Meagher, Thomas Francis

by E. P. Cunningham

Meagher, Thomas Francis (1823–67), Young Ireland nationalist and soldier, was born 3 August 1823 in Waterford city, the eldest child of Thomas Meagher and his wife Alicia Quan. Both parents came from well-to-do catholic merchant families. His father was a shipowner, specialising in the Newfoundland trade, who went on to become mayor of Waterford (1842–44) and an O’Connellite MP for the city (1847–57). Young Tom had a comfortable, even privileged, upbringing. He was sent to Clongowes Wood college, Co. Kildare (1833–9), and then to the sister Jesuit college at Stonyhurst, Lancashire (1839–43). Returning to Waterford in 1843, he supported Daniel O’Connell’s (qv) movement for repeal of the act of union. In January 1844 he moved to Dublin and registered as a law student at King’s Inns (nominated by O’Connell). He became actively involved in the affairs of the Repeal Association, and within a year had abandoned his law studies. This was a period of growing division between O’Connell’s old guard and the Young Ireland group. Influenced strongly by Thomas Davis (qv), Meagher was firmly in the Young Ireland camp, though consistently among its more moderate majority. In the critical meeting of the Repeal Association on 28 July 1846, at which Young Ireland seceded, he gave a stirring speech in defence of the ultimate right of recourse to arms, which earned him the sobriquet ‘Meagher of the Sword’. When the seceders established the Irish Confederation in January 1847, he was appointed to its national council and was prominent among its leaders. In February 1848 he stood as a Confederation candidate in a by-election in Waterford, where his father was one of two MPs for the city. The vacancy was created by the resignation of the other MP (O’Connell’s son, Daniel (qv)), who had accepted a government appointment. Meagher senior was a faithful O’Connellite, and the differences between father and son contributed to the defeat of both the repeal candidate and Thomas Francis.

On 15 March 1848 Meagher, whose passionate oratory made him a great favourite with the Confederate clubs, addressed a mass meeting in Dublin which adopted a congratulatory address to the new French revolutionary government, and was one of three delegates chosen to carry the address to Paris. He and William Smith O’Brien (qv) were prosecuted for seditious speeches made at this meeting, but were acquitted (16 April). While still on bail, Meagher went to Paris and on 3 April presented the address to the French government, returning with the green, white, and orange tricolour. Over the next few months Meagher addressed Confederate clubs in Dublin and the south-east, encouraging them to arm, and was appointed to the Confederation’s war directory. On 12 July he was arrested in his father’s house in Waterford. His supporters tried to prevent his removal to Dublin but, anxious to avoid a premature insurrection, Meagher ordered them to disperse. Again he was released on bail and when the government suspended habeas corpus on 22 July, Meagher pressed for action, travelling to the south-east with the other
leaders to organise an insurrection. Attempting to raise support in the surrounding area, Meagher was not present at Ballingarry, Co. Tipperary, on 29 July 1848, the principal engagement in the abortive rising. He later wrote an account of these events in which he blamed the failure of the rising on the timidity of his fellow leaders and the opposition of the catholic clergy.

After the collapse of the rising he went on the run and was arrested on 13 August near Cashel and charged with high treason. Together with Smith O'Brien, T. B. McManus (qv), and Patrick O'Donohoe (qv) he was tried in Clonmel and on 23 October 1848 sentenced to death. There followed a fairly comfortable detention in Richmond jail in Dublin while appeals were pursued. The sentences were eventually commuted to transportation for life, and on 29 July 1849 Meagher began the three-month voyage to Tasmania aboard the Swift. Both on the voyage out and on arrival the Young Irelanders were given special status. Meagher signed a ticket of leave and took lodgings in the village of Ross. Though forbidden to associate with his fellow convicts, he regularly met O'Donohoe, John Mitchel (qv), and Kevin Izod O'Doherty (qv). He had a sailing-boat, which he christened Speranza after the nationalist poet, Lady Wilde (qv), constructed in Hobart and hauled to Lake Sorell in his assigned district. He also found time to court and on 22 February 1851 to marry Catherine Bennett, the daughter of an Irish settler family. Meanwhile, plans for the escape of the Young Ireland convicts were being developed by Irish exiles in New York, and on 3 January 1852 Meagher wrote to the local magistrate surrendering his ticket of leave, and slipped aboard the Elizabeth Thompson off the east coast of Tasmania. Four months later he arrived to a hero's welcome in New York, and was immediately taken into the heart of the Irish-American establishment.

For the next ten years Meagher was a newspaper publisher, lawyer, public speaker, and social celebrity. He was admitted to the New York bar in 1855, founded and published the Irish News for a number of years, and made two expeditions to Central America, exploring commercial possibilities. His wife, who had remained in Tasmania, gave birth in March 1852 to a son, who died four months later. In March 1853 Catherine moved to Waterford and subsequently travelled to New York. Returning to Waterford, she had a second son and died, aged 23, on 15 May 1854. Two years later Meagher married Elizabeth Townsend, daughter of a wealthy New York railroad and steel family. He had no children with his second wife. His son was brought up in Waterford, subsequently emigrated to the US, and died in Manila in 1909.

The years before the civil war brought mixed fortunes to Meagher. His principal activity (and source of income) was lecturing, generally on Irish revolutionary matters. His success as a newspaperman and lawyer was modest. When in New York he lived at his American wife's family home. As a celebrated revolutionary, he was able to command a position as a leading figure among Irish-Americans, and to build a network of political connections with American politics. However, as his American base expanded his commitment to Irish revolution decreased. James
Stephens (qv) sought his support for the plans of the newly established IRB and their sister organization in America, the Fenians, in 1858, and came away disappointed.

When the American civil war began in April 1861, Meagher was an American citizen, and one of the acknowledged leaders of Irish-America. As a staunch Democrat, he supported the party's position of non-interference with slavery, and was initially ambivalent about the war, but soon swung enthusiastically to the union cause. He lent his name and energies to the recruitment drive, and was commissioned as a captain with the 69th Regiment in time to play a full part in the first battle of Bull Run in July 1861. The union forces were routed, and the 69th, having lost 150 men, returned to New York to regroup. By November three regiments were sent back to the war front in northern Virginia as the Irish Brigade, with Meagher as their commanding officer. He was commissioned as brigadier-general on 3 February 1862. For some eighteen months he commanded the brigade on continuous active service. It was engaged in all the major battles of the period, suffering heavy losses at Malvern Hill (1 July), Antietam (17 September), and Fredericksburg (13 December 1862). At this stage the brigade, originally 3,000 strong, was reduced to fewer than 500 men, and Meagher wrote to the secretary of war requesting that it be withdrawn from active service to regroup and recruit. When this request was not accepted he tendered his resignation, which was accepted by the president on 14 May 1863. The following year, after much badgering of the war department, he returned to the service and was given command of a rearguard garrison brigade in Tennessee. After a mismanaged transfer of his troops to join Sherman's Carolinas campaign, he was relieved of duty (24 February 1865) on the initiative and orders of the commander-in-chief, Gen. Ulysses S. Grant. Meagher emerged from the war with a mixed reputation: brave, eloquent, convivial, inspiring; skill or effectiveness as a commander are not mentioned by contemporaries.

After the war Meagher's stock was low. He had lost favour with many Irish-Americans for his continued support for the war and his backing of the Republican candidates Lincoln and Johnson in the 1864 election. There was little prospect of success in his former business pursuits. He persistently sought an official appointment from the Johnson administration and, when disappointed, travelled to Minnesota to seek opportunities in the West. While there he was notified of his appointment as secretary for the territory of Montana, not yet a state. This was still a wild frontier, and on arrival Meagher became acting governor. He threw himself fully into his new duties, which included the preparation of legislation for the territory, the maintenance of law and order, and the containment of hostilities with the Sioux Indians. His tenure was controversial, and relatively brief. Even his death was controversial. On 1 July 1867, while on an official tour of duty connected with the Sioux campaign, he fell overboard from a steamer moored on the Missouri River at Fort Benton. It may have been an accident, but his friends and supporters had sufficient belief that he was murdered by his political enemies that they put up a reward for the discovery of his killers. The mystery remains.
Meagher was just under 44 when he died. In each of his multiple careers as a Young Ireland revolutionary, a transported convict, a New York celebrity, a civil war general, and a territorial governor in the Wild West, he made a mark. His most notable monuments are fine equestrian statues in front of the state house in Helena, Montana, and on the Mall in Waterford.