

The Irish Brigades in the South African War 1899-1902



On 25 February 1902 the Limerick Chronicle printed the following news item on the death of a Limerick man in South Africa:

'Boer "Irish" Brigade'

'News of the death of Thomas Naughton, formerly of Fillisten, Adare, who seven or eight years since emigrated to America, and who joined the Irish Brigade, under Colonel Blake, when the South African war broke out, was lately received by his father, through members of the family in America. When the Irish Brigade broke up, young Naughton attached himself to General Botha's commando, and fought in many of the engagements under this general. Young Naughton was a fine specimen of an Irishman. He was only 27 years of age, and stood close on six feet. The news of his death has caused a shock to his poor father and friends, for whom great sympathy is felt throughout the city and county of Limerick.'

There is an old saying that "Irishmen fight everyone's battles but their own," and the Boer War, which began in October 1899, was no different. There were Irish regiments of the British Army, such as the Munster Fusiliers, the Connaught Rangers and the Dublin Fusiliers, fighting against the Boers, while

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on the Boer side there were two Irish Brigades.

There were thousands of foreign workers, called Uitlanders by the Dutch, living in the two Boer republics in 1899, and some of these were Irish. When hostilities began many of the Uitlanders, who had at times caused problems for President Kruger of the Transvaal, crossed the borders into British-held Cape Colony or Natal. While Kruger did not like the Uitlanders, his government did not force or order them to leave. All the government expected was that the Uitlanders who were willing to stay on would swear an oath "to remain obedient to the laws and the authorities of the country."¹

Of the estimated 3,000 Uitlanders who fought with the Boer armies, at least 200 were Irish. The first Irish Brigade in the Transvaal was organised through the efforts of John McBride. A member of the Irish Republican Brotherhood (Fenians), McBride had emigrated to South Africa in 1896 and worked as an assayer with the Rand Mining Corporation. In 1898 he had taken part in organising the Johannesburg '98 Centenary Committee, set up to celebrate the Irish Rebellion of 1798.³

At a meeting of the committee on 3 September 1899, the idea of forming an Irish Transvaal Brigade was put forward. At a further meeting called on 10 September, attended by most of the Irish Uitlanders in the Rand, it was agreed that a brigade be formed in anticipation of the coming war. First a deputation was chosen to approach the Transvaal government to seek recognition of the brigade and the granting of citizenship to its members. The request was agreed to by the government⁴.

Kruger was not too happy with the idea of foreign volunteers and is reported to have told one group, "Thank you for coming. Don't imagine we had need of you. Transvaal wants no foreign help, but if you wish to fight for us, you are welcome."

The First Irish Brigade

At the first meeting of the Brigade in Johannesburg on 1 October 1899, John McBride was nominated to be its leader, but having no military experience, he declined the offer. As a result, John Blake, an Irish-American, was elected colonel and McBride was given the position of major to the Brigade. Blake was a graduate of West Point Military Academy and had served nine years as a lieutenant in the American Army. At the same meeting a



The officer corps of Blake's commands. Blake is standing centre in white jacket, and McBride is on the right with revolver and rifle.



The Second Irish Brigade, Colonel Arthur Lynch (standing) and Captain Oates (on horseback).

proclamation appealing to all Irishmen to support the Boers was ordered to be issued. It was then posted conspicuously throughout the Transvaal⁵.

On 2 October, while the brigade officers were receiving their commissions from President Kruger in Pretoria, a recruiting office was opened in Johannesburg, overhead which flew the Irish, American and four-coloured flag of the Transvaal. The chaplain to the new brigade, Rev Leon Marchal, estimated that there were 2,000 Irishmen ready to fight⁶. However, the number of Irish who were willing to fight was far fewer, between 120 and 200. The brigade consisted mainly of Irish and Irish-American Uitlanders and ten Frenchmen.⁷ The flag of the brigade had been made in Connaught 32 years earlier for the Fenian rising of 1867.

The brigade left Johannesburg on 6 October and made their way to Volksrust, which was near the border with British-held Natal. The Boer General, Piet Joubert, inspected the men and thanked them for their services, at the same time expressing sympathy with their desire for a free Ireland.

In the opening months of the war the Blake-McBride brigade took part in the Boer invasion of Natal and was involved in many of the battles which followed, Dundee, the siege at Ladysmith, the fighting at Colenso and the British disaster at Spion Kop on 24 January 1900. In April they were reinforced by a contingent of fifty Irish-Americans from Chicago. By this time the Boers were retreating towards the Orange Free State, destroying railways and bridges as they went. By September 1900, the Boer forces had switched from conventional warfare to a campaign of guerrilla warfare.⁸ On 25 September, the First Irish Brigade was demobilised. By that time seventeen men

had been killed and over fifty wounded. Most of the men from the brigade left South Africa, McBride going to Paris. Blake and a few others stayed on and joined the Boer commando units.⁹

The Second Irish Brigade

The 2nd Irish Transvaal Brigade was formed by Arthur Lynch, who had lived at Carrickerry, Co. Limerick, as a boy. The youngest of a family of six boys and one girl, he emigrated to Australia when he was about fourteen years of age¹⁰. As an adult, he worked as a journalist based in London, and later was correspondent for the *Daily Mail* in Paris. When the Anglo-Boer war broke out in October 1899, Lynch went to the Transvaal as a reporter for the Paris newspaper, *Le Journal*. In January 1900, with the help of some Irish still in the Rand and some members of the Blake-McBride brigade, he organised the 2nd Irish Brigade. It is estimated that only a quarter of the 150 men who joined Lynch were Irish. The rest were French, German, Dutch, Austrian, Greek, Bulgarian, Italian and American¹¹.

Lynch's men reached the Natal front in February 1900, just as the siege of Ladysmith was coming to an end. The next four months were spent, much like the Blake-McBride brigade, in retreat. On 14 May they set fire to a field to stop some British cavalry from advancing on a weak Boer position. They repeated this tactic several miles further on, allowing Boer commandos to escape without any losses. Lynch later claimed that these fires were accidental. After arriving in Pretoria in early July, Lynch's brigade fell apart.

Lynch went to America and from there he returned to France. In 1901, when M.H.F. Morris, Unionist MP for Galway, succeeded as Lord Killanin, Lynch was

nominated to run in the resulting bye-election. Although he remained in Paris, nationalists were urged to vote for him and he defeated Sir Horace Plunkett, his Unionist opponent, by a margin of three to one¹³. That same year the British government had issued a warrant for his arrest because of his support for the Boers. When he arrived in England to take his seat in the House of Commons, he was arrested, tried and convicted of high treason and sentenced to death. Due to international protest and the personal intervention of the American President, Theodore Roosevelt, Lynch's sentence was commuted to life imprisonment. He was released after twelve months.

In June 1904, Arthur Lynch visited his old school at Carrickerry when he was in the area to look up some old friends. It took a while for his old school-teacher, Mr. Halpin, to recognise him. The old schoolroom brought back memories of a childhood spent in Carrickerry during the early 1880s.

"I suppose you must have seen a good lot of the world" said Mr. Halpin as he watched Lynch studying a map of the world.

"Yes" said Lynch, "I have been in America, France and South Africa."

"And what took you to South Africa?" asked the teacher, "you don't look as if you were soldiering for England."

"Oh no," said Lynch with a laugh, "I was soldiering for Kruger."¹⁴

Lynch represented West Clare as a Nationalist MP from 1909 to 1918. He died in 1934¹⁵.

Sean McBride was executed in May 1916 for his part in the Easter Rising, and possibly also for his support for the Boers.

In the summer of 1902, the flag of Lynch's 2nd Brigade was presented to the Mayor of Kingston-on-Thames by a soldier who had returned from South Africa. The flag, which was in the Boer colours and bore the name of the brigade and the words "For Liberty and Remember 98", was found after an engagement wrapped around the dead body of one of the members of the brigade. Pinned to the flag was the fly-leaf of a bible, on which was written in blood, "Send this flag to Dublin and pray for the soul of Patrick Mooney. Good Bye."¹⁶

REFERENCES

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