

Nursing Sisters in the Civil War: The New York Aspect

BY JAMES HIGGINS

*T*he contributions of Irish American men during the American Civil War are widely known. The total force of



Photo: Sister Cecilia, a member of the Sisters of Mercy as photographed by the Mathew Brady Studio circa 1860–65. She may have been a nursing sister. Courtesy of the National Archives, Still Picture Branch.

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2.3 million men fighting for the North included as many as 150,000 Irish Americans, many of whom were New Yorkers.¹ Prominent military leaders included New Yorkers Michael Corcoran and Thomas F. Meagher. The best known unit of Irish Americans was the famed Irish Brigade from New York City (which initially included the 63rd, 69th and 88th Regiments). Although fewer in number, thousands of Irish Americans such as General Patrick Cleburne supported their homeland in the South. The famed 10th Tennessee, for example, was recruited from Irish settlements in middle Tennessee and had an exemplary fighting record that won respect and admiration.

However, there is another group of Irish Americans who served with as much bravery and distinction. Roman Catholic nuns from at

least twelve separate orders served as nurses on the front, in field hospitals, transport ships and in hospitals behind the lines.² A majority of these nuns were Irish-born emigrants or of Irish extraction.³ Many were from New York.

NURSING IN THE CIVIL WAR

At the beginning of the War, there was no established nursing corps in the U.S. or Confederate armed forces. In fact, nursing was in its infancy. Approximately 9,000 nurses served northern casualties and 1,000 nurses tended the Southern wounded. But the term “nurses” in Civil War terminology had a different meaning from that in modern-day usage. Most nurses had little or nothing to do with the direct care and treatment of patients since few Civil War nurses had the necessary skills. Most of the 3,214 lay nurses who were appointed by Dorothea Dix (the Union Army’s Superintendent of Female Nurses) had few nursing skills. Also included in the total number of nurses were volunteers from the U.S. Sanitary Commission, the Western Sanitary Commission, the U.S. Christian Commission and “colored women” hired under General Orders in 1863 and 1864.⁴ Overall, few of these women had any training in practical nursing skills prior to the War. Indeed, most women employed as nurses were used to cook, clean and do laundry for wounded troops

SISTERS AS SKILLED NURSES

When hostilities broke out in 1861 one of the few sources of trained nurses available and willing to serve were the Catholic sisters. Some of these women had served with Florence Nightingale during the Crimean War.⁵ They had training that was far superior to any other group of women in the country. Sister nurses also had practical experience in running hospitals and caring for the sick and the indigent,

and they typically saw it as their Christian duty to care for the more needy elements of society.

Along with nursing skills and experience, the sisters had other qualities that made them particularly useful to the military and hospital authorities. The sisters belonged to organizations whose very bedrock was good order and discipline. As such, they were obedient to their superiors and higher authority. They took vows of poverty (hence had few if any material wants) and chastity (which made their presence in the wards less of a threat to the moral code of the mid-nineteenth century). The sisters were found to be hardworking, honest in their dealings with the patients and hospital community, and fair in dispensing medicines and supplies. They also possessed administrative skills (gained by running their own schools, orphanages and hospitals) that few women in nineteenth-century America possessed.⁶

The nuns also had their detractors. They had to overcome a deep suspicion of their faith. They also had to demonstrate their competence and dedication to the soldiers and doctors. By the end of the war though, the sisters had won over many who had doubts about their commitment and skills. Sanitary Commission worker Mary Livermore later wrote:

I am neither a Catholic, nor a advocate of the monastic institutions of that church...Never did I meet these Catholic sisters in hospitals, on transports, or hospital steamers, without observing their devotion, faithfulness and unobtrusiveness. They gave themselves no airs of superiority or holiness, shirked no duty, sought no easy place, bred no mischief.⁷

Nuns were called to serve by the authorities of both the U.S. and Confederate governments who often requested the services of the sisters on short notice. The sisters, however, were obedient to the local ecclesiastical authority (i.e., the Bishop) where their community was located and his reaction to requests was a crucial factor. For sisters in New York, the response of the Archbishop was crucial.

ARCHBISHOP HUGHES AS PATRIOT

The ecclesiastical head of the Catholic Diocese of New York who had authority over the sisters was Archbishop John Hughes. Archbishop Hughes was a fervent supporter of the Union cause who gave the sisters his permission to volunteer their services to the Union Army. Without his blessing and support, the sisters would never have been allowed to enter into military service.

The Archbishop was born in the small village of Annalaghan in County Tyrone on June 24, 1797. At age twenty in 1817, Hughes emigrated to America. He attended seminary at Mt. St. Mary's in Emmitsburg, Maryland and was ordained in 1826.⁸ Hughes was appointed Archbishop of New York in 1838.⁹ The Irish-born Archbishop was one of the most influential Irish Americans in the middle decades of the nineteenth century.

Archbishop Hughes' support of the Union cause manifested itself in many ways. His prestige and influence, along with the support of other prominent Irish Americans in New York City helped to recruit soldiers for what became the Irish Brigade. In May 1861, soon after the hostilities broke out between North and South, the American flag was displayed prominently at St. Patrick's Cathedral. This was a deliberate signal sent to native-born Americans that the Irish could be counted on as true and loyal to the Union. Hughes wrote on May 7, 1861:

The Flag on the cathedral was erected with my permission and approval. It was at the same time an act of expediency going before a necessity likely to be urged upon me by the dictation of enthusiasms in this city. I preferred that no such dictation of necessity should overtake us; because, if it had, the press would have sounded the report that the Catholics were disloyal, and no act of ours afterward could sufficiently vindicate us from the imputation.¹⁰

ARCHBISHOP HUGHES AS DIPLOMAT

In the Fall of 1861 a ceremony was held presenting the regimental colors to the Irish Brigade. This ceremony was held at the Archbishop's residence on Madison Avenue and presided over by the Very Reverend Dr.

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—Mary Livermore
U.S. Sanitary
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Starrs, Vicar General.¹¹ Hughes himself did not preside over the ceremony since he was in Europe on a diplomatic mission for President Lincoln and Secretary of State William H. Seward. Archbishop Hughes left New York City on his mission to Europe on November 6, 1861. He was bound for France, which maintained a shaky neutrality in the American Civil War. In France, he met with Napoleon III and the Empress Eugenie on December 24, 1861. Hughes' diplomacy extended to influential members of the French government and other prominent members of French society. Subsequently, President Lincoln lauded Archbishop Hughes' diplomatic efforts and reported that he had done a splendid job of presenting the U.S. administration's view on the conflict to the people of France and Europe.¹²

Although he hated slavery, Archbishop Hughes was not an abolitionist. He viewed the abolitionist cause as fanatical and in opposition to the United States Constitution.¹³ A visit to Cuba in 1858 may have led him to believe that swift abolition in the South would lead to chaos and violence.¹⁴ In a letter to Secretary of War Simon Cameron in 1861 Hughes outlined his view that Union, not slavery, should be the battle cry of the war effort:

There is being insinuated in this part of the country an idea to the effect that the purpose of the war is the abolition of slavery in the south. If that idea should prevail among a certain class, it would make the business of recruiting slack indeed. The Catholics, so far as I know, whether of native or foreign birth, are willing to fight to the death for the support of the constitution, the government and the laws of the country. But if it should be understood that, with or without knowing it, they are to fight for the abolition of slavery, then, indeed, they will turn away in disgust from the discharge of what would otherwise be a patriotic duty.¹⁵

Through his writings and actions, it is clear that Archbishop Hughes was a fervent supporter of President Lincoln's efforts to restore the Union.

Early in the War, Archbishop Hughes had appointed chaplains to the Irish Brigade. Father William Corby had been assigned to the 88th regiment.¹⁶ Fathers Thomas F. Mooney and the Rev. Bernard O'Riley, S.J., received appointments to the 69th regiment.¹⁷ Is it any wonder that he supported requests for sisters in his diocese to serve in the War effort?

There were two orders of nuns in the New York Diocese that volunteered their services to the government. These two orders were the Sisters of Mercy and the Sisters of Charity.

THE SISTERS OF MERCY

On July 15, 1862 nine nuns from the Sisters of Mercy left St. Catherine's Convent on Houston St. in Manhattan to board the steamer *Cahawba*. Traveling on the same ship with the sisters were five hundred horses headed for delivery to the U.S. cavalry. One can only imagine the traveling conditions on this ship. The sisters' ultimate destination was Hammond Hospital in Beaufort, North Carolina.¹⁸ Several weeks earlier General Ambrose Burnside, the commanding officer in that sector, made a request to the Vicar General of the New York Diocese for help. Brigadier General John G. Foster later reported to Secretary of War Stanton:

At the request of Major General Burnside, nine Sisters of Mercy have arrived from New York to take charge of the hospital at Beaufort (North Carolina) and under their kind and educated care I hope for a rapid improvement in the health of patients.¹⁹

After their long voyage, the sisters found the most appalling conditions at Hammond Hospital. The hospital proved to be a hotel of some five hundred rooms in the most desperate condition. The military authorities soon gave the sisters complete charge over everything in the hospital but the medical department. The Sisters of Mercy were not relieved from their duties in North Carolina until May 1863 when they returned to New York on the Feast of the Ascension.

THE SISTERS OF CHARITY

Unlike the war service of the Sisters of Mercy, the Sisters of Charity were not destined to serve their country on southern battlefields. Instead, the sisters were to serve their country in New York City. Early in the War, Archbishop



Hughes was reluctant to part with the services of the sisters who were urgently needed in New York. Writing to Archbishop Francis Kenrick of Baltimore in May 1861, Archbishop Hughes stated that the Sisters of Charity in his diocese were willing to volunteer but he objected saying "they have as much on hand as they can accomplish."²⁰ Archbishop Hughes felt that the sisters duties in New York (teaching, caring for the indigent and orphans) kept them busy enough. In 1862, however, the sisters were to become very involved in ministering to troops. But instead of them traveling south to the War, the War came to the Sisters of Charity.

In 1847, the sisters had established an academy for the education of young girls at 109th Street and Fifth Avenue in Manhattan. This property was located in what is today the north-eastern corner of Central Park. The Central Park Commission absorbed this property and the sisters moved on to Mount St. Vincent-on-

Hudson formerly known as Font Hill. New York City Mayor Fernando Wood was at first reluctant to see a military hospital established in Central Park since he feared the City would have to pay for it. These concerns were soon overcome and the hospital became a reality.

The "new" St. Joseph's Military Hospital that was established in 1862 was the very same property located in Central Park that the sisters had vacated a few years earlier.²¹ Moving back to their old quarters, the sisters were to stay on active service for three years caring for the troops. The sisters' duties at St. Joseph were extensive. One assignment entrusted to the sisters was the distribution of supplies and donations intended for the wounded placed in their care. Under the sisters' watchful administration, scarce commodities such as clothing, medicines, books, and paper were fairly distributed among the troops. It was not until almost a year after the war had ended that the sisters were released from their duties at St. Joseph's.²²

REMEMBERING THE SISTERS

An early twentieth century champion of a monument dedicated to the service of sister nurses in the Civil War was Ellen Ryan Jolley. As Chairman of the Ladies Auxiliary of the Ancient Order of Hibernians, Jolley was committed to having a monument built in the 1920s to honor the sisters' accomplishments. In documenting that service she did considerable research at the War Department and at archives maintained by the religious orders. Her research produced a list of approximately six hundred sisters who served as nurses, for both the North and South, during the War.

An analysis of the rosters compiled by Jolley produces some interesting results. Of the almost six hundred names compiled, over fifty percent of the sisters were born in Ireland. If we add in sisters with what are clearly Irish surnames, the results are startling. Irish-born and Irish American women comprised over seventy percent of the sister nurses who served during the Civil War. Excluding the numerous lay nurses who were solely employed as cooks, cleaners, helpers and laundresses, we can see that the sisters must have been a high percentage of the total nurses actually attending wounded soldiers.

Photo: Archbishop John Hughes as photographed by the Mathew Brady Studio circa 1860-65. He strongly supported the Union during the War and authorized nuns from his diocese to serve as nurses. Courtesy of the National Archives, Still Picture Branch.

They may have comprised as much as seventeen percent of all attending female nurses, and on a percentage basis their presence in nursing units was higher than the percentage of Irish American men serving in the military.²³ Going beyond Civil War nursing roles, the sisters' duties would have included changing and dressing wounds, administering medicines, dispensing supplies and occasionally even acting as assistants in the operating room.²⁴

These women truly made an extraordinary contribution in their numbers and in the quality of care given to the troops. Sadly, recognition of their service has not been commensurate to the level of service given. Although Jolley's efforts in 1924 did come to fruition with the dedication of a monument, *Nuns of the Battlefield*, in Washington, D.C.²⁵ there has not been much recent recognition of the sisters' war service. A book, *To Bind Up The Wounds* (1989), written by Sister Mary Denis Maher has been the most significant effort in the last decade to rectify this situation.²⁶

Notes

- 1 William J.K. Beaudot and Lance J. Herdegen, *An Irishman in the Iron Brigade: The Civil War Memoirs of James P. Sullivan, Sergt. Company K, 6th Wisconsin Volunteers* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1993). See editor's Preface by Lawrence Frederick Kohl.
- 2 Ellen Ryan Jolley, *Nuns of the Battlefield* (Providence, R.I.: The Providence Visitor Press, 1927). See Contents to see Orders that contributed Sister nurses.
- 3 Jolley, *ibid.* See the rosters compiled by Jolley after each chapter.
- 4 Sister Mary Denis Maher, *To Bind Up the Wounds* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989) p. 51.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 29.
- 6 Maher, *op. cit.*, p. 115.
- 7 Maher, *op. cit.*, p. 39.
- 8 Right Rev. Henry A. Brann, *Most Reverend John Hughes* (New York, 1912), p. 33.
- 9 Rev. Benjamin J. Blied, *Catholics and the Civil War* (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing 1945), p. 40.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 40.
- 11 David Power Conynham, *The Irish Brigade and Its Campaigns* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1994), p. 57.
- 12 Blied, *op. cit.*, p. 87.
- 13 Blied, *op. cit.*, pp. 32-33.
- 14 John R.G. Hassard, *Life of the Most Reverend John Hughes, D.D.* (New York: Arno Press, 1866), p. 363. See also Brann, *op. cit.*, p. 155.
- 15 Blied, *op. cit.*, pp. 44-45.
- 16 William Corby, *Memoirs of Chaplain Life* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1992), pp. 17-18. Father Corby is perhaps the best known chaplain of the American Civil War. He is particularly known for his granting of general absolution to the Irish Brigade at the Battle of Gettysburg in July of 1863.
- 17 *Ibid.*, pp. 17-18.
- 18 Jolly, *op. cit.*, pp. 207-210.
- 19 Maher, *op. cit.*, p. 73.
- 20 Maher, *op. cit.*, pp. 79-80.
- 21 Jolly, *op. cit.*, p. 21.
- 22 Sister Marie De Lourdes Walsh, *The Sisters of Charity of New York 1809-1959 Volume I* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1960), pp. 198-199.
- 23 Maher in *To Bind Up the Wounds* mentions the 1/6 ratio (sisters to total female nurses), see page 120. Irish American men may actually have been underrepresented in the Army. James McPhearson, author of *The Battle Cry of Freedom*, states "Despite the fighting reputation of the Irish Brigade, the Irish were the most under-represented group in proportion to population..." p. 606.
- 24 Maher, *op. cit.*, pp. 109-118.
- 25 Located at the intersection of Connecticut and Rhode Island Avenues.
- 26 Along with *To Bind Up the Wounds*, Sister Mary Denis Maher has written *To Do With Honor: The Roman Catholic Sister Nurse in the United States Civil War* (Ph.D. diss., Case Western Reserve University, 1988).