

James Huston, A Forgotten Irish-American Patriot

Three Young Ireland debacle in 1848 soon crowded New York with Irish rebels on the run from English vengeance. Many were well known, Thomas Francis Meagher, Michael Doheny, John Mitchell, and John Belleu McManus were famous even before they came to New York. James Huston was not a public figure when he arrived in the United States, but from 1850 to 1863 he was a prominent man in Irish circles in the Empire City. To day he is completely forgotten.

James Huston was born in Coleraine, Co, Derry, Ireland in 1819. He organized one of the first Mitchell Clubs, for training young men in the use of arms, to be formed in the north of Ireland. When the Habeas Corpus was suspended in 1848, his arrest was ordered and a reward of fifty pounds was placed upon his head. Huston escaped and made his way to New York. There was Irish revolutionary activity in New York even before the Young Irelanders arrived. Michael Phelan, an Irishman, raised in New York, and a well known billiard expert had been one of the leaders in the organizing of military companies which on May 29, 1850 became the Ninth Regiment of the New York State Militia. The Ninth was the first Irish Regiment organized in the United States.

James Huston, soon was a Lieutenant in the Ninth Regiment but he was far more than a junior officer, he was the chairman of the directory of a secret Irish revolutionary society called the Silent Friends, which

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1. The Irish American, August 1, 1863.
 2. Ibid., February 10, 1850. The United States Military and Naval Argus, February 1850.
 3. The Citizen, March 28, 1857. Adjutant General of the State of New York, Correspondence File, Box 91.
George A. Hussey and William Todd, History of the Ninth Regiment New York State Militia (New York: Veterans of the Ninth Regiment, 1889), pp. 3-5.
 4. The Irish American, May 30, 1857.

controlled the Regiment, and directed the selection of its officers Colonel Benjamin Clinton Ferris, the nominal head of the regiment, was an American, and had no knowledge of what was going on in his command.⁵ The Directory of the Silent Friends was composed of five members, supposedly known only to Michael Phelan, now a company commander in The Ninth. who acted as the go-between representing the Silent Friends in the Ninth. Huston's position, as leader of the secret organization was not known to the officers and men of the regiment, to them he was merely an obscure lieutenant.

Huston did not remain long in the Ninth. He took an active part in the organization of the Sixty-ninth Regiment which was accepted by the State of New York on November 1, 1851.⁶ Huston soon shifted to the new regiment and became commander of a company known as the Meagher Cadets, Co. K, which turned out to greet John Mitchell, when he arrived in New York on November 30, 1853.⁷

A dispute soon broke out between James Huston and a faction led by Michael Doheny, Doheny had been active in 1848 and had escaped to Paris before coming to New York. He was one of the better known of the Young Ireland Party, and had written a book "The Felon's Track" in which he gave an account of his escape.⁸ Doheny, through his friend Maurice Walsh, Treasurer of the Silent Friends, charged that the organization under Huston had become weak and corrupt. The Huston directory fell as a result of these charges blaming their fall of Doheny⁹

5. The Irish People, May 18, 1856.

6. The Adjutant Generals File, Boxes 94 & 95.

7. The New York Herald, December 3, 1853. The Irish American, December 10, 17, 1853.

8. Ibid., January 19, 1856

9. The Citizen, January 19, 1856.

Walsh was accused by Huston's friends of being a cat's paw for Doheny, who held no office in the secret society and seldom attended meetings. although he was a captain in the Sixty-ninth. Doheny, who was a rough and ready speaker of considerable ability defended himself successfully and won some following. Huston refused to resume office unless there was an accounting by the treasurer Maurice Walsh. Walsh contended that since Captain Huston had resigned his position he had no authority and refused to make an accounting. The Huston party seems to have had the majority but he refused to accept office until the affairs of the Silent Friends were in order and advised the membership not to contribute until it was clear where the funds were going. the result of this dispute was that contributions fell off and the society died of financial malnutrition. The exact date of these events is not clear but they seem to have taken place in the summer of 1853.

A meeting was called after a space of two years, in March 1855, to set up a plan to organize the Irish in America for action while the English army was mired down in the Crimea. This group, which became known as the Emmet Monument Association, urged Irishmen in America, to learn the use of arms and prepare to go to Ireland if opportunity offered.

The begining of this new society was stormy. Captain James Huston, at the first meeting opposed the election of Lieutenant-Colonel Doheny and brought up the subject of the unaccounted funds of the Silent Friends.

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10. The Irish American, February 2, 1856. The Citizen, February 2, 1856. This organization was generally known as the Silent Friends, several more formal names seem to have been used among the members. It was some times known as the Republican Union or the Irish Republican Union.
 11. The Irish People, June 2, 1866
 12. Doheny in 1853 had become Lieutenant Colonel of a new Regiment called the Republican Rifles. This regiment as accepted into the State Militia in December 1854, as the Deventy-fifth Regiment. In June 1857 it was consolidated with the Nineth. Many of those interested in the formation of the Seventy-fifth were active in forming the Thirty-seventh in 1861. This regiment was called the Irish Rifles.

Doheny, who realized he did not have the necessary votes to be elected over the objections of James Huston, proposed that Colonel James Ryan, commander of the Sixty-ninth Regiment be appointed head of the Directory. Ryan however refused the post and the vote went to James Huston. Huston however refused to serve. The reason for his refusal is not clear, but it seems to have been the matter of the unsettled accounts. Captain Huston, Colonel Ryan and John McClenahan, editor of the Citizen, attempted to set up a counter movement but were unsuccessful. During this time all three remained members of Emmet Monument Association, ¹⁴ AS THE SOCIETY WAS CALLED

A branch of the association, set up in Boston, soon came under the influence of Dr. Thomas Smith. Dr. Smith proposed to expand the organization and to organize it on a national scale. The plan was to hold regional conventions and to climax the matter by holding a National Convention to set up a provisional government in exile for Ireland. The Doheny Group in New York were opposed to bringing the plans of the Irish into the open because of the opposition it would generate among the Native American organizations which were very strong at this time. ¹⁵ Considerable negotiations went on between the leaders of the two groups, but despite the best efforts of the Emmet Monument Association the Boston organization, now known as the Massachusetts Irish Emigrant Aid Society, opened a Convention at the Astor House in New York, early in December 1855.¹⁶ The delegates of the Emmet

13]. The Citizen, August 12, 1854.

14. The name Emmet Monument Association was chosen in conformity with the injunction of Robert Emmet that no monument be erected to him until Ireland was free.

15. The Irish American, July 28, August 4, 1855. The Native Americans were anti-Catholic and Anti-Irish.

16. The Philadelphia Times, August 29, 1855.

Monument Association sought admission to the convention as equals to the Massachusetts Irish Emigrant Aid Society, but this was refused and they were allowed in temporarily, only as representatives of what the convention considered just another branch of the Boston Group

The convention appointed a committee on credentials which disallowed the admission of the delegates from the Emmet Monument association on the grounds that they were not really members of the Emigrant Aid Society. Doherty, who up to this time had attempted to make peace, now made a bitter speech accusing John McClenahan, of being a British agent. The convention in turn vindicated McClenahan. Felix Duffy, who was a company commander in the Sixty-ninth led some independent Military companies which had been organized by the Emmets into the Emigrant Society and the convention broke up with both organizations split wide open.

The Emmet Monument Association held a meeting on January 11, 1856 at the Broadway Tabernacle on Worth Street east of Broadway. The advance publicity was conciliatory in tone and Doherty was moderate in his prepared remarks, but he was followed by John O'Mahony, who in a most intemperate speech renewed the charges against McClenahan and concluded with the cry that he would not affiliate with men who were against Irish filibustering to free Ireland.

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17. The Irish American, January 19, 1856. The Citizen, January 19, 1856. John a. Kouwenhoven, The Columbia Historical Portrait of New York (Garden City, N.Y. Doubleday & Co., 1953), pp 196 - 224.
18. The Citizen, December 15, 1856. The Daily News December 15, 1856.
19. The Irish American, January 19, 1856. The name "Irish Emigrant Aid Society" did not indicate an intention of helping men come from Ireland, but an intention to aid them to go to Ireland from the United States to fight for freedom.

Patrick D. O'Flaherty, The History of the Sixty-ninth Regiment of the New York State Militia, 1851 - 1861 (dissertation, Fordham University, New York, 1963, Obtainable, University Microfilms, Ann Arbor Michigan) pp. 47 - 99. Contains the story of the pre-fenian revolutionary societies in New York City in considerable detail.

Captain James Huston, of the Sixty-Ninth entered the hall while O'Mahoney was speaking and as soon as he finished claimed the right to speak. He said he had heard statements made which were not true. McClenahan's opposition was not to the Emmet Monument Association but to those who thrust themselves forward as leaders. He claimed that the present association was an offspring of the Silent Friends which was destroyed by the very men who now aspired to be leaders. The chief offender, Huston, charger, was Colonel Doheny, and the chief bone of contention was the money that was never accounted for.

Doheny jumped to the platform and congratulated the meeting for hearing Huston in an orderly manner, and then made a long speech attacking Huston personally, and charging that the failure of the "Silent Friends" was due to a clique headed by Huston. Doheny then reaffirmed his conviction that McClenahan was in communication with the British Consul, and his belief was that he would betray the proceedings of the Convention to the English. Doheny then told of the opportunities he had given up to serve the cause of Irish freedom and proclaimed his willingness to lead or follow any one, even Jim Huston, if he would raise the banner. The meeting broke up when someone put out the lights. Both organizations, for all practical purposes went out with the lights.

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20. The Irish American, February 9, 1856. The Citizen, February 2, 1856. John O'Mahoney, one of the leaders of the 1848 attempt at revolt, had escaped to Paris, and in 1850 he came to New York. He became head of the Irish Revolutionary Brotherhood in the fall of 1858 and remained active in Fenian Affairs until his death in 1877. William D'Aroy, The Fenian Movement in the United States, 1856-1886 (Washington: Catholic University Press, 1947) Passim.
21. The Irish American, January 19, 1856.
22. The Citizen, June 14, 1856.

Captain Huston, despite the enemies he had made, seemed secure in his position as commander of Company "K" of the Sixty-ninth Regiment. His friend Colonel Ryan, the commander of the regiment, had backed him in the troubles resulting from the Astor House Meeting, and continued his support during the early part of 1856. Colonel Ryan attended a ball of the "Brian Brohims Guard" Huston's Company of the Sixty-ninth which was held at the Chinese Assembly Rooms during January 1856.²³ The Colonel also presided at a meeting in the Eagle Drill Rooms, when the members of the Guard presented their Captain with a sword in testimony of their faith and support..²⁴

The picture changed on June 4, when the Sixty-ninth turned out for parade at Washington Square. When Huston arrived he was refused his place on the right of the regiment on the grounds that the regiment was already formed. Huston protested that there was no regiment present to form. Colonel Ryan, however told Huston he must submit.

Huston told his opponents that they were "Filial relatives of a femine quadruped of the canine species" but agreed to give up his place and to march behind a cast off official of the British Government.²⁵ Company "K" however, would not agree to vacate their place and marched off the ground. A n investigation resulted in the court-martial of Captain Huston, for being late at parade and for conduct unbecoming an officer. The trial was held in October 1856, Colonel Ryan acting as prosecutor.²⁶ The court found Huston not guilty, but General Ewan on reviewing the case dissented and Huston was ordered to be tried again.²⁷

23. Ibid., January 5, 1856.

24. The Irish American, February 23, 1856. The Citizen, May 24, 1856.

25. Ibid., June 20 1857. This is a reference to Captain Michael Corcoran whose company had been given Hustons place. Corcoran had been an officer in the police in Ireland.

26. The Citizen, November 8, 1856.

27. Ibid., November 15, 1856.

A second trial begun on December 8, 1856, with Captain Corcoran acting as prosecutor was dismissed the following day for defect in the specifications and Huston was ordered restored to duty. In a short time Huston was rearrested, a trial was held and this time ²⁸ Huston was convicted. Huston charged that his opponents published the results of the trial before sending him official notice in order to give him less time to file an appeal. After considerable legal manuvering Huston's appeal was denied by the Adjutant General of the State of New York, and he ²⁹ was dismissed from the Sixty-ninth and from the Militia.

There can be little doubt that the whole matter stemmed from the stand Huston had taken at the Astor House Convention and the Tabernacle Meeting. Huston laid his troubles to what he called a clique of Ex-Peelers, a reference to Captain Michael Corcoran, who he believed was a front man for Doheny. It would seem that Huston was guilty, since the brigade commander General Ewen upheld the ~~verdict~~, and the Adjutant General denied his appeal. It is extraordinary that so much zeal and time were expended to convict Huston of a minor charge of being late for parade and using some intemperate language when he was denied his place ³⁰ in the line. Had he been a member of the Doheny-Corcoran faction the charges would never have been brought. Huston's Company supported him to a man, and left the Sixty-ninth forming an independent company called the Irish National Grenadiers, later they resumed the name Brian Brohoime Guard, which they used in the Sixty-ninth. These

28. The Citizen, December 20, 1856. January 24, February 7, 1857.

29. Ibid., February 21. March 7, 14, June 20, 1857.

30. Adjutant General's File, Box 108, General Ewen to A dj. Gen. Towensend, May 27, 1857.

31 The Citizen, March 28, 1857.

Independent Companies were numerous in the United States, and especially in New York City, because of the laws in effect at that time. Under the Militia Laws all citizens from eighteen to forty five were obliged to turn out for muster day, once a year, fully armed with three days rations. To facilitate this military companies, separate from the militia of the state were encouraged. Many of these target companies were larger, better equipped and uniformed than the militia supported by the state. They were supported by the members themselves, by prominent citizens, politicians, patriotic associations and even by groups of foreign origin. ³² The Irish were able at a later date to form an independent regiment known as the Phoenix Brigade, which in 1862 joined Corcoran's Legion during the Civil War.

Huston, on February 23, 1858 was elected Captain of Co."I" of ³³ Everything the Ninth Regiment. Everything in the Ninth Regiment on 1858 boded a storm. Its affairs had never run smoothly and from its beginnings there had been hints of discord and lack of discipline. There was strong criticism of the Ninth in the fall of 1857 by several Newspapers, the most vocal of which was the Express. The Ninth was called a "green coated rabble" and the number of men present was said to be the lowest in the division. An Officer of the Ninth answering the charges admitted that the officers had never given proper attention to their

32. The Irish American, May 2, 1857. Describes a parade of these target companies held on Thursday May 13, 1857. Almost fifty organizations are named comprising about 6000 men. The largest was the James Mulligan Guard commanded by Capt. James Murphy. Which later became famous in the Song "The March of the Mulligan Guard" by Harrigan and Hart.
33. Adj. Gen's File, Box 110. Colonel Ryan to Adj. Gen. Townsend. March 3, 1858.

commands. The election of James Huston seems to have been an attempt on the part of the men to improve the quality of Company "I". Colonel Ryan protested To Colonel Lucius Pitkin of the Ninth, and to the
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Adjutant General of the State of New York against the election.

How the matter would have turned out there is no way of knowing, for the Ninth was consolidated with the Sixty-ninth on May 3, 1858, and Huston
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was squeezed out. James Huston was out of the Militia for the next few Years and nothing is known of his activities since there is no mention of him in the Irish American, the only remaining Irish newspaper in the city, which was partial to the Doheny-Corcoran group.

The outbreak of the Civil War in April 1861, and the call up of the New York State Militia for ninety days created a need for good officers. Colonel Tompkins of the Second Regiment, early in May, applied to the Brigade commander General Ewen and the Division Commander General Sandford to have Captain Huston reinstated in the Militia, with his
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old rank in order that he might raise a company for the Second Regiment. Ewen declined to take action. It would seem that Huston was already acting as captain of Company "E" on April 18, 1861 although he did not
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receive his commission as Captain until May 21, 1861. The Second had many difficulties due to misunderstandings concerning whether the regiment had turned out for ninety days or had volunteered for three years. Many of the officers and men returned to New York and began

34. The Ninth Regiment never had an Irish Colonel. Benjamin Ferris, an American retired in 1858 and was replaced by Lucius Pitkin, a West Pointer. George W. Cullum, Biographical Register of the Officers and Graduates of the United States Military Academy (Boston: Houghton Mifflin & Co., 1891) I, 702.

35. The Irish American, May 11, 1861.

36. The Devoe Scrapbook No 22, p. 94, Sunday Mercury, no date. There are a number of scrapbooks put together by Devoe in the New York Historical Society. some are numbered and some are not.

37. Frederick Phisterer, New York in the War of the Rebellion 1861- 1865 (Albany, N.Y.: J.B. Lyon Co., 1912), LV, 2907.

to reorganize the militia regiment. Colonel Tompkins after promising to remain with the regiment in the field returned to New York and placed himself at the head of the militia regiment then in the process of reorganization. Colonel Tompkins raised 548 men but when the State authorities transferred three full companies to the 165th Regiment the remaining men staged a riot, which caused Colonel Tompkins to desert the project, and having obtained authority to organize a cavalry brigade he removed himself from the affairs of the Second Regiment, whether in the field or at home. Tompkins was not successful in his attempt to raise a brigade, but he was able to secure a commission as Colonel of the Thirteenth Cavalry.

Huston remained in the field with part of the Second regiment, now designated the Eighty-Second New York Volunteers, and early in 1862 he was acting as Quartermaster under the command of Colonel Henry Hudson. A member of his company in a letter home said, "The company miss Captain Huston's untiring attentions as it was his delight to see to the wants and comforts of his men"⁴⁰ Shortly after Colonel Hudson assumed command Huston was elected Lieutenant Colonel and began a school for line officers which greatly improved the efficiency and

38. Phisterer, *op. cit.* IV, 2897. DeVoe, Scrapbook No 24, p. 130B
The DeVoe scrapbooks are numbered in different ways. No 24 is numbered on alternate pages beginning at page one.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 129.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 17.

41. The custom in the Militia of the State of New York was that the men elected the officers and the board of officers elected the Colonel, Lieutenant Colonel and the Major. This custom was carried on by some volunteer regiments. Colonel Hudson seems to have been appointed by the military authorities. Confirmation of the elections by the Colonel was necessary before an officer could be commissioned.

contributed a great deal to the spirit and increased the discipline of the regiment.

Colonel Hudson early in December 1862 was removed from command of the eighty-second, having been charged by Major Beard of Brigadier General Gibbon's Staff with the failure to send a detachment of 100 men across the Rappahanock. Huston, who had been engaged in every battle since the opening of the Peninsular campaign in the spring of 1862, felt that such charges should not be brought against an officer who had fought with distinction in thirteen battles.⁴² He further believed that the charges were motivated by a desire on the part of certain elements of the administration to discredit the friends of General McClellan, who had been removed from command in the fall of 1862.

Huston commanded the Eighty-second during the battle of Fredericksburgh. His regiment was the second to reach the upper bridge, and when his men hesitated to cross, Huston drew his sword and with a shout of "Come on boys" led his men over the bridge. The Eighty-second did not take part in the attack but held a position above the city at an unfinished monument to George Washington's mother, not far from a paper mill. The position was commanded by Confederate artillery and sharpshooters, but under Huston's direction the men advanced by short rushes in small groups and succeeded in reaching their place without loss. The position was fortified and the sharpshooters driven off by concentrated and well directed rifle fire. The Fourth United States Infantry relieved them at eight in the evening and they returned to the town under the cover of darkness.⁴³

42. The New York Leader, July 4, 1863.

43. DeVoe Scrapbook No 24, p. 127. Most of the clippings in the DeVoe Scrapbooks of this period and from the New York Leader or the Sunday Mercury.

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General Alfred Sully, on Monday after the battle, when the Union Army was preparing to recross the river, was asked by General Howard if he had a regiment which could hold a position abandoned by two other regiments. "Yes Sir" Sully replied, "I can give you a regiment that will take the position and hold it." Then he called Lieutenant Colonel Huston and his veterans of the Eighty-second. Huston deployed his men in open formation, as he had the previous day, and soon re-occupied the position he had held before the battle. On Monday night after holding off the enemy all day, Huston quietly drew his men off and at ten in the evening recrossed the Rappahanock.

Colonel Hudson was finally dismissed on May 26, 1863, and Huston became Colonel of the Eighty-second, on June 19, ~~1863~~, but was never mustered in. This was due to the fact that the regiment was constantly on the march before the battle of Gettysburg. The regiment was posted with the rest of General Hancock's Corps on Cemetery Ridge during the battle, and on the second day was sent to aid the Third Corps which, under the brave but rash General Sickles, was in an exposed position. The Eighty-second and the Fifteenth Massachusetts extended the defence line along the Emmetsburg Road to the north of the brick house. Huston fortified the house and built a breastwork with stones and fence rails. The two regiments numbered only about seven hundred men and there was little time to dig in. When the enemy struck Huston was able to hold

44. Ezra j. Warner, Generals in Blue (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1964) p.488.

45. O.R. Series I, V. 21, p. 275. Report of Colonel Huston.

46. Frederick Phisterer, New York in the War of the Rebellion (Albany:

47. J.B.Lyon CO., 1912), IV, 2908.

47. O.R. S.I, V.27, pt. I, p. 419, Report of Brigadier General William Harrow.

48. Ibid., p. 158. Report of General John Gibbon.