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Review of *Shades of Green: Irish Regiments, American Soldiers, and Local Communities in the Civil War Era*

By Andrew Richter

Ryan W. Keating argues in *Shades of Green: Irish Regiments, American Soldiers, and Local Communities in the Civil War Era* that despite common threads, the experiences of the Irish during the Civil War era were not uniform. This work was clearly inspired by *Freedom for Themselves* by Richard M. Reid, which is itself a classic of the ethnic regimental history genre. Reid contends that analyzing only famous Irish regiments, such as the Sixty-ninth New York, fails to provide a holistic account of Irish experiences during the Civil War. Keating encapsulates this thesis by stating that the Irish in the mid-nineteenth century lived in “Irish Americas,” in which local communities were central to Irish identity, more than any other factor. Therefore, Irish immigrants did not see themselves as part of a national community of immigrants, but rather as residents of their city or state, which was typical of Americans at the time. He supports his thesis by demonstrating the variety of Irish experiences from the Twenty-third Illinois, the Ninth Connecticut, and the Seventeenth Wisconsin Regiments, some of which defy the typical narrative used for Irish-American history. Keating’s history of these regiments runs the gamut of wartime themes, including instances of gallantry, honor, misconduct, treason, success, and defeat. He uses these specific units as the basis for his research because they are often overlooked within the historiography of the Irish during the Civil War, and—as Keating argues—show the true complexity of studying ethnic regiments. His book primarily serves to repudiate the standard history of the Irish in the Civil War era, which has been based solely upon singular points such as the
Sixty-ninth New York Regiment, the Irish of Boston, and the New York City Draft Riots.

The first three chapters of Shades of Green share the identical structure and purpose of contextualizing the regions and the men from which the Twenty-third Illinois, Ninth Connecticut, and the Seventeenth Wisconsin emerged. Keating paints a vivid picture of the rapid growth of the Midwest and the increasing pace of Irish immigration in the decades before the Civil War. In particular, he focuses on the local cities in which these men lived: Chicago, La Salle, New Haven, Milwaukee, Madison, and Fond Du Lac. Keating additionally provides a fundamental understanding of how the Irish fit into American society as an “other” due to the nativism that developed from growing immigration. Their precarious position, in which their loyalty was questioned, and their rights were threatened, is the backdrop upon which Keating examines these men.

These chapters contain some of the most illuminating, yet heavy, statistical analysis. For example, Keating is able to plainly portray the economic differences between the men of the three regiments, indicating that different local communities held different opportunities for immigrants, and bolsters his claim of “Irish Americas.” The fact that these men were Irish did not wholly dictate their circumstances, however. His breakdown of their political, social, and economic standings is both a strength and a weakness. Their occupations, wealth, and family status, among other factors, are neatly and thoroughly laid out for the reader. The result is a litany of statistical data (such as percentages of men fitting into the aforementioned categories) presented on several consecutive pages, comprising roughly a third of each chapter. This sadly leaves the reader caught up in an overwhelming whirlwind of information as it is not distributed widely enough to be easily absorbed. This tendency does prove useful when Keating illustrates the problems associated with an ethnic regiment. By showing that only fifty percent of the men of the Twenty-third Illinois were Irish-born, and only seventy percent were of Irish descent in general, he displays that identities of ethnic units were
not as cleanly delineated as their names suggested. The soldiers from Milwaukee in the Seventeenth Wisconsin consisted of sixty-four men, of which a mere sixteen were Irish; there were more Germans from that city that enlisted in the regiment. Keating suggests that men were more interested in enlisting to save the Union and thus were less concerned with the identity of regiments, as many Irish joined standard units before Irish ones had a chance to form.

Although the fourth chapter is dedicated to the Irish soldiers’ heroic combat, it does not solely focus on gallant tales of battle. Instead, he uses their combat record to demonstrate what “Irishness” meant in terms of the perception of these men. “Irish charges” and superb defenses, which were uniquely effective, are described in detail for those interested in their military history within the broader context of the Civil War. The language that surrounded their actions was filled with references to their Irish heritage, which indicated that they were incredible soldiers because of their ethnicity. Furthermore, many of these courageous efforts were accomplished while high percentages of the men were sick from diseases caught in camp or from the environment. Their successes, then, were extraordinary, but typical of Irish soldiers.

Perhaps the best example dealing with “Irishness” was Keating’s inclusion of the early arrival of the Ninth Connecticut in New Orleans. In that city, these Union soldiers encountered many Irish immigrants who moved to the South. Yet despite their places on the opposing forces of the Civil War, these people from the same homeland embraced each other warmly. Although Keating does argue that many Irish immigrants already saw themselves as American, this instance illustrates that ethnic bonds ran deep. The only flaw in his narrative is Keating’s repeated assertion that the outstanding service of these men endeared their respective states to these immigrant soldiers. Unfortunately, his supporting evidence is limited to citing positive newspaper reports, and thus is not substantial enough to make such a claim. Perhaps including instances of major public support, such as ceremonies or parades, would provide additional substantiation. Nevertheless, this
statement is also problematic due to the later discussion regarding the erosion of American acceptance and support for Irish immigrants in the wake of the Draft Riots and the resurgence of nativism.

Keating’s discussion of disciplinary issues within the three Irish regiments studied is a thorough and nuanced one. His balanced approach to both honor and dishonor allows for a holistic account of these men, which is not always the case with either regimental or ethnic unit histories. As Keating aptly writes, “in sum, then, a large number of men were thrust together, away from the watching eyes of families and friends, with some money, a fair amount of free time, and a willingness to question orders.” His discourse on this subject encompasses rivalries and friction between and within officers and enlisted men, drunkenness, and desertion. The disharmony between Irish soldiers in the Union army, Keating contends, illustrates that the ethnic bonds between these men were not absolute and thus were not always observed. His analysis regarding the reasons for misconduct are as simple as they effective: these men acted out when the opportunity arose. By reviewing disciplinary records, Keating shows that factors such as garrison duty, stationing in a city, and lack of combat enabled soldiers to misbehave; simply, these environments frequently granted the time and resources to get into mischief. He expertly establishes that the isolated and recurring incidents that occurred during the service of these Irish soldiers was tied less to their ethnicity and more so to their circumstances. The only shortcoming found in his examination of disciplinary problems is that Keating only briefly touches on the sociopolitical understandings that led these men to act out against authority. He suggests that republican and democratic virtues (not party affiliations, but rather, political notions) contributed heavily to misconduct. Keating believes that these men were too used to being independent and free of authority, and therefore chaffed strongly against the military hierarchy. However, this intriguing assertion requires more elaboration as well as analysis to warrant its inclusion, as these ideas were not explained enough for those unfamiliar with them.
Keating’s approach to analyzing the New York City Draft Riots in 1863 is multilayered and thus may be difficult to discern initially. It is, nonetheless, meticulous and well argued. Although most of the chapter seems to deviate from the premise of the chapter itself as well as the book overall, his explanation for the Draft Riots is, perhaps, the best example of his refutation of the general historiography surrounding Irish immigrant history. Keating traces the socioeconomic circumstances of many Irish during the Civil War era and determines that their resentment towards the war effort was complex. The two main factors that drove the Irish of New York to riot were the possible economic competition posed by freed slaves and the hostility of Republicans towards Democrats, which many Irish were affiliated with. With this in mind, he argues that the Irish who instigated the Draft Riots simply felt that their place in American society was threatened, particularly after the major social gains made by their regiments on the battlefield. Keating contends that the Draft Riots were less about loyalty to the Union and more about socioeconomic security, in what he broadly terms “loyal dissent.” But this valuable assertion is a nuanced one and it requires foreknowledge of the typical analysis of the Irish and the New York City Draft Riots. This “loyal dissent” was multifaceted as the Irish in the United States expressed it in a variety of ways. Even while these loyal Irish from the three regiments declared allegiance to the Union, some balked at emancipation, others protested expanding the war effort beyond maintaining the Union, and more were distrustful of Republican intentions. By showing this, Keating contests the usage of the New York City Draft Riots as the sole event to ascertain Irish loyalty during the Civil War.

The attention Keating places on the home front in Illinois, Connecticut, and Wisconsin is a superb addition to his social history of the three Irish regiments. Although the families these soldiers left at home did not participate in combat during the Civil War, the author elucidates the struggles that these families endured and why it mattered. Drawing on letters the soldiers sent back home, Keating reveals that the men were not emotionally separated.
from the home front, but rather they were constantly contemplating the wellbeing of their families. Despite unreliable pay, welfare was still especially stigmatized in the nineteenth century due to fears that it would foster dependence and eventually create a class of people that permanently required it. Keating demonstrates how these anxieties and tensions over institutionalized support changed due to the nature of wartime circumstances. Through newspaper editorials, he displays how the public came to terms with the fact that support was, in this case, noble and just. However, many were unsure how to provide it and what the long-term implications would be. This concern was further exacerbated by the possibility of permanent injury or death on the battlefield; how would bounties and pay be dealt with? Keating does not ignore the home front in his narrative and *Shades of Green* is of a substantially higher quality as a result. Including the unseen and oft-forgotten difficulties endured by those at home allows for a more holistic and comprehensive understanding of American society during the Civil War era. The effects of the war effort were felt beyond the battlefield and Keating demonstrates how incredibly effectively.

The final chapter of *Shades of Green* analyzes the effects of the Civil War on the soldiers from the Twenty-third Illinois, Ninth Connecticut, and Seventeenth Wisconsin in the postwar period. Keating’s examination of these soldiers after the Civil War is a profound aspect of his book. As he notes, the historiography of Civil War soldiers often fails to account for their lives in the postwar era. To address this gap in the literature, Keating delves into various records, such as letters and pension applications, to glean insight into how these Irish men fared after the Civil War. This thorough analysis ably presents the assertion that although we may see overall trends in the postwar period, Civil War service did not wholly define a soldier’s endeavors. For example, Keating traces what type of injuries and wounds these soldiers received and how, or if, it affected their livelihoods after their mustering out. Some men were too disabled from their physical injuries to sustain themselves, while others found occupations that enabled them to work in a reduced, yet functional, capacity. While some veterans
were successful, others were not, despite the presence or absence of injuries. He also neatly ties westward expansion into this discussion by showing that men either moved to find employment compatible with their injuries or for the same reason as many other pioneers, which was the quest for opportunity.

*Shades of Green* constitutes a valuable contribution to the histories of both the Civil War and American immigration. Ryan W. Keating’s simple change of focus away from traditional locales of Irish history like New York, Boston, and Philadelphia, towards Illinois, Connecticut, and Wisconsin illuminates his thesis thoroughly. By comparing and contrasting the two sets, Keating makes a compelling case that ethnic histories are not monolithic. His work demonstrates that Irish immigrants during the Civil War era were varied and certainly not a uniform group. This argument is best seen in his chapters on discipline and the Draft Riots.

Although everyone Keating studied was Irish, the subjects of this study often defied typical narratives and regularly displayed their individual opinions towards the war. Not all Irish were brave, nor were they all rowdy and uncontrollable soldiers. Likewise, many Irish outside of New York reacted in ways more constructive than riotous. Keating successfully contends that a reexamination of Irish history on a broad scale is necessary in order to gain a more accurate understanding of their place in American society during the Civil War era.

Part of Keating’s thesis is that his focus on local communities brings something new to the history of Irish immigrants. However, this local focus seems to only extend to the shift to Illinois, Connecticut, and Wisconsin and the cities therein relevant to the three regiments. His analysis simply focuses on different local communities than traditionally used rather than illustrating what made them particularly “local.” Likewise, his concept of “Irish Americas” is not fully fleshed out. Although he argues against homogeneous ethnic history, he does not clarify or connect his assertions with this seemingly central concept. While this is not detrimental to the support for this thesis, it is a missed opportunity to make it clearer. Additionally, Keating presumes that
the reader is at least moderately familiar with the historiography of
the Irish in America in the nineteenth century. As a result, some of
his assertions will be unappreciated by casual readers or new
students of history, who may not be familiar enough with the
broader literature to recognize the significance of his contributions.

Nevertheless, *Shades of Green* is worthwhile for any
reader. It successfully stands on its own by making a compelling
argument for a change in how Irish history is interpreted. Ryan W.
Keating includes every topic from the wide array found within
regimental, ethnic, and Civil War histories. *Shades of Green*
weaves together political, social, economic, and military histories
into a holistic narrative. His book is comprehensive and thorough
without being superfluous. It is likewise built upon a solid
foundation of research, and the author supplements his findings
with excellent secondary sources to reinforce broader themes.
Keating does not neglect the history of the men he writes
about despite also arguing in favor of more nuanced ethnic regimental
histories; their stories are not sacrificed in the pursuit of the
broader thesis. It is both a traditional regimental history as well as
a repudiation of uniform ethnic regimental studies. He additionally
contextualizes his microhistory well within the expansive field of
the Civil War. Although the focus is on smaller subjects, Keating
does not sacrifice the larger picture. This book effectively imparts
vital knowledge of both Irish-American history as well as general
Civil War history.

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Author Bio

Andrew Richter is a CSUSB graduate who earned a BA in History (Summa Cum Laude) in June 2018, with a concentration in US History. Afterwards, he obtained a position as a Microcomputer Specialist II in the department of Accountability and Educational Technology within the San Bernardino City Unified School District. This position combines his affinity for technology as well as his desire to aid education, though he still hopes to become a history teacher someday. Andrew’s favorite extracurricular activity is working with the youth group at his church, which has been and continues to be a highly enriching experience. He would like to thank Dr. Ryan Keating, Dr. Jeremy Murray, Dr. Stephanie Muravchik, and Dr. Kate Liszka for the memorable opportunities of study that they offered. Finally, Andrew would also like to thank Quewyn Wild, a good friend who has extended both solicited and unsolicited guidance over the course of many years.
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