Address upon the dedication of the General Corcoran Historical Marker, North and Main Streets, Fairfax, Virginia.

October 19, 2013

Michael Corcoran was born in Carrowkeel, Ballymote, County Sligo, Ireland, in 1827. The name "Corcoran" means "purple" or "red-haired," although our man was not: he stood six feet two inches, and was blue-eyed and brown-haired. He was the only child of a retired British army officer who had served in India and Mary McDonagh, who claimed descent from Patrick Sarsfield.

His family originated in the Irish midlands, but was displaced to the poorer Mayo-Sligo area by the Cromwellian Plantation of the 1650s. Choosing Connacht over Hell, they became tenants on the estate of Lord Lorton, the Earl of Kingston. In 1667 the King-Harmans had acquired 23,000 acres in the Counties Roscommon, Sligo, and Cork. The expropriation of 90% of Ireland's lands during the seventeenth century reduced the native population to virtual slavery and their forced dependency of their 8-9 million descendants upon one cheap but plentiful crop, the potato. This theft of their natural inheritance enabled their colonial masters to live in luxury while they were forced to endure a series of food crises, climaxing in the Great Famine of 1845-48. That predictable catastrophe was its worst along the western seaboard, including Sligo. Thus what the teenage Corcoran witnessed of the pitiless degradation of his people left an indelible impression upon him that remained until his death.

Just as that catastrophe was striking the tenants on the King-Harman estate, his father passed away. To support his mother, he took the immediate option of a paying job with the Royal Irish Constabulary. He was assigned to Creeslough, County Donegal. His main obligations there were to break up illicit *poitín* stills and supervise the evictions of his destitute neighbors.

So: young Michael Corcoran was presented with the first grave moral crisis of his life. Witnessing the starvation of the poor of Donegal, and conscience-stricken by his own role as protector of the system that ensured it,

he took the difficult but honorable course. He first turned his police training to the cause of his people by joining the Ribbonmen, a locally organized formation which harassed landlords and their agents. The object of this "terrorist" group was the disruption of the social Darwinism that dictated the humiliation of his people. The pressures produced by his double role soon reached a crisis: he had to resign his position in the police.

In apparent hopelessness for his own future at the age of 22 and "in great sorrow," as he later recalled, he took a boat from Sligo Bay bound for Ellis Island. Starting as a post office clerk, he soon made his way into the burgeoning Irish political network in New York City. He moved from the office of the city registrar to the service of one John Heaney, owner of the Hibernian Hall, the central meeting place for the New York Irish. This hall functioned as a social, military, and political center: hosting dances, military drills for the 69th Regiment, New York Militia. This was composed of civilian volunteers charged with the maintenance of public order. Corcoran soon found himself a captain, and when called upon to quell the quarantine riots on Staten Island in 1858, acquitted himself so well that the next year he was promoted to the rank of colonel.

By this time he was a well-known political organizer in Tammany Hall. He could "deliver" the Irish vote in the Fourteenth Ward. When Heaney died in 1854, Corcoran took over the running of the Hibernian Hall, and married his patron's niece. When John O'Mahony founded the Fenians (the Irish Republican Brotherhood) in New York in 1858, Corcoran was among the first to join this organization dedicated to a military solution to the Irish question. An early venue for its meetings was the Hibernian Hall.

Corcoran met the second major moral challenge of his career when, as colonel of the 69th, he refused to parade his regiment in honor of the visit to New York in October 1860, of the nineteen-year-old Prince of Wales (Queen Victoria's son and the future King Edward VII). To justify this refusal Corcoran offered a legal quibble: no military unit was permitted appear more than once annually, and his had already performed that duty. But the moral and political

reasons were plain to all, especially to the Irish-American community. They, like him, had vivid memories of the recent Famine and its aftermath (there were between twenty-five and sixty thousand immigrants per annum pouring into America from impoverished Ireland at the time). From coast to coast they applauded. They sang the impromptu ballad:

"The Irish Volunteers"

When the Prince of Wales came over here and made a bubbaboo,

Oh, everyone turned out, you know, in gold and tinsel too.

But when the good old Sixty-Ninth didn't like these lords or peers,

They wouldn't give a damn for kings, the Irish volunteers!

We love the land of Liberty, its laws we will revere,

"But the devil take nobility!" says the Irish volunteer.

The ballad soon passed into obscurity, but not so the memory. Almost half a century later, it reappeared in a dramatic and unexpected way. The 1908 London Olympics was marked by a bitter US-UK rivalry. This was partly a class conflict between "proletarian" Americans and English "gentlemen." It focused on charges of unfairness in the adjudication of many events. Irish athletes resident in Ireland, moreover, were required to compete under the Union Jack. Irish Americans added to these political stakes by, first, sending seventeen athletes from the Irish American Athletic Club of New York, then, by taking home over thirty medals, and third, by insulting King Edward VII. Recalling the events of 1860, the American team violated the protocols of the Opening Ceremony by refusing, as they passed the royal box, to dip the Stars and Stripes. To this day—as we saw at the 2012 London Olympics—the American team still honors a tradition that originates in Michael Corcoran's truculent gesture.

Cocroran's public refusal made headlines that the authorities could not allow to pass. He was arrested and summoned before a court martial. But as the hearing was about to get under way, Providence—in the form of the shelling of

Fort Sumpter—intervened. President Lincoln issued his first call for the defense of the Union (15 April, 1861). Recognizing Corcoran's ability to summon thousands of Irish immigrants to the cause, the court martial was cancelled. So Corcoran mustered his 69th regiment under two flags, the Stars and Stripes and the green regimental bearing the inscription *Riamh Nár Dhruid ó Spairn Lann* [Who Never Shirked the Clash of Swords] and the Fenian sunburst, left New York on 23 April for the war front. This was no mean feat at the time, since not everyone appreciated their service: one Yankee, whose interests they were serving, was overheard saying, "The city is shut of a load of Irish rubbish."

His regiment served three months in Northern Virginia. He supervised the construction of Fort Corcoran (in what is now Roslyn) to protect Washington, and led his men at the First Battle of Bull Run (21 July) where he lost almost two hundred to death, wounds, or capture. Leading from the front, Corcoran was himself captured by the Confederates, and imprisoned in Richmond, Charleston, Columbia, and Salisbury. He was held captive for thirteen months. The hardships he endured gave him a permanent health condition, so that he subsequently suffered from fainting spells. While in prison he had the leisure to write a personal memoir. Echoing his ancestor's last words at the Battle of Landen, he wrote, "One half of my heart is Erin's, the other half is America's. God bless America, and ever preserve her, the asylum of all the oppressed of the earth, is the sincere prayer of my heart." Jefferson Davis recognized the quality of his character and offered him parole if he swore not to resume arms against the South. And in accordance with his moral principles (the slave-holding South was an ally of England's) Corcoran refused. He had met the third moral challenge of what was to be his short life.

He became, by chance, a hostage in the *Enchantress* Affair, and in turn, part of the prisoner exchange, on 15 August, 1862, in the resolution of that particular crisis. Upon his release, and in recognition of the principles that had informed his public and personal decisions, President Lincoln invited him to dinner at the White House. Corcoran was now a universally admired war hero. He addressed huge crowds outside the Willard Hotel in Washington, DC, in Philadelphia, New Jersey, and on Broadway. In these speeches he expressed the

fervor of his devotion to the Union, while also asserting that army life was a great training ground for the struggle that would follow in his native land. He was more charismatic and popular that the more famous Thomas Francis Meagher, with whom he had a personal rivalry. Meagher's troops were heavily engaged at Antietam, Fredericksburg, and Chancellorville and took heavy losses (1,200 in all). These burdens led to his eventual resignation. Corcoran, on the other hand, who was involved in less hazardous engagements, was appointed brigadier-general of the United States Volunteers, and authorized to form a new brigade which became known as Corcoran's Irish Legion.

With the support of Archbishop John Hughes, Corcoran was able to recruit 3,500 men in New York for his Irish Legion. Many of them—perhaps one third—were sworn Fenians. By now he was a senior figure in the Irish Republican Brotherhood, and elected to its five-member central committee. Second in command to General King in the Army of the Potomac, he led his Legion through the front, taking part in battles at the Deserted House, Nansemond River, and Suffolk (April 1863), thwarting the Southern advance on Norfolk. In this campaign, his legion lost 800 men, suffered 900 wounded, with four receiving the Congressional Medal of Honor. This phase of his career was celebrated in many ballads such as "The Boys That Wore the Green":

Colonel Corcoran led the Sixty-Ninth on that eventful day:

I wish the Prince of Wales were he to see him in the fray.

His charge upon the batteries was a most glorious scene,

With gallant New York firemen, and the boys that wore the green.

In April 1863 he was involved in an unseemly fracas in Virginia. He apparently refused to identify himself to one Lt. Col. Edgar A. Kimball, a member of the 9th Regiment, New York Volunteers. Recognizing his brogue, this night sentry called him "a damned Irish son of a bitch." A physical confrontation ensued which resulted in Kimball's death. For this indiscretion Corcoran was court martialed for the second time. But once again, faced with wartime emergency, and in consideration of his value as a leader of men, the charges

were never pursued. Later that year he was placed in command of the defense of Washington.

On 21 December Corcoran was riding back to his lodgings at the Court House from a first-hand inspection of the line at Fairfax Station. But a quarter of a mile from the end of this four-mile ride, his horse suddenly bolted, throwing Corcoran. He was found in a trailside ditch, his skull fractured. He died a few hours later from a brain hemorrhage in Gunnell House, beside which the historical marker unveiled today stands.

His body was brought back to New York City where it lay in state at City Hall before burial in Calvary Cemetery, Long Island. In 1914 a memorial tablet was installed in the Armory on Lexington Avenue, New York City; in 1990 a new gravestone was installed above his remains; and in August 2006 the Mayor of New York, Michael Bloomberg, unveiled Ireland's national monument to the Fighting 69th in Ballymote, County Sligo, Corcoran's birthplace. Around its base is the inscription, "New York, Ballymote, Creeslough, Bull Run."

Had Lt. General Michael Corcoran survived the war, like Thomas Francis Meagher, he might have become Americanized and lost his appetite for the liberation of Ireland. There is no doubt that in his premature death the Irish Republican Brotherhood lost a true leader. While he was replaceable in the war convulsing the United States, had he lived on, he would have provided what the Fenian rising of 1867 lacked: a man with an abiding passion for justice, extraordinary charisma, leadership skills, and pertinent military experience.

Lt. General Michael Corcoran, like other Irish officers of the Union forces in the Civil War—Cols. Patrick Kelly, Matthew Murphy, and Generals Philip Sheridan and Thomas A. Smyth—and the estimated two hundred thousand Irish-born men they commanded won for Irish-Americans a new respect in this nation. Against nativist prejudice, participation in the War Between the States vindicated Irish Americans' claim to full recognition of citizenship. That savage experience purged most of them of the desire for another war. Even so, many of them retained elements of their ethnic loyalty and concern for Ireland's liberty that was to reappear with consequences during the Irish War of Independence.

On this, the sesquicentennial year of his death—aged but 36—we remember this defender of the American Union, distinguished son of Ireland, and champion of social and political justice. Like Jesus in the desert, he suffered but resisted three temptations to the integrity of his moral vision. On the Day of Judgment, to which we will be summoned by his stern patron, the Archangel Michael, we will hear the vindication of the name of Michael Corcoran. No time server, he is among those who before their own career interests put historical justice first. Meanwhile, we are grateful for his moral example and (accepting the terminal superiority of divine judgment) pray*, Go ndéana Dia trócaire ar a h-anam dhíis* [May God have mercy on his faithful soul].

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