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An Irish Catholic Amateur Military Tradition in the British Army? The Irish Militia, 1793-1908

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ABSTRACT
Both an Irish military tradition and an amateur military tradition have been explored in the historiography involving the study of British Army as they relate to forces recruited and serving in Ireland over two centuries. This article will take this exploration further by arguing that it is possible to demonstrate that an Irish Catholic amateur military tradition existed in the Irish Militia, as established in 1793, and existing until the turn of the twentieth century. This Irish Catholic tradition fed into these two broader traditions, becoming integral parts of them, while also exerting Irish identity in its own ways.

Introduction

In his seminal work on the amateur military tradition in the British Army, I F W Beckett outlined that this tradition was essentially the framework in which auxiliary forces existed alongside their regular army counterparts, and dictated how they interacted with society.[1] To take this notion further, there were parallel and often competing traditions which existed within these forces, most notably so for those formations in Ireland from the seventeenth century onwards.[2] These took many forms, sometimes also acting outside the official British military framework, particularly in paramilitary organisations during the twentieth century. Crucially, these were often divided on political and religious grounds.

Much is often made of the Protestant military and volunteering tradition in Ireland, particularly in Ulster, but not of a Catholic tradition, and even less so of a Catholic

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[1]Ian Beckett, *The amateur military tradition, 1558-1945,* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991), p. 2.

[2]For more on an Irish amateur tradition from the middle of the nineteenth century onwards see William Butler, *The Irish amateur military tradition in the British Army, 1854-1992,* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016).

amateur military tradition in the British Army prior to the First World War. From the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Protestant tradition was to form an important part of the Protestant Ascendancy in Ireland, most notably in the amateur yeomanry of the late eighteenth century onwards, which was used largely to defend the newly established order.[3] This organisation sought to attract all social and most political elements of Irish Protestantism, at the exclusion of Catholic participation.

However, it was not only this Protestant contribution that made an impact on the amateur forces of Ireland during that period. Coinciding with the raising of a yeomanry force in the late eighteenth century was the creation of an Irish militia which was to have a significant proportion of Catholics in its ranks. This occurred, in some part, because it was raised with the use of the Militia Ballot, utilised to fill the majority of the force by compulsory means. If we are to see the yeomanry as an expression of the Protestant nation, then, as Thomas Bartlett has argued, so too can the Irish militia be seen as an equal expression of the Catholic nation.[4] By the 1850s, after a long period of disembodiment, the force came to be raised on a voluntary basis and, though its expression as the Catholic nation might have diminished, it clearly demonstrated a continuation of a Catholic amateur tradition.

At any one time, the militia in Ireland during the latter half of the nineteenth century had between 30,000 and 40,000 men serving in its ranks, and consistently over a fifty-four-year period. Though this did drop to a little over 23,000 during the Fenian infiltrations into the British armed forces during the 1860s, when the militia's annual training was periodically cancelled. Notwithstanding, it is clear that Catholic service in the militia might be deemed as a separate amateur military tradition in its own right; one which existed within a British framework and not the sole preserve of foreign service in European armies.

Catholics in the British Army; the historical context

Thomas Bartlett and Keith Jeffery have argued that 'there has been a persistent military flavour to Irish life, from medieval through to more modern times, that has

[3]For a history of the Irish Yeomanry see Allan Blackstock, *An Ascendancy Army; The Irish Yeomanry, 1796-1834,* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1998). For more on the context of defending the Protestant Ascendancy see Neal Garnham, *The Militia in Eighteenth-Century Ireland: In Defence of the Protestant Interest,* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2012).

[4]Thomas Bartlett, 'Defence, counter-insurgency and rebellion: Ireland, 1793-1803', in Thomas Bartlett and Keith Jeffery, eds, *A Military History of Ireland,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 247-293.

undoubtedly made a military career seem 'normal".[5] Much of the literature which covers Catholic participation in the British Army tends to focus on its regular forces, and it is much more challenging to apply many of the conclusions made by historians to that of service in the militia, especially as it relates to the forging of identities and traditions. As Thomas Bartlett has highlighted, it was not until the Seven Years' War (1756-63) which saw the lifting of the bar on Irish participation in the British armed forces, as the recruitment of the Catholic Irish for service abroad was permitted. At first this took place in the marines or the East India Company army, but then led to their recruitment during the American War of Independence (1776-83).[6] This move has been viewed as playing a significant role in shaping the problematic relationship between the British government, the ruling Protestant Ascendancy, and the Catholic community in Ireland.[7] As Ciaran McDonnell has observed, 'the creation of an Irish identity within the British military was key to the integration of Irishmen in the armed forces'.[8]

During the Napoleonic Wars, the army was not 'a crucible of Britishness' but, according to Catriona Kennedy, it also did not seek to impose a single identity on Irish recruits. What it did do though, was to cultivate a specific military identity and, in turn, a distinctive form of regimental Irishness. Furthermore, it provided a relatively tolerant environment for Catholic soldiers, giving a refuge to sectarian tensions at home.[9] While these issues may be applied to the Irish militia to some extent, what is clear is that, as a force which predominantly saw service on British and Irish shores, this argument can only go so far.

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[5]Thomas Bartlett and Keith Jeffery, 'An Irish Military Tradition?' in Thomas Bartlett and Keith Jeffery, eds, *A Military History of Ireland,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 1-25; see also Keith Jeffery, 'The Irish military tradition and the British Empire', in Keith Jeffery, ed., *'An Irish Empire? Aspects of Ireland and the British Empire,* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), pp. 94-122.

[6]Bartlett, 'Defence, counter-insurgency and rebellion', p. 248. See also V. Morley, *Irish opinion and the American Revolution, 1760-1783,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 137.

[7]Catriona Kennedy, "'True Brittons and Real Irish": Irish Catholics in the British Army during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars', in Catriona Kennedy and Matthew McCormack, *Soldiering in Britain and Ireland, 1750-1850,* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 37-56.

[8]Ciarán McDonnell, 'Loyalty and Rebellion: Irish soldiers in the British military during the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars', *British Journal for Military History*, 8, 3 (2022), pp. 57-78.

[9]Kennedy, "True Brittons and Real Irish', p. 51.

Throughout the nineteenth century, Irish military identity only strengthened, even as the proportion of Irishmen in the regular armed forces declined.[10] Keith Jeffery, Thomas Bartlett, and Timothy Bowman, among others, have characterised this as an Irish military tradition, which operated within the framework of an official military culture, and Irish Catholics in the regular armed forces were an integral part of that tradition.[11] By the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, as Loughlin Sweeney has recently contended, the army was not simply a foreign imposition on Ireland, but rather a longstanding institution within it.[12] By extension, the Irish militia, as a force entirely drawn from the local population, wherever that was in Ireland, was a clear expression of that too.

As the likelihood of a French invasion of Ireland increased towards the end of the eighteenth century, the British authorities were forced to reassess its policy of only entrusting Protestants with the defence of Ireland. The establishment of the largely Catholic Irish Militia in 1793 clearly marked a new departure in its way of thinking.[13] This arming of a large body of Catholic Irishmen proved to be controversial, not only because it was done by compulsion, but also because of fears that it might provoke armed revolt. As Padraig Higgins has argued, arms also possessed a symbolic power:

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[10]See H. J. Hanham, 'Religion and nationality in the mid-Victorian Army', in M. R. D. Foot (ed.), *War and Society. Historical Essays in Honour of J. R. Western,* (London: Harper Collins, 1973), pp. 159-182; Peter Karsten, 'Irish Soldiers in the British Army 1792-1922: Suborned or Subordinate?', *Journal of Social History*, 17, 1 (1983), pp. 31-64.

[11]Bartlett and Jeffery, 'An Irish Military Tradition?', pp. 7-8; Jeffery, 'The Irish military tradition and the British Empire'; Timothy Bowman, 'Irish Military Cultures in the British Army, c.1775-1992' in Kevin Linch and Matthew Lord, eds, *Redcoats to Tommies: The Experience of the British Soldier from the Eighteenth Century*, (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2021), pp. 192-209. Similar arguments might also be applied to Scotland, see Hew Strachan, 'Scotland's Military Identity', *Scottish Historical Review*, 85, 2 (2006), pp. 315-322.

[12]0Loughlin Sweeney, *Irish Military Elites, Nation and Empire, 1870-1925: Identity and Authority,* (Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), pp. 28-37.

[13]Bartlett, 'Defence, counter-insurgency and rebellion', pp. 247-8. It was not established without widespread rioting either, see T0 Bartlett, 'An End to Moral Economy; The Irish Militia Disturbances of 1793', *Past and Present*, 99 (1983), pp. 41-64; Ivan F. Nelson, 'The First Chapter of 1798'? Restoring a Military Perspective to the Irish Militia Riots of 1793', *Irish Historical Studies*, 33, 132 (2003), pp. 369-386; Ivan F. Nelson, *The Irish Militia 1793-1802; Ireland's Forgotten Army* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2007), pp.55-60.

they served to assert membership of the polity by the simple act of possessing and being trained in their use.[14] In that respect this was a departure from previous policy.

When the militia was first embodied, it was done so on the condition that it would only serve to protect Ireland itself, a policy which was to remain in place until the introduction of the Militia Ballot in 1807, which allowed for its use in other parts of the United Kingdom.[15] Continued distrust of leaving Catholic Irishmen to defend Irish shores was certainly a consideration in making this decision.[16] Notwithstanding, in so doing, it increased its utility as a force vital for home defence, whilst also keeping its role in providing recruits for the regular army.

Though auxiliary forces in Ireland essentially disappeared after the end of the Napoleonic Wars, Irish Catholics continued to be a crucial source of manpower for the regular armed forces. By 1830, 42.2% of members of the army were from Ireland, the majority of them Catholic. While this declined throughout the century, by 1878, twenty-five battalions had a non-English majority.[17] By this time, the Irish militia had been re-established and, though a large percentage of those who joined the militia went on to join the regular army, it also acted in competition for manpower. Once more, as we shall see, a significant proportion of these individuals were Catholic. By the turn of the twentieth century, as the Irish militia faced disbandment and with little additional outlet for participation in auxiliary forces in Ireland, Irish Catholics continued to act as an important source of manpower.[18] While it is clear that this was by no means as crucial as it had been in the previous century, the legacy of Catholic Irish participation was the forging of a strong identity and, by extension, tradition which would persist into the First World War and beyond.

[14]Though this did not only apply to Catholics, but also poor Protestants and Presbyterians. See Padhraig Higgins, "Let Us Play the Men': Masculinity and the Citizen-Soldier in Late Eighteenth-Century Ireland', in Kennedy and McCormack, eds, *Soldiering in Britain and Ireland, 1750-1850*, pp. 179-199.

[15]Henry McAnally, *The Irish Militia, 1793-1816; A Social and Military Study,* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1949), pp. 244-6.

[16]J.E. Cookson, *The British Armed Nation, 1793-1815,* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p. 201.

[17]Hanham, 'Religion and nationality in the mid-Victorian Army', p. 161.

[18]For more on military recruitment in Ireland prior to 1914 see Timothy Bowman, William Butler, and Michael Wheatley, *The Disparity of Sacrifice: Irish Recruitment to the British Armed Forces, 1914-1918,* (Liverpool; Liverpool University Press, 2020), pp. 16-42.

'The merest ragtag and bobtail of landlordism': officers in the Irish militia

In 1890, in the House of Commons, officers in the Irish militia were described by the MP for Kerry West, Edward Harrington, as 'puppies and cads' and 'the merest ragtag and bobtail of landlordism' whose fathers did not know what to do with them and so in their attempts to occupy them they found their place within the Irish militia.[19] This assessment, though somewhat of a caricature, typifies the makeup of the officer corps for much of the period. This, naturally, might be a characterisation which goes against the notion of an Irish Catholic amateur military tradition in the militia, primarily because the majority of these men also came from Protestant backgrounds.

However, with this in mind, it actually came to reinforce this Catholic tradition. As has been argued, during the late eighteenth century, the British and Irish governments had to constantly try and strike a balance between securing the support of the Protestant Ascendancy, and the loyalty of the Catholic majority. Thus, the militia became a place to unite what might be understood as previously competing Irish identities, both on religious, but also on class grounds, creating a distinctive Irish version of patriotism.[20] In this way, it also reinforced the social order, strengthening Irish Catholic identity in the other ranks of the militia, but also the Anglo-Irish Protestant identity in the officer corps.

Though Catholics were not prevented from serving as officers when the Irish militia was established in 1793, it was reported that, initially at least, none were awarded commissions. However, very quickly it was deemed necessary to appoint *some* Catholic officers to the corps.[21] It was stated that in the Louth Militia, for example, both Catholics and Protestants had been appointed to the regiment 'indiscriminately…as they appeared best qualified for it by character and situation'.[22] What is clear though, as Henry McAnally has observed, the majority of senior officers were Protestant and, in turn, especially if they were Colonels responsible for regimental appointments, this partly lead to the commissioning of their Protestant neighbours.[23]

Very quickly, and whether justified or not, the quality of these officers came into question. In 1797, Colonel John Moore, a future General, creator of the Light Division, and known for his ability to train his men, arrived in Ireland and made his feelings clear,

[19]Parl. Debs. (HC), vol. 348, cols. 367-425, 9 August 1890.
[20]Ciarán McDonnell, ''Zeal and Patriotism': Forging Identity in the Irish Militia, 1793-1802', *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 42, 2 (2019), pp. 211-228.
[21]F. Plowden, *Historical Review of the State of Ireland, vol.2,* (London, 1803), p. 435; McAnally, *The Irish Militia*, pp. 58-59.
[22]*Dublin Evening Post*, 5 September 1793.
[23]McAnally, *The Irish Militia*, p. 59.

stating that 'had pains been taken to select proper officers…they might…have been respectable troops', but that because the regiments were used by colonels as instruments of influence 'they made their appointments to suit electioneering purposes'.[24] Ivan Nelson, in defence of those involved, has stated that these kinds of criticisms could equally have been levelled at officers in the regular army, at least up to 1802.[25] Any inadequacies had also been highlighted to a greater degree once the Irish militia began to serve alongside its regular counterparts, while those with military aspirations soon found their way out of the militia and into the British Army.

Little had changed in the composition of the officer corps by the time that the Irish militia had been re-established in the 1850s. Having been disembodied and left as a force which only existed on paper with no legal framework in which to re-form it between 1816 and 1851, officers had to be provided for from scratch and from those who had been left on the regimental strength at the time of disembodiment nearly four decades previously. Those officers who were already on the *Army Lists* were given an opportunity to continue to serve, even though a number were now upwards of seventy years of age.[26] A report on officers in the Kilkenny Militia stated that,

gentlemen whose ages vary from 50 to 65 years are not calculated to commence the active duties of a military life, and more particularly so, when it appears that they have performed no military duties for 40 years, it must also be borne in mind that newly raised regiments composed entirely of recruits require active energetic officers to bring them into an efficient state.[27]

This situation led to a rapid turnover across the militia officer corps. By 1857, for example, the North Cork Rifles had replaced five of its original twelve officers of the rank of Captain or above.[28]

Perhaps expectedly, Protestant landowners continued to dominate its officer corps. In units such as the Londonderry Artillery (Militia) and Fermanagh Militia, two regiments based in Ulster, its officer corps was almost entirely Protestant in its

[24]Sir J.F. Maurice, ed., *Diary of Sir John Moore* (London, 1904), p. 11.
[25]Nelson, *The Irish Militia*, p. 121.
[26]National Library of Ireland (hereinafter NLI) Ms.1055 Letter from the Military Secretary regarding the inspection of officers of the Monaghan Militia, 27 January 1855.
[27]NLI Ms. 1074, f.623, 25 January 1855, quoted in Timothy Bowman and William Butler, 'Ireland', in I. Beckett, *Citizen Soldiers and the British Empire, 1837-1902,* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2012), pp. 41-56.
[28]J.D. Mercer, *Record of the North Cork Regiment of Militia, with sketches extracted from history of the time in which its services were required from 1793-1880,* (Dublin: Sealy, Bryer and Walker, 1886), p. 114.

composition across the period 1854-1908. In those regiments outside Ulster, though Catholic officers were present, they were still clearly the exception – in both the North Cork Rifles and Wexford Militia, for example, approximately 15% of the officers were Catholic across the latter half of the nineteenth century.[29] These figures also do not tell the whole picture, as the majority of these Catholic officers were commissioned during the first embodiment period at the time of the Crimean War, and their presence steadily diminished as the century progressed.

Though it is no coincidence that Unionist leaders Edward Saunderson and James Craig were officers in the militia, the fact that prominent nationalists such as William Redmond, John's brother, and Charles Stewart Parnell were also officers in Irish regiments, tells us something important about its broader non-military function.[30] The force also served a social function for those of a certain status, it was a chance to be seen in uniform, and provided a networking opportunity. This appears to be a function which was fulfilled, to varying degrees, across the period under consideration.

As the economic pressures of land ownership became a reality though, this function did soon diminish as the militia came increasingly to rely on officers from England, and to a lesser extent Scotland and Wales. These men joined Irish regiments in order to take advantage of the 'militia back door' as an easier route for a commission in the regular army. Up until 1881, regiments such as the North Cork Rifles, the Roscommon Militia, and the South Tipperary Artillery (Militia), had drawn at least three-quarters of their officers from Ireland, and as many as half from their respective counties.[31] Between 1881 and 1908, some of the same regiments only obtained two-thirds of their officers from Ireland, and even fewer from their own counties. The South Tipperary Artillery (Militia), for example, now only obtaining a fifth of its officers from

[29]Religious information was compiled from a number of sources, including Irish Census records, Burke's Peerage listings, and the following officer service records: The UK National Archives (hereinafter TNA) WO 68/308-310, North Cork Rifles, 1854-1907; WO 68/173-174, Wexford Militia, 1849-1907; WO 68/382, Fermanagh Militia, 1854-1907; WO 68/475, Roscommon Militia, 1854-1860; WO 68/88-95, South Tipperary Artillery (Militia), 1854-1907; WO 68/31-32, Dublin City Artillery (Militia), 1871-1906; and WO 68/64-65, Londonderry Artillery (Militia), 1855-1908. See also Butler, *Irish Amateur Military Tradition*, p. 62.

[30]Alvin Jackson, *Colonel Edward Saunderson: Land and Loyalty in Victorian Ireland* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), p. 42; Patrick Buckland, *James Craig: Lord* Craigavon (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1980), pp. 7-8; Terence Denman, *A Lonely Grave; The Life and Death of William Redmond* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1995), pp. 19-20; R.F. Foster, *Charles Stewart Parnell: The Man and his Family* (London: The Harvester Press Ltd, 1976), pp. 116-7.

[31]Butler, *Irish Amateur Military Tradition*, p. 53.

County Tipperary.[32] The majority of these officers continued to come from Protestant backgrounds, and only the Wexford Militia continued to attract Catholic officers in any significant numbers. What this meant was a strengthening of an Anglo-Irish Protestant identity, also present in the officer corps of the regular army, in contrast to the Irish Catholic identity found in the other ranks.[33]

'Catholic recruits who now swell the muster rolls of the Irish Militia': the other ranks of the militia

In the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as Catriona Kennedy has observed, autobiographical evidence suggests that Irish Catholics joining the regular armed forces did so for much the same reasons as their English and Scottish counterparts. These motivations ranged from a lack of alternative employment to a desire for foreign travel and adventure.[34] For the militia as a whole, similar motivations existed – a desire to escape the monotony of daily life; a chance to earn extra money; and an opportunity to raise one's own physical standard in order to meet the requirements of the regular army being principal among them.[35]

The same motivations did not, of course, apply in the same way to those who joined the Irish militia, especially from 1854 onwards. As the militia in Ireland came to rely more heavily on skilled labour, in stark contrast to its counterparts in the rest of the United Kingdom, it is clear that other motivations existed when men made the decision to join their local regiment.[36] Principally, service in the Irish militia gave individuals the opportunity to participate in county life, with a view to social progression. While units elsewhere tended to rely on the 'underemployed' in society, many of those in Ireland held what might be classed as steady and relatively secure

[32]Ibid.

[33]For more on the role of the Anglo-Irish gentry in the regular army see Nicholas Perry, 'The Irish Landed Class and the British Army, 1850-1950', *War in History*, 18, 3 (2011), pp. 304-332.

[34]Kennedy, ''True Brittons and Real Irish', p. 40.

[35]David French, *Military Identities; The Regimental System, the British Army, and the British People, c.1870-2000,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 210.

[36]Butler, *The Irish amateur military tradition in the British Army*, pp. 84-6. For more on the composition of the militia in other areas of the United Kingdom see Parliamentary Paper (C.1654). Report of the Committee appointed by the Secretary of State for War to enquire into certain questions that have arisen with respect to the militia and the present brigade depot system; together with minutes of evidence, appendix, and index, 1877, where it is stated that 'the classes from which recruits are generally obtained appear to be those of agricultural labourers, carters, colliers, dock labourers, mill operatives, miners, a lower class of mechanic, and the migratory portion of the labouring class'.

jobs, and so there was clearly a desire to contribute to some kind of bigger identity. Ciaran McDonnell's has observed, applying it to the broader armed forces in the 1790s, that while many Catholics, and some Protestants, in Ireland sought to break away from Great Britain, there were also many 'who embraced the British link with Ireland, or at least tolerated British control of Ireland, and military service was an avenue open to them'.[37] This continued to hold some resonance throughout the nineteenth century, and also applied to the Irish militia.

After its initial establishment in 1793, approximately three quarters of the Irish militia rank and file were Catholic and, as Henry McAnally observed, as a result a high degree of religious tolerance existed.[38] Though initially envisioned as a Protestant force, as noted, most officer positions had been filled up by this denomination, Irish Catholics came to dominate, while the other ranks also included a smaller proportion of Presbyterians.[39] The Clare Militia, for example, which in September 1793, consisted of 250 privates, were all Catholics except for five individuals.[40] That being said, proportionately, there were still more Protestants than Catholics present in the ranks in most counties during the first years of the force's existence, hardly surprising given the relatively recent change permitting Catholic enlistment.[41] The Militia Ballot, however, soon begun to swing the balance the other way as more Catholics were compulsorily enlisted, especially after the repercussions of the 1793 riots had dissipated after 1808.

In 1796, the Army Medical Board in Ireland reported that the Irish militia was composed 'of stout men in the prime of life drawn almost entirely from the Irish peasantry, inured by labour in the fields to every vicissitude of climate and of season'.[42] By 1801, a later report stated that 'a majority of the soldiers has certainly been drawn from the peasantry who are acknowledged to be as stout and as hardy as a race of men as any in Europe'.[43]

Fulfilling a vital role, the militia across the United Kingdom provided significant numbers of recruits to the British Army during this period. For those who joined the regular army from the Irish militia during this time, there is only limited evidence to suggest that there was a strength of Irish identity in the regiments they chose to join. This is partly down to the fact that, more often than not, recruits were 'drummed up'

[37]McDonnell, 'Loyalty and Rebellion', p. 75.
[38]McAnally, *The Irish Militia*, pp. 57-8.
[39]McDonnell, "Zeal and Patriotism', p. 213.
[40]*Dublin Evening Post*, 26 September 1793.
[41]Nelson, *The Irish Militia, 1793-1802*, p. 124.
[42]Source please – same as below???
[43]Quoted in McAnally, *The Irish Militia*, pp. 56-7.

by regular army recruiting parties visiting the militia regiments which were stationed nearby. That being said, it was recorded that in 1808 alone, the 88th (Connaught Rangers) Regiment of Foot had received 511 men from the Irish militia. In 1809, this number stood at 278, and in 1810 at 299 – not insignificant figures.[44] Though this is only a small proportion of the total number it is suspected who joined the regular army from the Irish militia, it is clear that some form of Irish identity did exist during this period, and one which would continue to grow when the militia was re-established in the 1850s.

During the latter half of the nineteenth century, Catholics were still over-represented in the Irish militia as the other ranks came to be filled with a disproportionately high percentage of that denomination. In a study of nine militia regiments in the 1880s, only one, the 3rd Battalion, Royal Irish Fusiliers, had a disproportionate percentage of Protestants compared to the county in which it was recruited. In this case, the battalion recruited in County Armagh, while others which recruited in Dublin, Sligo, Londonderry, Fermanagh, and even the greater Belfast area, had more Catholics in their respective battalions, compared to the number who lived in the county.[45] The Commanding officers of both the 4th and 5th Battalions, Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers (recruited in Counties Tyrone and Donegal), even went as far to say in 1890 that while they previously obtained many Protestant recruits, they were now almost exclusively reliant on Catholics.[46] In many ways, it is not surprising that this was the case, as the militia drew most of its recruits from the labouring class, and Catholics made up the majority of labourers. This meant that, to a large extent, it became a reflection of Irish society. It also continues to demonstrate quite clearly the Catholic amateur military tradition in the militia.

Irish militiamen who opted to join the regular army after having experienced a taste of military life also continued to express a strong identity in respect of their 'Irishness'.

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[44]D.A. Chart, 'The Irish Levies during the Great French War', *English Historical Review*, 32, 128 (1917), pp. 497-516.

[45]Figures are derived from a detailed study of c.20,000 militia attestation forms filled out by enlistees in the militia where addresses and religion are listed, found in TNA WO 68, and quoted in Butler, *The Irish amateur military tradition in the British Army,* pp. 86-7. The 3 Royal Irish Fusiliers, for example was 68% Protestant, having been drawn from a county with a 50.6% Protestant population. In comparison, the 4 Royal Dublin Fusiliers was 96.7% Catholic, and was drawn from an area which was 79.5% Catholic, and the Londonderry Artillery (Militia) was 57.4% Catholic, drawn from a 44.4% Catholic population.

[46]Parliamentary Paper (C.5922). Report of the Committee appointed to enquire into certain questions that have arisen with respect to the Militia, together with Minutes of evidence and appendices, 1890.

Throughout the nineteenth century, militia regiments were 'linked' to a regular regiment of the British Army. After the Cardwell-Childers reforms of the 1870s and 1880s, and their attempts at 'localisation' these links only strengthened, especially when militia units across the United Kingdom lost their county titles in favour of regimental ones.[47] For example, the North Down Militia, Antrim Militia, Royal South Down Light Infantry, and Louth Rifles became the 3rd, 4th, 5th, and 6th battalions of the Royal Irish Rifles, while the Wexford Militia, North Tipperary Light Infantry, and Kilkenny Fusiliers became the 3rd, 4th, and 5th battalions of the Royal Irish Regiment. These changes were partly designed to strengthen the local ties a regular regiment had to a particular area, which would in turn aid in recruitment.

By the late 1870s, on average, a third of recruits in the Irish militia had joined their linked regiment, and the same could be said in England, Wales, and Scotland.[48] As many as 45% of recruits from the Antrim Militia joined its linked regiment, the Royal Irish Rifles, but 80% joined an Irish regiment. Furthermore, while 56% of those joining the regular army from the Dublin City Militia went into the Royal Dublin Fusiliers, 92% joined an Irish regiment.[49] This demonstrates the strength of both a local, but also a national identity, inculcated partly during an individual's time in the Irish militia, and one which contributed to a specifically Catholic tradition.

There was certainly a high degree of religious toleration present in the Irish militia, and the army more widely, across the period. For example, the army actively sought to solve sectarian tensions, such as attempting to stop the spread of Orange Lodges in regiments.[50] To an extent, this extended to the militia, but was much harder to control. When first established, many militia Colonels recognised that an entirely Protestant force would not be prudent and would present many of the problems already seen in the Volunteers and the contemporary Yeomanry, but they were also very reluctant to permit a predominantly Catholic force either. However, there does appear to be strong evidence of Orangeism in the officer corps of the Irish Militia in

[47]For more on the Cardwell-Childers Reforms see E. Spiers, *The late Victorian Army, 1868-1902,* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), pp. 1-29.
[48]Parliamentary Paper (C.1874). Return of the number of volunteers from each regiment of the militia to the line in the year 1878, stating in each case how many volunteered to the linked line regiment, and how many to other corps; of number of commissions in the line given to officers in the militia, stating in like manner whether the commission so given was in the linked corps or another; of number of officers of the line transferred to militia, and whether linked or other corps, 1878.
[49]Butler, *The Irish amateur military tradition in the British Army*, pp. 89-90.
[50]McDonnell, 'Loyalty and Rebellion', p.74; Kevin Linch, *Britain and Wellington's Army; Recruitment, Society and Tradition, 1807-15,* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 146.

the early part of the nineteenth century.[51] Technically though, free exercise of both religions was permitted in the militia, though Catholic commentators objected to soldiers being required to attend Protestant services on a Sunday, before being permitted to attend mass.[52]

Occasionally too, the authorities struggled to adapt to the needs of Catholic militiamen, despite their strong presence in the force. This sometimes resulted in strong feelings of discontent, especially if the actions by senior officers were seen to impinge on their identities. In 1855, the majority of the Kerry Militia, stationed in Limerick, mutinied when members of the regiment were informed that they could not march to chapel, as was usual, accompanied by their band.[53] Strong punishment was promised to those involved, despite the fact that public opinion seemed to be on the participant's side. *The Freeman's Journal*, keen to stress that such actions were not acceptable, were prompted to highlight the importance of removing the causes of such disaffection, while also focussing on the Catholic identity of the regiment involved. In a lengthy article it went on to say that

> The falling of the cat-o-nine tails on the backs of the Catholic soldiers for such an offence…would be the signal for a total change in the whole aspect of the war. Recruiting in Ireland would end, the fall of the first drummer's lash would sound its death knell, and discretion tells the authorities that the raw Catholic recruits who now swell the muster rolls of the Irish Militia could not be relied upon to stand by with fixed bayonets, loaded muskets, and cap on nipple, to see the sentence of a court-martial executed for such an offence on the bare backs of a whole Catholic regiment.[54]

As will be demonstrated below, suspicion was often levelled at the militia simply *because of* its Catholic composition, but unsympathetic actions by the authorities did little to convince militiamen that they were trusted or, indeed, respected. In 1875, it was claimed in Parliament by Charles Stewart Parnell that men of the Royal Meath Militia had been prevented by their Commanding Officer from attending a Catholic Church service arguing that 'militia regiments consisting of Irish Catholics ought to be allowed…to fulfil their religious duties as their conscience dictated'.[55] A year later it

[51]Nelson, *The Irish Militia, 1793-1802*, pp.117-120. For Orangeism more broadly in the armed forces see David Fitzpatrick, 'Orangeism and Irish military history' in David Fitzpatrick, *Descendancy: Irish Protestant Histories since 1795,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 21-40.
[52]McAnally, *The Irish Militia*, pp. 57-60.
[53]*The Times*, 10 October 1855; 12 October 1855.
[54]*The Freeman's Journal*, 12 October 1855.
[55]Parl. Debs. (HC), vol.227, cols.929-89, 26 February 1876.

was alleged, again in Parliament, that no religious provision had been made for men of the Louth, Longford, and Monaghan militia regiments whilst on annual training. Furthermore, that a man of the Louth Rifles had died of sunstroke and that no clergyman was present to administer the last sacraments of the Catholic Church.[56] In addition, in 1883, whilst on annual training, the Monaghan Militia was once more in the spotlight as it was claimed that the men of the regiment were presented with meat, rather than fish, on a Friday.[57] The fact that many members of the Irish militia, both officers and other ranks, were often permitted to attend events in Orange Halls, occasionally in uniform, did little to counter feelings that Irish Catholics were not fully integrated into the armed forces.[58]

With the continued predominance of Catholics in the Irish militia, a distinctive identity clearly emerged, often strengthened by perceived injustices committed by its own officers and the authorities more broadly. However, beyond these injustices, accusations of disloyalty, whether justified or not, were never far away either.

'Eager aspirants for enlistment in the militia': Nationalist 'subversion' and loyalty in the Irish militia

As has already been touched upon, suspicion about arming Catholic Irishmen, especially on Irish shores, was a dominant feature of the Irish militia's existence. In many ways, this distrust by the authorities in London, as well as from the general public, had the effect of strengthening Catholic identity within the militia. There is no doubting, however, that nationalist groups, such as the Defenders and United Irishmen of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, and the Fenian movement from the 1860s onwards, actively looked to recruit members from the militia or encouraged their members to join it.

Before its establishment, members of the Defenders, the agrarian secret society, had largely been against the raising of the militia in Ireland, mainly because it was felt that members of the force would be sent abroad. It is also widely believed, however, that, once it did exist, the Society had also infiltrated the Irish militia.[59] The militia, nonetheless, came to be relied on to, quite literally, fight against the rise of this organisation. In December 1794, in Newry, the Dublin Militia fought off attacks from the Defenders and pursued them throughout the night.[60] Furthermore, in May 1795, the Londonderry Militia, stationed in Roscommon, fought a body of, it was claimed,

[56]Parl. Debs. (HC), vol.230, cols.1628-9, 20 July 1876.
[57]Ibid., vol.279, col.777, 24 May 1883.
[58]For examples see *The Freeman's Journal*, 21 August 1856; Parl. Debs. (HC), vol.225, cols.998-9, 6 July 1875; *The Nation*, 27 July 1872 and 3 August 1872.
[59]Bartlett, 'Defence, counter-insurgency and rebellion0', pp. 263-4.
[60]McAnally, *The Irish Militia*, p. 83.

3,000 Defenders, killing 50, and taking many prisoners. It was stated that 'the militia on their march were fired at first by the insurgents and in turn completely emptied their cartridges, boxes of seventeen rounds per man, against their assailants' and, eventually, they were 'completely routed'.[61] There is little evidence to suggest that any militiamen refused service as a result of this, or, indeed, switched sides.

In addition, the United Irishmen who had long targeted soldiers, induced militiamen to their cause with no exception. Wolfe Tone argued that in a crisis 'the militia, the great bulk of whom are Catholic, would to a moral certainty abandon their leaders'.[62] By July 1796, 15,000 Irish militiamen were claimed to be members of the United Irishmen. As Thomas Bartlett has highlighted, the denial of Catholic Emancipation in 1800 left the Irish militia as an anomaly, at best an embarrassment, and at worst a standing threat.[63] As such, in questioning its loyalty, the authorities could not feel comfortable leaving the protection of the state in the hands of a Catholic force. Increasingly, it came to rely on other forces, and sought to ensure that as much of the militia as possible was serving elsewhere in the United Kingdom. This policy was to continue until its disbandment.

Once re-established, the Irish militia played a key strategic role, largely in providing men for the regular army, but also on garrison duties, during the Crimean War.[64] There had been various disciplinary issues associated with this service though, and questions had been asked about the loyalty of the men involved. There was also still a lingering concern about permitting Irish units to serve within Ireland and many regiments found themselves serving in other parts of the United Kingdom, a clear demonstration that there were limits to any perceived loyalty.

Questions of disloyalty only increased from the 1860s, when the threat of Fenian infiltration into the armed forces as whole began to emerge.[65] The result was that the development of the militia was severely hindered by the authorities. Training was sporadically, and for long periods of time, suspended, leading to poor recruitment and damage to its reputation. In 1865, the *Irish Times* was reporting that Fenian agents had

[61] *The Morning Post*, 23 May 1795.
[62] TNA HO 100/62/333 Report on United Irishmen, October 1796, quoted in Bartlett, 'Defence, counter-insurgency and rebellion0', p. 264.
[63] Bartlett, 'Defence, counter-insurgency and rebellion0', p. 292.
[64] Butler, *The Irish amateur military tradition in the British Army*, pp. 141-144; Paul Huddie, *The Crimean War and Irish Society,* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015), pp. 138-149; David Murphy, *Ireland and the Crimean War,* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2002).
[65] A. J. Semple, 'The Fenian Infiltration of the British Army', *Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research*, 52, 211)1964), pp. 133-160

taken advantage of the militia's annual training, achieving 'great success' in their attempts to infiltrate the force. Furthermore, that the Fenians were 'eager aspirants for enlistment in the militia' for when the militia was called out for its training, the drill of many members was already perfect and that individuals were performing their duties nearly as skilfully as soldiers in the regular army. [66]

By 1866, when announcing that annual training was to be cancelled, Chichester Fortescue, the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, stated that,

> it would be unfair to the militia to call them together in large masses at a time when all the barracks in Ireland which usually received them were filled by detachments of troops, and to expose them to the attempts and to the machinations of Fenian agents, who, the Government knew, from information they had received, had directed their endeavours especially…to the corruption of the Irish Militia.[67]

Despite the cancellation of training, sporadic arrests of militiamen were made throughout the decade, and continued into the 1870s. This included arrest for offences such as: the illegal drilling of men, especially in the middle of the night; but also, the theft of arms from barracks, with serving militiamen sometimes implicated in both instances.[68]

The Land War did little to help any prospect of trust being afforded to the militia, and also continued to disrupt annual training into the 1880s. It was noted, for example, that nearly all members of the Kerry Militia were members of the Land League and that it was not wise for the regiment to meet together.[69] As has been mentioned, annual training was a crucial method used to recruit members of the militia. Without this, numbers dwindled, and so did the militia's strategic importance. With fewer members, fewer recruits were found for the regular army by this method too.

As the century wore on, questions around loyalty also filtered into plans for mobilisation in the event of a conflict. By 1886, it was stated that only six militia regiments 'known to be loyal' would remain in Ireland in the event of war.[70] Undoubtedly, 'loyal' in this context meant those units which had the highest

[66]*Irish Times*, 5 September 1865.
[67]Parl. Debs. (House of Commons (HC)), vol. 183, cols. 177-80, 30 April 1866.
[68]For examples see *Morning* Post, 3 March 1866; *The Times*, 17 May 1867; *Freeman's Journal*, 28 June 1877.
[69]NLI Ms.1304 Letter from the Adjutant of the Kerry Militia, to the Under-Secretary at Dublin Castle, 8 January 1881.
[70]TNA WO 147/33 Reports of a Committee on Army Mobilisation, December 1886.

percentage of Protestants within their ranks. By the 1890s, only three militia regiments were deemed to be loyal enough to be entrusted to serve in Ireland.[71] The outbreak of war in South Africa at the turn of the twentieth century led to a reassessment in strategic planning, and regiments of the Irish militia served as whole units or as detachments in South Africa itself, or carried out garrison duties in St Helena, Malta, Gozo, and the United Kingdom.[72] They did so with the question of loyalty constantly hanging over them, especially when some regiments refused to serve abroad when given the option to do so. Though, given the pro-Boer feelings of many Irish nationalists, and the campaigns against army recruitment, it is testament to the apolitical nature of the Irish militia that any service was rendered at all.[73]

Conclusion

The South African War led to a dramatic evaluation of British forces and their capabilities. One outcome of this was the disbandment of the militia as a whole, and the creation of the Territorial Force in 1908. It was decided that the latter force would not be extended to Ireland, with the members of the Irish militia being given the option to join the Special Reserve or discontinue their service. Various, smaller, amateur forces did come into existence in Ireland thereafter, some of which included Irish Catholics in their ranks. Most notably, small numbers of Irish Catholics were seen in the Volunteer Training Corps during the First World War and, for a limited time, in the Ulster Defence Regiment during the Northern Ireland Troubles. In such small numbers, it is not possible to view this in the same way as service in the militia.

That being said, it is possible to find an Irish Catholic amateur military tradition in the Irish militia, and this was found throughout its existence. It was both an extension of the amateur military tradition, either within the British military framework or working outside it, as well as the Catholic military tradition, usually found in the regular British Army. The Protestant domination of the officer corps naturally contradicts this notion, however, this dominance actually acted as a means to strengthen Catholic identity within the other ranks of the militia. Perceived injustices and the occasional poor treatment of Catholic soldiers by their officers, but also the authorities more broadly, united the press and the public and acted to strengthen their own identities as Irish Catholic militiamen. Continued accusations of disloyalty and possible nationalist

[71]0000000000TNA WO 32/7081 'Irish Militia Battalions allotted to Defended Ports in Ireland', 1887-1908.

[72]Butler, *Irish Amateur Military Tradition*, p. 145; Keith Jeffery, 'The Irish Soldier in the Boer War' in John Gooch, ed., *The Boer War: Direction, Experience and Image,* (London: Frank Cass, 2000), pp. 141-151 (p.142).

[73]Terence Denman, '"The Red Livery of Shame": The Campaign against Army Recruitment in Ireland, 1899-1914', *Irish Historical Studies*, 29, 114 (1994), pp. 208-233; Bowman, 'Irish Military Cultures in the British Army', p. 206.

subversion, present throughout the militia's existence, also acted to strengthen these feelings. The tens of thousands of Irish militiamen opting to join the regular army in particular, took this identity with them, especially when joining traditionally 'Irish' regiments of the British Army. The fact that these regular regiments also tended to include visual manifestations of Irish identity in regimental colours and badges, as well as battle honours, only helped to solidify this identity.[74]

It was only during times of emergency, threat of invasion, or war, that the authorities permitted the Irish militia to demonstrate its loyalty. During the Napoleonic Wars, this certainly had its limits and incidents of rioting, or subversion meant that an arm's length approach was adopted, i.e., it was better to mobilise the Irish militia and send it away from Ireland at the earliest possible moment, than allow it to serve in Ireland. This attitude was maintained when the militia was re-established in 1854, and during the South African War, when Irish regiments were sent to other areas of the United Kingdom to carry out their service or, in the latter case, were sent overseas. Exposing Irish militiamen to locations across the United Kingdom meant a strengthening of identity, as the British public and the press interacted with it on a regular basis. This often re-enforced perceptions that Irish soldiers possessed those qualities which made 'good' soldiers, while also reminding interested observers that they might lack discipline or be prone to rebellion.

It is clear then, that an Irish Catholic amateur military tradition existed in the Irish militia. The preponderance of Catholics in the ranks ensured it. This tradition and, indeed, identity, made a significant contribution to the broader Irish military tradition in the British Army and highlighted the enduring importance of Irish Catholic soldiers in Britain's armed forces, both at home and abroad.

[74]McDonnell, 'Loyalty and Rebellion', p. 64.