

Michael Kerwin in New York: His Life and Times, Part 1

BY ED O'SHAUGHNESSY

General Michael Kerwin was a man to be watched when he arrived in New York City in mid-1870. Though only thirty-three years old he had already lived a lifetime of adventure. Yet more was in store. At the end of his life, in 1912, his many adventures will leave him variously remembered. Civil War veterans would remember him a brave and meritorious soldier, wounded four times and nominated for the Medal of Honor. Irish Nationalists thought of him as a freedom fighter, imprisoned in Ireland in 1866 for plotting against the Crown and years later active in the secretive *Clan na Gael*. Political observers considered him a Republican partisan, the editor of a political weekly, and one of Boss Platt's trusted lieutenants. Critics of patronage appointments declared him a "professional office seeker." Recognizing opportunity with the spoils system, he pursued, and frequently lost, employment with the U.S. Postal Service, the U.S. Department of Treasury, the New York City Police Department, and the U.S. Department of Interior. Cheered or jeered he neither shied away from opportunity nor from controversy.



Today he is buried, along with his second wife, at Arlington National Cemetery, the resting place of heroes.

Kerwin was, in many ways, an emblematic nineteenth-century Irish American figure. Examining his life teaches us about the times in which our ancestors lived. We gain insight into the culture that once existed, and we are introduced to some of the players who influenced that culture. We also get an opportunity to consider the complexity

of Irish American activity on behalf of Irish independence, an activity that for many was central to their identity as Irish Americans.

FORMATIVE YEARS

Michael J. Kerwin was born in Wexford in 1837, and ten years later emigrated with his family during the massive famine exodus from Ireland. The family settled in Philadelphia, where, as a teenager, Kerwin trained as a lithographic printer. When the call for ninety-day volunteers went forth in April 1861, Kerwin promptly enlisted in the 24th Pennsylvania Infantry. In that short enlistment he rose from Private to First Sergeant

Photo:

Autographed carte-de-visite photograph of Michael Kerwin likely taken when he was living in New York City. He moved to the City in 1870 where he was welcomed by friends and former comrades. Courtesy of the Boys in Blue Collection, Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum.

Ed O'Shaughnessy's articles are inspired by research of his ancestral families. This article developed from research on his great-grandfather's association with Michael Kerwin. Kerwin was an interesting and influential man in New York in the late 1800s and early 1900s. He was also controversial. Ed is a retired U.S. Army officer and a retired university department director. He holds degrees in history, political science, and management. ©2021. Published with permission of Edward J. O'Shaughnessy.

Photo:
Portrait made from a
studio photograph of
Kerwin as a Major in
the 13th Pennsylvania
Volunteer Cavalry,
circa 1863. From *The
Story of a Cavalry
Regiment: Scott's
900* by Thomas West
Smith, 1897. Courtesy
of the New York Public
Library.



and earned a reputation for bravery and resourcefulness by volunteering to reconnoiter behind enemy lines. When the ninety-day enlistment ended the regiment mustered out. But Kerwin had developed a taste for action, and he promptly volunteered for the 13th Pennsylvania Cavalry, quickly moving up the commissioned ranks to become a Colonel on April 22, 1864.¹ He mustered out with his regiment in July 1865.

In September 1865, heeding the clarion call to liberate Ireland, Kerwin returned to the land of his birth expecting to lead an Irish republican army waiting in the shadows.² But Kerwin and his fellow conspirators had been misled, and the majority of these former officers were rounded up by the Crown's administration and jailed. It took intervention at the highest levels of the

U.S. government to secure Kerwin's freedom and return him home.³ Back in Philadelphia he married, sired a daughter and explored various employments, until confronted with a most pressing business, that of mobilizing the Fenian Brotherhood for war.

THE FENIAN FIASCO

Kerwin was serving with the Army of the Potomac when he joined the Fenian Brotherhood, and in later years was remembered as one of the most capable officers in that organization. We perceive his standing with the Fenian Brotherhood in President John O'Neill's decision to appoint Brigadier General Kerwin as his Secretary of War, effective February 3, 1870. This was not an honorific appointment. The military arm of the Fenian Brotherhood was again preparing to invade Canada.⁴ The proposed date for the invasion, May 24, was chosen not based on an assessment of operational readiness but rather an assumption of its propaganda effect. The Fenian Brotherhood intended to strike a blow for Ireland's freedom on Queen Victoria's birthday.

Knowing what we know today about the Fenian Brotherhood invasions of Canada we may wonder why a pick-up team of veterans and adventurers thought they could succeed where meaningful success had eluded them previously.⁵ Kerwin understood the risks too, but seemingly felt compelled to accept the role thrust upon him, for he stated in General Orders No. 1, February 4, 1870, "[I]n entering upon this important duty, I desire to say that the assurance of active operations being shortly commenced, and under circumstances which offer a reasonable hope of success, could alone induce me to take such a step. I, therefore, earnestly desire to see every available means made use of to place the Military portion of the F.B. on a war footing in the shortest possible time."⁶

Despite preparations and hopeful expectations, battle plans often fall apart upon first contact with the enemy, and such was the case with the 1870 attack on Canada. The U.S. newspapers, which covered the mobilization details, and a well-placed British spy helped contribute to the disaster.⁷ Kerwin resigned from the posi-

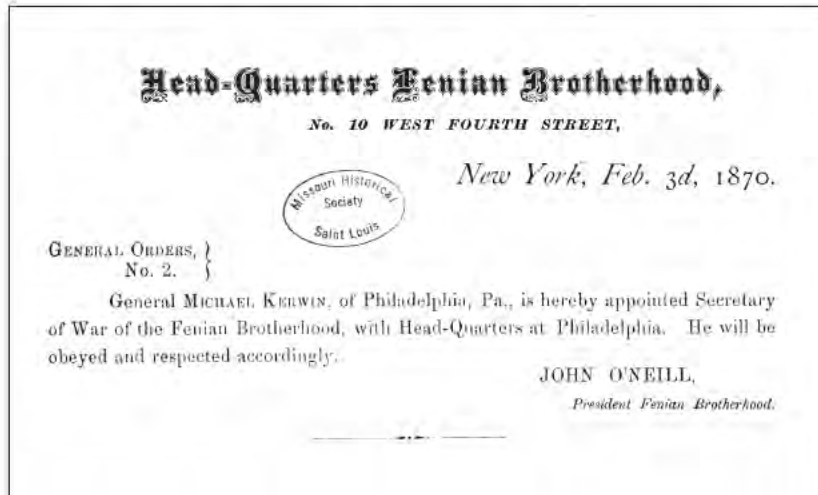


Photo:
Orders appointing General Michael Kerwin as the Fenian Brotherhood Secretary of War issued February 3, 1870. Courtesy of the Missouri Historical Society.

tion of Secretary of War on May 25. The press reported that Kerwin "now 'washes' his hands, it is reported, of the organization, and declares that he will have no more to do with it, at any rate while imprudent men may precipitate the men into a course of conduct for which they are not prepared."⁸

Shortly thereafter Kerwin abruptly removed himself from Philadelphia, leaving behind family and familiar surroundings. Lacking source documentation, historians can only speculate about the reasons for so unexpected a departure. Some have opined that the move may have been a Fenian Brotherhood reassignment, placing Kerwin in New York City where there existed a coterie of senior Fenian leaders and where the Fenian Brotherhood had its national headquarters.⁹ Others wonder whether the Civil War hometown hero left Philadelphia out of pro-

found embarrassment over the "Fenian Fiasco," as the press labeled the 1870 invasion. It is also possible that an unhappy marriage played some role.¹⁰ Whatever the reasons, shortly after the failed Canadian invasion Kerwin will surface in New York City.

WELCOMED BY FRIENDS

When Kerwin arrived in New York City in mid-1870 he was welcomed by friends and colleagues, former Union officers, and fellow Fenians. Kerwin had a knack for attracting admirers and retaining friends. They will take him in, facilitate opportunities, and forgive his faults. But men with driven personalities also develop detractors. They would be less forgiving.

Among the first to greet Kerwin in New York City was General Denis F. Burke, a member of the Fenian Brotherhood and a

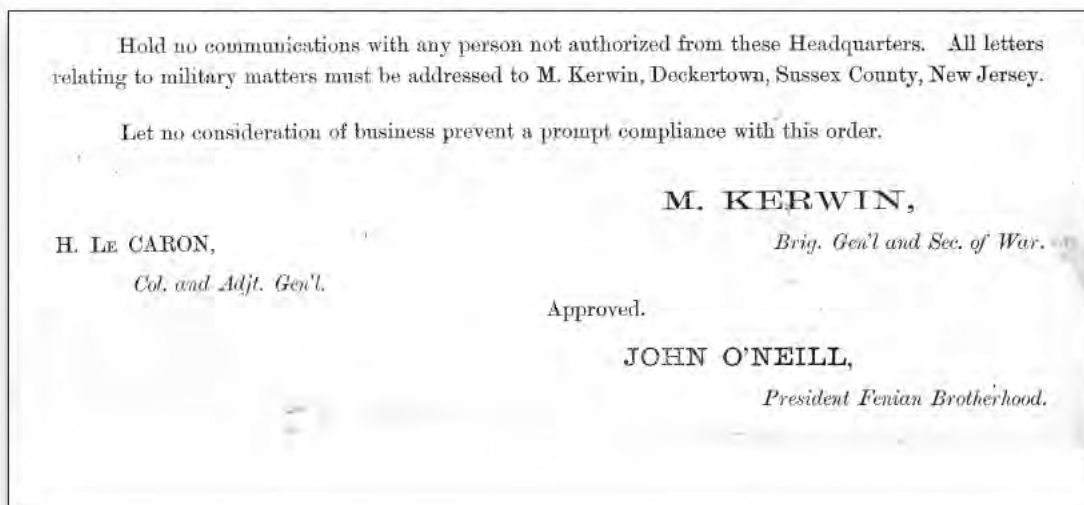


Photo:
Fenian Brotherhood mobilization orders dated April 28, 1870 with signature blocks at bottom. Henri le Caron, Colonel and Adjutant General, was the assumed name for British spy, Thomas Miller Beach. Courtesy of the Missouri Historical Society.

*Photo:
Mountjoy prison
photograph of Colonel
Denis F. Burke,
1866, a fellow
Fenian Brotherhood
conspirator and
Kerwin's best friend
until Burke's untimely
death. From the
Thomas A. Larcom
Collection. Courtesy of
the New York Public
Library.*

co-conspirator arrested with Kerwin in Dublin in 1866. More than comrades in arms, theirs was a very personal relationship. When a federal census taker was making the rounds in Manhattan in 1880, he recorded Michael Kerwin boarding with Denis and Catherine Burke. This was not Kerwin's first shared living arrangement and the Manhattan cohabitation may have carried on well beyond 1880.¹¹

Furthermore, three years after Burke's death in 1893 Kerwin would quietly marry Catherine Burke, and it is she, wife number two, who is buried with him in Arlington National Cemetery.¹²

Another colleague who welcomed Kerwin's arrival in New York City was General Patrick Henry Jones, a Civil War veteran and a fellow Fenian. He was then, conveniently, the Postmaster of New York City. Kerwin needed employment and Postmaster Jones was able to oblige him.¹³ In the days before the establishment of a professional civil service, public sector positions were often provided to friends and cronies. The awarding of employment based on political patronage is often referred to as the "spoils system," from the expression "to the victor belong the spoils" uttered by William Learned Marcy, a senator from New York, in 1832. At the end of his life Kerwin had accumulated thirty years in public sector employment, and all appointments but the first were the result of political patronage.¹⁴ Admirers would look upon this as an



impressive resume of public service. Detractors would label Kerwin a "professional office seeker."

POST OFFICE EMPLOYMENT

Kerwin began his public sector employment in 1871 with the innocuous title of "clerk" in the Registry Department of the New York City post office. Over the succeeding years he received promotions, based on merit he claimed, until he became an Assistant

Superintendent.¹⁵ Continued advancement would then require the backing of a patron. Given his capabilities and ambition there can be little doubt that Kerwin aspired to the office of the Postmaster, one of the most coveted patronage positions in the city.¹⁶ But Kerwin failed to secure his flank and his superiors sought opportunity to act against him. They found it in January 1882.

It happened that upon return to work from an extended absence Kerwin was confronted by his immediate supervisor, Superintendent William J. Russell, with a shortfall in registry forms that had occurred while Kerwin was away from the office. Superintendent Russell accused Kerwin of incompetence for allowing this to happen. Kerwin replied, intemperately, that his performance was the equal of his supervisor's, and he may have shown his displeasure with a fist brought up before his supervisor's face. Russell promptly hauled Kerwin before Postmaster Henry Pearson. Kerwin would recall that the U.S. Postmaster General, Thomas L. James,

was, alarmingly, also present. In defense, Kerwin claimed that he was unjustly targeted. When he was requested to apologize to his superior or face dismissal, Kerwin, who was known to say that he never retreated under fire, stood his ground. He was fired for insubordination.

There are multiple accounts of this dismissal, and, taken together, they give us a sense of the nineteenth-century public sector employment environment. Like many public sector agencies, the city post office was riven with political intrigue, with job security always an attendant risk.

Regarding Kerwin's response to this reality, we learn that he expected reward when the political environment turned his way, and that he could be petulant when the political environment turned away. A brief review of his post office dismissal gives us a foretaste of future employment experiences.

To begin the review, we have Kerwin's story that he was set up by U.S. Postmaster General James, who encouraged his son-in-law, New York City Postmaster Pearson, to find a

this era was political bias, and Kerwin alleged as much. Years later, when remembering this dismissal, he claimed he was dismissed because he was a Stalwart Republican while Pearson "was a Democrat True [though] he never had the manliness to proclaim it."¹⁸ But there was more to it. In 1881 Kerwin jumped the chain of command and sent written allegations to Assistant Postmaster General Hatton, a Republican, in Washington D.C., to discredit Postmaster Pearson, a Democrat in New York City, and the son-in-law of the Postmaster General. Among Kerwin's allegations was that Postmaster Pearson was a Confederate sympathizer, a Democrat who never missed an opportunity to misuse Union veterans, assumed to be Republicans, working in the post office.¹⁹ Kerwin was, of course, himself a Union veteran working in the post office, and a Stalwart Republican.

Kerwin was also frequently absent from work, which certainly tested his superiors' patience. Political pursuits, veteran events, Irish nationalist activities, the demands of his newspa-

Page No. 1
 Supervisor's District No. 100
 Enumeration District No. 567

Received June 11 1890

Eleventh Census of the United States.
 SPECIAL SCHEDULE.
 SURVIVING SOLDIERS, SAILORS, AND MARINES, AND WIDOWS, ETC.

Persons who served in the Army, Navy, and Marine Corps of the United States during the war of the rebellion (who are survivors), and widows of such persons, in New York, County of New York, State of New York, enumerated in June, 1890. Theodore Burke Enumerator.

| House No. | Family No. | NAMES OF SURVIVING SOLDIERS, SAILORS, AND MARINES, AND WIDOWS. | Rank. | Company. | Name of Regiment or Vessel. | Date of Enlistment. | Date of Discharge. | Length of Service. |
|-----------|------------|--|---------|----------|-------------------------------|---------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 |
| | | | | | | | Yrs. Mos. Days. | |
| 406 | 93 | Charles Halling | Private | C. | 1 st New York Art. | Apr 1861 | before war | |
| 452 | 100 | Denis F. Burke | Private | | 89 New York Art. | Apr 23 1861 | July 3 1865 | 4 2 10 |
| 464 | de | Michael Kerwin | Col | 115 | P.A. Cavalry | Apr 30 1861 | July 3 1865 | 4 2 3 |

Photo:
 Abstract from an 1890 census of Union veterans and widows showing that, at the time the census taker made his recordings, Colonel Michael Kerwin was living at the same address as was Brevet Brigadier General Denis F. Burke. Courtesy of Ancestry.com.

way to get rid of him.¹⁷ It cannot be surprising that U.S. Postmaster General James would want Kerwin gone. Essentially, Kerwin's lack of diligence had become too visible to ignore.

A common allegation in dismissals in

per, all competed for priority attention, and he would claim health issues. Filing for government disability, he cited war-related infirmities which necessitated, he claimed, frequent absences from work, sometimes for weeks at a time.²⁰

Photo:
Kerwin lived during a period when political party bosses exercised great influence over voters. Seen here are two Republican party bosses, Matthew Quay standing at left and Thomas Platt standing at right over the seated Richard Croker, the New York City Democratic party boss. From Puck magazine for January 24, 1900. Courtesy of ExplorePAHistory.com.



When Kerwin was “set up” for dismissal from the post office he was just returning to work from an absence. But this absence had nothing to do with war-time infirmities; he was recuperating from a broken leg. We do not know how this happened, but Kerwin had absented himself from work two years previously to recover from a broken leg and jaw which he received while absent from the office attending a Grand Army of the Republic encampment.²¹

Years later, when the political environment turned against Postmaster Pearson and he was not reappointed, Kerwin sent emissaries to the Republican political boss, Senator Thomas C. Platt, advocating his appointment to the vacated position. Platt heard the men out, then replied, “I will be frank with you gentlemen. General Kerwin is a highly educated gentleman and is in every way worthy to be appointed. His health, however, will not permit him to serve, and he cannot get the place. He can,

however, have anything else within the gift of the administration. Tell General Kerwin that I have acted towards him as a brother and would request him to withdraw from the race.”²²

While the coveted postmaster position went to a competing supplicant, Platt did promise Kerwin another gift of the administration. But in January 1882, when Kerwin was dismissed for insubordination, that promise was years in the future. To make himself worthy of a gift of the administration Kerwin would work tirelessly to secure a powerful patron and to see a Republican administration elected. The *Tablet* would be one means to that end.

NEWSPAPER EDITOR

While Kerwin was edging his way up the New York City post office he was also seeking venues to increase his visibility with specific segments of New York society. Accustomed to assessing the field of endeavor for competitive

The Tablet.

Messrs. Sadlier & Co., the oldest Catholic publishers in America, have sold their weekly journal, the well known New York Tablet, to General Michael Kerwin and Dr. D. P. Conyngham.

The Tablet was established in 1857, and was the successor of Thos. D'Arcy McGee's American Celt, McGee having sold his jour-

Photo:
Sale of the New York Tablet to Michael Kerwin and D.P. Conyngham was discussed, along with the paper's history, in Redpath's Illustrated Weekly, November 1, 1888. Courtesy of the Digital Library, Villanova University.

advantage, Kerwin considered the success many New York Irish had achieved in the newspaper business.²³ A man with organizational and communicative skills, Kerwin determined that he too could achieve success with a newspaper. He found one, and it served his purposes well. Kerwin would lead the New York *Tablet* for twenty-plus years, eleven years of which competed for his attention while employed with the post office.

Looking at the history we perceive why the *Tablet* appealed to Kerwin. A weekly publication of the renowned D. & J. Sadlier & Co. since 1857, the *Tablet* had an established reputation.²⁴ Its core subscribers were the New York Irish, Kerwin's ethnological base, and the Sadlier family was looking for a manager. Contemporary accounts give 1870 or 1871 as the year the Sadlier family turned over the management of the *Tablet* to Kerwin.

Though known as a Catholic newspaper, the *Tablet* also carried articles of secular interest to Irish Americans. Keeping a family hand in the newspaper, the wife of John Sadlier, Mary Anne Sadlier regularly provided stories and articles of religious nature, until late 1882. At that point her work ceased to appear in the *Tablet* because, according to her, "it has ceased to be a purely religious paper."²⁵ There certainly existed a disagreement in the perceived change from what had been a religion-heavy orientation to something else. Kerwin had already run off one editor and replaced him with a colleague, the famous David Power Conyngham, a former Civil War correspondent, a renowned author, an experienced editor, and a fellow Fenian.²⁶ But the precipitating cause for Sadlier family disengagement was financial. The family sold the *Tablet* to help

pay off debts.²⁷

The likely date of sale can be determined by noting a change in language on the editorial page. Where the Sadlier family name had routinely appeared, we suddenly read in a "Special Notice to Subscribers" that "We [Kerwin & Co.] will not be responsible for any business transactions through the Messrs. D. & J. Sadlier & Co. as that firm has no interest whatever in the *Tablet* as of the 21st of October 1882." There it is, and it will prove to be an inflection point.

One newspaper account later offered a bit more to the story, stating that the Reverend



Photo:
Published in the *Tablet* for September 1, 1888, this image of the Democratic candidate for President, Grover Cleveland, was superimposed on the Union Jack. Cleveland was described in the accompanying article as the "English Candidate." Courtesy of Marquette University.

Photo:
As a result of increased publication demands, new quarters for the *Tablet* were leased at the corner of Ann and Nassau Streets, in the heart of the city's newspaper district. This image was published in the *Tablet* for January 1, 1887. Courtesy of Marquette University.



THE TABLET'S NEW QUARTERS.

Doctor Richard L. Burtzell “loaned or gave Michael Kerwin \$1,000 to purchase the *New York Tablet*.”²⁸ Kerwin likely needed sponsorship because, finding himself temporarily embarrassed to be between government jobs, he did not have the ready cash himself. With the purchase of the *Tablet* Kerwin was free of lingering Sadlier family influence. Now at last he could use his newspaper as he wanted, and he wasted no time.

The *Tablet* began to establish a reputation as a no-holds barred Republican party newspaper with the Pennsylvania gubernatorial election in November 1882 and cemented this reputation with the national elections of 1884 and 1888.²⁹ Articles praising Republican strengths and castigating Democratic shortcomings became standard fare. Sounding much like the tariff arguments heard in recent times, from the general election of 1880 through the general election of 1888 Kerwin argued that tariffs were needed to protect the American worker, industry, and

shipping from the dominance of Great Britain, Inc. With the Irish vote in mind Kerwin labeled the Democratic candidates the “English” candidates, whereas the Republican candidates were the “American” candidates.

Determined to facilitate an “Irish bolt” from the Democratic party, in the *Tablet* we read such comments as

...in times past the Irish vote was solid for the Democrats. They were more loyal to them than any other nationality, and would be today, had that party nominated a true American for the Presidency. But they (the Irish voters) could not swallow a free-trader backed by English gold and by the English press... The English dislike Blaine [Republican Presidential candidate 1884], they know that he is a patriotic American and cannot be used as their tool in the White House... [England] knows that her shipping interests will suffer if he is elected, and to defeat him she

*is using all the means in her power. The Irish know this also, and loving America and hating England, they will cast their votes for the American candidate, and not for the Englishman's.*³⁰

Alas for Kerwin's expectations, Cleveland, the "English" candidate, squeaked out an election victory. It has been said that everything was going Blaine's way until just before election day when, at a pro-Blaine rally in late October 1884, a Presbyterian minister by the name of Reverend Samuel Burchard famously misspoke. Caught up in the rhythm of his rhetoric he thundered that the country did not want the party of 'Rum (drunks), Romanism (Catholics) and Rebellion (Confederates)' to be elected. The Democratic newspapers immediately made hay with this, and an unintended blow was delivered on Blaine. We do not know how many Catholic votes were lost by the brouhaha that followed, but Catholic votes were lost. Kerwin subsequently wrote in the *Tablet* that "The three Rs, Rum, Romanism and Rebellion should be supplanted by the three Bs, Burchard Butchered Blaine."³¹

Despite periodic election setbacks and criticism from newspapers of a different character and constituency, the *Tablet's* circulation soared to 20,000 copies, and larger 'quarters' were leased in December 1886.³² Kerwin would retain command of the *Tablet* until December 1893, at which time a Republican Ward leader and a trusted lieutenant of New York State Senator Thomas C. Platt he likely felt he no longer needed the paper.³³

POLITICAL OPERATIVE

Like many former Union officers, Kerwin retained a strong affinity for the party of Lincoln, and shortly after his arrival in New York City he determined to make himself a force within Republican circles. An opening move, reported by the *New-York Tribune* on July 1, 1871, was the organization of the Irish American Protective Tariff Association at No. 193, the Bowery, with Kerwin as its first president and his best friend forever, General Denis Burke, as one of two vice presidents.³⁴ The Irish American Protective Tariff Association will eventually be replaced by the

New York Protective Tariff League and become an important Republican party asset.

Evidencing early adaptation, Kerwin championed an idea in 1871 that would become a rallying theme for Republican campaigns from 1880 through 1888.

The skill sets that Kerwin honed as a military leader would also serve him well as a political operative. He thought operationally and was decisive tactically; attributes appreciated by the political network with which he affiliated. We observe a manifestation of this appreciation when, during the general election of 1880, an appeal to the New York Irish voter was deemed critical to a successful Republican outcome.

The general election of 1880 pitted a popular Democratic nominee, General Winfield Scott Hancock—a man Kerwin admired as a soldier—against an accidental Republican nominee, General James Garfield. The race was expected to be close. The "Solid South" would reliably vote for the Democratic candidate, despite that candidate being the hero of Gettysburg.³⁵ But the South did not possess electoral vote clout. The states with the largest electoral votes, especially Pennsylvania with 29 and New York with 35, had large Irish populations, but the Irish were inclined to vote Democratic. The Republican National Committee determined to weaken that inclination with an eleventh-hour appeal.

Written in late October by Professor Robert Ellis Thompson of Philadelphia, an occasional editorialist for the newspaper *The American*, the 500-word appeal called upon the Irish to vote as loyal Americans "against the English Free Trade Policy which had destroyed the industries of Ireland and would do so to the industries of America if not defeated in the polls."³⁶ The passionate appeal began with "*Irish Voters Attention!*" and ended with "*God Save Old Ireland!*"

With only days until election day Dr. William Carroll, a former executive of the *Clan na Gael*, was dispatched to New York City to request his "old friend General Kerwin" place the appeal before the New York Irish voter. Kerwin recognized the immediacy of the need, and he seized the moment.

Reformatted as a political advertisement the appeal filled an entire column on page 1 of the

New York *Herald* on the Saturday and Sunday before Election Tuesday. Dr. Carroll would recall that the appeal "appeared in fifteen places [on] one day in the New York *Herald*; was placarded over the dead walls of New York and widely circulated elsewhere."³⁷

Wharton Barker, a kingpin in the Republican National Committee, would later claim that the appeal facilitated "the transfer of 27,000 [New York] votes from Hancock to Garfield."³⁸ On Election Tuesday the crucial State of New York went for Garfield. Though he carried the national popular vote by less than 2,000 votes, Garfield won the electoral vote by a wide margin.

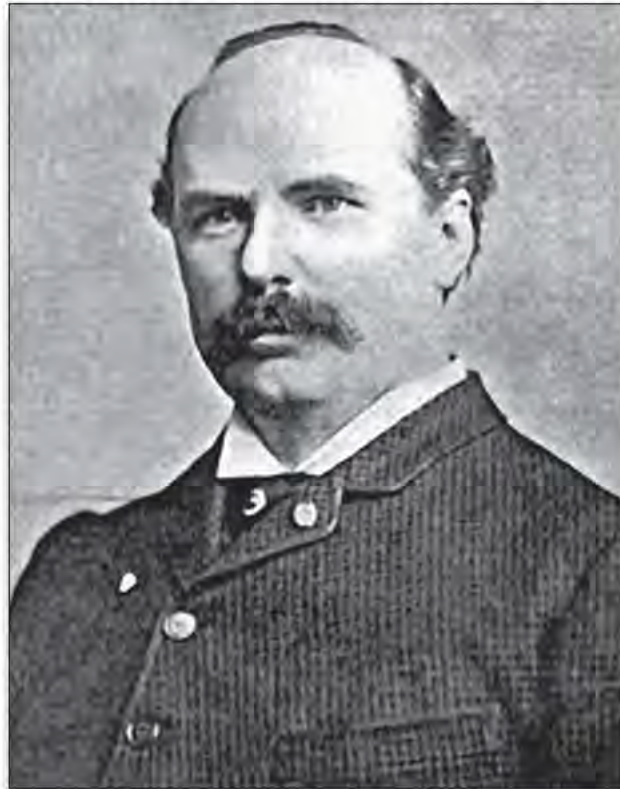
Kerwin's party and its tactics had prevailed.³⁹

The general election of 1884, also expected to be close, was later characterized by some as "the election that got away." This election pitted the Democratic Governor of New York, Grover Cleveland, against the Republican Secretary of State, James G. Blaine of Maine. It is remembered as a messy campaign as both candidates had to defend against accusations of personal or professional misconduct.

Eventually the outcome rested with New York. If the state went for Blaine, he would be elected president. Throughout the campaign Kerwin did his utmost to defend and advocate for Blaine, in the *Tablet*, in political gatherings

Photo:
So confident was Kerwin that Republican presidential candidate James G. Blaine would win the general election of 1884 that he prematurely published "Blaine Elected!" in the November 8, 1884 edition of the *Tablet*.
Courtesy of Marquette University.

| Blaine Elected ! | |
|--|------------------|
| As we go to press the indications point to Blaine's election. The Republican candidate carried the following States: | |
| States. | Electoral Votes. |
| California..... | 8 |
| Colorado..... | 8 |
| Illinois..... | 22 |
| Iowa..... | 13 |
| Kansas..... | 9 |
| Maine..... | 6 |
| Massachusetts..... | 14 |
| Michigan..... | 13 |
| Minnesota..... | 7 |
| Nebraska..... | 5 |
| Nevada..... | 3 |
| New Hampshire..... | 4 |
| Ohio..... | 23 |
| Oregon..... | 3 |
| Pennsylvania..... | 30 |
| Rhode Island..... | 4 |
| Vermont..... | 4 |
| Wisconsin..... | 11 |
| New York..... | 36 |
| Total..... | 218 |
| The election in New York State was very close and was carried by Blaine by only a small plurality. | |



*Photo:
Captain John C.
Delaney, Medal of
Honor recipient,
Fenian, and
Republican Party
operative was sent to
assist Kerwin in Irish
vote gathering for
the general election
of 1888. The move
is discussed in Sam
Hudson's Pennsylvania
and its Public Men
published in 1909.
Courtesy of Internet
Archive.*

and with interviewers. So close was the expected vote that when the polls closed on election night the outcome was still uncertain. But so certain was Kerwin that in a foretaste of a future miscalled election, the *Tablet* declared "Blaine Elected!" in its November 8, 1884 edition. The *Tablet* claimed that Blaine had narrowly carried New York State. When the final count was certified it was Cleveland who had narrowly carried New York State, by 1,047 votes.

Despite a significant Irish shift to the Republican party, it was not enough to overcome the influence of Tammany. In an article titled "After the Battle" in the *Tablet* for November 15, 1884, Kerwin told his readers that the though the paper had fought a good fight, the majority of Americans had voted for the Democratic candidate and, regardless of party affiliation "we are loyal to him who is legally elected President. We would not be a good citizen and be otherwise."

Kerwin would realize a more gratifying outcome with the election of 1888. As with the previous elections, New York State held the key to victory. Determined to secure the New York Irish vote, the chairman of the Republican National Committee, Pennsylvania Senator Matthew

Quay, sent a clever operative by the name of Captain John C. Delaney to New York City to assist the Republican boss, Senator Platt.

It is unknown if Platt directed Delaney to Kerwin, but after his visit with Platt Delaney arranged to meet his "good friend General Kerwin, then editor of the *Catholic* [sic] *Tablet* [and] the most intelligent and enthusiastic Irish Republican in the nation."⁴⁰ Delaney and Kerwin knew each other well, and they had previously collaborated in the 1882 Pennsylvania gubernatorial election.⁴¹

In preparation for his meeting with Kerwin, Delaney went through the city on a vote-gathering reconnaissance. Among the places he surveilled was the New York City waterfront. There he discovered that the longshoremen, a mostly Irish crowd, were habitually used by Tammany during election times to control balloting sites along the waterways. While on the waterfront, Delaney also observed a ship flying the Union Jack at work dredging the harbor. He was shocked to learn that the English ship was on a U.S. government contract.

When the two Republican operatives met, they discussed how to capitalize on what Delaney

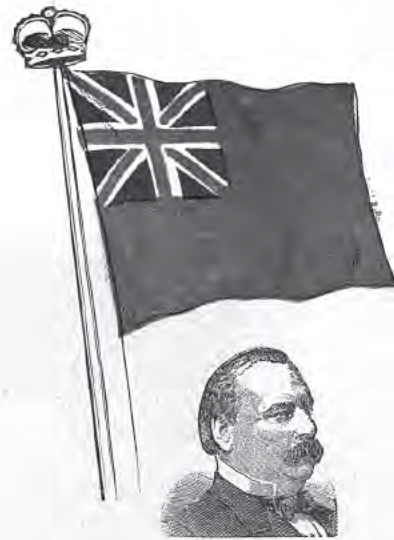
Regular Republican Nominations.



FOR PRESIDENT,
BENJAMIN HARRISON,
OF INDIANA.

"I would rather be Wm. O'Brien in Tullamore jail, a martyr to the cause of free speech, than the Lord-Lieut. of Ireland in Dublin Castle."—From speech of Gen'l Harrison at reception of Esmonde and O'Connor, Irish Members of Parliament, at Indianapolis, Dec. 5, 1887.

Regular Democratic Nominations.



FOR PRESIDENT,
GROVER CLEVELAND,
OF NEW YORK.

"Grover Cleveland has done more to advance the cause of Free Trade than any prime minister of England has ever done."—*London Spectator*.

Photo:

Images from the front and back of an election card used in the general election of 1888.

Produced by Kerwin and John Delaney, the card also contained drawings, one depicting an eviction scene in Ireland (see back cover). Known as the "eviction card," it was thought highly effective among Irish voters and was distributed in large numbers. Courtesy of the Susan H. Douglas Collection, Cornell University.

had learned. Playing into their hands was the name of the contracted English ship, the *State of Alabama*, which sounded mighty similar to the *Alabama*, the infamous Confederate raider, also the product of an English shipyard.⁴² Discussed also was another ill-timed Cleveland administration contract, this one with an English mill to supply blankets to the U.S. Army. Where some saw injustice Delaney and Kerwin saw opportunity, and they determined to turn these "Cleveland administration blunders" to their advantage.

While considering how best to disrupt the connection between Tammany and the longshoremen Delaney revealed that the longshoremen favored a Democratic-oriented publication called the *Emancipator*. Kerwin, who understood the power of the pen, was intrigued. He decided to turn the *Emancipator* to the Republican cause.

As it happened, the editor/owner of the *Emancipator* was a shady character who went by the name "Professor Mezeroff." We may assume some prior association between Kerwin

and Mezeroff because Mezeroff was more than a newspaperman; he ran a dynamite school in Brooklyn. It was reported that Mezeroff trained bombers that O'Donovan Rossa sent to Britain during the Fenian bombing campaign. It was known in select circles that Kerwin was also involved in the Fenian bombing campaign of Britain.⁴³

Kerwin called Mezeroff to a meeting at the Republican Party headquarters located at 91 Fifth Avenue to discuss matters of mutual interest. At that meeting Kerwin and Delaney made Mezeroff a compelling offer, the result of which was that the Republican National Campaign took control of the *Emancipator*.

In late September, the *Emancipator*, under new management, began publication as a weekly illustrated paper. Featuring provocative illustrations of a British-flagged ship laden down with blankets tagged "U.S. Army" and the *State of Alabama* flying the Union Jack while dredging the New York harbor, the *Emancipator*, in tandem with the *Tablet*, hammered away at the

“Englishness” of the Cleveland administration.

Concomitantly, persuasive Republican operatives were circulating among the longshoremen, educating them to the harm the Cleveland administration’s English contracts were doing to American workingmen, and keeping an eye on their Tammany counterparts. We might imagine that these persuasive Republican operatives were also helpfully circulating freshly printed copies of the *Emancipator*.

In late October the Kerwin-Delaney team came up with yet another tactic to influence still undecided Irish voters. They took the idea of a two-sided handout campaign card, commonly used in election times, to the next level with a folded four-sided card. Called “the eviction card,” what distinguished this campaign card from others were the images inside. On one inside page was an upsetting drawing of an Irish family being evicted from their humble home; the statement “What Free Trade Has Done for Ireland” was printed over the drawing. Appearing opposite was the reassuring drawing of an American worker returning to his comfortable home, under which appeared the statement “What Protection Has Done for America.”⁴⁴

When Delaney showed a prototype to Senator Quay, seeking permission to print 200,000 copies, the delighted Republican National chairman replied, “Make it a million, and when you get the proofs send the first to General Harrison, and then send proof copies to all the State committees, except in the South.”⁴⁵ The eviction card was later described as “the most famous campaign card ever designed, and the most popular too.”⁴⁶

Cleveland, an incumbent President and former New York Governor, lost his own state and thereby lost the election of 1888. After President-elect Harrison naively remarked to Senator Quay that Providence had delivered him the presidency, the irritated Quay told a Philadelphia reporter that Harrison “ought to know that Providence hadn’t a damn thing to do with it.”⁴⁷ Kerwin, on the other hand, did have a thing or two to do with it. For his redoubtable support of Harrison, Kerwin impatiently anticipated the gift of the administration promised by Senator Platt. It was anticipated by

the press as well, until the Crime of the Century intervened.

Ed. Note: Part II of “Michael Kerwin in New York” will appear in Volume 35 of New York Irish History.

Endnotes

I wish to thank Matthew Lantry, B.A., M.A., History, on the staff of the American University. A descendent of Michael Kerwin, Matt selflessly shared his extensive research on his ancestor, shared his insights, gave periodic feedback as the work progressed, and throughout provided invaluable collegial encouragement.

- 1 Kerwin was mustered out of the Union Army as a Colonel. Though often assumed, there is no record of a brevet to Brigadier General relating to federal service. The Fenian Brotherhood, however, did recognize Kerwin as a Brigadier General. The earliest found reference is a letter dated November 16, 1868, sent to General Michael Kerwin from Major Timothy O’Leary, the Assistant Adjutant General, Fenian Brotherhood. See Fenian files, Digital Library@Villanova University.
- 2 Colonel John O’Mahony, then President of the Fenian Brotherhood, believed that an organized Irish republican army of 300,000 existed which, when “officered by veterans who won their laurels putting down rebellion in this country,” would rise up to reclaim Ireland’s freedom. *New York Times* March 6, 1866
- 3 Kerwin was arrested February 17, 1866 and imprisoned in Kilmainham jail. He was transferred to Mountjoy jail in early March where he remained until released mid-July. His release was realized through the intervention of Secretary of State William H. Seward. His passage home was paid for by Delia Parnell, the American mother of Charles Stuart Parnell.
- 4 The strategic objective of the invasions was to achieve leverage with which to negotiate freedom for Ireland.
- 5 The first Fenian invasion of Canada was in 1866. The Battle of Ridgeway is considered a tactical success, but it failed strategically as the Fenian force withdrew in the face of reinforcing Canadian and British forces.
- 6 General Orders No. 1, February 4, 1870, No. 50 N. 12th Street, Philadelphia, PA.

- 7 The well-placed British spy went by the *nom de guerre* of Henri le Caron. His signature block can be seen on the important Fenian Brotherhood orders. His given name was Thomas Miller Beach. See *Twenty-Five Years in the Secret Service*.
- 8 General Orders No. 1.
- 9 The Fenian Brotherhood headquarters was then located at 10 West Fourth Street, New York City.
- 10 Kerwin married Mary Bowers on September 19, 1867, but left wife Mary and daughter Mary when he relocated to New York City in 1870. Mary Bowers Kerwin sued for divorce in January 1875 citing abandonment.
- 11 A June 1890 census of Union veterans recorded Brevet Brigadier General Denis Burke and Colonel Michael Kerwin living at the same address, 452 West 150th Street.
- 12 Catherine's last will and testament directed her estate to pay for the shared memorial stone under which she and Kerwin are now buried. It likely replaced a government marker provided at the time of Kerwin's burial.
- 13 See book review on *Patrick Henry Jones*, Volume 33, *New York Irish History*.
- 14 Senator Thomas C. Platt, the New York Republican Party Boss, would become Kerwin's patron, possibly as early as 1882. Platt facilitated Kerwin's appointment with the Department of the Treasury, influenced his appointment as a New York City Police Commissioner, and finally secured him a sinecure with the Department of the Interior. Kerwin was also nominated for positions which did not materialize. Among those were the New York City Port Commissioner, the New York City Postmaster, and the New York County Sheriff.
- 15 The history comes from contemporary accounts. The National Archives and Records Administration was unable to locate Kerwin's Official Personnel File (OPF).
- 16 The historical record alludes to this aspiration. Kerwin conditioned his support of Republican presidential candidate Blaine in 1884 on the removal of Postmaster Pearson should Blaine be elected. See *New York Times*, March 23, 1885. When Blaine was not elected Kerwin wrote a petulant appraisal of Pearson's reappointment by the incoming Cleveland administration. See the *Tablet*, March 21, 1885.
- 17 Kerwin will not forget US Postmaster General James' role in his dismissal. Revenge will come in 1889.
- 18 In "The New York Postmaster. Why should Mr. Pearson be removed now?" Kerwin renewed his complaints against Pearson and his father-in-law, James, and identified himself as a Stalwart Republican when remembering his sacking in January 1882. A 'Stalwart' Republican indicates alignment with the Platt faction of the Republican Party. See the *Tablet*, March 21, 1885.
- 19 Several newspapers carried this account. One is the St. Paul, MN *Daily Globe*, March 23, 1885.
- 20 Kerwin filed for disability in July 1879 claiming permanent impairment suffered from a lightning strike in 1864. Complaints were physical and nervous impairments requiring frequent bedrest for up to several weeks in duration, and loss of hearing. Medical examination noted mild impairments but nothing disabling.
- 21 While attending a GAR encampment at Bordentown, NJ, a group of rowdies, among them a Constable Bowers, knocked Kerwin to the ground and so thoroughly beat him that he was sent to recover at Pennsylvania hospital.

Kerwin claimed that the attack was a result of a political disagreement. A Kerwin descendant notes the similarity of the constable's name to that of Kerwin's abandoned wife, Mary Ross Bowers. It is an open question whether Kerwin's abandonment of Mary Bowers Kerwin led to a score settling by Constable Bowers.
- 22 *Evening World*, April 1, 1889
- 23 Irish reporters greatly influenced the *New-York Tribune* and the *Herald*, and important Irish editors included Thomas D'Arcy Magee of *American Celt*, David Power Conyngham of *Sunday Democrat*, James McMasters of *Freeman's Journal*, John Devoy of *Gaelic American*, Thomas Meehan of *Irish America*, Patrick and Augustine Ford of *Irish World*, and Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa of *United Irishman*.
- 24 Kerwin gives the history of the *Tablet* in an editorial dated January 1, 1884. There he states that in the dark days of Know Nothingism "the *American Celt* sprang into being, and for years battled against the intolerance of the enemies of the Church. When the editor of the *Celt* threw down his pen his paper was transferred to the Messrs. Sadlier, by whom it was issued under the name of *The New York Tablet*, which name since then it has borne." The unnamed editor who threw down his pen was Thomas D'Arcy Magee, who, when dissatisfied with treatment of the Irish in the U.S., relocated to Canada in 1857. D'Arcy Magee, elected as a moderate M.P., was murdered by Fenian thugs in 1868. His

funeral in Montreal drew an estimated 80,000 out of a population of 100,000.

- 25 "An Appeal from Mrs. M. Sadlier," *Tablet*, March 8, 1884, p. 2.
- 26 Major David Power Conyngham was a Civil War correspondent for the New York *Tribune*, editor of several New York weeklies and a prolific author on religious subjects and the Irish Brigade. He became the sole editor of the *Tablet* by 1879 and continued in that capacity until his untimely death at the age of forty-two on April 1, 1883.
- 27 Michele Lacombe, in "Frying Pans and Deadlier Weapons", *Essays in Canadian Writing* Vol. 29 (Summer 1984), page 103, stated that the *Tablet* was sold to ease the debt load of the then-struggling Sadlier company.
- 28 Burtzell, a pastor and a lawyer, is remembered as the defender of the Reverend Dr. Edward McGlynn against the intrigues of Archbishop Gibbons and the Propagation of the Faith at the Vatican. Kerwin spoke publicly in defense of Fr. McGlynn. See New York *Herald*, September 4, 1890.
- 29 Kerwin published character-discrediting articles about the Democratic candidate, Robert E. Pattison, in the *Tablet*, flooding the Irish-heavy districts in Pennsylvania with special edition copies.
- 30 *The Tablet*, editorial page, October 25, 1884.
- 31 *The Tablet*, editorial page, November 22, 1884.
- 32 Initially circulated to only New York City on Sundays, an additional printing run provided the distribution of 12,000 copies nationally on Tuesday. It was stated in several sources that the *Tablet* was the most widely read Catholic newspaper in the country.
- 33 The *Tablet* suspended publication December 2, 1893. *New York Times* Dec 3, 1893. An attempt to reorganize and find new sponsors ultimately failed.
- 34 *New York Tribune*, July 3, 1871
- 35 The Solid South largely voted for Democratic Presidential candidates from the end of Reconstruction in 1877 until the general election of 1968.
- 36 The English Free Trade bugaboo will be used again in the election of 1888. See discussion of the 'eviction card' later in this article.
- 37 *Pearson's Magazine*, Vols 35–36, page 443, May 1916.
- 38 *Ibid.*
- 39 It is helpful to remember that Kerwin was still a mid-dling Post Office employee in 1880 and the *Tablet* was still a Sadlier family paper. Though getting political recognition, Kerwin had not yet acquired Senator Platt as his patron. His ascent was still a work in progress.
- 40 *Pennsylvania and Its Public Men*, Samuel Hudson, Philadelphia, 1909, page 285.
- 41 They cooperated again in the election of Howard Taft in 1907. Closely associated in life, Kerwin and Delaney are still close after life. They arranged to be buried side by side in Arlington National Cemetery. Kerwin is buried in Section 3, site 2169 and Delaney is buried in Section 3, site 2170.
- 42 The *CSS Alabama* was built in secrecy near Liverpool. Though built for combat it was not armed during construction to avoid violating Britain's official position of neutrality. Fully armed in late 1862 the *Alabama* sunk several U.S. merchant ships before the *USS Kearsarge* sent it to the bottom off the coast of France in 1864. In 1869 the U.S. government filed for damages against Great Britain for violation of international law by harboring and repairing a fully armed and operating Confederate raider. In 1872 an international tribunal ruled in favor of the US. The duplicity of the British government in this matter was not soon forgotten.
- 43 'Professor' Mezeroff was thought to be a Russian anarchist but was an American of Russian and Irish descent. His birth name was Richard Rogers. Known to Jeremiah O'Donovan (O'Dynamite) Rossa, the "father" of the Fenian bombing campaign, 1881–1883, it seems reasonable to assume that Mezeroff was known to Kerwin, who allegedly recruited bombers and disbursed funds for the second phase of the bombing campaign, 1883–1885.
- 44 Irish evictions in 1887–1888 received considerable attention in the Catholic and Irish American press. See *New York Irish History*, volume 31, for a New York Irish American's witness account of evictions in County Clare.
- 45 The eviction card was not sent to the "Solid South," which would vote for the Democratic candidate, regardless. See endnote 30.
- 46 See *Pennsylvania and Its Public Men*, by Sam Hudson, Philadelphia, 1909, pp 282–290.
- 47 *Boss Rule in the Gilded Age: Matt Quay of Pennsylvania*, p. 117, by James A. Kehl.