

# MY FAMILY AND THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR

BY ROBERT MORROW



Dr. W.R. MacDermott 1839 - 1918

## Poyntzpass & the Civil War

The American Civil War was a bloody conflict fought from 1861 to 1865 between the United States and the Confederate States of America, war having broken out after several Southern states seceded from the Union forming the Confederacy. 200,000 Irishmen fought in the war, and like many other places in Ireland, Poyntzpass sent a number of her sons to shoulder muskets for the cause of their adopted homes.

Hostilities began on April 12<sup>th</sup> 1861 as a consequence of General P.G.T Beauregard opening fire upon Fort Sumter due to the refusal of the Union garrison there to surrender. The war had a number of causes, and the oft-quoted cause, slavery, is but one of them. The issue of slavery did play a part, but it wasn't the issue of slavery alone that caused the war; taxes and Northern over-reach were by far more contentious, and this because of the American principle of *states' rights*. Irishmen who fought did so for many different reasons, but above all it was out of loyalty to their adopted homes, either trying to maintain the Union or secure Southern independence.

Irish people had been migrating to America since the 1600s, but much of the migration before 1800 was from Ulster. This earlier migration consisted mostly of 'Scotch-Irish' or 'Ulster-Scots' people, whose ancestors had arrived from Scotland during the 17<sup>th</sup> Century Plantation of Ulster. One such immigrant to America, Jeremiah Morrow, was described in 1750 as "*Irish by birth, Scotch by blood, and Covenanter by faith*". These early migrants from Ireland had proven their mettle during the War of Independence, many of them serving under Washington and gaining great respect. Washington even commissioned a flag for the Irishmen of his army; a red flag, with a harp in the centre, and '*The Independence of Ireland*' written above the harp in shining white letters. However, there were also many Irishmen in the Loyalist forces during the war. At least two soldiers in the British Army had local connections; among the British troops taken prisoner at Saratoga after the surrender of General John Burgoyne to the Americans was James Kennedy of Acton, and John Morrow, an ancestor of mine from the local area, served with the Queen's Rangers before being resettled in Nova Scotia. Another ancestor of mine, John Roy MacGregor, was with the Black Watch, although not from Poyntzpass. Interestingly, the regiment with the most Morrows in it was the Royal Highland Emigrants, which was raised in the Scottish Highlands. It was after 1840 that the "Famine Irish" began arriving in America in large numbers.

The Dispensary Doctor in Poyntzpass from 1867 to 1918 was William Robert MacDermott. Born in 1839, MacDermott completed his medical degree in Trinity College Dublin in 1860, but mystery surrounds his whereabouts from then till his appointment as Dispensary Doctor for the Poyntzpass District in 1867. There is a strong local tradition, supported by MacDermott's own writing, that some of those years were spent in America and that he served for a time as a surgeon in the Confederate Army during the American Civil War. As to why MacDermott chose to emigrate to the American South, I don't know. But many Irishmen did, and there was a strong Irish community in Missouri where MacDermott seems to have settled. Although I've been unable to find any William MacDermott, William McDermott, William McDermod (or indeed any other variation of that name), in Confederate service as a *surgeon*, the records are so far from complete that this is not surprising. However, I have found *soldiers* by those names in Missouri units; and it's likely he performed his surgeries as a Private without the title of 'surgeon'. In MacDermott's book *The Green Republic* written under the pseudonym 'A. P. A. O'Gara', around 1900, there are many references to the American Civil War. The story is narrated by young Atty O'Gara who's come from Missouri to visit his uncle, the senior Dr. O'Gara, the doctor in the village of Jigglestree in rural Ireland, at the turn of the century. 'Jigglestree' is an exact replica of Poyntzpass and the senior Dr. O'Gara is certainly MacDermott himself.

Early in the book Dr. O'Gara mentions to his nephew Atty that he had been in America and served in the Confederate army in Missouri during the Civil War; "*My uncle never gave me an account of his experiences in America during, and previous to, the Civil War, but I knew that McCoy's connection with him dated from childhood, and that the latter had saved his life in some skirmish in Missouri. As a thing not to be kept a secret, my uncle told this and, moreover, that it was McCoy who had induced him to cut the infernal nonsense, as he called the military service of the Confederate States*". O'Gara's cart-driver McCoy, his long-term companion, who conveys them round the area, also mentions that he fought for his State in the Confederate army; "*Yes, sir. I went, Master Atty, with my State in the old days...*". McCoy even remembers seeing the famous Stonewall Jackson "*Well, Colonel, spirit would stand to him, and for a minute he minded me of old Stonewall with his pecker up*". Throughout the rest of it other references to America are made, such as the connection the Maquade

and McQueen families have to the United States. However, it isn't until later on in the book, near the end in the chapter called *'Megillo's Corner'* (obviously named for the real-life Magill's Corner) where a Union veteran is introduced. Leveson Megillo is his name, and he speaks to young Atty O'Gara about his service in the Union army during the Civil War. He recounts that he served under Sherman but lost his hand at the battle of Chickamauga in September 1863, when he was in his twenties; *"I served in the Civil War in America, under Sherman, and lost the hand at Chattanooga..."*. So, in *The Green Republic* alone can be found three characters who were involved in the Civil War, two Confederate (O'Gara and McCoy) and one Union (Leveson Megillo).

Since the *Jiggstreet* of *The Green Republic* is an exact mirror of Poyntzpass in 1900 and many characters and locations were identifiable at the time as real-life local people and places, the references to the Civil War must also surely reflect real people and events. I can see no reason why an Irish country doctor (MacDermott), writing a book in 1900 should have inserted so many references to the American Civil War unless he and people he knew had served in it and the area had been affected by it.

Another local figure who had involvement in the Civil War was Isaac Marston. Marston was born in Poyntzpass and emigrated to America during the famine, eventually ending up in Michigan. There he became Attorney General for the State and when conscription was brought in halfway through the war Marston had to carry out the process, which he detested. Although Marston had no involvement in the fighting, he did have involvement in the less-talked about aspects of the war, and he was active on the home front.

### The Irish Volunteer – Hugh Murphy



#### John Murphy

My ancestors, however, did have involvement in the fighting, and it would cost one of them his life. Hugh Murphy was born in 1840 in Lissummon to John Murphy and Agnes McCamley. John and Agnes Murphy were my great-great-great-grandparents so Hugh was my great-great-grand uncle.

Hugh and his sisters left Lissummon in 1859 or 1860. His younger brother Frank, was then only an infant, but would have met Hugh before he emigrated. Frank grew up in Lissummon and was my great-great-grandfather. The Murphys settled in Pittsfield, Massachusetts and *'Murphy Place'* there is named for them. Thankfully, we have all of Hugh's military documents, from the moment he volunteered to the moment he sacrificed his life, and also the documents pertaining to the pension his mother received after Hugh's death.



**21<sup>st</sup> Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry Regiment Flag.**

When the Civil War broke out in 1861 Hugh Murphy joined the 21<sup>st</sup> Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry Regiment. They were first attached to Burnside's Division and made their way down to North Carolina in order to attack rebel fortifications there. The 21<sup>st</sup> were the first regiment to plant their flag on the heights at New Bern and were reported to have fought valiantly.

After this they were attached to the Army of the Potomac under General George B. McClellan. McClellan's men had great respect for him, especially the Irish. In many songs written by the Irish during the Civil War, McClellan features prominently. But he wasn't the best tactician. On one occasion Confederate Maj. Gen. John B. Magruder was able to fool him by marching the same company of soldiers around a wooded area four or five times in order to deceive him as to the size of his force. McClellan subsequently called a retreat. The 21<sup>st</sup> took part in the Second Battle of Bull Run (also known as Second Manassas) and at the devastating Battle of Antietam, the single bloodiest day of fighting in America's history.

The most devastating battle for the 21<sup>st</sup> was the Battle of Chantilly in 1862 in Virginia. During the battle the 21<sup>st</sup> were ordered to group with the 51<sup>st</sup> New York; so, led by Col. Clark, they advanced into the woods as a huge storm was raging. The 21<sup>st</sup> met another unit in the woods and, assuming it was the New Yorkers, Col. Clark sent Lieutenant Rice forward to make contact and ordered the 21<sup>st</sup> to stand easy. However, as Lt. Rice approached he realised too late that the troops they'd stopped in front of were men from Jubal Early's Brigade, a Confederate force. No sooner had Clark realised this than the Rebels sent a volley. Clark ordered an immediate retreat back out onto the open fields where they were then ordered by Gen. Philip Kearny to fill a

gap in the Union line. Gen. Kearny called an advance, but was shot during the charge and killed. This halted both the Union and Confederate advances and there was a stand-off at musket points.



### **My Great-Great-Grandfather Frank Murphy and Family**

Eventually the Rebels charged the Union ranks, and this was to be the first and only time the 21<sup>st</sup> ever drew the bayonet. The hand to hand fighting was bloody and ruthless. Eventually it came to an end in the mud and the rain and the battle proved indecisive, with no clear victor.

However, it was to prove a smaller engagement, known as *The Battle of Globe Tavern*, which dealt the final blow to the 21<sup>st</sup>. This battle was more of a skirmish, and was fought between a Confederate force, under Generals Hill and Beauregard, and a Union force, under General Warren. On August 18th 1864 Warren's men entrenched about a mile from Globe Tavern, when Confederate troops under Gen. William Mahone (whose grandfather was Irish) unleashed a flanking attack looking for weak spots in the Union line. Many of the troops made a retreat, but the Confederates could not push through and were driven back and finally withdrew on the 24<sup>th</sup> August 1864. 251 men were killed in total. One of those men was Hugh Murphy. He was 24. He was shot in the side by a minié ball and died the following day.

After this the 21<sup>st</sup> was consolidated with the 36<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts Volunteers, and then in June 1865 with the 56<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts Volunteers before finally being mustered out of service in July 1865. Hugh's mother, Agnes, received a pension from the United States Government for the rest of her life. My grandmother Bridhe was born in 1934, 69 years after the war's end. She remembers well her grandfather, Frank Murphy. It was his brother Hugh who died at Globe Tavern and this fascinates me. The war didn't happen in the distant past; in fact, there are still children of Civil War soldiers alive and well in America today, and grandchildren, grandnieces, and grandnephews here in Ireland.

### **Irish Confederates – The Shiels family**

The Shiels (or Sheals/Shields) family of Poyntzpass were well known, as is their striking obelisk in the Catholic Graveyard. They were also my ancestors. The Catholic Church itself is built on land which used to be part of the farm of Neal Shiels. He signed the indenture in 1792, as did Michael Shiels, John Shiels and Bernard Shiels. Neal Shiels was a tenant of Alexander Thomas Stewart, who donated his land for the building

of the Church. I imagine Shiels was well compensated because he signed the indenture and if there had been any disgruntlement then I'm sure I would have heard of it!



### **Sheals Family Obelisk**

The Shiels family had moved down to Brannock and Aughtantaraghan during the time of the building of the canal (so goes my family's story) in the 1730s. Needless to say, they were Poyntzpass to the core and were one of the oldest families in the area. Their ancestors consist today of those descending from the Murphy family (which includes myself and my siblings). During the famine in the 1840s many of the Sheils family emigrated to the United States. James Shiels was my great-great-granduncle. It was he who got into a dispute with the Cassidy family in Aughtantaraghan over the 'Wedding Field' the story of which was the subject of an article in an earlier edition of 'Before I forget ...'. Jemmie Shiels was portrayed in the article as a cantankerous man but as the sole remaining representative of this long-established family I feel he was only standing up for his family's rights. It has been passed down to me that several of Jemmie Shiels's uncles and bothers had left Poyntzpass for the American South in the 1840s and when the war broke out several enlisted and fought in the Confederate army. After the war some of the Shiels family moved north to Philadelphia and became stonemasons. In 1869, not four years after the war, they sent home a great obelisk they had carved. At its base is the inscription; SHEALS, AUGHANTARAGHAN, 1869, Philad.

This obelisk was carved and sent home by Irishmen who fought in the Confederate army, who after the war moved North to people they once considered enemies; I can think of no better example to display how great and civilised American society can be than this tale. It shows how men escaping hardships which forced them from their homes settled in a land which would take them as adopted children. Then there they toiled and worked, and when war came they took up the sword for their adopted home which had given them freedom and compassion. Yet after the war between brothers, there was chivalry and respect.

We would do well to remember them, and I hope we will.