

Fighting Irish in Florida 1776-1783: Irish Allegiances during the Revolutionary War

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Introduction

Irishness has been defined by their rebellion against the British. But what unfolded in Florida during the American Revolution? Examining Florida's role as a British stronghold elucidates the overlooked contributions of three Irish figures:

- Oliver Pollock, the Patriot Financier of the Revolution.
- Margaret O'Brien Pollock, the Ideological Counterpart and Wife to Oliver Pollock.
- Colonel Lord Rawdon, the Loyalist Leader of the Volunteers of Ireland.

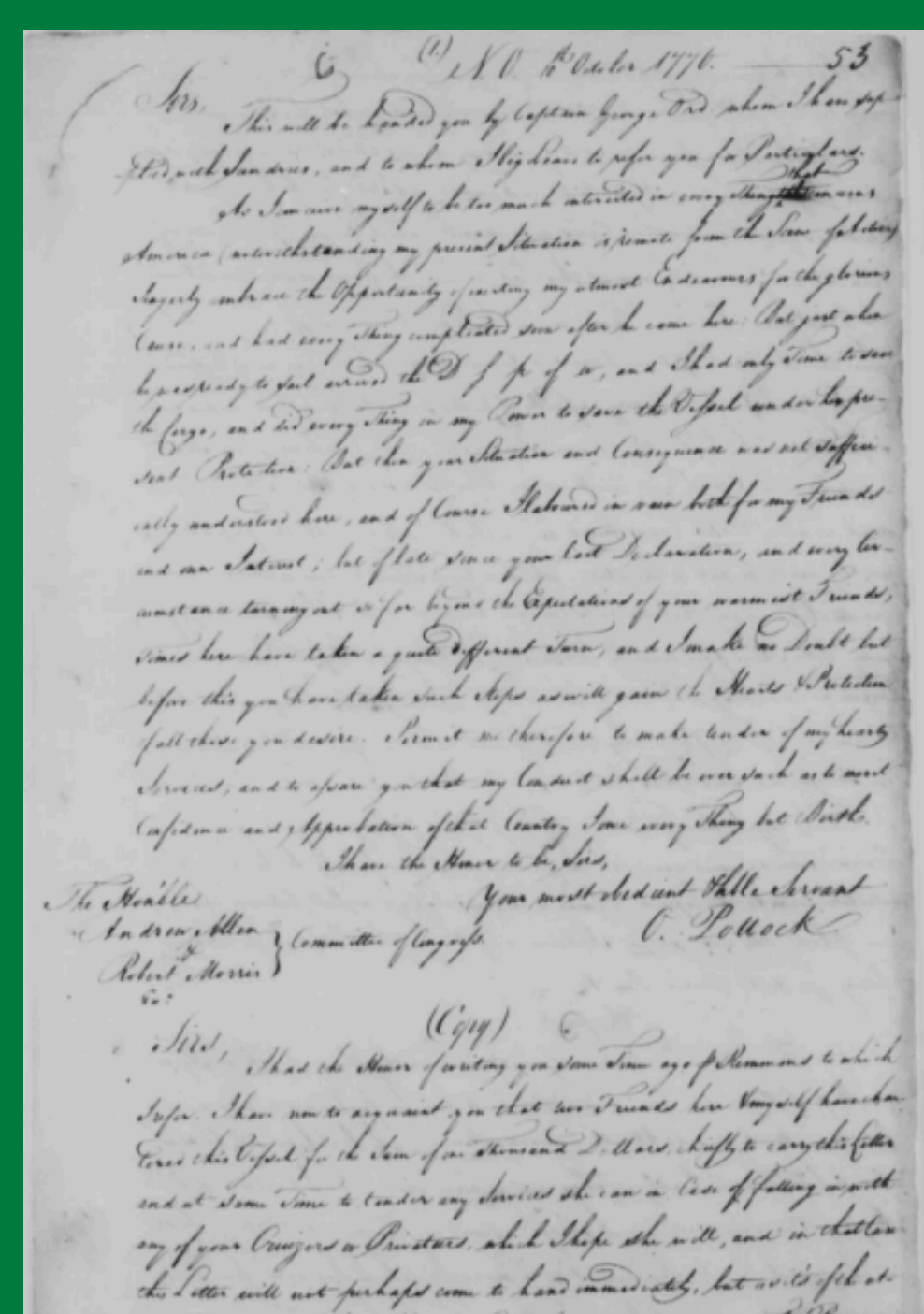
Irish insurgency spread far beyond Ireland and the UK, permeating the American Revolution. Consequently, I study whether the Irish utilized the Revolutionary War as a battleground to articulate their sentiments about British intrusion. Through these character studies, I investigate the plurality of Irish identity, with examples of Irish figures both supporting and resisting the Revolution. However, I have only begun the arduous work of representing different figurations of Irish actors during this conflict.

Methodology

- To overthrow the monolithic conception of Irish sentiment during the American Revolution, I adopted a character study approach.
- My first step in this process was to study the Southern Theater of the war. Dr. J. Leitch Wright's work, *Florida in the American Revolution*, aided this initiation process. Having selected my point of interest, I engaged with primary and secondary sources to trace Irish actors during the conflict.
- Reading Kathleen DuVal's *Independence Lost* provided me with an overview of Patriots Oliver and Margaret Pollock, inspiring me to hunt for primary documents to support my fermenting ideas, as well as to locate the loyalist opposition, Lord Rawdon.
- Next, I transcribed and close-read correspondences and newspaper articles, identifying themes for each character. My selection process followed the map Wright and DuVal established.

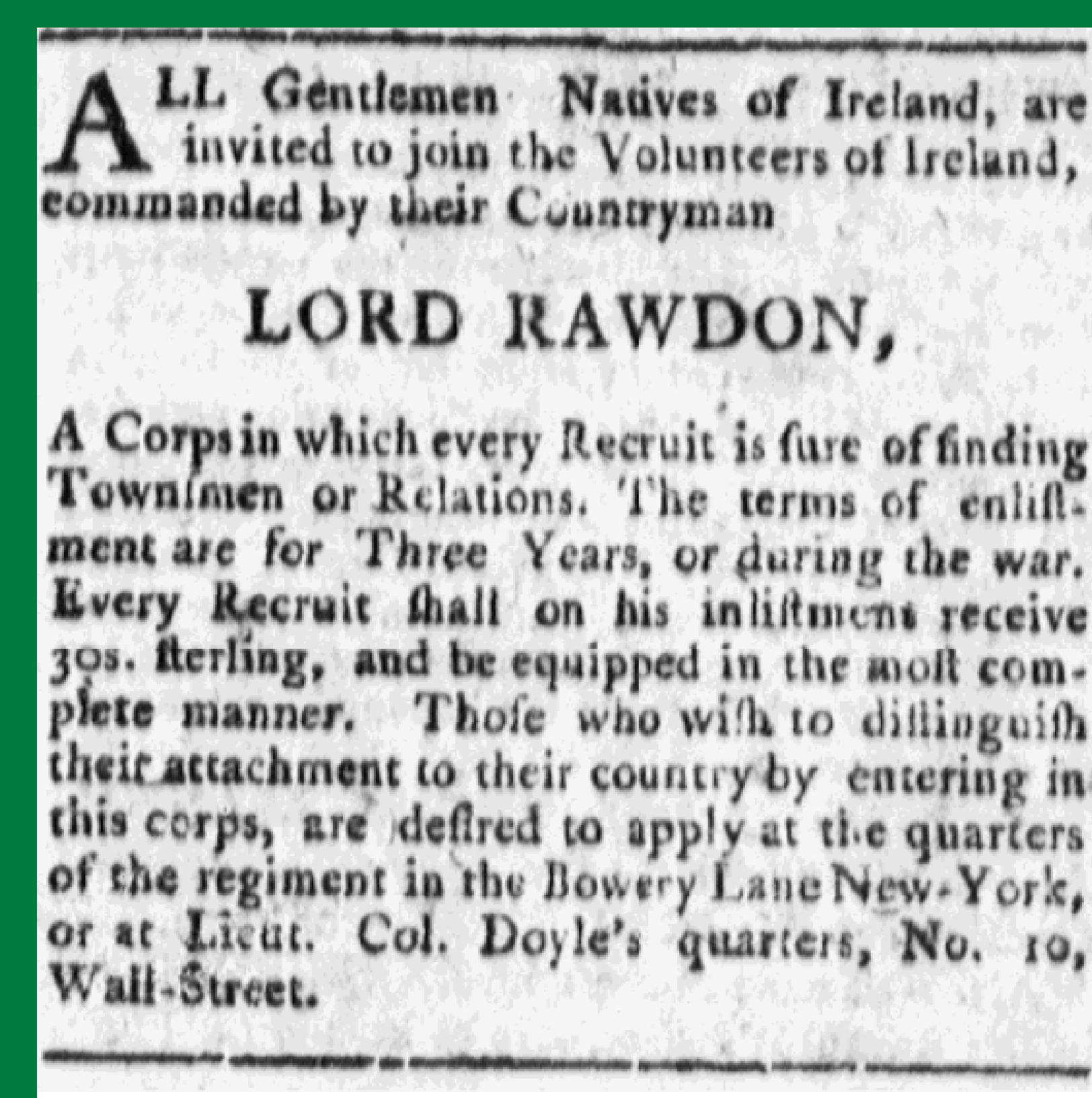
Discussion

- Oliver and Margaret Pollock were abandoned by the US after the war; they were not compensated for the current equivalent of \$1 billion their family contributed to the effort.
- Consequently, to recognize their sacrifices now is a form of homage that simultaneously unveils how "peripheral" forces can alter the trajectory of history.
- Colonel Lord Rawdon, despite being a loyalist, advocated more for the rights of native Irishmen than the Patriot Pollocks did, a fact that resists the simplicity of binary categorization.
- Analyzing individual characters through primary sources provides a nuanced insight about Irish behavior during the American Revolution.
- A revisionist attitude can promote the discovery of novel actors in conflicts long past.
- Future researchers could investigate Irish figures or groups like Alejandro O'Reilly, the Spanish-Irish Brigade, and those beyond the Southern Theater to enhance this individualized method of study.



"As I conceive myself to be too much interested in every Thing that can serve America (notwithstanding my present Situation is remote from the Scene of Action) I eagerly embrace the Opportunity of exerting my utmost Endeavours [sic] for the glorious Cause, and had every Thing completed [sic] soon after he came here"

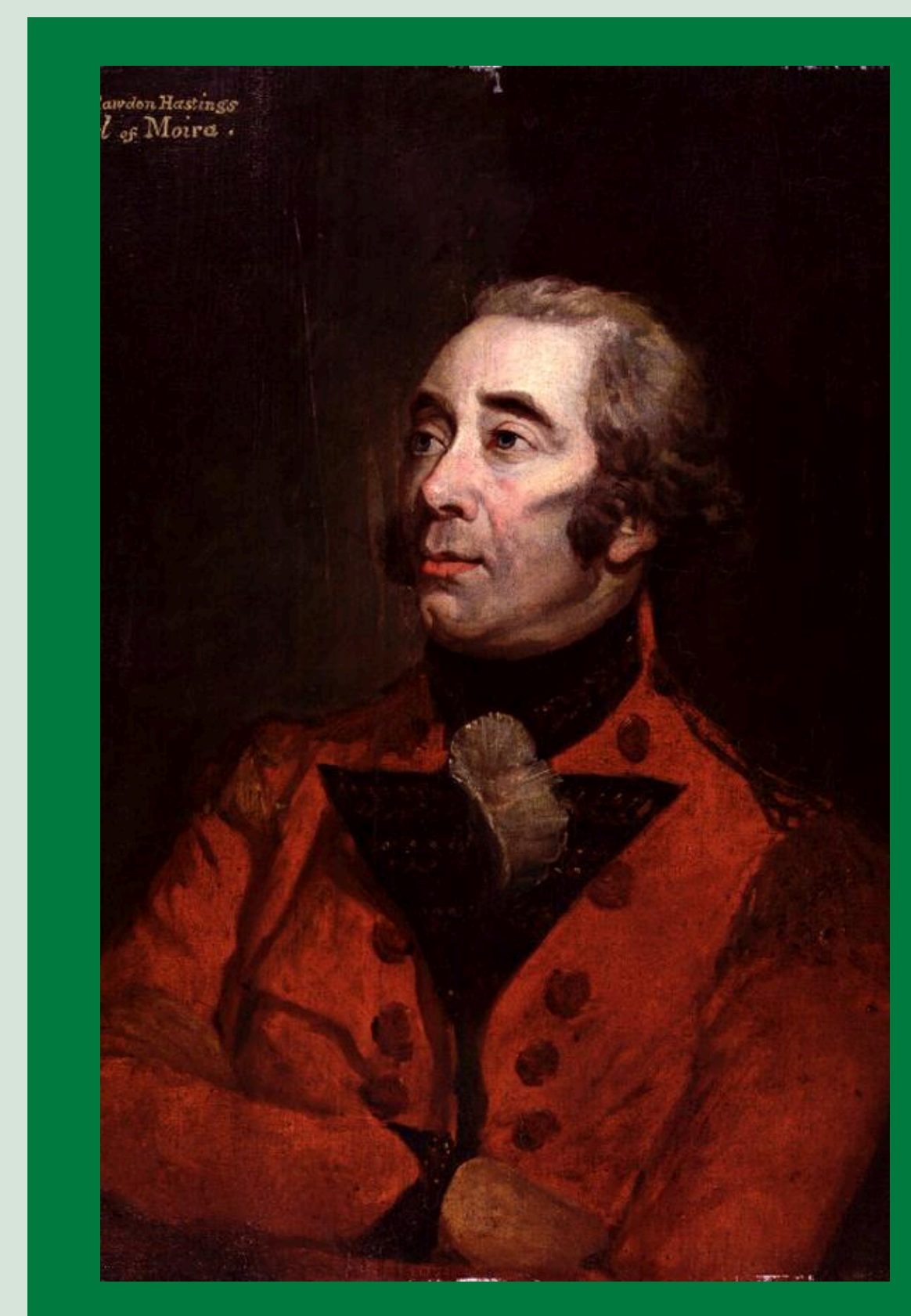
Oliver Pollock to Continental Congress,
October 10, 1776
extracted from Fold3 database



The Royal Gazette,
March 13, 1778 from Readex




Results

- Transcribing and analyzing the primary documents in conversation with contextual secondary sources clarifies the plurality of Irish motives during this conflict.
- Oliver Pollock, informally titled the financier of the American Revolution, functioned as a commercial spy, smuggling resources to patriot fighters. Although his impetus was originally profit, the emotive rhetoric featured in his later letters indicate he sincerely believed in the promise of the "glorious cause" as he terms it.
- Margaret O'Brien Pollock, the wife of Oliver, has been rendered an amorphous figure due to the absence of her voice on political matters. However, as confirmed in email conversation with Kathleen DuVal, Mrs. Pollock's familial history of fighting the British implies she perceived the American Revolution as a means of personal liberation. Margaret O'Brien Pollock's contentious relationship with Governor Miró attests to her sense of dignity and refusal to accept a newly-appointed foreign entity threatening her status.
- Juxtaposed against these characters, Colonel Lord Rawdon, an Anglo-Irish officer and eventual politician, represents the sect of Irishmen that rejected the precarious promises of the United States. His recruitment of the Volunteers of Ireland, an army composed of numerous Irish deserters from the Patriot military, on St. Patrick's Day signifies a collaborative relationship between the British and their hostile former subjects. Despite his support of monarchy, Rawdon went on to champion Catholic enfranchisement in the Irish Parliament.
- Consequently, my evidence demonstrates assuming Irish-Americans would gravitate towards either end of the conflict due to anti-British sentiment or learned obedience to their hegemonic oppressor is erroneous. Rather, when emphasizing the agency of each individual, the causes for Irish political action are seen as motley and mutable.



Colonel Lord Rawdon;
National Portrait Gallery, London

Extracted Quotes

Oliver Pollock 	"I dwell in an Obscure Corner of the Universe alone and unsupported. I have labored without ceasing. I have neglected the road to affluence, I have exhausted my all, and plunged myself deeply into Debt, to support the Cause of America, in the hours of her distress, and when those who called themselves her Friends were daily deserting her. But these things I do not boast of, what I do boast of is, that I have a Heart still ready (had I the means) to bear sufferings, and make new sacrifices." Sept. 18, 1782 letter to Continental Congress
Margaret O'Brien Pollock 	"So you threaten me. I think you Sir, as to your Credentials agaenst [sic] Ladies very possible but my own opinion is natural & obvious...but humanity obliges me to speak in the behalf of the feeble & the innocent..." Sept. 13, 1783 letter to Governor Miró
Colonel Lord Francis Rawdon 	"Yet I am well convinced that numbers have joined the Enemy merely to shield themselves from the atrocious barbarity of the Rebel Militia; which has been beyond what I ever heard of among the most savage nations." June 6, 1781 letter to General Clinton

Works Cited

