment on Riley and his men, we must understand their times.

It is no secret that when Irish immigrants arrived in America they found hatred, prejudice, and fear awaiting them. When they sought jobs and homes to secure their place as contributing members of society, they were impeded by anti-Irish sentiments embodied by signs that read "No Irish Need Apply." Some Americans, calling themselves nativists, defended their prejudices as essential to defending the purity of American identity. They held that to be American one must be aligned with the Anglo-Saxon

Protestant values central to national identity at the time. Nativists were obstinate that Irish refugees had nothing to offer American society. After all, they were popish pawns, Celtic barbarians who were inherently unsuited to participating in the forging of the young republic's future. Irish norms were not the norms of America, and nativists screamed that the admission of such newcomers would dilute and pollute everything sacred to American identity.

Finding no quarter in American society, many young Irishmen went off to join the U.S. Army. There, they found themselves subjected to the same intense persecution as before, coupled now with brutal military discipline and an absence of religious fulfillment. It is little wonder that during the war with Mexico so many Irish soldiers deserted a nation they felt had rejected them. Enticed by promises of land and a shared Catholic identity, two hundred of these deserters joined the Mexican Army and formed Los San Patricios and fought against the country they had briefly tried to call their home.

Even as the Irish deserters fought hard against the United States army, however, the Famine laid waste to their native land: one million dead, another million scattered across the world. The thousands of Irish immigrants who arrived in the U.S. had not left home to steal American jobs and benefits; they had come as refugees in order to survive.

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Those terms—immigrant and refugee—have a special relevance today as we continue to grapple with the great humanitarian crises of our own age. Today, there are upwards of 60 million refugees fleeing war and terror, searching desperately for a new place to call home. They have seen their countries turned into war zones, they have borne witness as their family and neighbors have been taken away, and they have had to watch helplessly as world powers argue over how to help them.

Yet in the wake of the recent terrorist attacks around the world, many Americans have chosen to oppose allowing victims the safety, comfort, and freedoms we enjoy in our country. Most recently, a candidate for the shoes of Abraham Lincoln and George Washington declared that in his America, people would be barred from coming to our country simply because of their creed. According to this modern-day nativist ideology, Muslims are inherently dangerous to American security and identity. What a historically ignorant position.

Let me explain my take on this by returning to our nineteenth-century narrative. Throughout the 1840s and 1850s, nativists had insisted that Irish immigrants, including Irish refugees, were unfit to hold American values. Moreover, the actions of Los San Patricios had suggested that disloyal Irishmen could be a security threat, even though the deserters were just a tiny minority of Irish immigrants. In essence, nativists believed that Irish immigrants had nothing but trouble to offer American society. The next decade would prove them dead wrong.

In a stunning reversal, Irish Americans proved their patriotic credibility during the Civil War as soldiers of the Irish Brigade and countless other heroic units. Not all of them were refugees of the Famine, but a considerable number were. Throughout the war, they proved that they were every bit as deserving of the title American as the nativists who had attacked them. In doing so, they showed that notions of who can be an American are anything but infallible.

Officers of the 69th New York Regiment. Photograph courtesy of the Library of Congress.

The case of Irish refugees is a critical one in understanding how American identity is constructed. Although early Americans had held anti-Irish sentiments based on notions, such notions dropped away in time. Even Los San Patricios have been largely forgotten as an irrelevant blip in the history of Irish American identity. Millions of modern Americans now claim Irish heritage. Few people would dare to say that the Irish have no place in American society. Ideas of an Anglo-Saxon Protestant identity have been outdated by the comparatively inclusive Judeo-Christian heritage championed by so many modern political commentators. 'Judeo-Christian,' however, is an invented term that conveniently incorporates all those groups who were originally excluded from full participation in the early republic: Catholics, Jews, and Mormons, for example. Nonetheless, 'Judeo-Christian' is still a term meant to intentionally to exclude others from participation in American society, just as 'Anglo-Saxon Protestant America' did long ago.

Muslim Americans still face horrific discrimination from modern day nativists whose ideology should have died out centuries ago. Islam is no more inherently incompatible with American identity than Catholicism. Muslims are no more inherently unsuitable for citizenship than the Irish. We're all human, and we all have the right to profess a commitment to the values of the United States of America regardless of our religion or ethnicity. There will always be people like Los San Patricios and radicalized Muslims who reject America's values—especially if America rejects them first—but they are the minority. Their existence does not prove that others who identify as part of the same group should be disqualified from participation in the American experiment.

This essay is nothing more than an impassioned plea to remember that our country is always reinventing who we are. There was a time before Irish Americans were a core part of American society, a time when they were scorned, hated, and doubted. Let us hope that the time when Muslims face the same prejudices will soon pass.

Be brave, America.

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