

The Return of Dr. Gallagher

By John Ridge

The festivities celebrating the Statue of Liberty's Centennial briefly focused our attention on the hundreds of immigrant success stories, big and small. But the centennial year for the statue also marked another less known anniversary--the return of Doctor Thomas Gallagher in 1896. It was the second time that Gallagher had entered the port. Unlike the fireworks exploding over the harbor in 1886 or 1986, Dr. Gallagher's return was marked with anguish and grief. Ninety years later, he is virtually forgotten. This brief account of his life reflects some of the newspaper accounts of the time.

Early Years in Brooklyn

Thomas Gallagher was an "Irishman born outside his country." He was born of Donegal parents in Glasgow in 1851. The family emigrated to America and settled in the Greenpoint section of Brooklyn. The neighborhood was a busy one at the time, filled with shipyards and other maritime activities. Consequently, many Irish were attracted to the area because of its employment opportunities. Considerable numbers came from the Northern counties, particularly the Glens of Antrim.

Soon after his naturalization, Gallagher entered Bellevue Medical College and graduated with honors three years later. He opened his medical practice in Brooklyn, on Manhattan Avenue, in the Greenpoint section he knew so well. He soon had a lucrative practice, with an income of \$8,000 a year. This was quite a sum in the 1880s. Because of his activities in the Irish nationalist society, Clan na Gael, Gallagher



was particularly popular with the Irish in Greenpoint, who then composed more than 35% of the neighborhood's population. Unlike many adopted citizens of the upper middle class, he did not attempt to conceal himself in the background. Any casual reader of the Irish-American weeklies of the time would have recognized his name from the various accounts of public meetings and annual picnics of the nationalist Irish groups in the late 1870s and early 1880s.

The climate of the Irish "physical force" nationalists both in Ireland and New York was in a demoralized state at that time. The Fenian movement, which at times had offered the promise of independence for Ireland, had collapsed in a sorry tangle of miscalculated rebellion, conflicting factions and ill-conceived or ill-fated military excursions in the late 1860s. The New York nationalists, chief among them the Clan na Gael, had experienced disappointment with their past programs and were willing to grasp for any straw in the hope of somehow reviving the struggle for Irish nationality.

The invention of dynamite by Alfred Nobel was regarded by many of these veteran nationalists as the straw that just might break the British hold on Ireland. It was argued that all previous rebellions were contained on Irish soil and that the British were

unaware of the seriousness of Irish political aspirations. A considerable number of Irish-Americans in New York, many of them residents (like Gallagher) of Brooklyn's Eastern District neighborhoods (Greenpoint, Williamsburgh, Bushwick, etc.), considered it time to bring the "war" directly to Britain. The Eastern District neighborhoods of Brooklyn became a well-known hotbed for the "physical force" movement.

Ill-Fated Mission

Men of science, like Dr. Gallagher, were particularly valuable to the "physical force" Irish nationalists. His ability to prepare chemicals and his access to them resulted in his selection as an instructor of classes in the use of explosives. His Greenpoint office became a rendezvous for those selected to make the journey to Britain to plant explosives in government buildings. One of those chosen to undertake the mission was Thomas Clarke, later to be a signer of the Easter Proclamation and a key figure in the 1916 Rising. (Clarke lived for several years in Greenpoint following his release from imprisonment).

Gallagher made a journey to Britain in late 1882 and again in the Spring of the following year. Playing the role of an ordinary tourist, he discovered that most of the planned targets, including the House of Commons, were well guarded by night and day. Consequently, lesser government targets were considered. Although he had not directly participated in any explosions, he was arrested by British authorities in his hotel room.

Papers like the "Irish World" rushed to his defense:

It is an easy matter to place dynamite in the room of a person who is looked upon as dangerous to the welfare of the English government. Scotland Yard has men in its employ for that purpose.

Gallagher was brought to trial on July 13, 1883 on charges of treason and felony, the former charge being related to his Scottish birth. The jury, after deliberating for an hour and a half, found him guilty and the Lord Chief Justice sentenced him to penal servitude for life. Also sentenced to life imprisonment was Thomas Clarke.

Agitation for His Release

New York did not forget its Irish doctor, but a constant barrage of appeals to the British Government fell on deaf ears and the years dragged on for Gallagher and other Irish Americans imprisoned under the harshest conditions.

In 1891, a released prisoner, Michael Markins, gave an account of Dr. Gallagher's privations in prison:

The worst treated man in Chatham prison is the Irish patriot, Dr. Gallagher of Brooklyn, who is sentenced for life. He has already gone through enough hardship to kill half a dozen men. His occupation is the hardest and most degrading work in the prison. Last Winter he broke his leg and the first occupation he was placed at after coming out of the hospital was that of drawing stones in a wagon with four other political prisoners. Two of the convicts were chained to the wagon, while



others had rope over their shoulders. A barbarian would sympathize with these poor men to see them.

In the mid 1890s, the Amnesty Association of Ireland and Great Britain was formed and succeeded in attaching itself to many prominent people in Ireland and Britain who would not ordinarily have concerned themselves about the fate of a few obscure Irish Americans. In late February of 1896, a mass meeting of the New York Irish was held in the Grand Opera House on West 23rd Street. James F. Egan, commissioned by the Amnesty Association to enlist the support of New Yorkers, presented a report of Gallagher's conditions to an audience that included many of the doctor's old friends and acquaintances:

"There is a big letter "M" over the cell door of Dr. Thomas Gallagher," said Mr. Egan. "Dr. Gallagher was a citizen of Greenpoint, Long Island. He was as fine a specimen of manly development as I ever saw when I met him in 1884. He was a mental and physical wreck when I left Portland Prison. He has been a hopeless lunatic since 1887. The letter 'M' over his cell door tells the visitor that the inmate is mad. The poor doctor sits in his cell all day long gibbering and laughing the terrible laugh of a maniac. Most of the time he is in a straightjacket, though he is

never violent."

Following a resolution of the U.S. Congress in his behalf, and the continued agitation of the Amnesty Association and American Embassy, the broken Gallagher was released in August 1896. The Doctor was still a man of principle, despite more than 13 years of imprisonment. He refused to accept the customary "six sovereigns" given to released prisoners. In the company of Dr. McBride of the Amnesty Association, he headed for the American Liner "St. Paul," destined for New York.

The Welcome Home

When word was received in America that Thomas Gallagher was on the way home, the New York Irish Political Prisoners Association met at the parlor of the Hotel Metropole to make arrangements for his reception. It had long been the tradition to welcome released or escaped Irish prisoners to the city. Huge public receptions had been given for Thomas Francis Meagher, John Mitchell, the Catalpa escapees and many others. The committee hoped for a similar reception for Gallagher.

Although reports of the doctor's mental condition had long circulated around New York, the New York Irish expected that the fresh air of American freedom would be enough cure for all his ills. The Irish World published a poem in anticipation of Gallagher's arrival:

Through many weary years
they've worn
the galling ball and chain,
Many a direful vigil kept
till night was on the wane.

The only music in their ears,
the rustling of the key,
The jailor's surly tones at
eve,
their only lullaby.

Yet a splendid vision met them
oft in the weary night,
Bringing to every darkened sense
a flood of blessed night.
They saw a younger Ireland rise
far o'er the Western main,
that in the future years would
break
The older nation's chain.

The reception committee was composed of all the wings of Irish Nationalist thought, from the Clan na Gael, to the Ancient Order of Hibernians--even the Irish Parliamentary Party in the House of Commons. The welcoming committee consisted of R. O'Beirne, the Civil War veteran for Clan na Gael, D.V. Clancy of the AOH and Stephen McFarland, the west side dry goods merchant, representing the Irish Nationalists. The three men were chosen to journey out by chartered boat to meet the steamship bearing Gallagher.

The tug containing the reception committee left the battery at 2:30 in the afternoon. In honor of the occasion, the tricolor of green, white and orange (then not in common usage by the Irish societies, other than confirmed Irish republicans) was hauled up to the top of one of the flag poles. With great expectation, they crossed the harbor and went up to the deck of the "St. Paul," where they met Gallagher.

"When they saw him they were shocked beyond measure. Not one of his old friends would have known him. The handsome, stalwart Irishman of thirteen years ago had become almost an old man. His form, still strong, is bent and emaciated. His sunken cheeks are covered with a closely clipped gray beard, and his hair has become but a narrow rim of white about his bald head.



His deepset eyes gleam with the restless light of an unbalanced mind."

Gallagher's brothers James and Michael of Brooklyn were the first to approach the returned immigrant. When the doctor addressed one of the brothers by name and asked for his sister, the hopes of the reception committee rose and General O Beirne advanced and said "Gallagher, I'm glad to see you." Thomas Gallagher immediately drew back in distrust, like a caged man, and a moment later he clenched his fist and began to strike out in all directions. The crew was forced to restrain him and lock him up in his cabin.

In the short sail to the pier on board the St. Paul, the committee became more aware of the full severity of Gallagher's prison treatment. His body was heavily marked with scars and there was evidence that three ribs had been broken--reportedly the effects of his keepers knocking him down and jumping on him.

By the time Dr. Gallagher had entered the waiting carriage with his brothers and sisters, he no longer recognized any of his relations. Word of his condition

Illustrations from John Ridge's Private Collection

quickly filtered out to the Irish New Yorkers waiting outside. The crowd, who had gathered to cheer a returned exile home, watched the horses pull the carriage through their ranks, as though they were watching a passing funeral. They stood in silence, the men taking off their hats in a sad pathetic greeting.

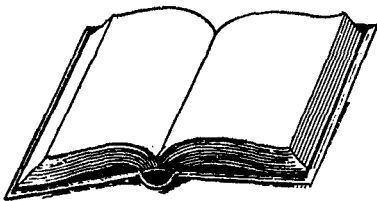
Dr. Albert Warren Ferris, an eminent specialist of mental illness was brought in to care for Gallagher, but his pronouncements confirmed what most of his friends and relatives already suspected:

"He cannot recover. It will never be possible for him to be cared for outside an asylum. His mental condition was due to his treatment. It must have been especially vigorous treatment. The prison officials have treated these men cruelly. Gallagher's condition is worse than death."

Epilogue

Dr. Gallagher lingered in his deluded state in an asylum in Flushing until his death in 1925. As a final tribute, his remains were buried in the Irish Revolutionary Brotherhood plot at Calvary Cemetery in Queens. His brothers and their families continued to live in Brooklyn for many years.

Old Greenpoint has largely changed in ninety years. The Irish have been, for the most part, swallowed up by the arrival of other immigrant groups. The 1980 census shows only two small "tracts", an area of about six blocks each, where the Irish are still the predominant ethnic group. As might be expected, the two tracts lie in the vicinity of the old Irish churches of St. Anthony's and St. Cecelia. No one is left to recall the memory of Manhattan Avenue's Irish doctor and his tragic life.



THE JOURNAL OF AMERICAN ETHNIC HISTORY, now in its sixth year of publication, continues to offer interesting articles about all aspects of the ethnic experience. Subscription to the journal includes membership in the Immigration History Society and members also receive a semi-annual Immigration History Newsletter which "offers bibliographic essays and information on research." For further information, contact: Ronald H. Bayor, Editor, Journal of American Ethnic History, School of Social Sciences, Georgia Institute of Technology, Atlanta, GA 30332.

Preserving Records

What happens to records of County Associations and other New York Irish organizations? Until recently, they remained buried in attics and basements of members, or were just thrown out as the paper began to accumulate. Several different types of efforts are now being made to preserve them.

The Irish American Cultural Center of New York (IACCNY) recently announced the establishment of a IACCNY library and Museum. John Concannon, author of *The Irish American "Who's Who"* and *"Irish Directory"* was chosen as curator and archivist. The goal of the project is to collect, organize and preserve the records of Irish American organizations, which are an invaluable source of New York and American Irish history. If your organization has records that it would like to contribute, or for further information, write to: Edward McKenna, Irish American Cultural Center of New York, P.O. Box 1218,, Grand Central Post Office, New York, New York 10163.

The archival staff of the Labor Archives of the Tamiment Institute Library, New York University, periodically has outreach programs in which they try to help labor organizations determine which of their records

and minute books have historical value, and how to organize and preserve them. Most recently, this was done for some of the numerous performing arts unions. Perhaps someone will do the same for Irish organizations.

Mike Devlin of the County Cork Association publishes a handsome monthly newsletter with events and notices of interest, and has begun to explore the possibilities of organizing that association's records. He is also planning, with Anne Canty of the *Irish Echo*, to begin an oral history project, recording the reminiscences and experiences of some of the organizations' older members. For further information, write to: Mike Devlin, County Cork Assoc. 3301 Greenpoint Ave. LIC, NY 11101

Some county organizations include histories in their journals. In the 75th anniversary journal of the Limerick Men's Benevolent and Social Association's, a publication which is dated from 1974, but which recently passed this desk, there are brief biographies of some of its older members, photographs and a brief history of the organization. This is an interesting and effective way of consolidating some county organization records.

Industrial History

There is an annual conference on Industrial History in Lowell Massachusetts which may be of interest to NYIHR members. This year's topic will be "Immigration, Ethnicity and the Industrial Revolution." The 1987 Lowell Conference is being planned in conjunction with the opening of the Patrick J. Mogan Cultural

Center and its important exhibition on the history of Lowell's working class immigrant culture. For further information about the conference and its publications, contact: Robert Weible, Lowell National Historical Park, 169 Merrimack St., Lowell, MA 01852.