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SECTION
FIVE

Irishmen in Our Revolution

Some Surprising Facts Dug Up by Michael J. O'Brien
Respecting Gaels Who Fought for American Freedom

"I MAY say," remarks J. I. C. Clarke in his introduction to Michael J. O'Brien's *A Hidden Phase of American History*, "he establishes unequivocally that 38 per cent. of the Revolutionary army that won American independence was Irish." This, of course, is enough to carry any dialectician on the subject of Ireland, pro or con, further into the book. The "hidden phase" meant in Mr. O'Brien's title is the part the Irish—not the Scotch-Irish, or the Peruvian-Irish or the Esthonian-Irish, but the regular Irish—took in General Washington's great drive. How Mr. O'Brien, who is the historiographer of the American Irish Historical Society, arrives at his percentage is briefly described in one of the 500 pages of his volume:

"I have not examined all of the muster rolls, but have selected a number indiscriminately from each of the original thirteen Colonies. . . . I have made a careful calculation (1), by counting the total number of soldiers of each unit, and (2), by a separate count of those of undoubted Irish birth or descent. In some companies I find the extraordinarily high percentage of 75 per cent. Irish while, on the other hand, it must be said that in other companies the percentage runs as low as 10, and in some New England regiments and some of those raised in the old Dutch districts of New York and the German settlements in Pennsylvania no Irish names at all appear. But on averaging them all up I have determined that 35.83 per cent. of the soldiers of the Revolutionary army were Irish. To those must be added some small percentage of those of non-Irish names, and not recorded as Irish; and it is proper also to consider the Irish proportion of those scattering bodies not attached to the regiments of the line. If we take the conservatively low figure of 2 per cent. as representing these elements we arrive at a total of 37.83 per cent., or substantially 38 per cent."

In his laborious search for contemporary opinion on the number of Irish in the Revolutionary army Mr. O'Brien discovered, in the Library of Congress, some original issues of the *Royal Gazette*, published in New York in 1779. These contained the testimony, given before a Parliamentary committee of inquiry, of Joseph Galloway, a loyalist attorney from Maryland. In answer to a question as to the composition of the rebel army Galloway said:

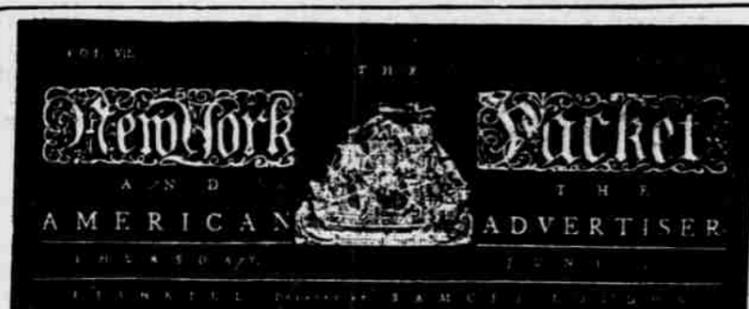
"The names and places of their nativity being taken down I can answer the question with precision. There were scarcely one-fourth natives of America; about one-half Irish; the other fourth were English and Scotch."

They Fought Like Fifty.

Another bit of contemporary evidence used by Mr. O'Brien is the testimony of General Robertson on June 8, 1779, and printed in the *Parliamentary Register*. Edmund Burke said to Robertson:

"How are the provincial corps composed: whether mostly of native Americans, or from emigrants from various nations of Europe?"

General Robertson answered, in part: "I remember General Lee telling me that he believed



The next parliament will have the happiness of meeting what has never been experienced by their ancestors, a free constitution and a liberated trade. The great object which we have to look up to for our commerce, is America; and this will not appear improbable, when it is considered that three parts of the American army were absolutely Irish; that the Congress contains many of the same nation, and that a predilection for our country, prevails through all America from the similarity we lately bore to their constitution: And to this, our being the nearest of part of the old world to the new; And no doubt remains but we must be the greatest gainers by their independence.

The volunteers of Ireland are preparing a congratulatory address to his Excellency General Washington, on the glorious emancipation of America, from British tyranny. To that renowned Chief, and the virtuous struggles of the American army, they, in a great measure, attribute their own happiness and independence, and are therefore determined to pay their tribute of gratitude.

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Facsimiles of despatches from Dublin and Philadelphia in New York "Packet" of June 19, 1783. Illustration in "A Hidden Phase of American History."

half the rebel army were from Ireland."

Mr. O'Brien dryly suggests that the mistake of these guesses was natural, as enough Irishmen to make up 38 per cent. of an army would surely appear like 50 per cent. in a fight.

The contention, frequently heard, that there was little Irish emigration to America before the Revolution except from the north of Ireland is taken up boldly by Mr. O'Brien. There is no way to arrive at the facts, he says, except by digging up the passenger ship arrivals from Ireland in that period. From the newspapers of 1771-74 he compiled a list of the Irish ships arriving at New York and Philadelphia:

"Of 576 sailings . . . during these four years only 247, or about 43 per cent., were to and from those northern ports where the 'Scotch-Irish' emigrants would naturally embark, and 329, or 57 per cent., were to and from those parts of Ireland where the 'old Irish' are admittedly the predominant element." Mr. O'Brien, who says that evidence of this character on this subject has never been presented before, submits that it is indisputable; and he adds a guess which is likely to find some assent in Ulster, "that not even the most enthusiastic advocate of the Scotch-Irish theory can claim that the entire population of Ulster was of Scotch descent." Also, an emigrant from Donegal (Where from? Donegal! How're the praties!

Very small! Howdye eat em? Skins an' all!), as Irish a county as there is in Ireland, would sail from Letterkenny or Londonderry, north of Ireland ports. Mr. O'Brien's research makes him conclude that between 1767 and 1774 America received 32,640 "Scotch-Irish" immigrants and 63,360 "plain Irish" immigrants.

Kellys, Burkes and Sheas.

Well, then, says the interested reader, there must have been a large number of Kellys, Burkes and Sheas in the Revolutionary army. Mr. O'Brien, anticipating this yearning for concrete information, presents it fully. On the rolls of the Revolutionary army there were 695 Kellys, 221 Burkes and 73 Sheas. There were 494 Murphys, 322 Ryans, 266 Sullivans and 231 O'Briens. There were 88 separate and distinct John Kellys. Mr. O'Brien does not assume that every Patrick on the rolls was an Irishman, admitting that there was a fondness for that name among some of the Highland Scots, but he adds that when a Patrick appears on the rolls it is usually in connection with a surname strictly indigenous to Ireland:

"One cannot be mistaken, for example, as to the racial origin of the 42 Patrick Kellys, the 34 Patrick Murphys, the 35 Patrick Sullivans and Patrick Ryans, or the 43 Patrick Reillys."

In an appendix of 130 pages Mr. O'Brien presents the names of the officers of the American army and navy of the Revolution who were of Irish birth or descent; and also the muster roll of the non-commissioned officers and enlisted men who bore the twelve Irish names most common.

The author quotes General Washington's order for the celebration of St. Patrick's Day in 1780:

"The General congratulates the Army in the very interesting Proceedings of the Parliament of Ireland, and the Inhabitants of that Country, which have been lately communicated, not only as they appear calculated to remove those heavy and tyrannical oppressions on their Trade, but to restore to a brave and generous people their ancient Rights and Freedom, and by their operation to promote the Cause of America. Desirous of impressing on the minds of the Army Transactions so important in their nature, the General directs that all Fatigue and Working Parties cease for to-morrow, the 17th, a day held in particular regard by the People of that Nation." General Washington added his hope that the celebration of the day would not be marred by disturbances.

Mr. O'Brien has been careful to set down, in hundreds of footnotes, the authorities for his statements, particularly when they refer to matters which have been in controversy. He has not spared the bayonet in attacking alleged distorters of facts about the early American Irish, and he takes particular delight in showing, by means of the army rolls, the slips that were made, even in Government publications, by writers whose estimates of the Irish population in America before the Revolution were ridiculously small.

A HIDDEN PHASE OF AMERICAN HISTORY. BY MICHAEL J. O'BRIEN. The Devin-Adair Company. 43