

THE UNION ARMY RECRUITS IN IRELAND

The flood of famine-fleeing Irish immigrants to North America receded during the late 1850s; by 1861 the flow had even reversed, as the horrors of the American Civil War drove migrants back to the home country. But two years later, though the war was bloodier than ever, immigrant numbers shot back up to 100,000. Two factors lay behind this. The first was railways.

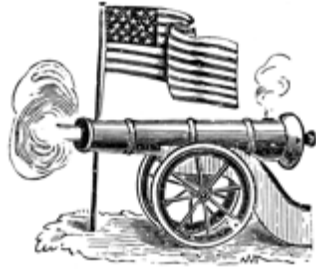
There was a race to build track towards the nation's centre from either side, but the mighty railway companies were having trouble persuading enough Americans to endure the dangerous drudge of building new line. Out west, they shipped in Chinese labour. In the east, they looked to Ireland. They sent agents across the Atlantic to the impoverished hordes on the edge of old Europe, promising high wages, short contracts and free land afterwards. The railway companies worked closely with the shipping lines: immigrants would get a seemingly free crossing, then, before they could leave the boat, they would be forced to sign work contracts that paid for their passage over a term of up to five years. It was all legal. Indeed US law required shippers to ensure arrivals did not burden the state, so the agents would not let immigrants leave the boat until they signed.

The second magnet was war. Unlicensed military recruiters from the northern states started appearing in Ireland. They promised bounties to young men prepared to contract their labour; in this case their labour being to soldier for the Union. So many recruits came this way that the southern Confederacy asked the Vatican to instruct Irish Catholics not to join the northern army. The British government echoed these concerns as it, and the powerful British railway companies, feared the haemorrhaging of cheap Irish labour across the Atlantic.

Even so, many young men from Galway and Sligo soon found themselves on the battlefields of Gettysburg and Cold Harbor. And many regretted it, as was shown by the popular song *Paddy's Lamentation*, also known as *By the Hush*.

By the Hush

*And it's by the hush, me boys
And be sure to hold your noise,
And listen to poor Paddy's lamentation.
For I was by hunger pressed,
And by poverty distressed,
And I took a thought I'd leave the Irish nation.*



*Oh you boys, now take my advice;
To America I'd have you not be coming
For there's nothing here but war,
And the thundering cannons roar,
And I wish I was back home in dear old Ireland.*

*I sold me horse and plough,
Me little pigs and cow,
And me little farm of land and I were parted.
And me sweetheart, Bid McGhee,
I'm sure that I'll never see,
For I left her there that morning, broken hearted.
Oh you boys, now take my advice...*

*It was me and a hundred more,
To America sailed o'er,
Our fortunes to be made, so we were thinking;*

*But when we got to Yankee lands,
They shoved a gun into our hands,
Saying, 'Paddy, you must go and fight for Lincoln.'
Oh you boys, now take my advice...*

*General Meagher to us said,
'If you get shot or lose a leg
Every mother's son of you will get a pension'.
But in the war I lost me leg
And all I got's this wooden peg;
Me boys it is the truth to you I mention.
Oh you boys, now take my advice...*

*Now I think meself in luck
To be fed upon Indian buck
In old Ireland, the country I delight in;
And with the devil I do say,
'Curse Americay,'
For I'm sure I've had enough of their hard fighting.
Oh you boys, now take my advice...*

Little changes. Under the gloriously-named programme, Military Accessions Vital to the National Interest, today's US Army fast-tracks citizenship to immigrants with language and medical skills – provided they join up and fight. Recently the Pentagon reported that 65,000 green card holders serve in this way. But when they return after years of service in, say, Iran or Afghanistan, many don't actually get their citizenship – and can be legally deported for minor offences like drink-driving. Many veterans, particularly of Mexican origin, have been expelled in this way. It's an injustice not lost on those who remember the civil rights movement was spurred, in part, by African American veterans returning from World War Two to find their status still unequal.