

An Irishman in France: A Review Article

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Noel M. McMahon (ed. & trans.), *Here I Am, Here I Stay! Marshall MacMahon 1809-1893*, Ballinakella Press, Whitegate, Co. Clare, 1993 - pp.xcv + 70 - ISBN 0-946538-12- 3. Price £15.99.

The achievements of Irish exiles in continental Europe in the eighteenth century have been well documented especially in terms of military history. Less well known are the successes of their descendants in the nineteenth century both on the battlefields of Europe and in politics. Leopoldo O'Donnell was Prime Minister of Spain from 1858 to 1863; Eduard Taffee held a similar position in the Austrian Empire from 1879 to 1893 while Maurice MacMahon became President of France, serving from 1873 to 1879. Both O'Donnell, who was created Duke of Tetuan, and MacMahon, given the title Duke of Magenta, have important main streets in Madrid and Paris named in their honour. The career of MacMahon has particular relevance to North Munster as his family roots lay in counties Clare and Limerick.

Marie Edme Patrice Maurice de MacMahon, as he was rather extravagantly named, was born in France, at the chateau de Sully near Dijon, capital of Burgundy, in 1808. He was the grandson of John Baptist MacMahon, who had been born in Dooradoyle, near Limerick city in 1715. The family were originally substantial landowners in county Clare but having lost their estates in the Cromwellian confiscations, had moved to Limerick in the later seventeenth century. Jean Baptiste, as he was subsequently known, emigrated to France as a young man. He qualified as a doctor and married a widow of one of his patients who had a fortune reputed to be the largest in Burgundy. Their son, Maurice-Francois had a successful army career though as a Royalist he went into exile from 1792 to 1803 and it was this profession that his son, the subject of this work and the second youngest of seventeen children, entered at the age of seventeen in 1825.

He had a very successful military career, being awarded the cross of Officer of the Legion d'honneur for bravery in 1830, becoming commander of the Foreign Legion in 1843, achieving the rank of Brigadier-General in 1848 and Major General in 1852. In July 1855 he was posted to the Crimea and immediately played a key role in the assault upon Sebastopol, the vital base of the Russian army and navy. He directed the successful attack on the Malakoff fortress and having planted his flag on the summit, received a message from the English Commander-in-Chief of the allies, enquiring if he considered it safe to remain there. His reply has become one of the most famous statements of courage and resoluteness ever uttered and is used as the title of this work: 'Here I am and here I stay.' For this success he was awarded the Grand-Croix de la Légion d'honneur. After some years in Algeria he took part in the invasion of Italy which arose from the declaration of war on Austria by France in 1859. This was a strategy to support the king of Sardinia, an ally of the French, in his attempt to expel Austria from its control of Italy. MacMahon achieved the most notable triumph of his entire military career during this campaign when he inflicted a decisive defeat on the Austrian army at the battle of Magenta in northern Italy in June 1859. On the following day he was made a Marshall of France, the highest rank in the French army and was given the title Duke of Magenta. The Emperor Napoleon III is reported to have told him 'MacMahon you have saved the army and the Empire'.

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MacMahon was now a national hero in France and in 1864 he was appointed Governor-General of Algeria. He spent six years there, working to reverse some of the more negative aspects of earlier French rule. In particular he sought to return some of the vast amount of confiscated land to the native Algerians, which had been seized and settled by French colonists who not surprisingly strongly resisted MacMahon's attempted reform. In personal terms MacMahon's time in Algeria shows his tolerance and concern for the local people but politically he was a failure and the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian war of 1870 allowed him a face-saving departure and the opportunity at the age of sixty-two to renew his military career.

He was given command of the First Army Corps but in his first engagement with the Prussian army suffered a humiliating defeat. Worse was to follow when after another reverse he was severely wounded and taken as a prisoner of war to Germany. After the overthrow of Napoleon III and the establishment of the Third Republic in 1870 MacMahon was in command of the army which defeated the commune uprising in Paris in May 1871 with extreme brutality and while he apparently attempted to limit the worst excesses of his troops, the ultimate responsibility for the savage repression rests with him.

The final phase of his career was in politics. He had been elected as a senator as early as 1856 but declined to run for election to the National Assembly in 1871 possibly due to the influence of his wife who strongly opposed such a move noting that it was an arena 'where a soldier can only lose his way'. However two years later after a parliamentary crisis he was persuaded to allow his name go forward for President and on 24 May 1873 he was elected President of the Third Republic by the National Assembly with only two votes cast against him. His wife's prediction about the pitfalls of politics proved to be all too accurate. His fundamentally conservative, even monarchist, instincts quickly became a problem in his relations with the chamber of deputies especially after the general election of 1876 which returned a strongly Republican majority. While MacMahon came to realise that the royalist pretender, the Comte de Chambord, would be a disaster as King due to his intransigence, he found it impossible to accept that as President he could not appoint his own ministers and tried to manipulate the situation by dissolving the assembly and calling new elections. When the Republicans were again returned as the majority party MacMahon became merely a figurehead President until he resigned his office in 1879 rather than agree to a purge of Monarchist generals in the army.

He lived in retirement thereafter until his death in 1893 at the age of eighty-five. He married, at the age of forty-five, Elizabeth de Castries from a French aristocratic family with Irish roots on her mother's side. The marriage appears to have been happy and their son Patrice succeeded as second Duke. Philippe, Marquis de MacMahon, the great-grandson of the Marshall, is the current holder of the title, as the fourth Duc de Magenta and is keenly interested in and proud of his Irish roots. He lives at the Chateau de Sully and in 1992 he was conferred with an honorary degree of Doctor of Laws by the University of Limerick.

This study of Marshall MacMahon almost defies description let alone classification. It is essentially a biography, based upon and incorporating an earlier biography translated from the original French. It includes essays on the MacMahon family, political events in nineteenth century France and the French army in the same period. There are extensive appendices which range from documents relating to genealogy, through an account of a battle in Algeria to a lengthy obituary from the *Freeman's Journal* newspaper. If that were not enough to arouse interest there is the intriguing fact that it is written by an accountant!

From these diverse elements, Noel MacMahon, an enthusiastic amateur genealogist and researcher, has fashioned an interesting and valuable account of this very important and neglected

member of the Irish diaspora. The brief, introductory, essay on the MacMahons of Thomond perpetuates the now discredited view of Brian Born as a promoter of learning and culture who saved Ireland from savage Vikings and is followed by a useful and interesting discussion of the French army and military tactics in the period of the Marshall's career. The remainder of the main text is divided into ten chapters which chronicle the main events of his life. This is essentially based on the biography *Les Premieres Annees du Marechal de MacMahon* written in 1894 by Germain Bapst, a French military biographer. This work has been translated and edited by the author with additional information from his own extensive and diligent research. Bapst's document ends with the victory at Magenta, so the account of the interesting latter stage of MacMahon's career, especially as a politician and statesman, is mostly based on original research and is too modestly labelled by the author as *postscript*.

Marshall MacMahon has not been without his critics: his administration in Algeria, his presidency of the Third Republic even his military reputation have all been the subject of debate. During his time in Algeria his bitter confrontation with the Archbishop of Algiers must have been particularly painful to the devoutly Catholic MacMahon, who in his youth had seriously considered becoming a missionary priest. This dispute was over the return of Muslim children, who had been placed in catholic orphanages, to their own tribes, a policy MacMahon supported. Eventually the Archbishop was successful in preventing this through a personal appeal to the Emperor, Napoleon III. His attempt to prevent the French colonists taking more land from the native Algerians also ended in failure. While his concern for the rights of the indigenous people was basically implementing French government policy at the time, his zeal to do so at some personal cost is greatly, as the author points out, to his credit. The claim sometimes advanced that his military skills have been exaggerated is open to debate but his bravery is not in question and in this work his reputation is stoutly defended. There is agreement that his achievements as President were limited, even indeed that he weakened the office, though his honesty, sincerity and good example cited in his defence here seems a fair judgement.

The book is handsomely produced by Hugh and Grania Weir's Ballinakella Press. It has a variety of photographs, maps, sketches and drawings which complement and illuminate the text. There is a useful index and a valuable guide to further reading. With the publication of this work a further important step has been taken in honouring the memory of this most distinguished member of the Wild Geese who played such a significant role in nineteenth-century French history. It also makes available, in a readable and attractive format, the details of his life and career which up to now have been largely unknown in the land of his ancestors.



