



Provided by the author(s) and University of Galway in accordance with publisher policies. Please cite the published version when available.

Title	The Italian Risorgimento and the Irish Papal Brigade
Author(s)	O'Connor, Anne
Publication Date	2013-12-03
Publication Information	O'Connor, Anne. (2013). The Italian Risorgimento and the Irish Papal Brigade. In Colin Barr, Michele Finelli , & Anne O'Connor (Eds.), Nation/Nazione: Irish nationalism and the Italian Risorgimento. Dublin: UCD Press.
Publisher	University College Dublin Press
Link to publisher's version	<a href="https://www.ucdpress.ie/">https://www.ucdpress.ie/</a>
Item record	<a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10379/15183">http://hdl.handle.net/10379/15183</a>

Downloaded 2024-05-14T12:34:55Z

Some rights reserved. For more information, please see the item record link above.



## **“Giant and Brutal Islanders”: The Italian Response to the Irish Papal Brigade.**

**Anne O’Connor**

In 1847, with the news of Daniel O’Connell’s death in Genoa, Italians responded with an outpouring of tributes to the Irishman. Hailed for his leadership qualities, Italians sympathised with the Irish over the loss of such a great man. There were orations, processions, commemorations and general celebrations of O’Connell’s achievements. Thirteen years later, during the Papal Wars of 1860, Irishmen came to fight and die on Italian soil, yet these men were greeted by ridicule and disgust. They had gone to Italy with high hopes for glory and victory, but were met with little support or sympathy in Italy for their attempt to defend the Papal States from the forces of the Risorgimento. In those 13 years, the nationalist movements in Ireland and in Italy had drifted apart, with the Italians finally seeing their ambitions for unity turned into reality, and the Irish coming increasingly under the influence of the Catholic Church.<sup>1</sup> And so by 1860, when Irishmen volunteered to fight in a Papal Army, the relationship between the two countries operated in a completely altered landscape to the one experienced by O’Connell.

The experience of the Irish Papal Brigade in Italy provides an excellent flashpoint of interaction between Irish and Italian nationalism. Irish military involvement in Italy stretched to only a few months (from May to October 1860), but even during this brief encounter, a complete lack of understanding and empathy between the two countries can be observed.<sup>2</sup> Irish nationalism had risen to a remarkable new crescendo of pro-papal enthusiasm and fervor, and this form of nationalism could not find any sympathy with the Risorgimento and its efforts to overthrow the Pope’s temporal power.<sup>3</sup> Although in the early stages of the

---

<sup>1</sup> For a background to these interactions, see K. Nowlan, R. Dudley Edwards, T. Desmond Williams (eds) *Ireland and the Italian Risorgimento*, Dublin: Italian Cultural Institute, 1960 and Giovanni D’Angelo, ‘Italia e Irlanda nel XIX secolo: contatti e malintesi fra due movimenti nazionali’ *Storia e politica*, 1976, 15, pp. 393-438.

<sup>2</sup> For a more detailed account of the Irish Papal Brigade see: G.F.H. Berkeley, *The Irish Battalion in the Papal Army of 1860*, Dublin: Talbot Press, 1929; see also Ciarán O’Carroll’s article in this volume; Mary Cryan Pancani, ‘New Light on the Background to the Irish participation in the Papal Army of 1860’ in *The Irish Sword*, XVI, 1986, no. 64, pp. 155-164; Carlo Paganini, ‘L’anno italiano degl’Irlandesi: 1860. Annotazioni storiche da ricerche negli archivi d’Irlanda e Inghilterra, in *Archivio storico lombardo*’ 1976, pp. 311-344.

<sup>3</sup> G.F.H. Berkeley has commented, ‘To the educated Irish Catholic in 1860 an attack made on the Papacy represented not merely a blow struck against the institution which he most revered, but also a change which he feared might indirectly affect his own country by weakening one of the sources of its moral strength. As to the internal affairs of Italy, he had scarcely better means of understanding them than the average Italian had of understanding the local politics of Ireland.’ *The Irish Battalion in the Papal Army of 1860*, p.18. For the close identification of the Papal cause with the cause of Ireland, see: E.H. Larkin, *The Consolidation of the Roman*

Risorgimento, there was some sympathy in Ireland to the cause of Italian liberation, these feelings were soon overshadowed by an overwhelming concern for the papacy, and a fervent belief in the right of the Pope to his temporal territories.<sup>4</sup> On the Italian side, as the Risorgimento reached its decisive stages, the incorporation of the Papal States into a united Italy became a central aim and any group standing in the way of this reality became a target for hostility. As they faced each other on the battlefields of the Marche and the Romagna, the distance between the two nationalisms was very evident, and an examination of these interactions shows the different paths that both movements had followed in the years since O'Connell's death.

### **Depiction in the Italian Press**

The Italian nationalist press greeted the arrival of Irish troops to fight on the opposite side of the battle lines with contempt and disgust. In fact, the depiction of the Irish was so negative that it bordered on the caricature and they were singled out for their lack of discipline and their almost beastly qualities. The newspaper *La Perseveranza* was particularly vehement in its denunciation of these unwanted Irish foreigners, variously terming them 'brutal' and 'gigantesque'; 'disruptive and undisciplined'; 'scoundrels'; 'incapable of orderly behaviour' and 'giant savages'.<sup>5</sup> On 1 July 1860, *La Perseveranza* reported that 100 Irish sent by O'Connell's land had arrived in Rome and called them, 'giant and brutal islanders'.<sup>6</sup> While on 7 September it reported, 'Those Irish are very strange: they wear their beards in a ridiculous fashion and they refuse to put on military attire. These people do not even inspire trust amongst their leaders and are only good for plundering.'<sup>7</sup> During the summer there were many reports of insubordination and disturbances, reports which were elaborated upon by newspapers such as *La Perseveranza* and *La Nazione*. Typical of these reports is the following:

And finally we have 450 Irish. These scoundrels (which they truly are) worry us because they obey no-one and are given everything that they want. A few days ago 53 of

---

*Catholic Church in Ireland, 1860-1870*, Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1987, p. 7; See also Jennifer O'Brien's article in this volume, 'Irish public opinion and the Risorgimento'.

<sup>4</sup> See Berkeley, *The Irish Battalion*, pp.16-18.

<sup>5</sup> See accounts in *La Perseveranza* on these dates: 1 July 1860; 12 July 1860; 14 July 1860; 15 July 1860; 23 July 1860; 27 July 1860. The newspaper *La Perseveranza* was founded in Milan in November 1859 following the unification of Lombardy with the Kingdom of Sardinia. It was supportive of the unification process and became the main newspaper for the moderates and monarchists amongst the upper classes in Lombardy.

<sup>6</sup> All translations from Italian by the author.

<sup>7</sup> *La Perseveranza*, 7Sept. 1860.

them coming from Macerata, while passing through a town called S. Giacomo 4 miles from here, robbed 11 hams from a delicatessen and they bore these aloft triumphantly as they entered the city. They drank all the liquors that a poor coffee shop owner had and in response to the requests by that poor man to obtain payment for what they had consumed, they replied by smashing everything that they could find in the shop with their sticks, the only weapons that they carry.<sup>8</sup>

This lack of discipline was seized on by the press and became an object of international discussion, with the British press highlighting any misdemeanors and the Irish nationalist press defending the papal troops.<sup>9</sup> The most negative depictions of the Irish came from *La Nazione*. Published in Florence, *La Nazione*, like its Irish counterpart the *Nation*, aimed to promote the principles of independence, unity and liberty.<sup>10</sup> However, whereas the *Nation* was instrumental in sending Irish troops to Italy and supporting their efforts, *La Nazione* regularly featured reports ridiculing Irish participation in Italy. Its report on 1 July 1860 announcing the Irish arrival in Ripetta, claimed that on disembarking their ship they had shouted ‘Viva il Papa’, but that their enthusiasm was met with silence – an illustration of the difference between the Irish expectations and the Italian reality. The journalist claimed that everywhere the Irish went their presence was marked by theft, fights and disorder of all types. Negative reports of Irish behaviour were relayed from Macerata and Spoleto; in the latter they were said to be given over to drunkenness and insubordination, whilst they were reported to have sacked Fuligno. In a telling final comment the reporter for *La Nazione* claimed that the sight of these Irish soldiers was enough to destroy any sympathy that their country might have elicited in Italy:

Respect for them! Oh if you could only see what respectable mugs! Filthy, shabby even though handsomely rewarded, famished and drunken day and night, just the sight of them is enough to destroy in an instant any sympathy or esteem that one might have for their Ireland and one can understand why they have fallen so low with no means for resurgence.<sup>11</sup>

Similar reports in *La Nazione* followed throughout the summer months<sup>12</sup> with the Irish consistently described in very unflattering terms:

---

<sup>8</sup> *La Perseveranza* 15 July 1860.

<sup>9</sup> See for example the many reports in the *London Times* and *Punch* during these summer months and the rebuttal of these reports in *The Nation*.

<sup>10</sup> See the opening editorial in *La Nazione*, 14 July 1859 which set out its philosophy of pro-unification and pro-revolution agitation. The reports from *La Nazione* were often picked up by other Italian newspapers and similar negative descriptions added.

<sup>11</sup> *La Nazione*, 1 July 1860.

<sup>12</sup> See reports in *La Nazione* on 7 June; 14 June; 24 June; 3 July and 4 July 1860.

They are savage beasts who do not understand reason and should be sent back to Ireland, because rather than being useful, they are a hindrance and an eye has to be kept on them. They are always drunk, insubordinate to all, they strike everyone, they drink and eat without wanting to pay, even violently asking for change from 10 or 20 franchi which they have never paid. These are the defenders of the Holy See.<sup>13</sup>

They were also referred to in the same article as ‘giant savages’ and this form of reporting was picked up on by the correspondent of *The [English] Times* who claimed that the Spoletans considered the Irish as

...large fine-looking, but very unfortunate infants, whose physical growth and power are far ahead of their moral development, and who had been inveigled into a position for which they had neither taste nor training to qualify them. They were turbulent and noisy and had a rooted aversion to drill with which, however, it appears that their officers did not greatly harass them.<sup>14</sup>

This, certainly not unbiased, form of reporting echoed the general depiction of these troops in the British press, particularly in *Punch*. Similar negative caricatures can be seen in Turin’s satirical publication *Il Fischietto* (The Whistle), where the Irish were mocked for their huge appetites and the readers were told that they demanded potatoes with every meal and they were happy if three conditions were met: 1) that they be paid well, 2) that they eat well, and 3) that they be allowed sleep the rest of the time.<sup>15</sup>

### **Motivation for going to Italy**

Moving beyond this form of caricature, some of the papers did question why the Irish were present in Italy fighting in defence of the Papal States? In these accounts, the Irish soldiers were often presented as people tricked by priests into enlisting; or else driven by hunger and poverty to enlist. In *La Nazione*, for example, the paper’s correspondent wrote that although initially he believed that the Irish were barbarians who had come to prey on Italy, he now realized that most of them were unfairly duped into coming under the pretext of finding work.<sup>16</sup> This report was also carried in *La Perseveranza*, which generally took a very hard line against the Irish but which seems to have mellowed by September 1860.<sup>17</sup> In July, in the course of a by now regular description of Irish disturbance, the same paper had cited, [An Irishman] who speaks some Italian said “Our great priest tricked us saying that here all the

---

<sup>13</sup> *La Nazione*, 4 July 1860.

<sup>14</sup> *The Times*, 21 November 1860.

<sup>15</sup> *Il Fischietto*, 3 July 1860.

<sup>16</sup> *La Nazione*, 29 August 1860.

<sup>17</sup> *La Perseveranza*, 3 September 1860.

priests had been killed and all the churches burned, and that we were needed to restore Catholicism”<sup>18</sup>.

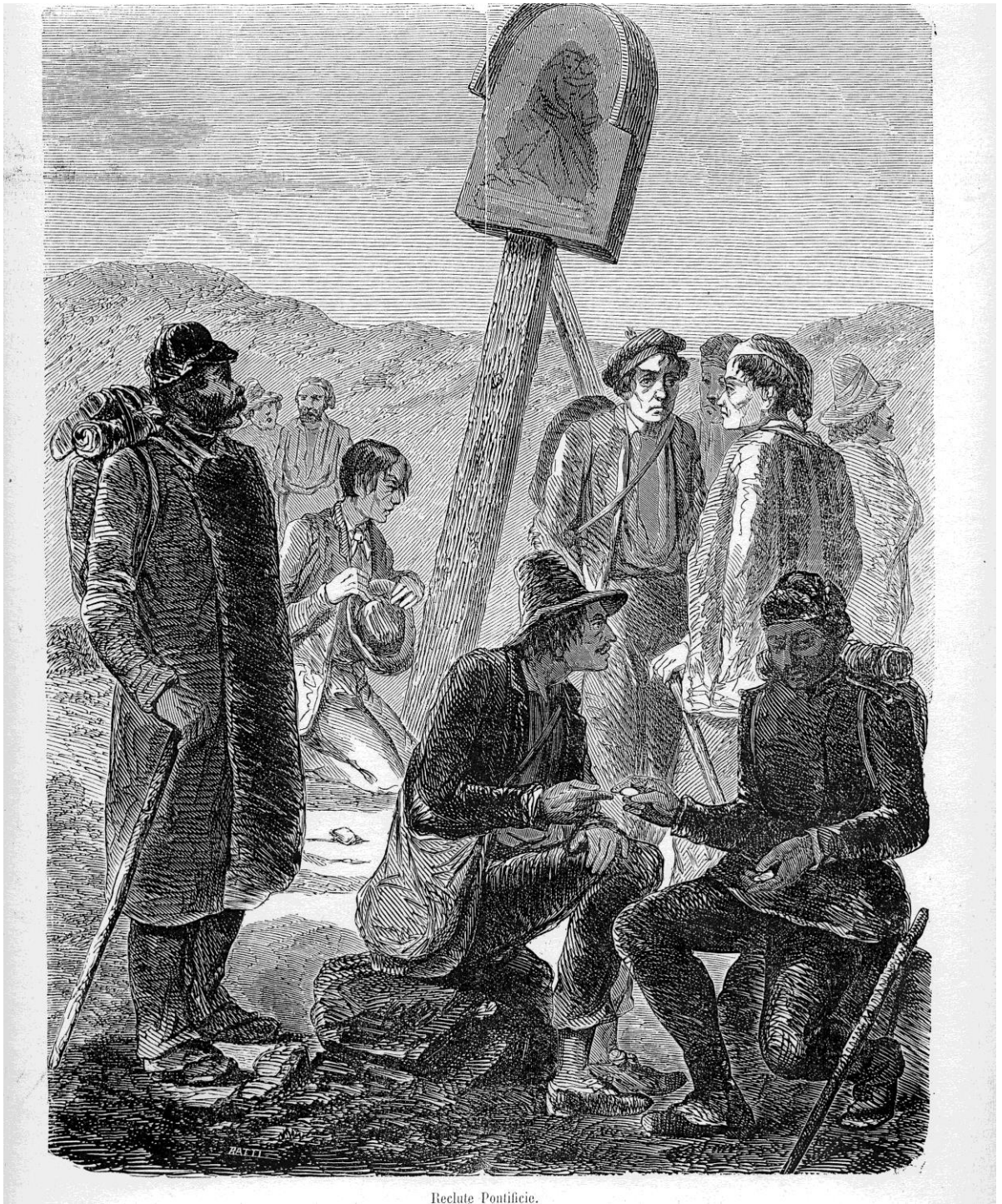
Elsewhere it was reported that the Irish had caused disturbances in Ancona, claiming that they had been tricked into believing that they were going to work on the railroads in Italy.<sup>19</sup> At other times, the case was put forward that the Irish had come to Italy because of their poverty; in *Il Mondo Illustrato*, for example, the Irish were presented as a famished people lured to Italy with promises of work and food. The illustration from *Il Mondo Illustrato* (reproduced here) shows thin and haggard men gathered around a religious image. They are far from the vigorous physiques that would be expected in the depiction of army recruits, as well as at odds with the earlier depictions of the marauding savage terrorizing shopkeepers. The famished look of the men instead harks back to Famine times in Ireland when such images of hunger and physical weakness were reproduced around Europe. The accompanying article says that these famished Irish (of 1860) were forced by hunger and necessity to come to Italy and finishes by exclaiming ‘What a miserable sight!’<sup>20</sup> It is certainly a more sympathetic depiction of the Irish recruits than the previous stories of plunder and disruption spread by the press.

---

<sup>18</sup> *La Nazione*, 4 July 1860.

<sup>19</sup> *La Perseveranza*, 14 July 1860 (reporting from the newspaper *L'Adriatico*).

<sup>20</sup> *Il Mondo Illustrato*, 15 Sept. 1860.



Reclute Pontificie.

## Mercenaries

Italians were perplexed that foreigners would come to Italy in 1860 to defend a regime that was viewed by many of them as repressive, backward and ultimately contrary to the wishes of the majority of the inhabitants of those areas. One of the most common accusations made in the Italian press about the Irish troops (and indeed the other international troops serving in

the Papal Army) was that the reason they had come to Italy was to make money, consequently the soldiers were regularly referred to as foreign mercenaries. Tapping into a long Italian tradition (dating back to Petrarch) which lamented the unwanted presence of foreigners on Italian soil in order to motivate Italians into action, the outbursts against the ‘Papal foreigners’ can certainly be seen as attempts to ignite the Italian ‘natives’. Take for example the rallying call of Enrico Cialdini (Generale comandante) before his troops went into battle against the papal forces at Ancona in September 1860 (forces which included Irish soldiers):

I lead you against a band of foreign adventurers, brought into our country by a thirst for gold and a lust of pillage. Combat and disperse without mercy these miserable assassins; so that by your hands they may feel the anger of a people who will assert their nationality and independence.<sup>21</sup>

The presence of foreigners on Italian soil in the Papal States was thus used as a motivational factor for the Italians to take action.<sup>22</sup> *Il Mondo Illustrato* called the papal recruits ‘bought people which their country abhors, which the world curses and which Italy devours.’<sup>23</sup> In its rallying call to Italians on 7 September 1860, *La Nazione* claimed that in the upcoming battles, Italians will rid the country of foreigners, a sentiment echoed that same day in *La Perseveranza*:

Italians wait for this: ready to assume the responsibility for a war if no other means will work to free Italy from the oppression of vile vandals. What will be of comfort to them in this situation is the thought that such a war would not be fought against Italians but against adventurers devoid of faith and county, European gypsies, come to defame with their service the formerly famous and honoured sword.<sup>24</sup>

This manner of provoking Italians into action conveniently ignored the fact that the largest contingent in the Pope’s Army was actually Italians from the Papal States.<sup>25</sup> The foreign troops were, however, easy targets. As Berkeley notes, ‘there was no one to defend them because their own sympathisers were not proud of having been compelled to enlist foreigners.’<sup>26</sup> The Irish troops were aware of this form of denigration and the accusation that

---

<sup>21</sup> Speech transcribed in *Narrazione della battaglia di Castelfidardo e dell’assedio d’Ancona*. Scritta da un Romano, Italia, 1862, p.10. See also similar language in Cavour’s ultimatum which reached Cardinal Antonelli in September 10, stating that the presence of such mercenary troops was ‘offensive’ and that ‘the government of His Majesty the King of Sardinia cannot but have grave concerns about the formation and existence of foreign mercenary troops in the service of the Pontifical government.’ For more on this see C.T. McIntyre, *England against the Papacy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983, p. 208.

<sup>22</sup> See for example the rhetoric used in *La Perseveranza*, 15 September 1860.

<sup>23</sup> *Il Mondo Illustrato*, 15 September 1860.

<sup>24</sup> *La Perseveranza*, 7 September 1860.

<sup>25</sup> See Berkeley, *The Irish Battalion*, p. 7-32. He estimates the numbers as follows: Italians 6,500, Austrians 5,000, Swiss 3,500, Irish 1040, Belgians 610, French 530.

<sup>26</sup> Berkeley, *The Irish Battalion*, p. 40.



they had come to Italy to make money; the Italians, however, did not realise that many of the Irish troops had given up well-paid jobs in order to go to Italy and fight in defence of the Pope, and that accusations of mercenary motivation was very far from the truth. In his memoirs, papal soldier Michael Crean, noted with disgust that the Italians had erected a commemoration on the front of the church of S.Simon in Spoleto, in which the fallen Italians were remembered and the Irish and French who defended Spoleto were described as mercenaries. He commented: ‘This is only the common form of reference to soldiers who in entering the service of the Holy Father had certainly no pecuniary object to serve. [...] It is characteristic of the Italian mind, or at least a certain section of it, to indulge in these vulgar scurrilities.’<sup>27</sup> The memorial reads:

On XVII September, a group of Italian soldiers led by the valorous Brignone, while conquering the ‘Rocca’ rid it of the mercenaries of tyranny and restored freedom to Spoleto.

The Irish, who felt that they had embarked on a worthy and noble cause in defending the Papal States were baffled at the reception they received in Italy. Another soldier in the Irish Papal Brigade, Joseph McCorry, reported overhearing ‘two cut-throat Garibaldian marauders’ at an adjoining table in a café saying that the Irish are rogues and thieves. McCorry also said that while the hireling soldier fights mechanically for his pay, and ‘when convenience serves will rob the dead and dying and ill treat the vanquished’, the volunteer fights on principle – God and duty, faith and country’.<sup>28</sup> McCorry felt that his participation in the Italian wars was motivated by the most noble of sentiments, a feeling that was in sharp contrast with the perceptions on the Italian side.

## **War campaign**

As can be seen from the dates of publication of these above-mentioned newspaper articles, the negative descriptions of the Irish are clustered around certain times, possibly when critical feelings towards the defence of the Papal States ran highest, in particular in the spring and early summer of 1860. It has been argued that these negative reports were ‘paving the way for intervention’<sup>29</sup> and certainly many of the reports do seem to have an air of war-time propaganda. Making reference to Irish soldiers causing disturbances in Macerata, *La Nazione*

---

<sup>27</sup> Michael Crean, ‘The Irish in Italy in 1860’ in *Seven Hills Magazine*, 1908, vol. 2, pp. 9-10.

<sup>28</sup> Joseph McCorry, *The History of the Irish Papal Brigade*, Manchester: J.J. Sale, 1885, p. 86; pp. 88-9.

<sup>29</sup> Berkeley, *The Irish Battalion*, pp. 47-8.

asked ‘For how much longer will this oppression have to be tolerated?’<sup>30</sup> The Irish could not be said to have been singled out for particular attention in this respect, negative reports regarding the Swiss, French and Austrian troops who served in the papal armies were also common.<sup>31</sup> From the beginning of April until the middle of September, *La Nazione* gave vent to an uninterrupted stream of accusations against the papal army and its entourage and similar reports are to be found in like-minded publications such as the *Monitore Toscano* and *La Perseveranza*. *La Nazione* was the central hub of reports sent in by revolutionary committees all over the country, and the paper best articulated Italian discontent with the political state of affairs in the Papal States.<sup>32</sup> Such politically motivated reports should not be interpreted as racial slurs (on the Irish, or other foreign forces), but rather should be seen in the context of heightened emotions and wartime propaganda in a country experiencing huge transition and upheaval.

Against the tide of vilification, there was one attempt by Italians to reach out to their Irish comrades, one that might even be interpreted as a more twentieth-century war propaganda. The Irish paper, *The Nation*, reported in August 1860 that a pamphlet written in (poor) English, exhorting the Irish to ally themselves with the Italian cause, had been distributed to Irish soldiers in Italy. The pamphlet said:

[...] Come! Imitate and shake hands with the Italians your equals, and brothers in Christ. We respect, and kneel at his church but we will resolutely overthrow the schism that only sustains a worldly power, and that with hireling bayonets make the brothers, cut their brothers’ throat. We Italians confidents in his words we fight and win, as he wrote that never against him will prevail the doors of hell. Our courage, and our valour will annihilate everywhere our foes. Irish! Unite yourselves to us, and so you will be the true sons of Ireland, you will operate according to the Gospel of the great, Christian family, and you will go back to your house blessed, and protected by the father of all Creatures, as obedient sons of his will. Viva Italy – Viva Ireland – Viva the union the true followers of Christ.’<sup>33</sup>

The appeal would appear to have fallen on deaf ears and was disparaged in the Irish press. Despite this isolated attempt, it can be observed that the general feeling between the two sides, not unsurprisingly, was one of mutual hostility. Indeed, the negative attitude that we have seen in the Italian press was not a one-dimensional phenomenon - the Irish were equally ill-disposed towards the Italians. Archbishop Paul Cullen of Dublin who had been

---

<sup>30</sup> *La Nazione*, 3 July 1860.

<sup>31</sup> See for example the reports in *La Nazione*, 12 April 1860; 14 June; 24 June 1860; 4 July 1860; 20 July 1860; *La Perseveranza* 3 July 1860; 12 July 1860.

<sup>32</sup> See Berkeley, *The Irish Battalion*, p. 47.

<sup>33</sup> Reproduced in *The Nation*, 18 August 1860.

instrumental in efforts to help the Pope later claimed, 'All [the returning Irish troops] speak with the greatest contempt of the Italians. The people will always retain that feeling towards their Southern Brethren.'<sup>34</sup> Much of the reason for this 'contempt' stemmed not from ideological differences but rather from the very negative experience while in Italy.

### **Negative experiences in Italy**

The Irish troops would appear to have had a particularly unhappy experience in Italy. As Ciaran O'Carroll has observed in this volume, there was a lack of cooperation and consultation among the organisers of the Papal Brigade which undermined the morale of the force.<sup>35</sup> Disillusionment, disgust and a sense of betrayal set in as promise after promise was broken. There were problems relating to the appointment of commanders, uniforms, wages, discipline and diet. Archbishop Cullen in Dublin was in regular contact with Tobias Kirby, rector of the Irish College in Rome, about the sufferings of the Irish troops. Kirby received reports from various parts of Italy detailing these problems and it is clear that the Irish did not settle well in Italy.<sup>36</sup>

E.H. Larkin has suggested that the real cause for the continuing ferment among the Irish, had less to do with a lack of discipline, than with an aggrieved sense of nationality. He claims that the Irish deeply resented the various attempts that had been made to subvert their character as an Irish brigade by incorporating them into other papal units.<sup>37</sup> This frustrated sense of nationality was almost inevitable given the 'green hype' that had surrounded the troops on their departure. Indeed, although ostensibly a religious venture, the participation of Irish troops in fighting in Italy became in time a vehicle for nationalist outpourings. The 'greening' of the venture became one of its main features and rallying calls. Comerford even suggests that nationalists may have tried to take advantage of it, using the Papal Brigade as a

---

<sup>34</sup> Cullen to Kirby, 22 November 1860, Pontifical Irish College, Rome, KIR/NC/1/1860/109.

<sup>35</sup> See also Berkeley, p. 35: 'A great deal of disillusionment remained in store for the Irish, especially for those among them who had served in the British army; here in Italy, instead of shilling a day, good food, and fair sleeping accommodation and water supply, they received a penny halfpenny a day, food that did not always suit them, had very few means of keeping clean and slept among fleas and mosquitoes. The men of the Irish Constabulary, who had resigned their good pay and their right to a pension, must have felt that they had made a great sacrifice.'; and E.H. Larkin, *The Consolidation of the Roman Catholic Church in Ireland, 1860-1870*, Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1987, pp. 20-30.

<sup>36</sup> See for example the letter Archbishop Cullen to Kirby, 'There is one thing now certain – that the men were very badly treated going out and badly treated whilst in Italy.' Cullen to Kirby, 23 June 1860, Pontifical Irish College Rome archive, Kirby papers, NK 2, 3, #121.

<sup>37</sup> E.H. Larkin, *The Consolidation of the Roman Catholic Church*, p. 29.

training ground for future military ventures.<sup>38</sup> The intervention and decision to send a force provided an outlet for Irish nationalism which did not always make reference to the Italian situation. For example, when the Irish were defending Spoleto, they were urged into battle not just to defend the Pope but also to honour their own flag. In the words of a poem penned at the time, ‘The Siege of Spoleto’:

One standard flaunts it proudly above the stirring scene;  
And Erin’s shamrocks glisten o’er its field of glorious green:  
And gallant hearts beneath it thrill with wildest joy to-day,  
And smiling lips breathe words of deep impatience for the fray.<sup>39</sup>

The prevailing idea in this particular battle was that the Irish were fighting for past wrongs in Ireland rather than current wrongs in Italy:

There is fever in each vein, there is frenzy in each heart,  
And memories o’er each throbbing brain, like angry spectres, start,  
And sternly ask to be avenged; Revenge, how grimly sweet!  
And Erin’s sons that day in blood retrieve each past defeat.<sup>40</sup>

Further evidence that Irish participation was not just religious in nature comes from the determination to keep a distinctly Irish Brigade, that the soldiers would not be simply absorbed into other larger units. As the *Morning News* stated: ‘The Irish Brigade will be Irish. It is composed of men who feel that have too long had to do with English control’.<sup>41</sup> In July 1860, *The Nation* reported on the joy and emotion felt in the Irish College in Rome at the raising of a green flag for the Brigade:

When the Green Flag was solemnly raised aloft, and a breeze unfurled it to view, there rose a cheer. No, it was a cry – a wild passionate cry of joy that burst like the war of artillery; it was the strong emotion of a thousand hearts, emotions that had slept in the hearts of the race since the day Sarsfield sailed from Limerick, leaving Catholic altars trusting to “Saxon Faith”.<sup>42</sup>

---

<sup>38</sup> R.V. Comerford, *The Fenians in context: Irish politics and society 1848-1882*, Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1988, p.32.

<sup>39</sup> M. MacCaffery, *The Siege of Spoleto*, New York: O’Shea, 1864, p. 23.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.* p. 66. See also the poem, ‘Lines to the Irish-Italian Brigade’ by I.M.S.O. published in *The Nation*, 7 July 1860:

For fatherland of old we shed  
The ruddy stream that warms the vein –  
For Faith the faithful Irish bled,  
For Faith they now shall bleed again.

<sup>41</sup> Quoted in *The Times*, 19 July 1860. See also Berkeley, p. 34.

<sup>42</sup> *The Nation*, 14 July 1860.

It can, therefore, be said that Irish participation in the Papal Brigade was indeed motivated by religious feelings but that these feelings also fed into a particular brand of Irish nationalism which was defined by its Catholicism and in opposition to the ruling Protestant English class.<sup>43</sup> Although initiated by the clergy as a religious venture, the Brigade became a vehicle for anti-English rhetoric; and through it the Irish would assert their nationality and identity.<sup>44</sup>

When many of these aspirations were trampled on the Italian battlefields and in the accompanying propaganda, the Irish naturally felt a sense of grievance and disappointment at their Italian experience. There was a sharp jarring between their ambitions and the reality in Italy, and a sense that their many sacrifices were not appreciated. It was hardly surprising that they began to wonder ‘if it was worth dying for a people who apparently did not want to be died for’.<sup>45</sup>

McCorry, a member of the Irish Brigade, reported a conversation that he had with a fellow soldier in Perugia:

- ‘What do you think of this place Mac?’ asked Tom Kirwin [...]
- ‘It’s a nice town, but the people are very cold Tom’ said I
- ‘Stupidly cold, I think; more surly than I could have expected them to be in this enlightened age. But perhaps they don’t like us Mac’ said Tom ruefully
- ‘Yes coldness but faintly expresses it, and I fear that their surliness arises more from a misrepresentation of us than from natural causes; I fear so Tom. Be can’t we be as cold as they? To my thinking it is all but impossible for us to ingratiate ourselves into their graces should we try ever so’.
- ‘To Jericho with them! What do we care for their scoffs, or frowns or surliness? not one jot! Eh Mac? Isn’t that the way to deal with them?’<sup>46</sup>

When the troops returned to Ireland in November 1860, Archbishop Cullen was anxious to disperse the soldiers as soon as possible so that details of their discontent with the Italian

---

<sup>43</sup> This interpretation was not unanimous: *The New York Times* felt that the Irish involvement in the defence of the Papal States was a betrayal of its nationalist tradition and the paper suggested that O’Connell, in disgust at the Brigade would ‘rise from his grave, take his heart away from its resting-place in the Irish Church at Rome, and lead the patriots of Italy against his recreant countrymen’ *The New York Times*, 21 June 1860.

<sup>44</sup> See Jennifer O’Brien’s article in this volume; Larkin, *The Consolidation of the Roman Catholic Church*, p. 3. Joseph McCorry, a member of the Irish Brigade, claimed that the Brigade aimed to defend not just the Pope but also to defend one of the elements that defined the Irish nation, namely its Catholicism. He said he was in Italy ‘[...] to preserve the lamp that has shed its rays along our fathers’ and our own paths for fifteen hundred years from being extinguished either by Italians or any other race whatsoever. Have we not too, passed through the crucible of suffering and persecution. Have not our fathers stained the earth with their life’s blood in Ireland defending home and liberty’ McCorry, *The History of the Irish Papal Brigade*, p. 64.

<sup>45</sup> Having interviewed veterans of the conflict, Berkeley reported that ‘Even 50 years later, these men still surprised by the strange reception their received from a population whom they had come to defend: they had expected to find everyone devoted to the Pope and to be received as deliverers.’ *The Irish Battalion*, pp. 51-2.

<sup>46</sup> McCorry, *The History of the Irish Papal Brigade*, p. 84.

venture would not become too widely known. Rather than enhancing relations with Italy, the venture had done the opposite and driven the two apart.

## **Conclusion**

Throughout the period of the Risorgimento there was very little empathy between Ireland and Italy, this is particularly true of the latter stages of 1860. The Italian hero Garibaldi was denigrated in Ireland and his name entered the common lexicon as an insulting term.<sup>47</sup> On the other side, Mazzini insisted that Ireland would be better-off remaining in the Union and denied legitimacy to claims for separation. In this climate the Irish Papal Brigade met with hostility in Italy, and the conflict and confusion that resulted from the experience only served to further distance the two countries.

The Irish who fought in Italy were neither there for personal gain nor were they guided merely by pious self sacrifice: a firm national agenda underpinned their presence on Italian soil. These nuances were not countenanced by the Italian nationalist press which viewed the troops as a group of unfortunate miscreants who, spurred on by greed or ignorance, were standing in the way of Italian dreams of unification. Propaganda (an element of all modern wars) and differing forms of nascent nationalism, formed the background to these interactions, so that in the space of two decades relations between Ireland and Italy had slipped into conflict, confusion and controversy.

---

<sup>47</sup> See Anne O'Connor, 'That dangerous serpent: Garibaldi and Ireland in the Nineteenth Century' in *Modern Italy*. Vol. 15, Issue 4, 2010, pp. 401 – 415.