

The Brown-Robed Irish Army

BY ALFRED ISACSSON, O.CARM.



An army is a complex organization. For the soldier on the line, there are unseen personnel supporting him in communications, supply, rations, and intelligence. During the years of fighting in Ireland—the War of Independence (1919–22) and the Civil War (1922–23)—these unseen personnel included the Carmelites of New York on the side of Ireland and the Republicans respectively. They are the subject of this article.

A CARMELITE PARISH IN 1889

Edward McGlynn was the pastor (1886–1888) of New York's eastside parish of St. Stephen. He was distressed by the poverty of his parishioners, mostly Irish immigrants, and sought in the theories of Henry George a solution for them. This incurred the disfavor of his archbishop, Michael Corrigan, who brought about the excommunication of McGlynn.¹ Corrigan sought to heal the resulting unsettled attitude of the Irish at St. Stephen's by slicing off a portion of their parish and giving it to the Carmelites of the Irish Province in 1889.² He trusted that their being sympathetic with the Irish would heal wounds in the new parish of Our Lady of the Scapular.

Notices in the newspapers about the

Carmelites and their parish appeared when there was a special event like a bazaar or an annual parish reunion. This all changed with the Irish Rising of 1916. Carmelites who had been in Dublin for the Rising and had been transferred to New York spoke to Irish groups of their experiences. Berthold Keating ministered to the wounded of the Rising and, upon his arrival in New York, told the *Irish World* newspaper of his aiding the wounded Volunteers in Jacobs Biscuit Factory. Albert Metcalf was called to Jacobs factory on the second day of the Rising and there he ministered to the wounded.³

The Irish Carmelites had a provincial chapter in Ireland that summer of 1916. Denis O'Connor was a delegate to the chapter and used the occasion to visit family and relatives. When he returned to New York that September he was transferred from Transfiguration Church in Tarrytown, N.Y. to the Carmelites' Manhattan church. He gave an interview to the *Irish World* describing the British occupation and their martial law. O'Connor was changed by this experience. He made his Our Lady of the Scapular Church a center of Irish activity.⁴ I suspect that his spurt of activity and his total support of everything Irish was due to his becoming a member of the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB).⁵ The Carmelite, Peter Elias Magennis, was elected an assistant general of the order in 1908 and served in that capacity until 1919. At Our Lady of the Scapular, he spent a good portion of 1914, 1915 and 1916, as he did from early 1917 until August of 1919. He was cut from the same cloth as O'Connor and worked with him in the promotion of Irish activities in the parish.⁶

The Friends of Irish Freedom (FOIF) was organized in 1916, a month before the Rising, by the Irish Race Convention in New York City. Its purpose was to encourage and assist any movement working for Irish freedom. While the Carmelites did not establish a branch of the FOIF until June 16, 1917, about a year after its foundation, they then entered wholeheartedly

Photo:

Our Lady of the Scapular Church on East Twenty-eighth Street in Manhattan. This photograph was taken during the 1920s. Courtesy of Alfred Isacsson, O.Carm.

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into promoting the group. At this inaugural meeting, Daniel Cohalan spoke to the eight-hundred persons present about the necessity of American support for Irish freedom.⁷



SECRET AGENTS AND PROTESTS

The Carmelite Branch being anti-English in tone and characteristically Republican, brought what were called “secret service agents” to meetings. They were probably members of the U.S. Department of Justice hoping to hear evidence that conflicted with President Woodrow Wilson’s policy of total support of England. Liam Mellows was a speaker one evening, and he asked two Irish-looking agents, “What will you say when your grandchildren ask you what you did in the Great War to free small peoples? Will you tell them that you were engaged in New York City holding down the unarmed Irish with revolvers trying to silence their claim to be free?”⁸ (The meetings of the Carmelite Branch had a speaker at each of their meetings, a lecture on some aspect of Irish culture, and then a social time.)⁹

The Irish Progressive League which attended Sunday Mass at Our Lady of the Scapular and met afterwards in the Carmelite Hall organized a meeting for May 4, 1918 in Madison Square Garden, then at Twenty-sixth Street and Madison Avenue, to protest British conscription in Ireland. Peter Elias Magennis was one of the main speakers. He called British conscription in Ireland an attempt to exterminate the Irish. Mrs. William Jay, on behalf of the organization called the Ultimate Committee for the Severance of all

Social and Professional Relations with Enemy Sympathizers, had tried to prevent the meeting and having failed in this, Mrs. Jay protested the anti-English tenor of Magennis remarks at the meeting to John Cardinal Farley, Archbishop of New York. Magennis had cited the presence of Irish at Bunker Hill and other significant battles of American history. He called British conscription in Ireland a British attempt to eradicate the Irish. Cardinal Farley waffled in making a reply to Mrs. Jay and when he finally did so, he said that he would not permit Magennis to lead or be involved in political gatherings. Magennis tried to explain his presence at the rally, and Irish groups protested the actions of Farley to the Apostolic Delegate.¹⁰ Cardinal Farley’s injunction did not inhibit the actions of Magennis. He continued his many activities in support of Irish freedom.

Peter Elias Magennis had been elected president of the FOIF, but Daniel Cohalan and his allies forced him from this position when Magennis was elected prior general of the Carmelites at their 1919 general chapter. In his stead, Michael Gallagher, Bishop of the Diocese of Detroit, was made president with the backing of Daniel Cohalan. This new administration ceased to be supportive of Eamon De Valera, which had been a hallmark of the FOIF. Cohalan also desired that the money raised by the FOIF in the United States be kept here and not sent to Ireland. On October 20, 1920 De Valera announced the formation of a new organization, the American Association for the Recognition of the Irish Republic (AARIR) which, of course, was supportive of himself. Ever loyal to De Valera, the Carmelite Branch of the FOIF joined the organization as the Carmelite Council.¹¹

Our Lady of the Scapular had many Irish-oriented affairs such as dramatic plays, musicals, lectures, and dances. Admission was probably charged for these and, additionally, appeals for causes in Ireland were made. Beginning about 1920 we have records of the contributions and their disbursements. Money was regularly given to a series of funds with various innocent and charitable sounding titles—which are generally agreed to be for the purchase of arms and other anti-governmental activities. Money was also given to Harry Boland, a purchaser and trans-

Photo:
Berthold Keating, the
Carmelite priest who
served as chaplain to
men of the 1916 Rising.
Courtesy of Alfred
Isacson, O.Carm.



porter of armaments to Ireland. The amount of money raised and sent to Ireland was in excess of \$150,000. It was sent to various funds, but all was sent for the same cause.¹²

CASH SUPPORT AND ARMS

The American counsel in Dublin on June 9, 1921 wrote his superiors in Washington that without American money the IRA would have to quit in three months. He listed all the funds including “the Prisoners Dependants Fund” and the “Refugee Fund” and stated they were simply a conduit for Sinn Fein. The counsel then listed all the people that were interested or active in funneling money to Ireland. A good number of these people were associated with the New York Carmelites.¹³ (Besides the records of the United States Department of State, there are records of this money moving in the papers of Eamon De Valera and in the archives of the Carmelites of the New York Province.) Arms could not be obtained without funds.¹⁴ Sean Reid, O. Carm., pastor of Our Lady of the Scapular 1943–64, came from a staunch Republican household in Kilkenny and studied in Rome (1927–33) during the time of the generalship of Peter Elias Magennis. Only when he came to New York did he learn of Carmelite involvement in the arms business and the use of the priory and church basements as an arsenal.¹⁵

Arms and ammunition were gathered in the United States for shipment in small quantities to Ireland. The storing of these was a problem but as Edmund O’Brien wrote:

...later [in mid-summer of 1920] a safer and more commodious store for such goods [arms and ammunition] was found in the Carmelite Priory which was, if I remember correctly, on Twenty-ninth Street, on the East Side. The Carmelite priests were favorably disposed towards the Irish cause and gave their help in every way. In this case, it provided us with a place within their grounds to use as a dump for arms and ammunition, which relieved us of a lot of anxiety regarding the safety of such stuff.”¹⁶



The Carmelite arsenal was soon to be put to use.

There was the purchase of five-hundred Thompson sub-machine guns. Some were stored in the Carmelite church and priory where they were sewn into burlap sacks for shipment. Harry Boland and Jim McGee chartered a ship, the *East Side*, for the guns to go to Ireland. The guns were brought to the *East Side’s* dock in Hoboken, New Jersey. Because there was a longshoremen’s protest action against British ships docked in Hoboken, Jim McGee and his longshoreman failed to move the Thompsons below deck and their presence was reported to the police. Attempts by those behind the operation to repossess the Thompsons failed, and they remained in custody of the federal government. The arrests of people thought to be involved were made, but on the completion of the legal process no one was prosecuted. Fortunately, the Carmelite connection never was made public.¹⁷

Photo (top): Peter Elias Magennis on the steps of Our Lady of the Scapular Church. Courtesy of Alfred Isacson, O.Carm. *(right):* Christopher Slattery was one of the Carmelite priests who served as a courier in the “Brown-Robed Army.” Courtesy of Alfred Isacson, O.Carm.



In May, 1922, just before the start of the Civil War, Liam Pedlar wrote from New York to Harry Boland in Ireland concerning what Pedlar called the “.45 proposition.” Pedlar cited the original order as being for 700,000 rounds of .45-caliber ammunition and a down payment of \$15,000 had been made—and a balance of \$13,000 remained.

Pedlar wanted Boland to authorize Father Denis O'Connor to give him this balance to complete the deal. O'Connor was estimated to have \$18,000 to \$20,000 on hand for this purpose.¹⁸ The deal for the ammunition seems never to have been completed.

Jim McGee and his family lived above the shop of a gunsmith in St. Gabriel's parish just north of the territory of the Carmelite parish. It was here that McGee purchased guns for shipment to Ireland. McGee would collect the weapons, and his work as a longshoreman and his acquaintance with ships' crews enabled him to ship them to Ireland. When the Midtown Tunnel between Manhattan and Queens was being constructed, St. Gabriel's Church and its neighboring streets were leveled for the tunnel. It was then that Jim McGee moved his family to Queens—but did not cease his work for Ireland.¹⁹

Every cause has its fifth column. Carmelites stationed at Our Lady of the Scapular came from Ireland and were periodically allowed vacations there. Peter Elias Magennis and Christopher Slattery carried messages from Ireland for men in the movement in New York. Hugh Devlin arrived in 1921 with a message for Liam Mellows which he delivered to him personally.²⁰ A military organization has safe houses for the movement of its men. The Carmelite Priory on East Twenty-ninth Street was a safe house, a place where messages were received and exchanged. When Eamon De Valera escaped from Lincoln Prison and came to New York, he came in secret to the priory and spent his first night in America

there. Others like Harry Boland, Sean Nunan, Liam Pedlar, and Liam Mellows were some who used the priory as a safe house.²¹

In the conflicts of the War of Independence and the Civil War, there was working behind the scenes a brown-robed army.

Page 1 Pr. O'Connor's Copy N.Y., Aug. 31, 1901
NEW YORK FUND

We beg to acknowledge the following subscriptions which have been allotted to the purposes intended by the donors:

6	Thomas Realy Employees	\$4,000.00
8	Manhattan Council	2,000.00
5	Lexington Avenue Mass Meeting	1,810.98
	St. Malachy's Council	1,100.00
	Carmelite Council	1,000.00
	New York State A.A.S.I.R.	1,000.00
	Eccentric Firemen's Council	1,000.00
	Sligo Men's Association	1,000.00
	Terence MacSwiney Council	1,000.00
	John Hancock Council	700.00
	Robert Emmet Council	644.00
	American Association for the Recognition of the Irish Republic, New Jersey	627.00
	J. A. Mcweeney, State President	505.00
	Samson Council	505.25
	Citizens of the Irish Republic	500.00
	Myra Francis McPartland Council	500.00
	Wishy O'Dwyer Council	500.00
	Manhattanville Council	500.00
	Robert Emmet-Terence MacSwiney Council, Jersey, N. J.	482.00
	Robert Emmet Council	448.00
	Robert Emmet Council	425.00

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Notes

1. Alfred Isacson, *The Determined Doctor: the Story of Edward McGlynn* (Tarrytown, 1998 2nd ed) 21.
2. Frank Dixon, *Archbishop Corrigan and the Irish Carmelites* (Maspeth, [1977]), 38–9.
3. *Irish World*, June 20, 1916; *Gaelic American*, Dec. 30, 1916.
4. See Alfred Isacson, “Denis O'Connor” in *New York Irish History* 20 (2006), 23–6.
5. *Irish World*, Sept. 23, 30, 1916.
6. Peter O'Dwyer, *The Irish Carmelites* (Dublin, 1988) 350–1, 355–6.
7. William J. Carr, *The Irish Carmelites of New York City and the Fight for Irish Independence, (1916-1919)* (Middletown, N.Y., 1973) 12–4; Alfred Isacson, *Always Faithful: The New York Carmelites, the Irish People and Their Freedom Movement* (Middletown, 2004) 37.

Photo:
The original Carmelite Priory on East Twenty-ninth Street that served as a safe house during the War of Independence and the Civil War in Ireland. Courtesy of Alfred Isacson, O. Carm.

Illustration:
A page from the account book, kept in records of the Carmelites, showing contributions to the “Refugee Fund” set up to provide funding during the War of Independence. Courtesy of Alfred Isacson, O. Carm.

**600 MACHINE GUNS
SUPPOSED FOR IRISH
TAKEN ON SHIP HERE**

**Latest Type of Quick-Firers
Found in Coal Bunkers of
Outgoing Vessel.**

AMMUNITION ALSO SEIZED

**Customs Men Find \$150,000
Cache Following Reports of
Plan to Smuggle Guns.**

MAY HAVE BEEN STOLEN

**Change in Crews Led to Information
of Plot — Fourth Search Re-
vealed War Supplies.**

Six hundred machine guns, believed by Federal authorities to have been destined for Ireland, were discovered by customs agents yesterday on board the steamer East Side at Hoboken and later were seized on a steamer operated by the Hoboken police. According to one report the ship was bound for Belfast, but this later was denied.

The seized machine guns, known as the Thompson sub-machine guns, and made by the Colt's Patent Fire Arms Manufacturing Company, were the latest development of automatic quick-firing small arms. Guns of this type, capable of firing 600 shots a minute, recently were acquired by the riot squad of the New York Police Department.

The machine guns, together with many varieties of magazines, a small quantity of ammunition and 170 unopened boxes thought to contain small arms, were valued at \$150,000. They were found in thirteen large sacks concealed in the coal bunkers of the East Side. No labels giving the names either of the shipper or the consignee were attached to the sacks. The East Side, which sailed last night for Norfolk, Va., and thence to an Irish port, according to report, is a United States shipping agent vessel operated by the Cosmopolitan Shipping Company, Inc., with offices at 115 Broadway.

Custody of the munitions by the Hoboken police was disputed by Federal authorities, who yielded under protest, and the matter will be threshed out this morning in a hearing before Recorder Adolph C. Carsten of Hoboken. New York port officials declined to discuss the affair beyond saying that the munitions had not been seized by Federal authorities, but were "detained pending investigation."

According to the Hoboken police, the machine guns were taken from the East Side by customs agents on the charge that their shipment was illegal in that no permit had been obtained from the State Department to send them out of the country. Customs officials told J. J. Fallon, Corporation Counsel of Hoboken, that shipment of the disputed munitions constituted violation of the neutrality laws. Department of Justice officials admitted that they had been investigating reports of arms shipments to Ireland.

Chief Hayes of the Hoboken police said that the customs men had obtained their first information of the presence of the weapons from members of the crew. Four searches were made, three of which were unsuccessful, and it was only on the final search of the vessel's bunkers that the suspected war material was discovered.

Other Shipments Reported.

Reports have come to this country recently that arms and ammunition of American make have been captured from Sinn Fein forces in Ireland, and have been the subject of question in the House of Commons. Unconfirmed rumors have flitted along the New York Harbor front of secret munition shipments to Ireland. Although Federal agents have been closely on the watch, yesterday's seizure was the first of any weapons for a suspected Irish destination. The seizure of such a quantity of machine guns was said to be one of the largest in filibustering history.

While Customs Inspector Curran and about twenty customs officers were searching the East Side, Frank Williams of Hoboken, accompanied by his attorney, Thomas J. O'Neill, with offices at 310 Broadway, New York, applied for a search warrant from Recorder Carsten. In his affidavit Mr. Williams declared that on June 11 a quantity of munitions owned and stored by him in Hoboken

had been stolen. He said that he had reason to suspect that the weapons were on board the East Side. The affidavit made no mention of the circumstances under which the arms were alleged to have been stolen nor how Mr. Williams obtained possession of them.

When seen by reporters in Recorder Carsten's court, Mr. Williams declined to discuss the matter and refused to give his Hoboken address. Mr. O'Neill, his attorney, professed to know little about Mr. Williams's affairs other than that he represented himself to be in the munitions business.

The search warrant issued by Recorder Carsten read:

"Whereas, it appears to me, Adolph C. Carsten, by the oath of Frank Williams, the following goods: 600 Thompson machine guns, 30 extra 30-capacity box magazines, 5 50-capacity drum magazines, 5 100-capacity drum magazines, 80 extra 30-capacity box magazines, 50 50-capacity drum magazines, 20 100-capacity drum magazines and hundreds of parts of machine guns, were on June 11, 1921, stolen and carried away from said Frank Williams, in the City of Hoboken, and that said Williams has just and reasonable cause to suspect that said goods are concealed in and upon the steamer East Side, owned by the Cosmopolitan Shipping Company, which said ship is lying in New York Harbor, attached to Pier 2, in the City of Hoboken, these are, therefore, in the name of the State of New Jersey, to authorize and command you to enter upon aforesaid East Side and search for said goods, and if you shall so find the same, that then you secure said stolen goods and bring them, together with any person in whose custody you may find same, before me to be dealt with according to law."

Police Take Up Search.

When Sergeants Joseph Cornell and John Beatty went to Pier 2 armed with the search warrant, they were informed by Captain George Bartlett of the East Side that the munitions already had been removed from the vessel by Customs agents. The sergeants told Captain Bartlett that they did not believe him, whereupon the Captain put his statement in writing.

The policemen then made a tour of the pier, where they found the munitions on a motor truck guarded by Customs Inspector Curran and his men. Some of the sacks had been ripped open, disclosing boxes and machine guns.

Under protest of Inspector Curran, the Hoboken Sergeants seized the munitions and, followed by the Customs agents, took them to Police Headquarters. Here Inspector Curran claimed the arms, declaring that he was acting under verbal authority from the Collector of the Port of New York. Chief of Police Healy refused to accept the verbal order, and took up the matter with Corporation Counsel Fallon. Curran assured Mr. Fallon that the detention of the munitions by the customs authorities was based on suspected violation of the neutrality laws, and the Hoboken Corporation Counsel confirmed this statement by a telephone colloquy with Assistant Surveyor of the Port William Buscher. Corporation Counsel Fallon informed Mr. Bartlett that no evidence was in the possession of the Hoboken authorities to the effect that there had been a violation of neutrality laws. After further telephone contact it was agreed between the Hoboken and Customs authorities that the seized weapons should remain in the custody of the Hoboken police and that the disputed claims of Federal and municipal authorities would be brought before Recorder Carsten.

The war material was watched last night by a joint guard of Hoboken police and Customs agents. According to the police record, 13 sacks containing 165 unpacked Thompson machine guns, 239 large boxes of magazines, one small case of cartridges and one small box thought to contain small arms.

Three Inquiries Begun.

Investigations as to how the arms were smuggled on board the East Side and their destination were begun last night by officials of the Customs Service, the Department of Justice and the United States Shipping Board. Officers of the East Side professed to be unaware of the presence of the munitions in the coal bunkers.

The New York Directory lists the officers of the Cosmopolitan Shipping Company as A. F. Mack, President; J. E. James and J. H. Payne, Vice Presidents; Charles S. Quantrell, Secretary; Leigh Hudson, Treasurer.

Two changes of crews, caused by the marine strike, resulted in the discovery of the arms, and a member of the crew was said to have "tipped off" Federal officials.

According to one report made to Government investigators, the sacks containing the munitions were brought alongside the East Side by launches at midnight and hoisted aboard as "engine room supplies" when a curious number of Federal agents also were informed that after the second crew had been assigned to the East Side, some Irishmen in a launch had hailed the deck watch and asked permission to "deck and remove some supplies" delivered on board by mistake. The watchmen refused to let the strangers on board without authority from the owner.

Held up by customs examination, the East Side was scheduled to sail on Tuesday. She cleared last night for Norfolk.

WASHINGTON, June 15.—The Department of Justice tonight ordered its agents in New York to make an investigation of the arms seized on the steamer East Side, at Hoboken, to determine whether they constituted a shipment for Ireland. The report probably will be transmitted to the State Department, officials said, in case it is found that a shipment was intended, for a decision as to whether it can be moved.

8. For more information on the Irish patriot Liam Mellows, his activities, and his prosecutions see Alfred Isacson, "Liam Mellows' New York Court Cases" in *New York Irish History* 19 (2005)14-7.
9. Sean Cronin, *The Revolutionaries* (Dublin, 1971) 172.
10. *New York Times* May 5, 6, 1918; Kelly to Bonzano, [N.Y.] June 29, 1918, cover letter to Farley [N.Y.], June 12, 1918, Vatican Archives, Apostolic Delegate, Washington, V 82/1.
11. Jim Maher *Harry Boland* (Dublin, 1998) 131; Isacson, *Always Faithful*, 55.
12. Alfred Isacson, "Traces of Clandestine Operations in the Records of the New York Carmelites," *The Irish Sword* 25 (Winter, 2007) 437-9.
13. Consul Report, Dublin, June 9, 1921, p 12, # 752, Roll 218, Record Group M 580, National Archives and Records Administration; Hughes to Dumont, Washington, July 11, 1921, #785 in *ibid.*; Consul Report, Dublin, Aug 9, 1921, #986, 1068, 1071 in *ibid.*
14. 150/1030 De Valera Papers, University College Dublin (UCD); Archives, Carmelites of the New York Province, Middletown, NY (ANYP).
15. 150/1030 De Valera Papers, UCD.
16. Reid to Brannigan, Middletown, May 20, 1992, copy; Brannigan-Isacson Correspondence, both in Archives New York Province.
17. 150/1309 De Valera Papers, UCD; Alfred Isacson, "Indictments in the *East Side* Thompson Seizure," *The Irish Sword* XXIII (Winter, 2003) 446-7; "Tying up Some Loose Ends of the *East Side* Seizure in *ibid.*, XXV (Summer, 2007) 320-6.
18. Pedlar to Boland, N.Y., May 24, 1922, copy from Brian Murphy, OSB.
19. Boland to McGarrity, Dublin, July 17, 23, 1923, McGarrity Papers, National Library of Ireland, Dublin, 17424; conversation with Ann McGee Cunningham, 2001.
20. Donal O'Callaghan Research, Oral History, ANYP.
21. Nunan to O'Callaghan, Washington, Nov 17, 1943.

Illustration:
On June 21, 1921, the New York Times provided an account of the weapons seized in Hoboken. Courtesy of the New York Times.