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A training school for rebels: Fenians in the French Foreign Legion



Six years before Hollywood made Beau Geste (1926), Bray and Arklow doubled for North Africa in the Celtic Cinema Company's Rosaleen Dhu, a romantic tale of an exiled Fenian who joins the French Foreign Legion.

J. F. X. O'Brien took part in William Walker's 1855 filibuster in Nicaragua for much the same purpose.

John Devoy

An angst-ridden father's chiding of his rebellious son persuaded John Devoy 'to run away and join the Zouaves'. (Initially recruited solely from the Zouaoua, a tribe of North African Berbers, the flamboyantly dressed Zouaves evolved into an élite French force.) The eighteen-year-old Fenian had already secured the requisite letters of introduction and successfully resisted the appeals of his chief, James Stephens, to join the American military instead. The Paris correspondent of the Irishman, J. P. Leonard, took the young Devoy and his request to be a Zouave to the French Ministry of War, where it was confirmed to him that as a foreigner he was only able to join the French Foreign Legion. Devoy's service with the Legion, however, was short and far from action-packed for one seeking combat training and experience. After reading reports of the escalating crisis in the United States and of the funeral of Terence Bellew MacManus in Dublin, he decided to return to Ireland. He withdrew from the Legion officially on 5 March 1862, having served less than a year but with enough French to impress Stephens and the wherewithal to train others in the rudiments of soldiering.

In 1920, six years before Hollywood made the film *Beau Geste*, Bray and Arklow doubled for North Africa in another, less famous silent film about the French Foreign Legion made by the Celtic Cinema Company, entitled *Rosaleen Dhu*. Based on a story by John Denvir, the film tells the romantic tale of an exiled Fenian who joins the Legion and later marries an Algerian woman, only to discover that she is the heiress to a large Irish estate. Such escapism was probably welcome in 1920 as the War of Independence entered its bloodiest phase, but, in the best tradition of film-making, the tale was, in fact, 'based on a true story'. During the nineteenth century a considerable number of Irishmen served in the *Légion Etrangère*, and a number of them were indeed members of the Irish Republican Brotherhood.

In 1851, seven years before the IRB was established, one of its founders, Thomas Clarke Luby, set out for France, intent on joining the Foreign Legion in order to learn infantry tactics. The Legion had temporarily suspended recruitment at the time, however, and so his ambition was frustrated. This is the first known instance of Irish separatists identifying the Legion as a training school for rebels, though the idea of going abroad to acquire military experience was then current. The Cork Fenian

J. J. O'Kelly

James J. O'Kelly [see 'From the files of the DIB', p. 66] joined the IRB in 1861, and after he moved to London he quickly became leader of the city's



Thomas Clarke Luby—in 1851, seven years before the IRB was established, he set out for France, intent on joining the Foreign Legion in order to learn infantry tactics. (Multitext)

New Orleans. In fact, it seems that the discipline of the 1st and 2nd Battalions of the Légion Etrangère snapped as the French intervention faltered during 1866 and that, after looting the deserted town, 89 Legionnaires deserted. Devoy certainly claimed that when O'Kelly was informed about the planned rising in Ireland he 'took the first chance of deserting', eventually making his way to New York.

In the aftermath of the unsuccessful rising of 1867, O'Kelly was involved in rebuilding the IRB in Ireland and supporting early Fenian attempts to cooperate with Isaac Butt's emerging Home Rule movement. The outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War in 1870, however, saw O'Kelly return to the French colours. Having satisfactorily accounted for his disappearance four years earlier, O'Kelly was commissioned colonel and undertook to recruit a new 'Irish Brigade' for the French army. Setting up his base in Liverpool, he was in the process of recruiting Irishmen when Paris surrendered. O'Kelly was by no means the only Fenian to fight for France against Prussia, however.

Circumventing the Foreign Enlistment Act

The same odd conglomeration behind the pre-Fenian campaigns of the MacMahon Sword presentation (in recognition of his command of the victorious French campaign in northern Italy in 1859), the Irish Papal Brigade and the National Petition (a plebiscite on Irish self-determination in 1860) re-emerged in the post-Fenian hiatus of 1870 to sponsor the idea of an Irish ambulance unit in support of the French in the opening days of the

Fenians. He fell out with James Stephens, however, and in 1864 resolved to join the Legion. O'Kelly and Devoy had been boyhood friends, and the latter's example doubtless influenced him. Devoy actually warned him of the hardships of Algerian service and of the likelihood that the Legion would be deployed to support the French-sponsored Emperor Maximilian against the Mexican republic. Notwithstanding Devoy's republican scruples, O'Kelly resolved to enlist. Indeed, his service in North Africa suggests that he was able to reconcile himself to French colonialism. According to Tim Healy, O'Kelly later recounted the story of how he had once 'debated within himself, when placed as a sentry over Moorish prisoners, whether he would shoot them if they tried to escape, but resolved that if they did he would act as a Frenchman'.

As Devoy predicted, the Legion was sent to Mexico. O'Kelly apparently fought in several battles, though he always remained tight-lipped about his Mexican service. Thirty years later he claimed that after the 'disastrous battle of Mier' he and other stragglers had made their way to



John Devoy as a prisoner in 1866. Six years earlier, the chiding of an angst-ridden father persuaded the then eighteen-year-old to run away and join the Zouaves.

Franco-Prussian war. The idea of the ambulance was partly the result of the previous efforts to raise the Irish Papal Brigade in the service of Rome against the French and Italians.

Recruitment was restricted by the threatened enforcement of the Foreign Enlistment Act of 1819. The ambulance would circumvent the legislation, draw philanthropic support and offer useful practical aid to the French while avoiding the taint of treasonable ulterior motives. A subsequent gathering of suitably respectable, mildly nationalist Francophile medics, bandage-dressers and stretcher-bearers—including, unsurprisingly, perhaps a fair quota of Fenians—met in the autumn of 1870 in Dublin to prepare for dispatch to Le Havre. At 400-strong, for the staffing of four ambulances, the unit was implausibly large but provided adequate cover for the organisation of a breakaway volunteer corps of soldiers. They were commanded by a scion of the Waters Kirwan family of Galway who was an ex-British Army officer and a keen sympathiser of the Fenians. He was later active in Home Rule

circles before emigrating to Canada, where he achieved high rank in the army and helped stifle Louis Riel's 1885 Northwest rebellion. Captain Martin Waters Kirwan took command of a 100-strong segment of the 'ambulance' once in France, formed into a company and attached to the 2nd Regiment Étranger (the Legion at this time having dwindled to only a couple of regiments). Kirwan's staff was complemented by a medic released by the ambulance, Dr Macken, the Legion veteran Frank McAlevy and the former Fenians Terence Byrne and Martin Carey. The ambivalence, incompetence and privation of life in the Regiment Étranger during the winter of 1870/1 did not entirely destroy the morale of the Irish company under Kirwan. The support of provincial dignitaries and the wonderment of the rural peasantry, combined with the action of engagements with Prussian troops and examples made by the French, such as the execution of a Polish soldier for selling some of his kit, ensured that mutinous talk was kept to a minimum. The Irish proved capable enough, despite hunger, dysentery and frostbite, and fought well with surprisingly few casualties at Montbelliard, covering thereafter the retreat to Besançon until the armistice in February 1871. The ambulance under a Dr Baxter remained in Le Havre after the departure of Kirwan's company in October 1870, but little else is known of their subsequent activities, though it contained some august names such as Thomas More Madden, the famous Irish gynaecologist son of R. R. Madden, and Charles William McCarthy, who became a renowned surgeon in Australia in later years. The majority of Kirwan's men returned to Ireland at the cessation of hostilities, wary of being accused of being mercenaries, and only one individual, Lieutenant B. Cotter, chose to return with the Regiment to Algeria.



A flamboyantly dressed élite French force, but as a foreigner he was only able to join the French Foreign Legion. (National Museum of Ireland)

James Stephens, forever trying to re-ingratiate himself into Fenian circles since his fall from grace in the mid-1860s, had also responded to pressure from his supporters in Ireland to form an Irish unit in support of the French at the outbreak of the war. This, however, appears to have had little tangible effect other than a mooted drawing together of the divided Fenian movement. Instead, Stephens travelled to Paris alone and attempted to engage the embattled government of the French Republic.

A second London Irish group

Besides Kirwan's outfit, there was one other group of Irishmen, some of them Fenians, who took part in the Franco-Prussian conflict in the ranks of the French Foreign Legion. This group appears to have been organised by some of the London Irish, possibly prompted by the local IRB. By the time Kirwan's volunteers had arrived, most of this group had already returned to England under a cloud owing to their 'ingenuity' in supplementing meagre French military rations. Bernard Molloy, James Lysaght Finigan and Edmund O'Donovan were among the 40 or so who remained with the Legion and who served until the war ended.

Although not known to have been a Fenian, Molloy had already served with the Papal Zouaves (attaining the rank of captain) when he joined the Legion.

Although Finigan was a middle-class, Liverpool-Irish tea merchant, he had Fenian connections and military ambitions. He had formerly volunteered for the Papal Zouaves and with the outbreak of war enlisted at Tours with the Legion, where he quickly recognised O'Donovan, who was serving under an assumed name. O'Donovan was a Trinity-educated journalist, recruited into the IRB by O'Donovan Rossa. During the 1860s he was head-centre of a circle of Trinity students and was imprisoned on several occasions for his activities. Although O'Donovan doubted the wisdom of the 1867 rising, he participated and subsequently escaped to France. According to Finigan, many of the Irish Legionaries had also experienced 'troublesome times on the hillsides of Ireland' and spent time in 'British dungeons'. The Irish suffered heavy casualties during the winter campaign and were involved in the French defeat at the second battle of Orléans in December 1870. Finigan and O'Donovan were captured, with the latter being sent to Bavaria as a prisoner-of-war. Finigan later entered parliament as a Parnellite, while O'Donovan subsequently became a distinguished journalist, losing his life in 1883 covering the Sudan campaign.



After 1900, neo-Fenians made common cause with Germany. W. Hatherell's depiction shows Roger Casement recruiting among Irish POWs for Germany's 'Irish Brigade'. Only 52 men answered the call. (Mansell Collection)

End of a tradition

The Franco-Prussian War witnessed the end of an Irish tradition of French military service that stretched back to the seventeenth century. A considerable number of those who served were Fenians, motivated by Francophile sentiment, Jacobite romanticism or a desire to acquire military training. After the defeat of the second empire of Napoleon III, Irishmen continued to serve in the Legion, though in smaller numbers. The most notable among this later group was the Corkonian Michael MacWhite, who served with the Legion in France, Greece and Turkey during the Great War and was awarded the Croix de Guerre three times before embarking on a 30-year-long career as an Irish diplomat. MacWhite, like his Fenian Legionnaire predecessors, fought against the Hohenzollerns. Indeed, in his dotage and after a long career as a journalist, adventurer, Fenian and Parnellite lieutenant, J. J. O'Kelly remained a strong supporter of France in 1914. In contrast, after 1900 neo-Fenians made common cause with

Germany, though Roger Casement could induce only 52 men to join his German 'Irish Brigade', in contrast to the many thousands of Irishmen who had volunteered for French service in previous centuries.

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Further reading:

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C. Richards, *The hand of Captain Danjou: Camerone and the French Foreign Legion in Mexico* (Ramsbury, 2005).