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# FROM BALLINGARRY TO FREDERICKSBURG: DAVID POWER CONYNGHAM (1825-1883)

*By Michael Fitzgerald*

The subject of this article achieved distinction in several fields; yet today it is rare to find Tipperary people who know of him. He was a patriot and a revolutionary in 1848, a novelist and historian and a journalist on America's greatest newspaper in his time.

He saw action as an officer in the American Civil War, where he was wounded in action and commended for bravery. He remained an uncompromising patriot all his life. He was a cousin and friend of Charles Kickham, a friend and admirer of Meagher of the Sword and a friend of John O'Mahony and other leading Fenians.

David Power Conyngham was born in Crohane, county Tipperary, in 1825. The exact date of his birth cannot be traced because the baptismal registers for Ballingarry parish for that year are incomplete — although records exist for most other members of his family. However, most reliable accounts give the year 1825, and agree that he was three years older than Kickham.

He was the eldest son of John Cunningham and his wife Catherine Power. His parents were well-off farmers. In the Griffith Valuation lists John Cunningham is shown as a tenant of over 142 acres, held in 1855 from Malcolmson, Pike and Fennell. In addition, he held several small holdings which were sublet to others, the largest to a William Cunningham, who may have been a brother or other close relative. William also had a son named David, a fact which made research somewhat confusing.

Catherine Power's mother was a Kickham according to local tradition, apparently a sister of Charles Kickham of Ballydavid, grandfather of the novelist. This tradition is supported by the fact that James Kickham of Mullinahone, uncle of the novelist, acted as baptismal sponsor for another Cunningham brother.

The land was the Powers' property; John Cunningham had married in there, and his own native place is not recorded. The surname was then very common; at least half-a-dozen Cunningham families lived in Killenaule parish. Early marriages were the norm in the early nineteenth century, and if the ages on the family tombstone in Lismolin are correct, John Cunningham was only 19 when David was born.

A Thomas Power, probably an uncle, also held a substantial holding in Crohane and a Richard Power of Crohane took part in the 1848 Rising. Richard's name appears several times in the marginal graffiti on classical textbooks used in the hedge schools in the area at the time, which seem to have attracted scholars from as far away as Ballaghadereen, county Mayo. The graffiti also mention the Mahers of Laha, Castleiney, who ran a famous classical school.

David presumably received his early education at one of these schools. Later he went to Queen's University Cork, but left without a degree, as was quite common then. He is believed to have been intended for the priesthood, but found he had no vocation. Later his younger brother Maurice became a priest; he died in New York, aged only 30, in 1874. He and David are buried in the same grave in Calvary Cemetery, New York; a nephew Laurence also became a priest and laboured in the United States for many years.

After leaving Cork David did not settle down in any occupation. He roamed round Tipperary during those famine years, probably staying with various relatives — absorbing all he saw, listening to stories and traditions. He retained them all in his remarkable memory, and later was to use many of them. David was a frequent visitor to the home of the Kickham cousins in



Mullinahone, becoming a close friend of Charles, three years his junior. They had much in common and shared political views.

David became a Young Irelander, and later a Confederate. Even at this stage he was an extremist, who saw no good, under any possible circumstances, in the British connection or the landlord system. He never changed these views. He seems to have been influenced by James Fintan Lalor and Thomas Davis in particular, although his political philosophy was probably nearest to that of John Mitchel.

From early 1848 it became gradually obvious that rebellion was coming. O'Connell was dead. Meagher and Mitchel were openly calling for insurrection. Eventually the government pounced. Mitchel was tried before a packed jury, sentenced and transported. William Smith O'Brien took over. The leaders, when warrants were issued for their arrest, left Dublin for the country. Their journey took them to Kilkenny, Waterford, Carrick-on-Suir, Mullinahone and eventually to Ballingarry.

Cunningham was deeply involved from the beginning as the leader of a Confederate Club. He is said to have acted as a guide in the area, and took part in the Council of War in Ballingarry just before the Rising. The evidence given at the trial of Smith O'Brien and the other leaders shows the extent of his involvement. After the collapse of the Rising at Farrenrory he was immediately placed on the police list of wanted men. The police sought informers, but found few of any use to them.

Members of the Unionist ascendancy usually confined their evidence to the fact that their houses had been raided for arms, naming only the raiders known to them. Others, either reluctant or simply "on the make", mentioned only those already known to the police. Their evidence was worthless, since it seldom gave evidence of treasonable intent. Only two witnesses were of use; one was an Englishman employed by the mining company, the other a summons server. Here are some extracts from their statements.

"On Wednesday, 26th of July, the chapel bells commenced ringing to join those at Mullinahone, and at the hour of ten o'clock that evening 400 persons assembled, all armed in various ways, and proceeded under the command of said McCarthy (schoolmaster at Mr. Fitzgerald's of Jessefield), John Cormack of Boulea, David Cunningham of Crohane, and Wright of Mullinahone, with music on the way to Mullinahone. I accompanied them till we met Smith O'Brien, J.B. Dillon, a person called Donohue from Dublin, Devin Reilly and some other with about 200 persons, mostly armed, coming on to Ballingarry

I was in the village of Ballingarry on Thursday 27th of July when about noon I saw William O'Brien drilling a large mob of persons in the street, some armed with guns and pistols, others with pikes, pitchforks, and other weapons. . . Mr. O'Brien also told them that he had appointed David Cunningham of Crohane also a commander, and asked them if they were satisfied to obey him whenever he called on them, on which they replied Yes. I heard David Cunningham ask the mob if they knew of any persons having arms who were not joined with them; and if so, to take them by force and to mark them. I afterwards on the same day saw the aforesaid John Cormack and David Cunningham leading the said mob who were formed four deep. Cunningham was armed with a gun."

At the trial of Smith O'Brien and the other leaders, the evidence was similar; but the summons server was a bit worried at that stage. Under cross-examination he said he had heard of Cunningham, but did not know if he should know him or not. Later he said that on the 28th of July he saw David Cunningham and a person whom he heard was a schoolmaster at Martin Fitzgerald's of Jessfield, drilling the people and acting as leader. He admitted he got £20 reward for his information.





David Power Conyngham

The Grand Jury, whose duty it was to decide if the defendants named should be sent forward for trial, found true bills against eight of the defendants as well as the principal leaders. The eight were: Edmund Egan, John Cormack, William Peart, Thomas Finnane, David Cunningham, John Brennan, John Preston and Thomas Stack. Only seven prisoners appeared at the bar. Cunningham was missing.

Since he gave no account of how he escaped it is reasonable to assume that he escaped from custody. Normally no case went to the Grand Jury unless the accused could reasonably be expected to stand trial. There is no evidence that he was actually present at the War House, but he probably was. Many years later, in his book *Ireland Past and Present* he remarked that many of those who took part were sons of leading farmers, and mentioned as such, "Powers, Kickhams, Fitzgeralds, Mullallys and Cunninghams".

Most accounts say Cunningham escaped to the United States at this time. One writer, Rev. W. Hickey, merely states that he had to leave home, others that he went to America in 1861 or in 1863. In the shipping lists of emigrants who landed in New York in November 1848, there is a David Cunningham, aged 40, labourer. The age does not agree; Cunningham was then 23, but these lists are far from reliable in such matters.

Probably his brother William had to leave home too; David's use of the plural above suggests that he was also involved. These were the years of the great exodus from the Famine and of the coffin ships. Thousands were fleeing the country daily, and escape in disguise was easy.

However, after a few years, he was back in Ireland, possibly because of the illness and death of his father or sister Ellen. Both died in 1856. His father had suffered considerable losses in the years before he died, as a result of the Famine and the failure of a local loan fund bank of which he was chairman.

After David's return he began contributing literary and political articles to the *Tipperary Free Press*, published in Cashel. No copies containing his work appear to have survived although some, unsigned but identifiable, were reprinted in another Cashel paper in the 1880s. He probably wrote for other papers as well. His brother Thomas inherited the family farm; this may have been a family arrangement.

In 1859 his first novel was published by Duffys, Dublin entitled *The Old House at Home* by "A Tipperary Boy". A new edition in 1861 was entitled *Frank O'Donnell* by Allen H. Clington. Several later editions under the title *The O'Donnells of Glen Cottage* bore his real name. This novel was still in print in 1917.

Based loosely on real events, its main theme was the judicial murder in 1858 of the Cormack brothers of Loughmore for the alleged shooting of John Ellis in 1857. It was undiluted nationalism — anti-landlord, anti-British, anti-"souper". The sufferings of the starving people take up much of the story. The style and dialogue bear a strong resemblance to the work of Kickham. It was probably the first novel of the time to take such a strong nationalist stand.

In November 1860, according to Kickham, Cunningham was among those who welcomed home the Mullihahone contingent of the Papal Brigade. The following April the American Civil War began; he returned to the United States and joined the staff of the *New York Herald*.

It is by no means easy to reconstruct his movements at this time. Existing accounts vary and often contradict one another. For example, an obituary in the *Tipperary Leader* states he went to the United States in 1863 with letters to General Meagher from Smith O'Brien and P.J. Smyth. According to Cunningham, Fr. Hickey was there as a journalist in April 1861.

It seems certain that he joined the *New York Herald* in 1861, and the fact that he obtained such a post on the country's biggest paper suggests that he was already known there, or had previous experience in the 1848 - 1855 period. The editor was a Scot, James Gordon Bennett, who detested England and all it stood for; many of the staff were Irish, former members of Young Ireland. Conyngham, as his name was now spelt, was sent to the front as a war correspondent. As such he was attached to the newly-formed Irish Brigade.

While the 69th New York Volunteers — the "Fighting Sixty-Ninth" — is always associated in the public mind with the Irish Brigade, the fact is that the Brigade consisted of five regiments. At first these included the 63rd and 88th New York regiments; at various times during the war the 116th Pennsylvania and 28th Massachusetts regiments became part of the Brigade. At one time the 29th Massachusetts was also part of the Brigade; but this was later replaced by the 28th.

Conyngham seems to have been a civilian war correspondent in the early years of the war. His name does not appear on any list of officers before March 1863, when he was a captain and acting *aide-de-camp* to General Meagher at the battle of Chancellorsville. He was then a staff captain, attached to the Brigade as a whole rather than to any individual regiment. It is likely that he had held this rank for some months before that.

Conjecturally, from various pieces of evidence and from a close examination of his book *The Irish Brigade and its Campaigns* it is possible to check at least some of his movements. Using this method it appears he was not at the front in the early months of 1861, after the war started. From September the narrative shows a more personal tone than when it described the first months. These appear to have been written from newspaper reports, in particular those of a James Turner. Then Conyngham was with the Brigade until about Christmas of that year, when he returned to Ireland.

In February of 1862 he married in Killenaule Anne Corcoran. The marriage was not a success; the reasons are not recorded, but a tradition I have heard suggests that both parties may have



been at fault, and it is likely that his return to the States had a bearing on the rift. It seems that his later returns to this country in the next ten years were connected with attempts to heal the rift. He was in his 37th year then, and his bride a few years younger. She also came of comfortable farming stock.

*The Irish Brigade and its Campaigns* shows for most of 1862 the same features as it did in early 1861. It was written from the reports of others. Then he returned, probably before Christmas 1862, when the narrative takes on a more personal note. It was most likely on this occasion that he brought letters to General Meagher from P.J. Smyth and Smith O'Brien, and was appointed a staff captain to the Brigade.

He also continued to send reports in his capacity as a war correspondent. According to his obituary in the *Tipperary Leader* this occurred in 1863, when the Brigade was encamped before Fredericksburg. In fact the brigade was encamped there in November 1862, and the battle there took place on 13 December 1862.

The issue which caused the American Civil War was not slavery, but whether individual states had (or had not) the right to secede from the Union. The Irish were divided on this. Before the war Meagher had favoured the southern view. Mitchel remained a Confederate to the end, making himself very unpopular in New York, a city of which his son later became Mayor.

The Cunningham family was also divided. David's younger brother, William, who had also fled after the '48 Rising, had gone at first to Canada. Later he moved south to Houston in Texas, where he established a very successful law practice, and joined on the Confederate side. William had married a native American from Carolina, had no children of his own, but had two adopted daughters — possibly step-daughters if his wife Sarah had been married before.

William joined the Second Texas Infantry in or before August 1861 as a second Lieutenant. His later war history is not recorded, but it is known that he reached the rank of Colonel. Possibly he was the Colonel Cunningham who served under Stonewell Jackson at the battle of Gaines Mill in 1862.

We know from David's own account that David twice crossed the lines secretly and in civil dress, hoping to meet someone who might have news of him. I have heard one story from tradition that, after the capture of a Confederate town, David was challenged in a saloon by a man who told him that he had seen him in the same saloon a week before wearing a Confederate uniform. There was a strong family likeness between the brothers.

David Conyngham was a modest man, who rarely mentioned his own doings. As staff officer and *aide-de-camp* he was close to General Meagher and in a position of danger. Meagher was brave to the point of recklessness and on one occasion he had his clothing in tatters from bullets and his horse shot, refusing to move his command post until the last moment. Conyngham himself had four horses shot under him, was wounded in the breast at the battle of Resaca, mentioned in despatches and commended for bravery.

Of all the battles in which the brigade took part, that of Fredericksburg was by far the bloodiest for the brigade itself. The town of Fredericksburg was of vital strategic importance. Here on 13 December 1862 the Brigade was ordered into action against the Confederates, who held a virtually impregnable position behind stone wall embankments on a hill called Maryes Heights.

Before the battle Meagher gave out green sprigs of boxwood to all ranks for their caps, to identify them as Irish. Zookes Brigade led the uphill charge against Maryes Heights against a withering fire, which quickly thinned their ranks. Meagher's came next. The artillery could give no support; there was almost no cover, and the advance was impeded by piles of bodies. Two-thirds of the brigade were lost.

Conyngham commented: "It was not a battle. It was a wholesale slaughter of human beings —



sacrificed to the blind ambition and incapacity of some parties". This was a reference to the Northern Commander, General Burnside, who was relieved of his command soon afterwards, and is to-day remembered mainly for, of all things, his whiskers!

Conyngham goes on to describe the harrowing scenes of that bitterly cold winter evening on the battlefield, piled high with thousands of dead and wounded. It was the worst defeat the Union had suffered. For the Irish it was all the sadder, because the Confederates who held Maryes Heights were mainly Irish too.

Even the correspondent of the London *Times* (no friend of the Irish or the Union side) paid a handsome tribute to the reckless courage of Meagher's Brigade. In all, the Union lost 12,000 men that day, and the Confederates about 4,500.

Many years later the popular Irish-American ballad by J.I.C. Clarke (a Fenian) ran:

"Said Shea, It's thirty odd years, bedad,  
Since I charged to drum and fife,  
Up Maryes Heights, and my old canteen  
Stopped a rebel ball on its way;  
There were blossoms of blood on our sprigs of green,  
Kelly and Burke and Shea".

Conyngham never mentioned if he took part, or was personally in the battle; but his account reads like that of one who was there. He was no militarist by nature. Of war he remarked here that, seen in its true colours, it was the most horrible curse that God could inflict upon mankind.

He went on to tell how the Brigade, despite its appalling losses, celebrated Christmas in camp in its usual style. But it was no longer a Brigade. Meagher asked that it be relieved from duty to recover and refill its depleted ranks by recruiting. But the recruiting drive was not very successful. When the Brigade fought at Chancellorsville it numbered only about 520 men, and soon afterwards Meagher, in May 1864, resigned on the grounds that he no longer had a brigade to command. His resignation was accepted, and he was replaced by Col. Patrick Kelly.

Meagher was reinstated the following year, 1864; Conyngham was then with Sherman's army in the south. His book on the Irish Brigade was completed by his close friend and old neighbour Doctor William Maher, the surgeon to the Brigade, a native of Killenuale. Doctor Maher had remained with the brigade and became a prominent member of the old comrades association of the brigade after the war. It was to fall to him to organise Conyngham's funeral, to write his obituary, to write the preface to his last book and to be chief pall-bearer at the funeral.

Meanwhile, during 1864 and 1865 Conyngham was in Georgia, and became the author of a book on that campaign. Although never reprinted, it is still considered indispensable for anyone studying that campaign.

*Sherman's March through the South* is described as "Written by one who served as volunteer, aid-de-camp and war correspondent". Certainly Conyngham saw much action on the famous march from Atlanta to the sea, where he carried despatches under fire, being wounded in action at Resaca. His third book on the war, now very rare, was *The Sisters of Charity on Southern Battlefields*.

When Sherman reached the sea the Confederacy was split in two and its main forces cut off from the great Texas granaries. Still the South fought on bravely to the end, when General Robert E. Lee surrendered to Appomattox on 9 April 1865.

After the war Conyngham went back to New York, but not to the *New York Herald*. He may have made a visit to Ireland then between 1865 and 1867. He remained in close touch with events here, and is known to have written articles and verse aimed at securing Kickham's



release from jail. He was given the honorary commission of Major by the State of New York on 1 November 1867 for "gallant and meritorious services in the late war".

In November 1865 a letter in the Fenian Papers described him as "late of the Herald". In 1866 John O'Mahony founded a Fenian paper called *The Irish People*, the title of the Dublin Fenian paper suppressed in 1865. Conyngham was the registered proprietor, and it lasted over a year.

He was, as his last book shows, a strong supporter of O Mahony, and bitterly opposed to James Stephens as Fenian Leader. In this he was at one with Kickham and many other leading Fenians. The Fenian movement in the United States was constantly in turmoil and riddled with dissension. There appears to be no evidence that Conyngham was himself a sworn Fenian, but he was a close associate of many leading Fenians of his time.

In 1868 he founded another paper, *The Staten Island Leader*, with P.H. Gill. After this he joined the *Sunday Democrat* as part owner. While he was with this paper he was approached by some Chicago members of the American Democratic party, who hoped to start a paper which would be both pro-Democrat and pro-Fenian.

Conyngham travelled to Chicago with Stephen J. Meany to discuss this project. It came to nothing then, but eventually got off the ground two years later, by which time he was otherwise engaged. Stephen J. Meany was an old '48 man, a Fenian, and a well-known writer and poet.

Conyngham is next found holding an executive post with the U.S. Post Office. Again he left, to return to Ireland, this time for a prolonged visit. He may have intended to stay in Ireland on this occasion. It was probably on this occasion that he built the house in Crohane which he called Glen Cottage after his first and most famous novel. Eventually he returned to New York.

His next post was managing editor of the *Tablet*, a paper owned by the Sadlier family, a strongly Irish Nationalist paper. James Sadlier's wife, Mary, a native of Cavan, was the author of many historical novels. The paper had been at one time the semi-official organ of the New York Archdiocese and anti-Fenian, but by now Church opposition to Fenianism was waning. Conyngham's views were always strongly Catholic. Later he became, with General Michael Kerwin, proprietor of the *Tablet*. Kerwin was also a prominent Fenian, and had been Fenian Secretary for War at the time of the 1870 Fenian invasion of Canada.

Conyngham wrote three more novels around this time. They were: *Sarsfield*, published in 1871; *O'Mahony, Chief of the Comeraghs*, 1879, and *Rose Parnell, the Flower of Avondale*, 1883.

"O'Mahony" is a story of strong Tipperary interest. It deals with Tipperary in 1798, includes "the flogging sheriff" Judkin Fitzgerald, and the death of Father Sheehy. As he admitted in the preface, this was a deliberate anachronism. He also made Fr. Sheehy a Carmelite. The story seems to include much that he had heard in tradition in his early years, and is strongly both Catholic and patriotic.

Other books from his pen were *Lives of the Irish Saints* and *Lives of the Irish Martyrs*. These may have been re-issued as one volume later. They gained him an honorary degree of Doctor of Laws from Notre Dame University, and a special letter of commendation from the Pope. Both books were based on mainly published material which he used with good judgement. They have, as usual, a Tipperary flavour.

Father Sheehy's story is told in detail, as is that of Dermot O'Hurley, the martyred Archbishop of Cashel, and other Tipperary martyrs. He also included the little-known story of Fr. Maurice Kinrehan, the parish priest of Mullinahone, who was martyred in Elizabethan times near the village of Ballypatrick.

Conyngham was also co-author, with a Fr. Thomas Walsh, of an *Ecclesiastical History of Ireland*.





*Ireland, Past and Present* was his last book. It was his personal view of Irish history, and is particularly interesting when he writes of his own times, even though, with his usual modesty, he says nothing of his own part.

Some time after 1876 he paid his last visit home. This was the occasion when he had a tombstone erected over his parents and deceased members of his family in Lismolin. This stone is now fallen and broken, and when I last visited there it was invisible in the undergrowth. It reads:

“Erected by Major David Power Cunningham LLD, alias Conyngham, of New York, U.S.A., in memory of his father Mr. John Cunningham of Crohane who died July 8th 1856 aged 50 years, and his sister Ellen who died 9th December 1856 aged 26 years. Anastasia, wife of Mr. John Walsh of Kilkenny who died January 31st 1870, and Kate, wife of Mr. R.R. Rice, Kilkenny who died March 3rd 1876 aged 31 years.

Also in memory of his brother, Col. Wm. P. Cunningham, Barrister, who died in Houston Texas February 18th 1867 aged 40, and the Rev. Maurice Cunningham who died in New York, U.S.A. October 9th 1874 aged 30”.

David himself died of pneumonia in New York on 1 April 1883, at his residence, 7 Vandam Street. He had been ill for only a few days. He was buried in Calvary Cemetery in the same grave as his brother, Fr. Maurice Cunningham.

His sister was also in New York at the time of his death. She married Michael Kerwick; they later returned to Ireland. His brother Thomas of Crohane had married a Miss Hickey of Derricknew, Killenaule. She was aunt of Laurence Hickey, the Thurles publican who was murdered in 1920 by the Black and Tans.

David Power Conyngham was the author of at least ten books in all. All are now scarce; some are unobtainable. Yet they were still in print in America for many years after his death, and many American public libraries have copies of the best known. His *Irish Brigade and its Campaigns* has been reprinted many times — indeed, three times in the last ten years — and is a very valuable historical source book. His fiction, in a style which strongly resembles that of his cousin, Kickham, is still very readable.

Colonel William Cunningham, David’s brother, returned after the Civil War to a defeated and depressed Houston, but did not resume the practice of law. Instead he became a teacher until his death in February 1867. His widow Sarah continued to teach in Houston after his death, until at least 1881. By 1884 she had disappeared from the records there, having possibly moved elsewhere.

Much of Conyngham’s work appeared in the form of articles, essays, stories and verses in many papers, mainly in the United States. Many were unsigned; many are now lost. A complete list of his books, as far as can be traced, follows.

#### NOVELS

The O’Donnells of Glen Cottage  
Sarsfield, or the Last Great Struggle for Ireland.  
O Mahony, Chief of the Comeraghs.  
Rose Parnell, the Flower of Avondale

#### CIVIL WAR BOOKS

The Irish Brigade and its Campaigns  
Sherman’s March through the South.  
The Sisters of Charity on Southern Battlefields.



## IRISH HISTORY

Lives of the Irish Saints  
Lives of the Irish Martyrs.  
Ireland Past and Present.  
An Ecclesiastical History of Ireland (with Rev. T. Walsh).

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Amongst those who supplied information are the following:—

Michael Kerwick, Newpark, The Commons, Cashel, and James Kerwick, Ballyarsna, Cashel (grand-nephews of Conyngham);  
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