

# JAMES MCKAY RORTY

*An Appreciation*

By Brian C. Pohanka



**From Donegal Town to a Place Called Gettysburg**

*'A Worthy Officer, A Gallant Soldier, An Estimable Man'*

**On the Occasion of the Unveiling of a Memorial  
First Calvary Cemetery, Queens, New York  
May 29, 1993**

***FAITHFUL FENIAN***

***AMERICAN PATRIOT***

The following poem was written by Michael Scanlan, a member of the Fenian Brotherhood. It was published in "The Irish World and American Industrial Liberator," June 18, 1887. Scanlan dedicated the poem to Rorty, "the gallant and patriotic soldier whom I had in mind at its first writing."

### CAPTAIN O'HAY

The long day of battle and carnage was over,  
The Spirit of Silence came down with the night  
And spread her cool mantle of shadow to cover  
The wrath and the wreck of the day from our sight;  
The hour had passed nine and a truce had been sounded  
-- Which smote, with its sweetness, our passion and  
pride --  
As we marched, sad and silent, to bring in the wounded,  
And bury the dead as they fell side by side.

The new-risen wind swept the clouds from the night,  
And the stars, like the eyes of sad angels, look'd forth,  
And the field of the dead by the pale moon was  
lightened --

Alas, for the moon-lighted homes in the North!  
And full in the moonbeams a cannon seemed keeping  
Its sentinel watch o'er the dead of the day,  
And over it leaning a soldier seemed sleeping:  
He raised up his head -- it was Captain O'Hay!

Captain O'Hay was a soldier from Erin  
Whose pulse beat unchanged in success or defeat;  
His was a spirit which never knew fear in  
The first in attack and the last in retreat;  
His voice loud in fight like a trumpet's assailing  
The red front of war with inspiring disdain,  
Stole over the heart in sweet numbers bewailing  
The days when his country was Freedom's domain.

His eye with its old battle fire gave us greeting,  
But greeting which presaged sore travail of mind,  
When he spoke we all knew that his brave heart was  
beating

Forced marches to leave some fond message behind:  
Death had him at bay, but awaited surrender,  
Nor sought that surrender by sudden assault;  
The purpose which blazoned his soul's dying splendor  
Had brought the grim despot lance-poised to a halt!

"I'm glad that you've come, for my spirit is pluming  
Its wings for its flight to the grand camp above;  
Ah, the long weary hours I have waited your coming  
To leave you a soldier's last message of love!  
The rage of the tempest which swept our position  
Soon left me alone with my boys dead and true;

In sighting this gun I received new commission --  
Already I hear the drums beating tattoo!

By the links which were forged in the furnace of danger,  
Dear comrades, nay, brothers, baptized in the grand  
Red font of Freedom, you'll think of the stranger  
Who fought 'neath your banner and died for your land!  
But know in the mess when his heart seemed the  
lightest,

And he sang those gay songs, has his soul been in tears,  
When his spirits were wildest his eyes sparkled brightest!  
'Twas the mem'ry and fire of the long vanished years.

How oft in the rattat of musketry's rattle,  
When this cannon belch'd fire and death at his  
command,

Has he prayed that his life might go out in some battle  
On his own native hills for his own native land:  
When thro' the green valleys the war-cry is sounding,  
And bugle blasts ring in the long-looked-for day,  
And the men of my land down the hillsides come  
bounding  
Who'll answer the roll-call for Captain O'Hay?"

A dozen bright sabres flew out of their sheathing,  
A dozen bronzed lips kissed them, each shouting, "I!"  
He looked to the stars, but he looked there unbreathing,  
His spirit had passed from the earth to the sky.  
Tho' mustered for death -- tho' we knew death had made  
him

A figure to shine 'mid his spirit compeers --  
Tho' the red field was burdened with heroes -- we paid  
him

The soldier's last honors in silence and tears.

We dug him a grave near his own shining cannon,  
And laid him therein with his sword by his side,  
Far away from his home by the fair flowing Shannon,  
In the strength of his years and the flush of his pride;  
Brave hearts and high souls shrined in song and in story,  
Went out, Gettysburg, in thy fierce bloody fray,  
But no spirit took wing from thy red tide of glory  
More bold than the spirit of Captain O'Hay!

- - Michael Scanlan

**IN MEMORY OF**  
**CAPTAIN JAMES McKAY RORTY**  
**1837 -- 1863**



"...A WORTHY OFFICER,  
A GALLANT SOLDIER  
AN ESTIMABLE MAN"



## JAMES MCKAY RORTY

PVT., CO. G, 69<sup>TH</sup> N.Y.S.M.  
LIEUT. 2<sup>D</sup> BTN. ARTY., IRISH BRIGADE  
LIEUT. 14<sup>TH</sup> N.Y. INDPT. BTY. LT. ARTY.  
GEN'L STAFF 2<sup>D</sup> CORPS  
CAPT., BTY. B 1<sup>ST</sup> N.Y. LT. ARTY.

BORN DONEGAL TOWN, IRELAND  
JUNE 11, 1837

FELL IN BATTLE FOR HIS ADOPTED COUNTRY  
GETTYSBURG, JULY 3, 1863

## Foreword

In 1988, while reading a book on the battle of Gettysburg, I came across two short paragraphs which told of the death in action of Captain James McKay Rorty during the Confederate cannonade that preceded Pickett's charge. The account told how Captain Rorty calmly directed the fire of his battery "as if on review at West Point." Eventually, so many of his men were casualties that he himself had to help work his only remaining gun, loading and firing "with an energy almost superhuman," to quote from one eye-witness account. He was finally cut down by one of the last Confederate shots fired during the cannonade. He had just passed his 26th birthday. If history has not given Captain Rorty the attention he deserves, it is perhaps because he competes with so many other men who were equally heroic on that bloody day. It is ironic that his battery (Pettit's) never again saw close action for the remainder of the war. If James Rorty had survived Gettysburg, he might well have lived to honorable old age. He would have married and raised a family, and, if he had lived to be 83, seen the near realization of his dream of a free Ireland. Like so many other veterans of the Civil War, he would probably have returned to Gettysburg year after year, reuniting with his old comrades and former adversaries, each man wondering how he could have survived such a day. Perhaps one of his direct descendants would be writing these words instead of me.

But despite the brevity of his life, James Rorty did leave a legacy to his country. It was through his efforts that the Rorty family was brought to America. His younger brother, Richard (1841-1915), was the first to follow him in 1860. Another brother followed two years (i.e., David, 1862) later. His parents and younger siblings arrived in May 1863, a scant six weeks before Gettysburg. Our family records include an affidavit from James' mother, Catherine, which mentions how James used his soldier's pay to buy their passage and to purchase household effects upon their arrival in New York. She makes special mention of a clock that he bought which was one of her prized possessions. It is apparent that the Rortys lived on the edge of poverty during those early years in America. James' father, Richard, never recovered from the shock of his son's death and seems to have been unable to work. James' mother and one of his sisters used his back pay to open a small dry goods store. The death certificate for James' sister, Mary Devere, who died at 32, tersely lists her occupation as "washing." Mary's children, Charles and Mary, did not reach adulthood. One cannot read the records from this period without being strongly moved.

While the history of the Rortys in America has its share of tragedy, it is also the story of a family that never lost its vision of what America had to offer. Richard Rorty, my great grandfather, moved to Middletown, New York, where he opened a store. Richard was a better scholar than a shop keeper (Gaelic poetry was his specialty) and died in debt; but he did make certain that his six children were well educated. The results were astounding. His sons Malcolm, Philip and James all rose to positions that belied their humble origins. James (1890-1966) in particular achieved notoriety as a poet and author in the Twenties and Thirties and wrote a number of books that are still read. James' son, Richard, a professor at the University of Virginia, is considered one of our country's foremost philosophers. Malcolm (1875-1936) rose to be Vice President of AT&T and President of ITT. Philip (1876-1941) became a prominent attorney. Richard Rorty's daughter, Bertha, married Nelson Blount. They had two children, Richard and Eleanor. I have always thought that, if Bertha Rorty could marry a man with a name that is historically associated with Ireland's oppressors (in the Seventeenth century, the Blounts were the Earls of Mountjoy), there is hope yet for peace between the two nations. It should no longer be a question of who cast the first stone but of who will cast the last. Of the other descendants of Richard and Catherine Rorty, I can offer little information. They have been scattered around our country over the succeeding generations and many now carry different surnames. Yet, whether they know it or not, they all share a legacy of which they may be proud. And they all owe a debt to James McKay Rorty... "a gallant soldier, a worthy officer and an estimable man."

May his memory remain as green as the gallant Irish banner under which he served.

*Stephen Rorty Blount  
Spring, Texas*

## **James McKay Rorty**

### **A Worthy Officer, A Gallant Soldier, An Estimable Man**

*by Brian C. Pohanka*

The roll call of Irish heroes of the American Civil War is a long and honorable one: Corcoran, Cleburne, Meagher, Doheny, Dowling, O'Mahony, Sweeny, Mulligan, Smyth . . . Soldiers, orators, patriots -- the names evoke a legacy of bravery and idealism that still retains the power to inspire. As the poet William Butler Yeats wrote of a later generation of Irish heroes, those of us who draw inspiration from that gallant litany "murmur name upon name . . . whenever green is worn." Time and circumstance have obscured the memory of James McKay Rorty even as the elements eroded the marble stone that marked his grave. But the written testimony of his comrades and compatriots, and the indelible record of his own words and deeds, have ensured Rorty's place in the pantheon of Irish valor. One hundred and thirty years after he fell amidst the smoke and flame of battle, we gather to pay tribute to his courage, to keep his memory green.

#### **DONEGAL TO NEW YORK**

Rorty, an anglicized version of Robhartaigh, is rare among Irish surnames. With roots principally in County Donegal, but also in Sligo, its variants include the names Rortie, Roerty, Roarty and McGroarty, as well as Rafferty (Raithbheartaigh), of which it is said to be an older form. (1)

James McKay Rorty was born in Donegal Town on June 11, 1837, the first of 10 children of Richard Rorty (1813-1893) and his wife Catherine (1816-1901). James was baptized by Father Eugene McCafferty of Donegal on June 18. We know little about his early life, but from surviving correspondence with his father in which James refers to "the business you brought me up to," (2) we can assume that in Donegal the younger Rorty assisted his father in his trade, the dry goods business. Like so many other young Irishmen, James sought a new beginning in America, emigrating to New York in the year 1857. He obtained a job as a book canvasser, and when economic depression put an end to that occupation, turned again to the dry goods business. He seems to have been no more successful in that pursuit. "God knows I have struggled with both mind and body," he recalled, "and at the end I was as far off success as ever, and had only succeeded in crippling my intellect, and shattering my constitution." (3)

Despite his financial reverses, James did earn enough money to bring two of his younger siblings to America. Eighteen-year-old Richard McKay Rorty arrived in New York in 1860, and 16-year-old David Rorty in 1862. By that time James was serving with the Army of the Potomac, and a year later his soldier's pay would ensure the passage of the rest of the family. Unsuccessful as he was in business pursuits, Rorty found an outlet for his hopes and dreams as one of a growing number of Irish nationalists based in New York City and its

environs. As early as 1850, expatriates Michael Doheny and John O'Mahony -- veterans of the 1848 Young Ireland revolutionary movement -- had commenced their efforts to organize Irish militia units throughout the United States. The same year Rorty arrived in New York, a group of 13 Irish exiles, members of the so-called Phoenix Society, met at Michael Doheny's office to organize what became the Irish Republican Brotherhood. The American branch of the I.R.B., the Fenian Brotherhood, was led by its "Head Center," the scholarly John O'Mahony. Rorty was initiated into the rapidly growing ranks of the Fenian Brotherhood by Patrick W. Phelan. Ten years Rorty's senior, Phelan was a native of Tipperary who had emigrated to New York in 1855 and held a position as coachman and caretaker at the Madison Avenue residence of a wealthy Manhattan family. In 1859 Rorty signed on as a member of Captain Phelan's Company D, the "O'Mahony Guards," one of 40 independent companies comprising the Phoenix Brigade. (4)



**MICHAEL DOHENY**  
*Former Young Irelander and  
Lt. Colonel, 69th NYSM.*

An avid exponent of eventual military confrontation with England, Rorty soon began to make a name for himself in Fenian circles, both as a writer and orator. Michael Cavanagh, a future biographer of Thomas Francis Meagher, first encountered the promising 23-year-old in 1860. Cavanagh found Rorty to be "well-educated, gentle, and unassuming in manner, and gifted with a power of eloquence rarely vouchsafed to so young a man." (5)

### **SOLDIER OF THE 69th**

On April 20, 1861, a week after the garrison of Fort Sumter surrendered to Southern forces, James McKay Rorty enlisted for a term of 90 days in Company G (the "Mechanics Guard") of the 69th New York State Militia, a regiment commanded by Colonel Michael Corcoran, one of the founders of the Fenian Brotherhood. The Captain of Company G was Felix Duffy, a native of Monaghan who had come to America in 1840, fought in the Mexican War, and was noted for a fiery and passionate nature that frequently found him at odds with Colonel Corcoran and other Irish-American leaders. (6)

The 69th New York left Manhattan amidst great fanfare on April 23, and after a brief stint of duty at Annapolis, Maryland, arrived in the beleaguered capital at Washington. Private Rorty and his comrades spent several weeks wielding picks and shovels in the construction of a line of earthworks on Arlington Heights before marching forth on July 16 to what nearly everyone expected to be the climactic battle of the war -- an engagement waged on the fields and woodlots that lie along the sluggish stream called Bull Run. In company with the other regiments of Colonel William T. Sherman's brigade, the 69th New York crossed Bull Run and joined in the assault on the Confederate position atop Henry House Hill. During the fighting, the 69th lost 60 men wounded and 37 killed, among the latter acting Lieutenant Colonel James Haggerty; the national and regimental flags were



**MICHAEL CORCORAN**  
*Fenian Chief...Division  
Commander, US Army.*

Photo: Joe Maghe, Riverton, Ks.

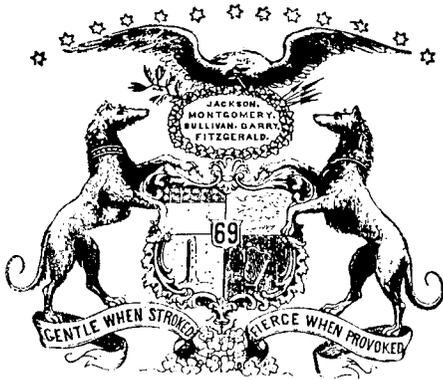
taken, although the regimental was later recaptured. Yet, amidst the carnage and chaos, the Union forces sensed that victory was within their grasp. This confidence proved premature, and by late afternoon the survivors of the 69th found themselves caught up in the increasingly demoralized retreat of General Irvin McDowell's Federal army. In an account written three months after Bull Run, James Rorty excoriated Sherman's leadership on the field, claiming he had "mismanaged his brigade" by committing it piecemeal and ordering Colonel Corcoran to retreat at a time when the 69th was still holding its own. "I do not pretend to say that we could have held the position," Rorty wrote, "but ... we did so until ordered to abandon it." (7)

When the retreat began, Corcoran formed his troops in a square, the classic Napoleonic stratagem for warding off a mounted assault. The 69th was able to maintain this formation until the unit reached the banks of Bull Run, at which point Sherman, who was riding within the square, in Rorty's words, "told the men to get away as fast as they could as the enemy's cavalry were coming." Rorty called Sherman's ill-advised order a "license to run." (8) With the regiment now scattered in inextricable confusion, Colonel Corcoran and nine followers, Rorty among them, found themselves cut off and surrounded in a small house. In the course of their brief battle with pursuing Confederates, half a dozen more Federals came to their aid. But resistance was clearly futile, and Corcoran's party surrendered to a detachment of Virginia cavalry. Additional captures brought the prisoner total from the 69th to just under 100 men.

### IMPRISONMENT AND ESCAPE

By July 24, Rorty and hundreds of other captives found themselves confined in an overcrowded Richmond warehouse. Only then did Rorty and his comrades receive a paltry food ration. Perhaps because of his pre-war notoriety, Colonel Corcoran was singled out for particularly harsh treatment. Rorty was impressed by his commander's "manly fortitude" and "consistent dignity" in the face of purposeful indignities. "He was never allowed to go out," Rorty noted, and "was kept quite apart, even from us who were in the same building." Ultimately Corcoran was transferred to a military prison in Charleston, South Carolina. As a result of what Rorty termed "great atrocities" on the part of his Confederate guards -- such as firing at the prisoners "on the slightest pretence" -- Rorty concluded that "the honor of the corps" required the 69th to mount an escape attempt. On September 18, Rorty and two companions -- 1st Sergeant William O'Donohue and Private Peter Kelly, both members of Captain Meagher's Company K (portrayed in artist Don Troiani's "Irish Zouaves") -- slipped out of their prison, clad in civilian garb. Captain James P. McIvor was supposed to have accompanied them, but was suspected by the guards and put in irons. (9)

Traveling by night, hiding and resting during the day, Rorty, O'Donohue and Kelly worked



Rorty was one of many US military luminaries to serve with the 69th (insignia above), which has earned 63 Battle Honors from 1861 through 1945.



On the 16th March, 1861, the Irish citizens of New York presented to the 69th Regiment a green color in recognition of its part in the Prince of Wales affair. It rests today in the halls of the 69th Regiment Armory in New York City.

their way northward. Their rations -- two pounds of hardtack -- soon ran out, but the young Irishmen found an ample supply of corn in the fields that lay along the route. A week after leaving Richmond, they eluded a Confederate picket line and found themselves on the banks of the broad Potomac River near the mouth of Aquia Creek. Several Federal gunboats were within view, and the escapees determined to reach the vessels. Sheltered in an abandoned fishing shack, Rorty and his comrades constructed a crude raft, and under cover of darkness Sergeant O'Donohue paddled out, eventually reaching the U.S.S. *Seminole*. Suspicious and fearful of a Confederate ambush, the ship's captain refused to send a party ashore. The following night, Rorty and Kelly set forth on another raft, and were picked up by the gunboat *Penguin*. The two were then conveyed to the larger U.S.S. *Yankee*, whose commanding officer provided them with a much-needed change of clothes. Rorty described his appearance as "naked and half savage." The three lucky Irishmen were soon safe and sound at the Washington Navy Yard, recounting their adventures to an admiring audience. (10)

Rorty returned to New York, where he was officially mustered out of the 69th N.Y.S.M. Even before their son's close brush with death, Richard and Catherine Rorty had written to James, beseeching him not to reenlist, and had apparently elicited a pledge that he would abide by their wishes.

### REENLISTMENT - IRISH BRIGADE

But the sorry state of the economy, coupled with the realization that he was both physically and spiritually suited to army life, compelled James Rorty to break his word. Thomas Francis Meagher tendered him the rank of 2nd Lieutenant in the newly formed 5th Regiment of the Irish Brigade, and Rorty accepted. On November 15, James penned his

father a heartfelt and eloquent letter [see Appendix] in which he sought to justify his decision. "I cannot deny that I was attached to this profession," James wrote of soldiering, "and that I found in it the realization of many a cherished dream." In an appeal to his father's own convictions, he noted that the military skills he acquired in America's Civil War would be of value in "the sacred cause of my native land . . . I cannot see why I should not make myself competent to lead in the cause of Ireland." (11)



*Departure of 69th NYSM to the Seat of War, April, 1861.*

The 5th Regiment of the Irish Brigade was initially intended to consist of two squadrons of cavalry and a battery of 12 guns, thus serving as an auxiliary to the infantry, which comprised the bulk of the brigade. Rorty had wished to join the cavalry contingent, but when its organization was delayed, he found a place with Company D of the 2nd Battalion, New York Light Artillery. The company would be led by his friend and fellow escapee, Captain William O'Donohue, while Major Thomas O'Neill commanded the four-company battalion. (12)

At Fort Schuyler (Throgs Neck, Bronx, New York) on December 1, 1861, Rorty's Fenian mentor, Captain Patrick Phelan, presented the lieutenant with a saber, sash and belt as a tribute from his prewar comrades in the "O'Mahony Guards." Irish Brigade commander Thomas Francis Meagher officiated at the presentation ceremony.

"You now set an example worthy of imitation by again taking up the sword," Meagher told the proud young officer. "As your conduct in the past is the best guarantee of what it will be in the future, I present you with this blade. Let its bright blade ever reflect the purity of your own honor." Echoing Rorty's own convictions, Meagher concluded, "I feel that it will not lighten your blows to know that every blow you strike in the cause of the Union is aimed at the allies of England, the enemy of your land and race." In response, Rorty thanked his comrades for their gift, stating, "My political faith as an Irishman has only one article -- a firm belief in the future resurrection of Ireland. And whether death meets me, as I hope it will, on an Irish battlefield, or whether it overtakes me battling for freedom on the hot plains of the South, it will ever find me as firm in that faith as it finds the dying Christian in the faith of his own resurrection."

The cheers and applause had barely died away when Rorty was presented with yet another saber, sash and belt, as well as a Colt revolver, these courtesy of his friends in the Williamsburgh section of Brooklyn. Rorty responded that he was "bewildered and overwhelmed by the kindness," and vowed that the weapons "should never be used in any way that is incompatible with or derogatory to the untarnished reputation and unpurchasable honor that in all ages characterised the Irish soldier." (13)

The four companies of the 2nd Battalion, New York Light Artillery, departed New York on December 16. On December 21, less than a week after arriving at "Camp Meagher," a mile east of the Capitol in Washington, the under-strength and hastily organized battalion was consolidated. Companies A and C became Company B, while Companies B and D were merged to form Company A -- six 10-pounder Parrott guns manned by 154 artillerymen. Rorty's rank was unaffected by the change, but William O'Donohue was forced to revert to the rank of 1st Lieutenant, yielding the Captaincy of Company A to William H. Hogan.

A close friend of Thomas F. Meagher and commander of Brooklyn's "Napper Tandy Artillery," the 42-year-old Hogan was a former newspaperman from Nenagh, Tipperary, who had emigrated to America in the wake of the failed 1848 rebellion. It was not long before Rorty, O'Donohue and the other officers realized that Hogan was also a heavy drinker, possessed of a violent and at times irrational temper. His character flaws inhibited the training of the fledgling gunners in the intricacies of artillery drill, and fostered dissension among officers and men alike.



Photo: Joe Maghe, Riverton, Ks.

**THOMAS F. MEAGHER**  
*"Meagher of the Sword"...Founder  
of the Irish Brigade... Acting  
Governor of Montana.*

## FROM WASHINGTON TO THE PENINSULA

In mid-March of 1862, Hogan had to be released from arrest in order to lead his battery in General George B. McClellan's massive campaign against Richmond. Transported down the Potomac River and Chesapeake Bay to the tip of the Virginia Peninsula, McClellan's Army of the Potomac commenced a siege of the Confederate stronghold at Yorktown. In the course of these stirring events Lieutenant Rorty fell ill, and on April 15 was sent to a military hospital at Fortress Monroe. It was some weeks before he was able to rejoin Battery A. During Rorty's absence, his fellow officers brought charges against Captain Hogan. Lieutenants O'Donohue, Thomas O'Shea and Joseph P. Flynn accused Hogan of "habitual drunkenness," "conduct prejudicial to good order and military discipline," and "defrauding the Government" -- the latter charge stemming from the Captain's having sold an army horse to one of General Meagher's staff officers. (14) While Rorty was not a party to these charges, he publicly expressed his opinion that Hogan was guilty of "incompetency and misconduct." (15)

On May 26, 1862, with Hogan under arrest pending a court martial, General McClellan ordered the ill-fated 2nd Artillery Battalion to be broken up, and its various two-gun sections reassigned to other batteries. Lieutenant O'Donohue's section, to which Rorty was attached, was assigned to Battery C, 4th U.S. Artillery. Another section went to Battery G, 1st New York Light Artillery, and the third to Battery B, 1st New York, commanded by

Captain Rufus D. Pettit. All of these units served in Captain George Hazzard's artillery brigade, in Brigadier General Israel B. Richardson's 1st Division of the Second Corps. (16)

Rorty, who had by now recovered from his illness, served only two days in the 4th U.S. Artillery. On May 28 General Richardson appointed him Acting Ordnance Officer on the division staff. A grizzled veteran of the Regular Army, Richardson was so informal in his dress that he was often mistaken for an enlisted man. His determined, combative nature earned him the nickname "Fighting Dick," and his straightforward style quickly won the admiration of the men in the ranks.

Second Lieutenant Rorty accompanied General Richardson through the strenuous and bloody fighting of the Seven Days Battles and, while his staff duties necessitated a great amount of paper work, he did his share in carrying orders through the dangers of the battlefield. Nonetheless, by July 2 when McClellan's battered army arrived at Harrison's Landing on the James River, Rorty had come to view his assignment to the division staff as an unfortunate turn of events, particularly in light of the fact that his friend William O'Donohue had covered himself with glory in the hard-fought engagements of White Oak Swamp and Malvern Hill.

On July 5, Rorty vented his feelings in a lengthy letter to his old Fenian comrade, Patrick Phelan. Like most soldiers in the Army of the Potomac, the lieutenant supported General McClellan's controversial "change of base" from the York to the James. In Rorty's view, it was neither a defeat nor a retreat, rather "a preconceived and well-planned movement . . . rapid and brilliant." When General Robert E. Lee's forces attacked McClellan at Malvern Hill on July 1, Rorty described how the Federal artillery "mowed them down in masses with double rounds of canister."

"I am unlucky enough to have no share in the honors of these brilliant affairs," Rorty complained. "I have great cause to regret this, inasmuch as the duties of an ordnance officer in the field are as inglorious and ungracious as they are important and responsible." He expressed the hope "that some benign influence will, before long, restore me to my duty as an artillery officer, in which capacity I am vain enough to think I have had moderate success."

Rorty concluded his letter to Phelan with a moving tribute to Captain Joseph O'Donoghue of the 88th New York, a dashing 22-year-old from County Cork who had fallen at Malvern Hill. "Rest, great heart, rest, under the hallowed turf of a soldier's grave; a comrade grieves selfishly for your loss, but glories in your glory!" (17)

### **ANTIETAM TO CHANCELLORSVILLE**

In early September 1862, General McClellan's Army of the Potomac, which had been withdrawn from the Peninsula, marched northwestward from the defenses of Washington to confront Lee's invading forces. On September 17, the two armies clashed along the banks of Antietam Creek in the bloodiest single day's fighting of the entire war.

Meagher's Irish Brigade was decimated during the Union assault on the heavily defended sunken road, ever after known as "Bloody Lane." James Rorty's general, Israel Richardson, was fatally wounded as he attempted to carry the formidable Confederate position. As the Federal regiments reformed their shattered ranks, McClellan dispatched a new commander

to take charge of the First Division, Second Corps. Rorty would hereafter be serving on the staff of General Winfield Scott Hancock.

Tall, robust and soldierly, "Hancock the Superb" was a striking and magnetic leader of men. Hot tempered and profane, he worked his staff hard, but was invariably praiseworthy of their efforts. After Antietam, he complimented Rorty and his other aides for their "intelligence, bravery, and fidelity." (18) Rorty could have asked for no better general under whom to serve. In large part due to Hancock's influence, on December 9, 1862, Rorty was appointed to the rank of 1st lieutenant. (19)

The lieutenant had just returned from a trip to Washington to obtain much-needed division ordnance stores, when, on December 13, 1862, the Army of the Potomac was committed to a poorly conceived assault on Lee's forces at Fredericksburg. General Ambrose Burnside, who had replaced McClellan in the wake of "Little Mac's" failure to pursue the Southern army after Antietam, sent wave after wave of attackers forward in a suicidal charge on Marye's

Heights. "Their devotion transcended anything I ever saw or even dreamed of," one Federal officer wrote; "Men walked right up to their deaths as though it were to a feast." (20)

Hancock's division, which included Meagher's Irish Brigade, was torn to pieces by shellfire and musketry. The General and his staff galloped through the carnage, rallying the shattered formations, and hastening up reinforcements. Hancock was grazed by a bullet, three of the staff were wounded, and four had their horses shot from under them. James Rorty was one of the casualties: A bullet struck him in the left arm, and his slain horse sank beneath him. (21)

On December 15, the injured lieutenant received a 20-day medical leave of absence. While not life threatening, Rorty's wound was slow to heal, and on January 6 his leave was extended another twenty days. While little is known of his activities in this period, we can assume that he relished the time spent with his brothers Richard and David, and discussed their plans for bringing the remainder of the Rorty clan from Ireland to New York. Soon after his return to the winter encampment of the Second Corps at Falmouth, Virginia, Lieutenant Rorty was surprised to see his old and much-despised Captain, William Hogan, serving on the staff of General Meagher. Hogan had recently returned to the army following a six-month stint on recruiting service, having been dispatched to New York by Meagher at the conclusion of the Seven Days fighting. Somehow or other, the charges against Hogan had been forgotten, a situation that Rorty and his comrade William O'Donohue were determined to rectify.

Four months earlier, the old 2nd Battalion had been redesignated the 14th Independent Battery, New York Light Artillery, an action more symbolic than meaningful, since for all intents and purposes the Artillery of the Irish Brigade had ceased to exist. The dispersal of



**WINFIELD S. HANCOCK**  
*"Hancock the Superb" commanded the Union's illustrious Second Corps, Army of the Potomac.*

their cannons and gunners still rankled, and both young officers were determined to exact revenge on their former commanding officer.

On February 21, 1863, Rorty and O'Donohue pressed their case against Hogan in a letter to General Hancock's Adjutant, Lieutenant William G. Mitchell. "In consequence of the arrest of the accused," the lieutenants wrote, "his battery was dismembered, and the undersigned in common with the men of the company, have thereby suffered much personal grievance, being deprived of their legitimate position and rights solely for the offenses committed by Captain Hogan." (22)

Hancock referred the charges to General Meagher, who hotly contested the lieutenants' accusations. The Irish Brigade commander lauded Hogan's recruiting efforts, describing him as "a faithful and gallant officer, one on whose intelligence, activity and bravery any general might well depend." Meagher went on to call Rorty and O'Donohue "exceedingly incorrect," and stated that the charges against Captain Hogan should be "instantly dismissed." Just in case, Meagher made ready to send Hogan on another tour of recruiting duty. The Captain was preparing to depart when, on March 26, General Hancock placed him under arrest. A month later Hogan was court martialed and cashiered.

A week after their old nemesis had been disposed of, both Rorty and O'Donohue were plunged into the vortex of combat at Chancellorsville. Yet another new commander of the Army of the Potomac, Major General Joseph Hooker, found to his dismay that even the best laid plans were apt to go awry when facing skilled and determined foemen like Lee and "Stonewall" Jackson. On May 3, the third day of fighting, Hancock's division of the Second Corps was called upon to cover the withdrawal of Hooker's defeated forces. As at Fredericksburg, Hancock and his staff were conspicuous amidst the flying bullets and exploding shells. Shrapnel tore a leg from Hancock's horse, and the staff officers scrambled to save the wounded from the blazing Chancellor house. In his after-action report Hancock praised the "great gallantry" of his staff, and mentioned Rorty by name. (23)

Tragically, the battle of Chancellorsville claimed the life of Rorty's good friend and comrade in the escape from Richmond, William O'Donohue. While commanding three guns of the 4th U.S. Artillery in the final desperate effort to safeguard the Union retreat, O'Donohue was cut down and left to die in the hands of the enemy. His was a sad loss for all; one officer characterized Rorty and O'Donohue as "the most highly educated and accomplished young Irishmen in the Second Corps." (24)

### **RORTY THE FENIAN**

Not only did James McKay Rorty maintain his association with the Fenian Brotherhood, he assumed an important role as Recording Secretary to one of the organization's military subgroups, the Potomac Circle. The Head Center of the Potomac Circle was Surgeon Laurence "Larry" Reynolds of the 63rd New York. Born in Waterford City in 1804, Reynolds had practiced medicine in Liverpool and was prominent in both the Chartist and Young Ireland movements before emigrating to the United States. Larry Reynolds was a hospitable man, a born raconteur, whose wit was combined with a powerful eloquence. The Potomac Circle, the membership of which included many distinguished officers, held their meetings at the hospital tent of the Irish Brigade at 8 p.m. on the first Sunday of each month. (25)

## **SCHEDULE OF ACTIVITIES**

John T. Conway, Program Chairman

### **Calvary Chapel -- 1 P.M.**

#### **MEMORIAL MASS FOR JAMES McKAY RORTY**

Donegal Town, Co. Donegal

celebrated by

Rev. Paul Duggan, St. Gerard's Church, Paterson, NJ

Chaplain, Donegal Association of NY, Inc.

Rev. John O'Halloran, Chaplain, Oliver Tilden Camp, Sons of Union Veterans

### **Parade to the Gravesite**

#### **COLORS**

1st Battalion 69th Infantry, NYArNG

Major Harry Brady, Jr., Commanding Officer, 1/69th Infantry

Lieutenant Colonel Frank X. Riggio, Commanding Officer

1st Battalion, 69th New York Air Defense Artillery

Veterans Corps, 69th Regiment, Bernard B. Kelly, Commander

Living History Participants:

United States and Confederate States Representatives

### **Graveside Ceremonies**

Liam Murphy, Commander, USNR and NY Naval Militia

President, Irish Brigade Association

Honorable Peter T. King, Member of Congress

Mr. Stephen Rorty Blount

Mr. Michael C. Meehan, Former President, Donegal Association of NY

Lieutenant Colonel Kenneth H. Powers, Regimental Historian, 69th NY

Mr. Gerald Regan, Poem Recitation, "Captain O'Hay," by Michael Scanlan

**Principal Address -- Mr. Brian C. Pohanka, Alexandria, Virginia**

### **Blessing of the Rorty Memorial**

#### **NATIONAL GRAVES COMMITTEE**

John T. Conway -- Chairman

Helen Grogan

James Grogan

Brian C. Pohanka -- Honorary Chairman

#### **EDITORIAL STAFF**

Gerald A. Regan, Copy Editor; Brian Pohanka;

Stephen Blount; Charlie Lavery; Liam Murphy;

Conor Lavery (artist); Stephan O'Neill; and

Jack Conway.



THOMAS CLARKE LUBY  
*Fenian organizer...Rorty admirer.*

Early in 1863, the prominent Fenian and Irish revolutionary Thomas Clark Luby paid a visit to the Potomac Circle. He was particularly taken with Rorty, whom he described as "the cleverest and most promising young Irish soldier" that he encountered. "He was really very considerable," Luby recalled, "one who would have been of priceless value to us at home. A nice-looking young man, well-mannered, well-spoken, highly intelligent, seemingly educated, certainly well-informed on military subjects . . . . T'was indeed a pleasure to converse with him." After Rorty's death at Gettysburg, Luby noted "he was probably a more serious loss to our cause than even Corcoran." (26)

Having received word from his brother Richard that their parents and siblings had at long last arrived in New York, on May 25, 1863, James requested and obtained a 10-day leave of absence "to enable me to attend to urgent family business." Rorty departed on May 28, and hastened to New York in order to get his family settled in their new home on Franklin Street in Williamsburgh (Brooklyn). (27)

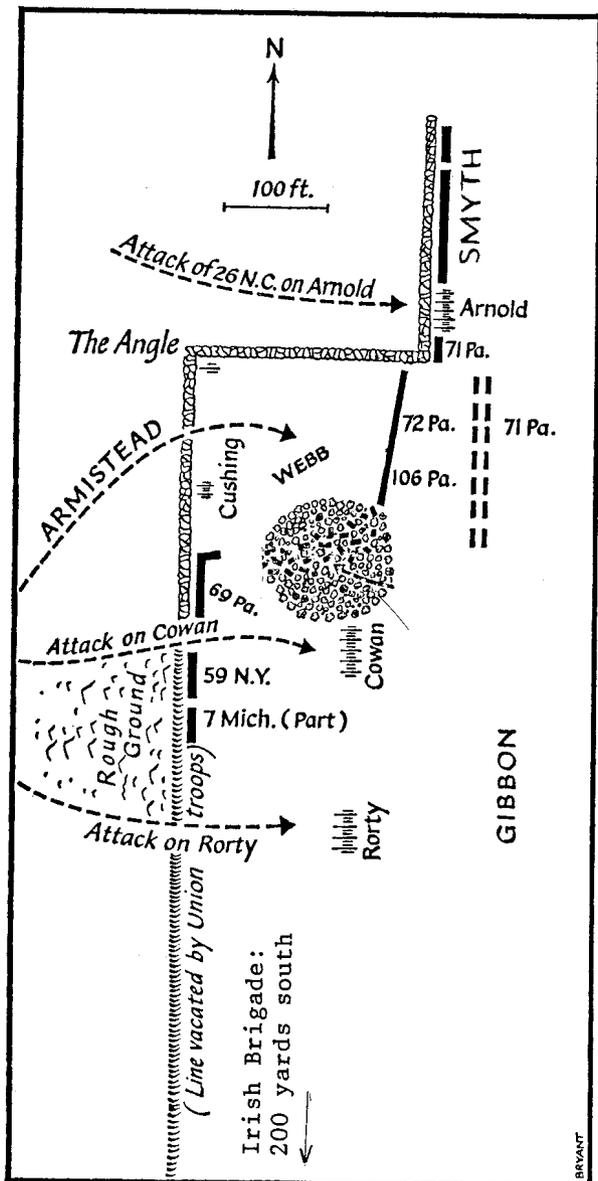
After a separation of six years, the emotion with which James must have greeted his parents, three brothers and four sisters can only be imagined. The children ranged in age from eight-year-old John to 21-year-old Catherine. The two youngest, John and Margaret, had been toddlers when James left for America, and must have had only the vaguest remembrance of their soldier brother.

During Rorty's all-too-brief reunion in New York, he took the opportunity to visit his Fenian colleague Michael Cavanagh. As Cavanagh recalled, their conversation centered on the future of Ireland, what Cavanagh termed "the subject nearest his heart." Cavanagh would receive one letter from his friend after Rorty returned to the Army of the Potomac. Cavanagh penned a reply, which was returned to him several weeks later, stained with Rorty's blood. (28)

## GETTYSBURG

On May 31, during his leave, Rorty was promoted to the rank of Captain, thus replacing Hogan as ranking officer in the 14th New York Independent Battery. As the battery was for all intents and purposes a paper organization still dispersed among other units of the Second Corps, Rorty would continue to serve as Ordnance Officer to Winfield Scott Hancock, who was now commanding the Second Corps. It was June 23 before Rorty was officially mustered in as Captain. By then the Army of the Potomac was at Thoroughfare Gap, marching northward toward Maryland and Pennsylvania, a march that would culminate at a crossroads town called Gettysburg.

On July 1, when word of the initial clash at Gettysburg reached Major General George



*Rorty's Battery of 114 men was particularly hard hit in the July 3 bombardment. Relative position shown. (From "Pickett's Charge," by George R. Stewart, with permission of Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston.)*

was likely a witness to the advance of the Irish Brigade following Father William Corby's rendering of general absolution to the assembled soldiery. (30) Later in the day, Rorty's guns formed part of the improvised "Plum Run Line" on the southern reaches of Cemetery Ridge. The fire of these massed cannon helped repulse General James Longstreet's assault, which had crushed back the advanced Third Corps salient at the Peach Orchard.

Having sustained a loss of one man killed and eight wounded, plus 13 horses put out of action, Battery B was ordered north along Cemetery Ridge to a point just west of General Meade's Headquarters. It was midnight by the time they arrived, and after gulping down

Gordon Meade, who had replaced Hooker as chief of the Army of the Potomac, Hancock was sent ahead to assess what was clearly a deteriorating situation. Accompanied by several aides, the "Superb" fighting general did what he could to restore order among the battered units that had rallied on Cemetery Hill. While these dramatic events transpired, it seems probable that Captain Rorty remained behind to hasten up the Second Corps ordnance trains. However he was on hand for the second day of battle on July 2.

With both armies on the field in strength, poised for what was clearly shaping up to be a decisive engagement, James McKay Rorty obtained Hancock's permission to assume a more active role in the fighting. On the afternoon of July 2, he was ordered to take command of the four Parrott guns comprising Battery B, 1st New York Light Artillery, a unit recently transferred from the Artillery Reserve to the Artillery Brigade of the Second Corps. This was the same battery, formerly commanded by Captain Rufus Pettit, to which one section of Hogan's old battery had been reassigned. Battery B's present commander, 1st Lieutenant Albert S. Sheldon, was no doubt disappointed at being supplanted by an ambitious staff officer, but Rorty had every right to the position, and welcomed the chance to finally test his mettle with the big guns. (29)

It is unclear at exactly what point Rorty took charge of the 114 men of Battery B, but most reports indicate he was on hand by late afternoon, in time to take part in the costly and confused battle that raged between Cemetery Ridge and the Emmitsburg Road. His four guns took position near the famous Wheatfield, and he



*Artist's impression of Rorty manning a Parrott gun alone. Irish World, NY, 1887.*

some coffee, Rorty and his exhausted artillerymen dropped to sleep beside their guns. They were roused three hours later, breakfasted, and soon after daybreak moved again, this time to a position on Cemetery Ridge, 250 yards south of the famous "Copse of Trees" and facing the Codori house and barn that stood beside the fence-lined Emmitsburg Road. (31) As fate would have it, the battery was now directly in the path of the desperate Confederate assault that would go down in history as "Pickett's Charge."

At 1 p.m. on the afternoon of July 3, the Confederate artillery stationed on Seminary Ridge exploded into action, paving the way for the infantry assault with the greatest bombardment ever to take place on American soil. The Union batteries fired back, and for the next two hours the very ground trembled and reeled as hundreds of cannon blazed away amidst the roiling smoke and screeching shells.

One of the first rounds fired by Rorty's battery was defective, exploding just after it left the muzzle and cutting down an officer of the 20th Massachusetts, the unit defending the low stone wall in front of the guns. (32) To avoid further injury to the hapless infantrymen who had to lie prone as the shells roared over their heads, Captain Rorty ordered his guns rolled forward to the wall, where they continued their deadly duel with their Confederate counterparts. The Napoleons of Brown's Rhode Island Battery were stationed a few rods north of Rorty's guns, while the infantrymen of the 19th Massachusetts and 42nd New York "Tammany Regiment" lay in support to the rear and right of Rorty's Parrotts. (33)

The incoming fire began to take a deadly toll all along the embattled Second Corps line, and Battery B was particularly hard hit. "The men sighted their guns as if the fate of the nation depended on their exertions," one of General Hancock's staff observed. "With guns dismounted, caissons blown up, and rapidly losing men and horses, the intrepid commander moved from gun to gun as coolly as if on a West Point review. While bringing up ammunition, some of the men dismounted to lessen their exposure to fire, but this the stern disciplinarian would not permit, and ordered them to remount and ride into position." (34)

Midway into the bombardment all of Rorty's guns had been damaged, and two knocked out of action, one of them blown off its carriage. A caisson exploded in a roar of flame, and more horses went down tangled and shrieking in their traces. An incoming shell smashed the wheel of one of the two remaining pieces. At that point Captain Rorty cast aside his sword belt, stripped off his coat, and in shirtsleeves, black with powder and smoke, seized a sponge staff and joined the crew of the one remaining Parrott gun. Observing Rorty's gallant gesture, Colonel James E. Mallon of the 42nd New York rushed up to the captain, embraced him, and cried, "Rorty, you're the bravest man I have ever seen or heard of!" (35)

Desperate for more men to replace his fallen gunners, Rorty shouted to the commander



*Detail from oil by Paul Dominique Phillipeteaux in the Cyclorama at the Gettysburg battlefield. The Clump of Trees and adjacent stone wall mark the central point of attack on July 3, 1863, by Confederate forces (the High Water Mark). The guns of Captain Rorty's Battery B, 1st NY Light Artillery, were positioned just beyond those in the extreme left. Photo detail by Lane Studio, Gettysburg, Pa.*

of the 19th Massachusetts, Colonel Arthur Devereux, "For God's sake Colonel, let me have a dozen men to work my gun." In response some twenty infantrymen cast aside their muskets and came sprinting over to the decimated battery. One Massachusetts officer, 2nd Lieutenant Moses Shackley, risked his life to fill a sponge bucket at a shell-swept spring behind the ridge, and brought the precious water back to cool the scorching iron of the remaining Parrott. (36)

Finally, the Confederate infantry began their awesome, parade-ground advance. The lines of Southern troops rose and fell with the undulations of the ground, bayonets flashing in the sun, blood-red battle flags flapping overhead. The Union infantry held their fire until the Confederate troops reached the fences along the Emmitsburg Road, when the blue clad line rose up and unleashed a crashing, deadly volley. Pickett's Virginians pressed on despite their losses, the men firing as they advanced. "Death was in the air," one of Rorty's gunners remembered, "the bullets flying like bees from a disturbed hive." (37)

The remaining gun of Battery B continued to fire at the oncoming regiments of General James Kemper's brigade to their front. As the Rebels passed around the Codori house and barn and clambered over the roadside fences, the artillerists cut the fuzes of their shells still shorter, then switched to canister shot. The deadly iron balls ripped through the advancing formations like huge shotgun blasts.

By the time the ravaged Confederate formations made their last desperate surge up the slope of Cemetery Ridge, James Rorty was dead. It is unlikely that we will ever know the precise moment of his fall, the nature of his fatal wound, or if it was a shell fragment or bullet that cut him down. One account indicates that he was struck in the head while attempting to replace a shattered cannon wheel. However, the battery 1st Sergeant later told Captain William P. Wilson, Rorty's tent-mate on Hancock's staff, that Rorty "fell, shot, as the sergeant supposed, through the heart, as he died almost instantly." (38)

With Rorty dead beside the guns and Lieutenant Sheldon wounded, the surviving cannoneers grappled hand to hand with a group of Confederate soldiers who gained the wall and leapt among the wrecked battery. Sergeant Louis Darveau shot a Confederate captain who had planted a battle flag on one of the guns, then drew the handspike from the piece and crushed the officer's head. A moment later Darveau was himself killed. (39)

By the time the survivors of Pickett's division recoiled from their brief toehold on the ridge, and the Union survivors realized they had breasted the Confederate "High Water Mark," Rorty and nine gunners lay dead, and another eight, including Lieutenant Sheldon, had been wounded. Three of the slain enlisted men had earlier served with Rorty in the Irish Brigade. (40)

### BURIAL AND LEGACY

In the late afternoon or early evening of July 3, Captain Rorty was buried just north of the spot where he was killed. Captain Andrew Cowan, commanding officer of the 1st New York Independent Battery -- which had taken the place of Brown's shattered Rhode Island Battery just before the Confederates gained the wall -- recalled, "I found him [Rorty] dead on the field and assisted with my own hands in laying him in his grave." Next to Rorty, Cowan interred a Confederate field officer who had fallen in the assault on Cowan's guns. (41) While riding along the line on July 4, Rorty's former tent-mate, Captain Wilson, saw crude headboards marking both graves. (42)

Following the battle, Rorty's belongings were gathered for return to his family. The 1st Sergeant of Battery B carried the Captain's field desk and baggage to Captain Wilson, while gunner Joseph English salvaged Rorty's watch and chain, "and some other little things." (43)

Some two weeks after the armies departed the blighted field of battle, 22-year-old Richard Rorty traveled to Gettysburg and exhumed his brother's remains for reinternment in New York. On July 19, 1863, the gallant Captain was laid to rest in Calvary Cemetery. (44)

While the memory of James McKay Rorty has faded with the passage of time, the reaction to his death makes plain the fact that his loss was keenly felt -- not only because of his bravery, but because of his promise.

In his post-battle report, the commander of the Second Corps' Artillery Brigade, Captain John G. Hazard, noted, "In the death of Capt. J.M. Rorty the brigade has lost a worthy officer, a gallant soldier, and an estimable man." (45) Wounded Captain P.J. Downing of the 42nd New York, a witness to Rorty's heroism, wrote John O'Mahony, "Rorty's death is as severe a loss as Ireland has had for a long time. He surpassed everything in the Army of the Potomac on the 3rd instant . . . No words can express what he deserves." (46) David P. Conyngham, future historian of the Irish Brigade, called Rorty "one whose Spartan heroism



*Original Rorty family headstone sustained severe erosion for over a century.*

would shed a lustre upon the brightest days of chivalry. . . . Rorty was not only a true soldier, but devoted heart and soul to the cause of Ireland." (47)

*May our and future generations draw inspiration from this brave and deep-souled warrior, "whenever green is worn."*



Photo: James Clouse, Battlefield Guide, Gettysburg.

### AUTHOR'S ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I first learned of James McKay Rorty when, at age 12 or so, I read Stewart's Pickett's Charge. Over the years I periodically added to my Rorty file, but it was not until Gerald Regan located his grave in Calvary Cemetery that I commenced my research in earnest. A telephone conversation with Professor Richard Rorty led me to his cousin, Stephen Rorty Blount, without whose guidance and support this endeavor would not have been possible. I also offer heartfelt thanks to Michael H. Kane, who generously shared the results of his zealous, exhaustive scholarship on Irish-American military history and the Fenian Brotherhood. My appreciation also to Jack Conway, Charlie Laverty, Liam Murphy, Tom Clemens, Scott Hann, Robert McLernon, Ed Raus, Dr. Richard Sauers and Joseph Silinonte, all of whom contributed to my research.

– Brian C. Pohanka

## Appendix

The letter James Rorty wrote to his father explaining why he reenlisted, in defiance of his parents' wishes, is a moving and eloquent expression of his guiding philosophy: that the military experience he hoped to gain on the battlefields of the South would enable him "to lead in the cause of Ireland." The original letter was written without paragraph breaks, which are supplied here for clarity. Otherwise it is reproduced below in its entirety.

New York Nov. 15th 1861

My dear father,

I received your letter of the 23rd ult. some days since, but being unusually busy I could not answer sooner. I grieve to destroy the happiness and contentment that my successful escape has given to you all and more especially to my dear mother, but I cannot deceive you, and though I would fain conceal the fact, you would sooner or later learn it, viz. that I have again taken up arms, and accepted a commission as lieutenant, tendered me by Col. Thomas Francis Meagher in his own regiment, the 5th Cavalry of the Irish Brigade.

I hope my dear father, that you will forgive me, for this double breach, of my duty and my pledged word. I know that you would readily do so if you knew how hard it was for me to succeed in the business you brought me up to, or in any similar pursuit. God knows I have struggled with both mind and body, for three years, and at the end I was as far off success as ever, and had only succeeded in crippling my intellect, and shattering my constitution. The occupation of book canvassing, to which I turned at first promised well, but failed when bad times came on, and at present would not pay my board. I am convinced that under no circumstances, could I succeed in a commercial career: this is no recent opinion of mine, I have held it as long as I can remember.

The fact is I have no plodding genius, and though I am capable of great exertion, I must have some more powerful incentive than the mere prospect of gain. However I intended to keep the promise I made you some time ago, until my return to New York, but the gloomy appearance of business, and my inability to get any lucrative, much less any suitable employment, turned my thoughts to the army again, from which indeed I could scarcely detach them, especially since I had the prospect of an honorable position.

I cannot deny that I was attached to this profession, and that I found in it the realization of many a cherished dream. More than that it was beneficial to me in the highest degree, morally and physically. I joined the 69th a shy, morose, and gloomy being, weak in body and with fluctuating health, never it is true alarming, but never very firm or secure from change, the worst phase was the weak state of my nerves, and a moping melancholy, that grew on me daily. After enduring extraordinary fatigue and hardships I returned, in less than six months with every trace of asthma or consumption gone (a subject of frequent alarm to me before) my sinews braced and invigorated as if they were turned into iron ones, my nervousness gone, (nothing for curing that like the hiss of rifle or musket balls), and in its place a cool, steady self possession that thank God will keep me out of panics at any rate, and in short time such an entire improvement in my size, weight and appearance, that it takes an intimate friend to recognize me. I have also been benefitted by acquiring a more thorough knowledge of the world, and of my countrymen in particular: more tact, address and general information, which will be useful to me in any path of life.

As to the danger of death, I always trusted in God's protection, and though it appeared at one time imminent, if not unavoidable, I was never very apprehensive. I believe in my heart that the dry goods business would be to me a more certain if not a more speedy road to death than a military life is. It is true I never intended to resume that occupation, since I left it: I quitted it after long and serious reflection, and when it was dangerous to follow it any longer as well as useless, and not from a momentary whim or from a fanciful disgust.

As to getting a situation under government, it can only be had through political influence, and I, thank God, have no friend among the politicians, who monopolize all the civil appointments. They are a set of Catalines, who next to English abolitionism are responsible for the unhappy condition of this great and once happy country. I could not get such a place.

But apart from the motives of self interest, and the higher one of attachment to, and veneration for the Constitution, which urged me to defend it at all risks, there is another, and a dearer one still which weighed heavily with me, namely the hope that the military knowledge or skill which I may acquire might thereafter

be turned to account in the sacred cause of my native land. I may state in this connection, that some time before the present unhappy war broke out, I joined the Phoenix Brigade, an organization of Irishmen similar in its objects and means to the United Irishmen of bygone days, and had the honor to gain through some essays I wrote and published in the organ of the Brotherhood, the friendship and approval of that single minded patriot John O'Mahony Esqr. I did not then nor can I now see why I should not make myself competent to lead in the cause of Ireland, while I was willing to follow in the same holy and ennobling struggle.

And it is somewhat odd I confess to me, that you should rejoice at the cheering fact that some 250,000 Irishmen will become disciplined or perhaps veteran soldiers, while you grudge your son should incur any risk in acquiring the same honorable privilege. And yet my dear mother and you profess your willingness to give not me alone but us all to serve the cause that, even now we are promoting indirectly. For are we not serving "the foe of Ireland's foe?" Does not every mail bring the cheering indications that the overgrown and bloated commercial body of England will fall like an empty sack, if it cannot get the usual supply of American cotton to stuff and bolster it up?

And still further, dear father, let me reassure you of my firm conviction, that the separation of this Union into North and South would not only be fatal to the progress of constitutional freedom but would put impassable barriers in the way of future immigration. It would close forever the wide portals through which the pilgrims of liberty from every European clime have sought and found it. Why? Because at the North the prejudices springing from the hateful and dominant spirit of Puritanism, and in the South, the haughty exclusiveness of an Oligarchy would be equally repulsive, intolerant and despotic. Our only guarantee is the Constitution, our only safety is in the Union, one, and indivisible.

And now my dear father, if what I have urged would obtain your and my dear mother's forgiveness and blessing, I would indeed be happy. The consciousness of my disobedience is the only drawback to that happiness. I implore you then to give it to me, that I may feel an entire conception of duty, and battle with a light heart. Commend me to the prayers of my old pastors.

I know you will be glad to hear that Mass and religious exercise form a part of the daily duties of the soldiers of the Brigade. Do not imagine that in camp and field we learn bad habits. Nothing is farther from the truth. As to your wish to have the conduct of my friend O'Donohue explained I am glad to be able to say that he is entirely blameless about the affair. He did his best to induce the Captain of the *Seminole* (US ship) to send him back for us with a boat, but the latter insisted on sending him to the War Dep. with his news; O'Donohue would not go however until he promised to send for us the following night. As it was under the guns of a Confederate battery, and as a boat's crew had been murdered by the enemy a few days before near the same place, save two who escaped, the captain left us to our own resources, which was somewhat mean as well as cowardly. O'Donohue is a good and loyal comrade. He is captain of the company to which I belong.

your affectionate though undutiful son,

James Rorty

P.S. I broke no parole in escaping from the South and am not liable to be either shot or hung should I fall into their hands again. That is a mistake.



**JOHN O'MAHONY**  
*Celtic scholar, Fenian organizer*  
*and Colonel, 99th NYNG.*

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

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2. Letter, James to Richard Rorty, November 15, 1861. Rorty's Pension File, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
3. Ibid.
4. Michael H. Kane, "American Soldiers in Ireland (1865-67)," ms. Phelan's Pension File, National Archives. Phelan later served as a company commander in both the 164th N.Y. Zouaves of the Corcoran Legion and in the 18th N.Y. Cavalry. He died March 11, 1890, and was buried in "New" Calvary Cemetery, Section 12, Range 30, Plot O, grave 1.
5. "Irish World and American Industrial Liberator," June 18, 1887. Hereinafter cited as "Irish World."
6. Duffy resigned from the 69th N.Y.S.M. prior to Bull Run, subsequently enlisted in the 69th New York Volunteer Infantry and was killed at Antietam.
7. Letter of James Rorty to Patrick Phelan, October 12, 1861, published in the "Irish American," October 26, 1861.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid. After his exchange James P. McIvor served as Colonel of the 170th N.Y. of the Corcoran Legion. He received the brevet rank of Brigadier General for "meritorious services" in the Appomattox campaign, and Brevet Major General "for gallant and meritorious services during the war."
10. Rorty to Phelan, "Irish American," op.cit.
11. James to Richard Rorty, op.cit.
12. The five-company cavalry battalion known as "Galligher's Irish Dragoons" later became the nucleus of the 13th Pennsylvania Cavalry. Letter, Michael H. Kane to Brian Pohanka, May 31, 1991. Major O'Neill would die during the war as the result of a riding accident. D.P. Conyngham, The Irish Brigade and Its Campaigns, Glasgow, Cameron & Ferguson, 1866, pp.268-69.
13. "Irish American" December 7 and December 14, 1861. Rorty's and O'Donohue's companion in the escape from Richmond, Peter Kelly, was similarly presented a sword and accoutrements following his commission as 2nd Lieutenant in Company K, 69th N.Y. Vol.Inf. On August 2, 1862, Kelly would be dismissed from the service for carrying a challenge to a duel from Lieutenant John Conway, 69th N.Y., to Lieutenant William H. Baker of the 62nd N.Y. Kelly's Military Service File, National Archives.
14. Hogan's Military Service File, National Archives. At one point, the intoxicated Captain Hogan had drawn his sword on a subordinate officer.
15. Letter of Rorty to Phelan, July 5, 1862, printed in the "Irish American," July 26, 1862.
16. p. 1594, Frederick Phisterer, compiler, New York in the War of the Rebellion 1861 to 1865, Vol.II, Albany, J.B. Lyon Company, State Printers, 1912. Captain Hazzard was mortally wounded at the Battle of White Oak Swamp.
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19. Rorty was mustered in as 1st Lieutenant to date from November 1. Rorty's Military Service File, National Archives.
20. Letter of Colonel Orlando Poe, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
21. O.R., Series I, Vol. XXI, p.231, and Rorty's Military Service File, National Archives.
22. Hogan's Military Service File, National Archives.
23. O.R., Series I, Vol. XXV, Pt.1, p.315.
24. Captain Edward Field, 4th U.S. Artillery, quoted in letter of Michael Cavanagh, "Irish World," June 18, 1887.
25. Thomas Francis Galwey, The Valiant Hours, Stackpole Co., Harrisburg, PA, 1961, pp.74-75. Letter of Michael H. Kane to Brian Pohanka, March 19, 1991.
26. John O'Leary, Recollections of Fenians and Fenianism, Vol.I, Irish University Press, Shannon, 1969, pp.221-222.
27. Rorty's Pension File, National Archives. The Rorty children who arrived in New York in 1863 were Catherine, 22; Michael, 16; Mary, 15; Theodore (Teddy), 15; Frances (Fanny), 12; Margaret (Maggie), 9; and John, 8.
28. "Irish World," June 18, 1887.
29. Stephen Rorty Blount, "Captain James McKay Rorty," 1989, ms.
30. Rorty's position between the brigades of Colonels Edward Cross and Patrick Kelly (Irish Brigade) appears in a map drawn by General John Gibbon in O.R., Series I, Vol. 27, Pt.3, p. 1087. This was prior to the advance into the Wheatfield. See also Harry W. Pfanz, Gettysburg: The Second Day, University of North Carolina Press, 1987, p. 436.
31. "Pettit's Battery at Gettysburg," National Tribune, February 3, 1910. Apparently, Albert Corbin was the author. Hereinafter "National Tribune."
32. Robert Garth Scott, ed., Fallen Leaves: The Civil War Letters of Major Henry Livermore Abbott, The Kent State University Press, Kent, Ohio, 1991, p.184. The officer killed by the premature explosion was Lieutenant Henry Ropes, 20th Mass., who was seated and reading a volume of Charles Dickens - presumably to steady his troops with his nonchalance -- when he was cut down.
33. Visitors to the Gettysburg Battlefield should note that either the monuments to the 19th Mass. and 42nd N.Y. are too far north, or the present monument to Battery B, 1st New York Light Artillery, is somewhat south of the battery's historical position. Virtually every account places these two small regiments directly to the rear and right of Rorty's guns. Three months after Gettysburg, Colonel Mallon was mortally wounded at the Battle of Bristoe Station, Va. Major General Hancock had passed Rorty's battery only moments before being saluted by Col. Dennis O'Kane's 69th Pa. Volunteer Infantry (an Irish, Green Flag regiment) as depicted in artist Dale Gallon's "Hancock's Ride", see Hancock's Ride: A Conspicuous Presence...A Calm Assurance by Col. Samuel W. Flocq, USA (Ret.).
34. Francis A. Walker, General Hancock, New York, 1895, cited in George R. Stewart, Pickett's Charge, Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston, 1959, p. 148.
35. "Irish World," June 18, 1887.
36. Stephen R. Blount, "Pettit's Battery," op.cit. and History of the Nineteenth Regiment Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, 1861-1865, The Salem Press Co., Salem, Mass., 1906, pp.235-236. See also Stewart, Pickett's Charge, p.148.
37. "National Tribune," op.cit.
38. Letter of William P. Wilson to Winfield Scott Hancock, December 6, 1885, quoted in The Reunion of Cowan's Battery on the Battlefield of Gettysburg, July 3rd 1886, privately printed, 1886, p. 20.
39. "National Tribune," op.cit.
40. John W. Buscy, These Honored Dead: The Union Casualties at Gettysburg, Longstreet House, Hightstown, N.J., 1988, pp.17-18. The three former members of the 14th N.Y. Independent Battery were Privates Hugh Gavin, Michael Halloran and Patrick F. Kelley.
41. The Reunion of Cowan's Battery, p.18, op.cit. For another account of Cowan's Battery, see New York at Gettysburg, Vol.III, J.B. Lyon Co., Albany, 1900, pp.1177-1186.
42. Wilson to Hancock, op.cit.
43. Letter of Patrick Davis, Battery B, published in the "Irish American," July 18, 1863. Of Rorty, Davis wrote, "He was a brave soldier -- brave to a fault."
44. Rorty's was interred in Section 5, Range 14, Plot U, grave 9.
45. O.R., Series I, Vol. XXVII, Pt.1, p.480.
46. "Irish American," July 18, 1863.
47. "Irish American," October 17, 1863.



## JAMES McKAY RORTY

Company D, O'Mahony Guards, Phoenix Brigade  
Company G, 69th New York State Militia  
2nd Battalion, New York Light Artillery, Irish Brigade  
14th New York Independent Battery, Irish Brigade  
General Staff, 1st Division, II Corps  
Secretary, Potomac Circle, Fenian Brotherhood  
Ordnance Officer, II Corps, Army of the Potomac  
Captain Commanding, Battery B, 1st New York Light Artillery

### THE FENIAN FAITH

John O'Mahony, founder of the Fenian Brotherhood in America, was a scholarly man, as well as part of the international combination of Irishmen responsible for the founding of its Irish counterpart, the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) on St. Patrick's Day, 1857. In 1857, O'Mahony had also completed the translation of *Foras Feasa ar Eirinn le An Athar Seathrun Ceiting* (the 1629 classic - Keating's History of Ireland). O'Mahony was inspired by Keating's account of the *Fianna*, an elite, third century Irish national guard. From the words *fiann*, *Fianna* and *feinnidhe*, O'Mahony coined the Irish word *finini* and the English word Fenian to describe those modern-day Irishmen who would risk all to defend the land and the honor of Ireland and the Irish. In early 1866, O'Mahony published his translation to scholarly acclaim.

The American Civil War (1861-1865) -- for both Union and Confederate forces - became the great training ground for the Fenian (Irish Republican) Army which intended to later return home and win Irish freedom. Fenians from both sides, even general officers like "Fighting" Tom Sweeny (later Military Chief of Staff of the Fenian Brotherhood in America) and Patrick Cleburne -- both Cork-men, though one Catholic and the other Protestant, had consulted on Irish military matters during lulls in the fighting.

The nomenclature of the Fenian Brotherhood and the Irish Republican Brotherhood became interchangeable by 1865 as veterans of the American Civil War (including Fenian Colonel Thomas Kelly and Captain Timothy Deasy) returned home to Ireland to help make good on O'Mahony's promise to James Stephens to provide the cadre to help prepare Ireland for the Rising. It offered the greatest potential of success since the Nine Years War against Elizabethan England.

In 1866, the Fenian Brotherhood in America, frustrated by the failure of the 1865 Rising at home, determined to strike England where they found her, and so invaded Canada. In June, at Ridgeway in Upper Canada, Fenians under Colonel John O'Neill (late of the US Cavalry) defeated a British-Canadian force in battle and then retired to Buffalo. While the Fenian raid did not establish an Irish Republican base in North America, it did convince the average Canadian voter of the virtue of confederation. Thus the Dominion of Canada (i.e., Home Rule for Canada) came into existence on July 1, 1867.

It was men of that same Irish Republican Brotherhood, like Tom Clarke, who kept what Padraic Pearse would describe as "The Fenian Faith." These same Fenians would inspire, help organize and lead the 1916 Easter Rising and the Irish War for Independence (1919-1921), which created the modern Irish state.

-- Liam Murphy and Morgan Llywelyn

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 In honor of Private Willie Mitchel,  
 1st Virginia Regiment, CSA, killed  
 July 3, 1863. Son of John Mitchel.  
 In honor of American Fenians of '66-'67  
 -- USA and CSA veterans.  
 In honor of T.F. Bourke, 7th Louisiana,  
 CSA, and Irish Republican Brotherhood

Today's ceremonies are sponsored by the Irish Brigade Association, Ft. Schuyler, NY.  
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Photo: Brian C. Pohanka



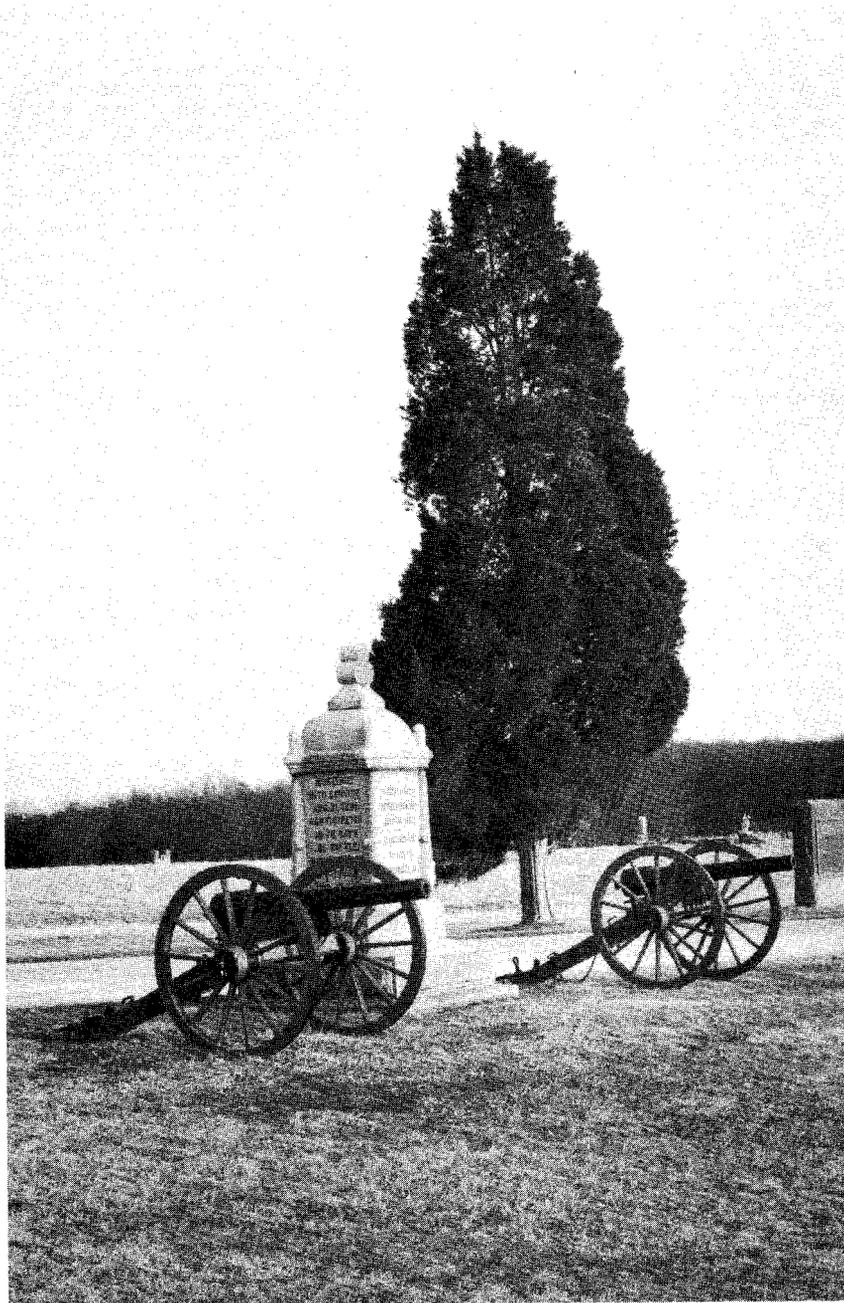
*Monument to the New York regiments of the Irish Brigade at Gettysburg, Pa. Here, at the Wheatfield on July 2, Captain Rorty's battery overlooked the maelstrom that developed when the Confederate corps of General James Longstreet attempted to destroy General George Meade's left wing. The monument, erected in 1888, was executed by a veteran of the Confederate Army's Staunton (Va.) Artillery, William Rudolf O'Donovan, who fought in the Gettysburg campaign. The monument was erected by the State of New York.*



Photo: Lane Studio, Gettysburg, Pa.

*Right front panel (opposite) of the Celtic Cross honors Captain Rorty and his 14th New York Independent Battery, initially part of the Irish Brigade and ultimately Rorty's Battery at Gettysburg.*

Photo: Brian C. Pohanka



**Monument to  
Battery B, 1st New York Light Artillery  
Near the High Water Mark of the Confederacy  
*'Rorty's Battery'***