

“A Project So Flashy And Bizarre”: Irish Volunteers and the Second Schleswig War

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Abstract

The *Alexandra Cent Gardes* was the name given to an Irish volunteer force of one hundred men who, in February 1864, were said to be prepared for battle on behalf of Denmark in the war against Austria and Prussia. The scheme was the brainchild of the eccentric Goodwin Richard Purcell O’Leary (1817–1876), a medical professor at Queen’s College Cork, mainstay of the Cork social scene, grandson of the storied (and lamented) Art O’Leary, and self-proclaimed head of the O’Leary Clan. Reports of the *Cent Gardes* prompted a mixture of bewilderment, anger and ridicule in Ireland, and despite his precarious military position, Danish King Christian IX ‘politely declined’ the offer of Irish aid. This article outlines the history of the *Cent Gardes* idea, analyses O’Leary’s varied motivations for raising an armed force for Denmark, and examines the reasons behind the ‘flashy and bizarre’ project’s failure. A minor footnote in the history of the Second Schleswig War, the story of the *Alexandra Cent Gardes* nevertheless permits an examination of the delicate nature of international diplomacy, and of the complexities of Irish identities, in the nineteenth century.

Quoting the *Cork Examiner*, the *Times* reports that a total of one hundred Irish Gentlemen, as stated by an enthusiastic admirer of Princess Alexandra, are ready to participate in our war against Germany, as a distinct corps of volunteer cavalry, under the names of the ‘Alexandra Cent Gardes’. They are prepared to equip and support themselves, but they require a Danish frigate to be sent to collect them and their horses from Cork. Sixty-four men have already signed up for the expedition. (*Faerelndet*, 15 Feb 1864).

In February 1864, Danish newspapers reported the formation in Cork of an Irish volunteer brigade—the *Alexandra Cent Gardes*—which was being prepared for action in the Schleswig War. This article examines the background and motivations of the project’s leader—Goodwin Purcell O’Leary—as well as the reactions to the plan.

Foreign Volunteers in Nineteenth-Century Wars

The 1860s were a decade of considerable turmoil in various parts of the world (and given the prevalence of war and famine, it is no coincidence that 1863 saw the formation of the International Committee of the Red Cross) (Barnett, 2011, 76–82). Foreign volunteers—representing a variety of motivations—were a common feature in the various wars being fought at this time, in Europe and, e.g. in the American Civil War (Sarlin, 2009; Arielli & Bruce, 2013, 1–12). These included Irishmen fighting (in relatively small numbers) for the Papal Army (O’Connor, 2010; Doyle, 2010), and in the American Civil War (Shiels, 2013); Scots fighting under Garibaldi (Fyfe, 1978); Italians defending Poland in 1863 (Flores, 2016); and volunteers from Norway-Sweden, and Finland, arriving in Denmark in 1864 to repel the Austro-Prussian forces (Juel Hansen, 1957). The symbolic importance of these interventions often outweighed the practical help given. For example, Francesco Nullo’s ‘Garibaldi Unit’ in Poland is still commemorated, although it consisted of around twenty men (Flores, 2016, 36). The grateful memories of eleven or so Finns in the Danish army in 1864 provided a basis for Danish relief efforts during the Great Finnish Famine of 1868 (Häkkinen & Newby, 2018). It was in this context that an Irishman offered a small force of fellow ‘gentlemen’ to King Christian IX in February 1864.

The O’Leary

One British newspaper dismissed the Irish volunteer project as ‘flashy and bizarre’—which in fact is a fitting description of the movement’s leader, Goodwin Richard Purcell O’Leary (1817–1876). O’Leary was born at Kanturk House, in County Cork, and was sent away to be educated in Paris at the age of five. He returned to Ireland aged thirteen, at which point he entered Trinity College Dublin, graduating three years later. Subsequently, he chose medicine as a profession and took an MD at the University of Edinburgh, before returning once more to his home county to take up a professorship in Medicine at Queen’s College, Cork (*Lancet*, 25 Aug. 1876). He lived at various locations in Cork City, including a townhouse at Sidney Place, Montenotte, and later at Morrison’s Quay (Henry & Coughlan, 1863; Wilkie, 1872)¹. O’Leary delighted in his position as head of the O’Leary clan, therefore simply being referred to as ‘The O’Leary’ (O’Leary, 1998)², and was as well known for his social life as his considerable academic achievements. Stories abounded of his romantic adventures and his skills as a huntsman, as well

1 References to the various Cork Directories were originally encountered on a blog-post about Art O’Leary. See <https://muscrai.wordpress.com/2016/01/11/arthur-oleary-the-outlaw/> (accessed 3 Mar. 2018).

2 This self-appointed ‘chieftain’ position is open to debate. Peter O’Leary argues that it was a ‘position to which had he no good claim’.

as incidents that suggested eccentricity, if not mental instability. He was deeply proud of his family history—his grandfather Art O’Leary had fought for Maria Theresa’s forces in Austria and had been shot dead in 1773, after being condemned as an outlaw for owning a horse worth more than £5 (it had been brought back from Austria, but it was forbidden under the Penal Laws for a Catholic to own such an expensive beast). The lament *Caoineadh Airt Ui Laoghaire*, written by Art’s widow, Eibhlín Dhubh ní Chonaill, has been praised as the ‘greatest poem written’ in Ireland or Britain in the 1700s (Titley, 2000, 73). The O’Leary’s family motto—*Laidir isé lear Rígh* [‘Strong is the King of the Sea’] was a strong symbolic tie to Viking-era Ireland, a tie which Goodwin O’Leary held very dear, and which was certainly a part of his motivation in suggesting Irish aid to the Danes in 1864.

‘A Romantic Occurrence’

The chance to fight for Denmark therefore linked two strands of O’Leary’s personal heritage—the ‘Viking blood’ and volunteer tradition of his storied ancestor (O’Leary, 1998). The specific desire to fight for Princess Alexandra also highlights his fondness for impressing ‘young ladies of great beauty’. As an indication of O’Leary’s romantic impetuosity, a story circulated around Cork, and then Ireland—and eventually much further afield—about an incident at a society ball near Queenstown (*Cork Constitution*, 9 Jan. 1864). During the course of the evening, O’Leary (described only as ‘a gentleman residing in Cork, of considerable eminence in the scientific world, as well as distinguished in the hunting-field and in social circles’), fell into conversation with a ‘young lady of great beauty’. This irked two English officers who were also present, who suggested to O’Leary that while he might be an accomplished flirt, he was less distinguished in ‘more manly contests’. The upshot of this—and it is reported as being on the ‘best authority’—was a £20 wager, involving a hunt at Fermoy, where O’Leary took on (and beat) the English officers while wearing the woman’s bracelet as a good-luck charm. To emphasise his victory, O’Leary also made good on a promise to write the lady a love ballad, and have it performed at a packed Cork Theatre, in front of the entire foxhunting fraternity of the south of Ireland in full hunting costume. ‘This little bit of romance...’ wrote the *Cork Examiner*, while also providing the lyrics of O’Leary’s serenade, ‘is peculiarly refreshing in these prosaic days’. (*Cork Examiner*, 22 Jan., 12 Feb. 1864; *Bell’s Weekly Messenger*, 1 Feb. 1864). Meanwhile, O’Leary’s romantic spirit was concocting a plan with wider international implications.

The Background to the 2nd Schleswig War

While this horseplay was being enacted in Cork, dark storm clouds were gathering over Schleswig-Holstein. The Schleswig-Holstein Question had a long and complex history, and was ignited in the mid-nineteenth century by a variety of

external and internal factors, particularly the success of the February Revolution (1848), and the development of Danish and German nationalist movements, both of which claimed part or all of Schleswig-Holstein as their ‘national’ territory (Griffiths, 2004, 33–7). A three-year war (1848–51), costing nearly ten thousand lives, ended with Denmark’s territorial integrity being guaranteed by the ‘London Protocol’ (1852). The tension barely relented in the following decade, however. In 1863, King Frederick VII proclaimed that Schleswig was a part of Denmark, which violated the 1852 Protocol and led to demands from Prussia that Frederick rescind the claim. The sabre-rattling escalated, with Prussian threats of invasion, but the Danish Parliament agreed on a joint constitution for Schleswig and Denmark in November 1863. Frederick died, suddenly, on 15 November, without having signed the new constitution. Therefore, only a few months after his daughter Alexandra became the Princess of Wales, Christian IX acceded to the Danish throne. His first task was the ratification of the ‘November Constitution’, which would provoke a potentially devastating war with Prussia (Jespersen, 2004, 22–6; Derry, 1979, 239–48). Despite the legal and historical intricacies of the situation, the Prussian advance into Schleswig and Jutland meant that ‘most Englishmen forgot about the complexities... and only saw it as a battle between a weak nation, Denmark, and two great powers’ (Morris, 1971, 132)³. Various British initiatives raised funds to relieve the embattled Danes, and O’Leary’s *Cent Gardes*, despite their focus on military rather than financial aid, can certainly be seen in this context.

The Royal Wedding of 1863

The O’Leary was quite clear that his *Cent Gardes* had a duty to thwart what he saw as Prussian aggression, but if extra motivation were needed for mobilisation, then it came in the charismatic form of the Danish princess Alexandra. The Royal Wedding of March 1863, which united the British and Danish royal houses, exposed various interwoven strands of identity in Great Britain and Ireland. The marriage between Alexandra, daughter of the Danish heir-apparent Christian, and Albert, the Prince of Wales, prompted widespread celebrations throughout the islands, and it has been argued that ‘Irish loyalty was not seen as mere sycophancy, but genuine’ (McCarthy, 2017, 29). As well as demonstrating the complexity of Irish national identity in the mid-nineteenth century—highlighting what, in the Scottish context, has been called ‘Unionist-Nationalism’—there were possibly more pragmatic reasons for Irish people welcoming this particular union, as both nationalist and unionist sides thought that could benefit from Alexandra’s support (Morton, 1999;

3 Warren B. Morris, Jr. also notes that the *Cent Gardes* represented the ‘strongest expression of support for the Danes’ among various public initiatives that were instigated in Britain and Ireland.

Jackson, 2012, 137)⁴. Although the depth and sincerity of public feeling in Ireland was vigorously debated in the months and years after the wedding, generally along nationalist / unionist lines (McCarthy, 2017, 23–53), the proposed Irish visit of Alexandra and her husband in 1864 prompted obsequious verse from Cork, very reminiscent of O’Leary’s love poem in January 1864 (including ‘The noblest blood of Erin is the Norse drop in her veins... Oh, it’s *cead mille failte*, Princess Aroon!’) (*Cork Constitution*, 24 Mar. 1864).

This marriage also gave rise to a great deal of enthusiasm for Scandinavia (and Denmark in particular) in Britain and Ireland, and in the shared ‘Viking’ past of those lands (Newby, 2013). The O’Leary certainly rode this wave of enthusiasm, and took the opportunity to promote the Scandinavian heritage of his own family line. If he needed any further confirmation of the Viking vogue, then it had been provided by Alfred Tennyson’s welcome poem for Alexandra—‘Sea King’s daughter from over the sea’—which was widely publicised on the occasion of the royal wedding (*Freeman’s Journal*, 13 Mar. 1863; McCarthy, 2017, 40). The resonance with his own family’s ‘Sea-King’ heritage surely strengthened The O’Leary’s commitment to the idea of a chivalrous intervention on Alexandra’s behalf.

O’Leary and The *Alexandra Cent Gardes*

From its very conception, then, the ‘interesting movement’ which was said to be afoot in Cork, aiming to send an armed force to Denmark, was surrounded in romanticism and chivalrous ideals. O’Leary was not named directly as the instigator, at least not initially in the Irish sources, but was rather obliquely referred to as ‘a gentleman well known in leading Cork circles, from his professional abilities, his social eminence, and his great success on the hunting field’, who ‘contemplated to organise nothing less than a brigade of Irish gentlemen, to take service under the King of DENMARK in the present war... recall[ing] the ancient days of knight errantry, from their romantic and chivalrous character’ (*Cork Examiner*, 2 Feb. 1864).

O’Leary, apparently, was well prepared for action. The day after the hostilities were officially declared between Denmark and Austria-Prussia it was reported in Cork that he had written to Christian IX to offer a hundred ‘Irish gentlemen’, forming a corps to be known as the *Alexandra Cent Gardes*, in honour of the ‘future Queen of England’. He had also written to the Prince of Wales asking for the British to give official sanction to the scheme, and concocted a uniform (in the ‘national colours’) and a motto—‘*Right Against Might!*’—for his men (*Cork Examiner*, 2

4 Following Morton, Alvin Jackson has argued that ‘treated with appropriate caution, the phenomenon of “unionist nationalist” is meaningful for the Irish, and perhaps more meaningful than has been generally understood within Irish historiography’.

Feb. 1864). Even at this early stage, sixty-four men (the *Cork Examiner* claimed to have an actual list of names, though it refrained from publishing them), were said to have signed up for the jaunt, and as all were of ‘independent means’, the only demand made of the Danish king was to send a frigate to Queenstown in order to convey the gallant Irishmen to the ‘theatre of war’. The departure to Denmark would feature various elements of pomp and ceremony, including a ball at the Cork Athenaeum the preceding night. O’Leary’s letter to Christian was also reproduced in English translation:

SIRE—Sprung myself from the ancient Scandinavian Vikings, as my name in the Irish language attests, I am penetrated by the old patriotic feeling, shared in by so many of the best blood of Ireland, which impels us to defend the menaced rights of Denmark. My friends, to the number of one hundred, *The Irish Cent Gardes*, place themselves at the disposal of your majesty. A corps of a hundred Irish gentlemen mounted on their own horses and equipped at their own expense, presents itself to fight in the cause of your father of their future Queen. Should your Majesty condescend to accept their services a hundred Irish gentlemen will present themselves at Copenhagen as volunteers in the battle of ‘Right against Might’. Your majesty will excuse this liberty taken by a plain individual, but, the volunteers are ready, and only await the signal from your Majesty to show their devotion to the Princess of Wales, and their faith in the justice of Denmark’s cause. (*Cork Examiner*, 2 Feb. 1864).

In claiming to be from ‘the best blood of Ireland’, O’Leary seemed to be differentiating himself and his kin from the majority of Irish (either Anglo-Norman or ‘pure’ Celts, for example), and making his brigade as palatable as possible to a European monarch. Europe’s version of Ireland was often based on the negative stereotypes peddled in the London press, and with Fenianism beginning to gain international notoriety in the mid-1860s, it was important for O’Leary that his gentlemanly credentials should be recognised, as well as his historical blood connection to the Danes (McMahon, 2016, 247–285; Pittock, 1999; White, 2004; McGarry & McConnel, 2009).

Initial Reaction

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the immediate reaction in Ireland was mixed, with elements (not necessarily in equal measure) of anger, incredulity, mockery, and support. The response in Cork to the volunteer plan was immediate, and again it appears as though local readers would have known exactly who was behind the *Cent Gardes*, even though O’Leary had not yet been named in person. AJD wrote that (*Cork Examiner*, 3 Feb. 1864):

The distinguished and learned promoter of the *Irish Cent Gardes*, the happy victim to Cupid's dart and gallant follower of Nimrod, shows an example worthy of his great descent.

Otherwise, AJD decried the 'madcap Quixotes', who risked damaging Ireland's international reputation by advertising a military intervention which had little chance of being realised, still less of having any beneficial outcome. The 'useless bloodshed' of a European war should be the cause of horror, rather than the opportunity for the would-be knights of Cork. AJD conceded, however, that there might be one appropriate outlet for their 'chivalric tendencies':

Let him who boasts of the patriotism of an Irishman, the honour of a gentleman, the chivalry of a knight, dash to the Polish struggle and interpose his sword between the hated Russian knout and the bleeding body of some devoted Polish lady. Let Irishmen unfurl their standard in the sacred cause of Liberty—the cause of God.

AJD's letter was supported in the next day's paper, (*Cork Examiner*, 4 Feb. 1864) by 'Civis', who explained that he had originally presumed the *Cent Gardes* story to be a hoax, but then questioned the object of these volunteers' support. Like O'Leary, 'Civis' was keen to refer to medieval history, but instead of an imagined connection between Ireland and Denmark, he stressed a troubled past. He also proposed support for the persecuted (and Catholic) Poles, rather than the 'cruel Danes', who 'if I recollect rightly, have sacked and burned this city at least three or four times? Let those knights-erranty give up their amusements for one day and night, and read the Danish invasion of Cork, and they will blush to find themselves the laughing stock of their fellow-citizens.'⁵

In Dublin, the Conservative *Daily Express* published a withering lampoon, which seemed to mock O'Leary's 'national' aspirations and throw general ridicule in the direction of Cork. It also picked up the theme of Irishmen apparently taking up arms in defence of a historical enemy, again appealing to medieval history:

THE King of Denmark need have no fear of being worsted in the unequal conflict with the haughty Germans. He has friends, it seems, even in quarters where he might least expect to find them. Who would have thought that Irish sympathy would be aroused on his behalf? Can we believe the evidence of our senses when we read in the *Cork Examiner* that the blood of Munster is up, and a brigade of Irish Volunteers are preparing to offer their services to the Danes? It is not mere moral support that they propose to give, but they are ready to fight. Who

5 The *London Evening Standard* (5 Feb. 1864) also noted the irony in aiding the former foes, saying that Irish aid 'would be some return for the fate of Turgesius, the Dane, and the slaughter at Clontarf of Brodar's 1000 mail-clad warriors'.

will say henceforth that the Celts are not a martial race? The glorious tradition of the past are not forgotten; the praises of Malachi, who won the golden collar, and the exploits of Brian the Brave are treasured in impassioned song, but the impulsive chivalry of Cork is superior to vindictive recollections, and is ready to make a generous return to the descendants of an old foe when it comes to their turn to face a 'proud invader.' ... Whether it is a real genuine adventure, or rather a capital joke, it is worthy of the fervid imagination of the South, and, according to the issue, may add a new chapter to a sensation novel, or an effective scene to the next extravaganza. (*Dublin Daily Express*, 4 Feb. 1864).

Also in Dublin, but across the political spectrum from the *Daily Express*, the nationalist *Irishman* dismissed O'Leary as an 'anonymous lunatic' and warned the King of Denmark to be sure these volunteers were not pirates. (*Irishman*, 6 Feb. 1864). It also suggested a valedictory anthem for the volunteers' proposed departure from Queenstown:

When southern *shoneens* act the flunkey,
 And would for Denmark sail away
 To stop them who would be the donkey,
 What man so base as bid them stay.

There only needs a name to brand them
 To stamp their name for ever more
 And this, we kindly, beg to hand them
 And write them down 'The Cork Cracked Corps'

The *Northern Whig*, in Belfast, referred to the *Cent Gardes* as 'the half-dozen blockheads', dismissing them as bored members of the Irish middle-classes looking for some excitement, and also questioned the idea that they represented 'Ireland' in any meaningful way: 'As to the Dano-Irish *Cent-Gardes*, they represent the feelings of the Irish people just about as much as Garibaldi's English legions represented the actuating motives of the English nation; and bear probably the same proportion to the numbers of the country...' (*Northern Whig*, 30 Mar. 1864)⁶.

The satirical English publication *Fun*—a contemporary rival to *Punch*—also indulged in some half-hearted wordplay (*Fun*, 2 Apr., 9 Apr. 1864) while the London *Universal News* went to even greater lengths of mockery, printing an eight-stanza poem in mid-April, using cod-Irish spelling, and recycling various jokes and tropes that had been used elsewhere in the previous weeks (*Cork Examiner*, 19 Apr. 1864).⁷ Some elements of the London press had more direct political concerns, especially when the *Cent Gardes* still appeared to be a viable project. The *Daily Telegraph*,

⁶ See also, Sutcliffe, 2013.

⁷ Ciaran O'Neill (2014, 55) has recently highlighted Kevin Shillington's earlier characterisation of Aylward as a 'feckless adventurer.'

for example, suggested parallels between the political questions of Ireland and Schleswig-Holstein. In particular, it highlighted what it saw as inconsistency and hypocrisy in an ‘Irish contingent’ seeking to help the Danes (cast here as the oppressors) retain a union that was despised by a majority in Schleswig-Holstein (*Cork Examiner*, 28 Mar. 1864). The *London Evening Standard* was aghast that Irish troops should be so keen to expend ‘rivers’ of their blood in foreign battles, rather than as part of the British Imperial Army, although it fully expected the Danes to avail themselves of the Irish offer after the hoped-for Swedish military force had failed to materialise (*London Evening Standard*, 5 Feb. 1864).

The movement also attracted some interest from Irish mercenaries, despite the widespread mockery. An open letter was published from Alfred Aylward, offering himself for service in Denmark. At the time, Aylward was aged twenty-one, just back from fighting for Garibaldi in Italy, and in the American Civil War, and described himself as ‘dark, spare, wirey, partially injured to and careless of the discomforts, privations, and inconveniences incidental to a campaign.’ He also claimed ‘some knowledge of military matters’, and that ‘references will be provided on demand.’ (*Cork Examiner*, 9 Feb. 1864).

As a possible, limited, counter to this negativity—although there is a chance that this was a disguised satire of the whole affair—the *Southern Reporter* (5 Feb. 1864) published the ‘BATTLE SONG OF THE “CENT GARDES”’, claiming that it was written by The O’Leary himself. The ‘Battle Song’ is imbued with nationalist imagery, but also appeals to the romantic element of fighting on behalf of the Princess, and of impressing ‘Erin’s maidens’. It also makes reference to Pan-Scandinavism, giving the impression of the war being a wider struggle between Scandinavia and the German Confederation—a battle of two ‘Pan’ ideologies—and brushing over the absence of official Swedish involvement on the Danish battlefields.

BATTLE SONG OF THE CENT GARDES

For Denmark hurrah! The Irish Guard say.

As they venture their lives for the Danish Princess—

They stand by their doom—they shun not the tomb,

In the cause of just when bullies oppress.

For in tent or in field, they never will yield

While in chorus they sing the words of their bard

‘For right against might, to battle and fight.

Is the object and aim of the Irish Cent Gardes.’

The Shamrock on high, they’ll conquer or die,

As they peril their all in liberty’s cause

For the Pan-Scandinavians, to fight Prussian knaves,

They seek no reward but their Prince’s applause.

For in tent etc.

Yes! Erin again will see her true men,
 Like her heroes of old, on the enemy charge;
 And her maidens with pride, will stand by their side,
 And their loyalty show to the world at large
 For in tent, etc.

The *Cork Examiner* claimed that ‘showers of letters come pouring in on the gallant gentlemen... many from ladies’, a fact that was also reported in Denmark (*Cork Examiner*, 29 Feb. 1864; *Aarhus Stiftstidende*, 16 Mar. 1864). An intervention from Ireland also had the potential to embarrass British ambivalence over Schleswig. With British public opinion somewhat on the side of the Danes, but tempered by ‘pusillanimous political leadership’ and a Royal Family ‘as usual, stridently pro-German’ (Evans, 2011, 358), the *Examiner* published a long poem from Caroline Gifford Phillipson, which opened ‘Shame! Shame! British men’ and went to on demand that ‘poor Denmark’ be saved ‘from its fate’ (*Cork Examiner*, 29 Feb. 1864; Peel, 1981, 151). For a small number of Britons, at least, the Corkmen were taking timely and decisive action on the side of justice.

Danish Response

Apart from the anger and mirth that O’Leary’s project engendered in the Irish and British press, and a degree of speculation in London as to the very identity of the *Cent Gardes*’ leader, any readers awaiting updates on the progress of the ‘half-dozen blockheads’ were to be disappointed.⁸ At the end of February, though, O’Leary was able to assure readers of the *Cork Examiner* that the project had not ‘been allowed to drop’, and that he was still ‘actively involved in drawing up the details’ of the expedition. Apparently, the Danish Ambassador in London was to forward the offer to Christian IX (despite it being reported in the Danish press from mid-February), and thereafter ‘the completion of the exercise’ depended by necessity on ‘the reply received’ from the King. ‘There can be little doubt’, continued the *Examiner*’s article, ‘that the response will be a favourable one, considering the present critical state of the Danish arms, and the great assistance that such a corps as that proposed could render to them’ (*Cork Examiner*, 29 Feb., 5 Mar. 1864). The *Liverpool Mercury* (22 Oct. 1864) reflected on the affair later in the year, with a sense of sardonic boredom:

⁸ *Cork Examiner*, 8 Mar., 9 Mar., 10 Mar. 1864, and *Cork Examiner*, 9 Mar. 1864 for the curious game of cat-and-mouse that was going on in the columns of the *London Times* in regard to O’Leary’s identity.

This Quixotic proposition was of course ridiculed by the entire public, but the gallant Celt was not to be put down by sneers or laughter, and he laid his proposal before the Danish court. In due time he had his answer.

The King of Denmark's decision was made public on 23rd March 1864, seven weeks after the original story appeared, and clearly some weeks after the actual reply was sent from Copenhagen (*Cork Examiner*, 23 Mar. 1864). The communication was made, apparently, through Princess Alexandra herself, who was thought to have a particular interest in 'the chivalrous offer of the brave Hibernians.' (*Cork Constitution*, 23 Mar. 1864).⁹ The response, however, despite the pressure being piled upon the Danish army (and with Austro-Prussian forces having crossed into Danish territory), was a 'polite' rejection. It was also recorded, recalling his grandfather's exploits, that O'Leary's 'devoted followers' had bought him a horse worth 125 guineas, and that 'the gallant chief does not abandon the hope of realising his dreams of glory.' The letter of rejection was widely reprinted in Ireland and Britain, and this extract from the *Glasgow Daily Herald* (26 Mar. 1864) perhaps best sums up the prevailing tone:

It is to be regretted that a project so flashy and bizarre should have called forth the following letter: Castle of Christiansberg, Copenhagen, February 16th. The undersigned Grand Marshall of the Royal Court is deputed by the King, his master, to thank Mr. O'Leary and his noble companions for their chivalrous offer. In the present situation of affairs the bravery of the Royal army will compensate for want of numbers. Nevertheless, his Majesty knows how to appreciate the noble idea of the brave Irish, both as King and as father of the dear Princess who has just given an heir to the throne of England. May God watch over the destiny of your noble country as that of Denmark. W. OXHOLM. Monsieur O'Leary.

The *Cork Examiner*, which had effectively been O'Leary's mouthpiece during the whole affair, blamed the king's rejection on 'reasons of the gravest international policy'. Trowbridge is more explicit in his account from a half-century later: 'For reasons of state... the *Alexandra Cent Gardes* were not permitted to leave Ireland.' (Trowbridge, 1921, 148). That is, they could not be allowed to compromise Britain's precarious ambivalence over the Schleswig-Holstein question (Sandiford, 1975, 114; Morris, 1971). The presence of a large Irish contingent fighting on the Danish side could have caused a great deal of embarrassment for the London government, not only in its relations with Prussia, but also in prompting awkward questions from Danophile British subjects about the lack of state intervention. No matter how

9 Trowbridge (1921, 148-52) notes the offer of the *Cent Gardes*, and even argues that the lack of 'ridicule' for the scheme demonstrated the strength of British public opinion in favour of the Danes.

much the *Cent Gardes* might have trumpeted their autonomy, or their lofty ideas of ‘Right against Might’ in protecting Princess Alexandra’s homeland, any apparent partiality from the British side would not be countenanced.

If not for London’s interference, the *Examiner* (reproduced in *Cork Constitution*, 23 Mar. 1864) continued:

... what an ovation the Chief and his noble band would have received at the hands of the maidens and matrons of Copenhagen! From reliable information, we can understand that the Ladies of the Danish Capital would have rushed to the shore to welcome the *Cent Gardes* with open arms; and such was the enthusiasm—the intense and indeed extraordinary ferment—which the very announcement caused among the patriotic maidens of the heroic North, that the hero who survived the chances of war and battle, was almost certain to fall a willing sacrifice to the only [slightly] less dangerous influences of the affections.

The rejection was also covered in the Danish press, with little commentary added to Oxholm’s statement (*Dagbladet*, 30 Mar. 1864).¹⁰ The British press drew a line under the affair, noting that ‘this polite letting down of the Irish brigade has exposed them to much ridicule in the sister island, and it has been suggested that the gallant O’Leary and his *Cent Gardes* have a more appropriate field for their chivalry in Munster than in Jutland.’ (*Greenock Advertiser*, 29 Mar. 1864).

Swedish newspapers noted with interest the rejection by Christian IX of the Irish *Cent Gardes*. ‘It is strange’, contemplated one writer in *Nya Wermlands-tidningen* (*Nya Wermlands-tidningen*, 2 Apr. 1864) ‘that the King of Denmark has refused the offer of the English [sic.] gentleman, while at the same time a whole load of Swedish mercenaries are supposed to share in the glory of the Danish army!’

As to the *Cent Gardes*’ potential adversaries, it seems unlikely that the combined forces of Prussia and Austria would have been too perturbed by a frigate full of Hibernian foxhunters. In Graz, Austria, the *Telegraf* referred to an ‘Irish Don Quixote’, whose offer had been rebuffed by the Danish king (*Telegraf*, 30 Mar. 1864). Where the story appeared in German newspapers it was treated with disdain:

The knights are all magnificently equipped and clothed to properly impress the Germans; of course, they should not be treated as cannon fodder, but as gentlemen, and provided with the best food. In their enthusiasm, this knightly company have already emptied many dozen bottles of champagne in Dublin. (*Regensburger Morgenblatt*, 1 Apr. 1864)

¹⁰ Reproduced in many provincial papers in the following days.

O'Leary's Visit to Denmark & Sweden

Although the idea of the *Cent Gardes* was never realised, O'Leary seems to have made a considerable amount of social capital from the publicity it generated. Moreover, in June (while a peace conference aimed at solving the crisis was taking place in London) he was reported to be in Copenhagen in person, busily seeking an interview with the King and hawking a revised plan around different ministries. One Swedish journalist commented wryly, on learning of O'Leary's agitation in Copenhagen, that 'an Englishman, even if he was born on the Erin's Green Isle, does not so easily give up on an idea that has taken root inside of him' (*Norrköpings Tidningar*, 21 Jun. 1864; *Malmö Nya Allehanda*, 22 Jun. 1864). He was now proposing a thousand men (*Mille Gardes*), some of whom were professional soldiers and prepared to relinquish their positions in the British army to come and fight for Denmark. This idea was met with scepticism, with the editorial in *Dags-Telegraphen*, for example, claiming that source of the story was reliable, but that they were not willing to 'vouch for the details' (*Dags-Telegraphen*, 14 Jun. 1864). Danish newspapers again gave plenty of coverage to the odd Irishman who had seemed prepared earlier in the year to risk life and limb for the Danes, and stressed the heroic lineage from Art O'Leary, the family motto (slightly reworked as *Strong is the Vicking* [sic.]) as well as recycling the 'romantic incident' involving the pretty heroine and the English officers (*Flyveposten*, 31 Aug. 1864; *Aarhus Stiftstidende*, 1 Sep. 1864). In September 1864, he was part of a 'British' party that attended a soirée at Christiansborg Palace in honour of the visit of the Prince and Princess of Wales (*Flyveposten*, 20 Sep. 1864). After some apparent discussions of protocol, and waiting for several weeks, O'Leary finally got his royal audience with the King of Denmark, and was 'kindly greeted', by a laughing King Christian (*Göteborgs Handels- och-Sjöfartstidning*, 3 Sep. 1864; *Daily News*, 21 Sep. 1864; *Irish Times*, 24 Sep. 1864; *Cork Constitution*, 30 Sep. 1864).

At the end of September, O'Leary left Copenhagen and headed to Stockholm, where he also seems to have been warmly greeted by the Swedish court—again, partly as a result of the story of Art O'Leary having been translated and put into the Swedish press (*Post- och Inrikes Tidningar*, 27 Sep. 1864; *Flyveposten*, 7 Oct. 1864; *Wexford Independent*, 22 Oct. 1864). Once more, the *Cork Examiner* published a sympathetic account, before allowing O'Leary himself to give his version of events (quoted in *Glasgow Herald*, 22 Oct. 1864):

It will be recollected that at the commencement of the war in Denmark, a gentleman named O'Leary offered to equip, at his own expense, and transfer to that country, a Royal Bodyguard of Irishmen. The King of Denmark thanked him for the sympathy indicated in his chivalrous offer, but explained that he was reluctantly compelled to decline taking advantage of it from his relations with England. Mr. O'Leary, it seems, is now in Sweden... he adds:... 'The Secretary

of State called to inform me that the Lord Chamberlain had orders to invite me to the King's dinner at Ulriksdal the next day, as well as to the subsequent fêtes, and that the English Minister had directions to present me to his Majesty before dinner, with the possibility of being presented to the Queen after. On my entering the reception room his Majesty came up to me, gave me his hand, and in English welcomed me to the palace, saying that he was glad to receive the Irishman who had been willing to risk his life for the Scandinavian cause, and publicly thanked me and the Irish gentlemen who offered to accompany me. Immediately afterwards the Queen's Chamberlain came to me, saying that her Majesty desired that I should be presented to her; and on presentation her Majesty, in good and perfect English, told me that she was glad to see in her parlour the originator of what she was pleased to term a chivalrous attempt, adding that it was not my fault if the King of Denmark was so ill-advised as not to accept the offer. She further added that the Northerners would ever feel grateful for the Irish sympathy, which was not in words, but was willing to prove itself in deeds. Next evening, at Drottningholm, the residence of the Queen Dowager, the King presented me to his mother, and the Queen Dowager said to me: "*Monsieur, vous avez conquis une pensée noble et généreuse, dont je vous remercie, et dont la Scandinavie vous sera à jamais reconnaissante.*"

While the *Cent Gardes* had not seen active service, The O'Leary was nevertheless able to present himself as a Scandinavian hero by the end of 1864. Denmark had suffered huge territorial losses, but the more general 'Scandinavian' cause—which many presumed had also perished on the battlefields of Jutland and Schleswig, owing to Sweden's reluctance to send military aid—had not yet been completely abandoned (Hilson, 2006). O'Leary, the 'King of the Sea', had at least burnished his family's 'Scandinavian' reputation, even if he had not lived the gallant military life of his decorated grandfather.

Aftermath

O'Leary's colourful activities did not end with the *Cent Gardes*, and it was with some justification that he was later referred to as 'the last and wildest of the wild sept of O'Leary.' (*Northern Whig*, 13 Oct. 1876). At a 'Costume Ball' in Cork in 1871, for example, it was reported that 'few appeared in fancy costume', with O'Leary being a notable exception (*Wexford Independent*, 15 Feb. 1871). For the most part, he seemed to conform to a Victorian ideal of a Celtic chieftain:

His dress was: The cucull, the short cloak of the Irish people, fastened by the Tara brooch. Underneath that a saffron coloured tunic of nine yards of cloth, wearing the chieftain's belt, the chieftain's golden bracelets, the chieftain's golden anklets, the collar of gold the same as that worn by Malachi, King of Ireland, who fought the Danes at Clontarf.

Interestingly however, in addition to the sword of Art O’Leary and other bits and pieces hanging from his costume, he wore:

the officer’s cross of the Dannebrog, given to him by the King of Denmark for offering him a hundred Irish gentlemen, all mounted at their own expense, to fight against the Prussians in the Danish War. Whereupon the King of Denmark placed at his disposal a man of war on the eve of the Battle of Alsens. But, as he was starting, a telegram arrived that the Battle of Alsens was fought, and the Danish cause lost. The O’Leary and the Prince of Wales are the only persons in the United Kingdom who have the right to wear this cross.

Less than a decade after the event, therefore, a limited rewriting of history had already taken place. Far from the ‘ridicule’ which Christian IX’s ‘polite refusal’ might have caused, a narrative was now being put forward that the *Cent Gardes* were poised for action, only to hear that their participation would have been futile after the Danish defeat at *Slaget om Als*. The defeat at Als, however, was at the very end of June 1864, some three months after the King had rejected O’Leary’s volunteer plan (Buk-Swienty, 2010). Moreover, it is not quite clear how O’Leary came to receive the Order of the Dannebrog. It is quite possible that King Christian, while they were having their good-humoured chat in Copenhagen later in 1864, gave O’Leary some sort of award, and maybe even permission to wear a medal. But—unlike other foreign mercenaries who actually shed blood on various battlefields for the Danes during the Schleswig Wars—there is (apparently) no official record in Danish sources of the honour being given to The O’Leary.¹¹

One of the final accounts of O’Leary in public suggests outright mental instability rather than simple eccentricity, as he was arrested in Cork for ‘running like a maniac’ through Queenstown, ‘dressed to represent the Shah of Persia, in a yellow suit, and chamois knee-breeches, armed with a sword, bow, arrow and large club, wearing a gold crown for a cap.’ He had also been followed by curious groups of emigrants waiting for passage from Queenstown, at whom he sporadically fired arrows, making them flee ‘in all directions’. After returning home by train he shot a loaded pistol over the head of a young strawberry seller, frightening her ‘out of her wits’, before finally going home and destroying furniture in the house with his sword. For this, he was incarcerated, briefly, and there is no real indication of what happened between this incident and his death three years later (*Downpatrick Recorder*, 28 Jun. 1873).

¹¹ The award should be noted in *Kongelig dansk hof- og statskalender*, and probably it would also have been reported in official sections of Danish newspapers. So far, however, no confirmation of O’Leary being appointed to any rank of the Order of the Dannebrog has been found.

The O’Leary died on 9th July 1876, at the home of his cousin, Goodwin Purcell, in Charlesworth, Derbyshire. O’Leary had been in the English countryside hoping to recover from illness, but this was not to be, and his remains were brought back to Ireland for burial—he now lies alongside his illustrious grandfather in Kilcrea Friary (*Cork Constitution*, 13 Jul. 1876; *Dublin Weekly Nation*, 5 Aug. 1876). He was remembered as ‘an accomplished physician, an admirable linguist, an audacious wit, a blithe-some boon companion, and a strenuous steeple-chase rider’, and representative of a particular kind of Irish gentleman that was thought to have died out. ‘He had his faults’, reflected the *Northern Whig*, but ‘who has not?’ (*Northern Whig*, 13 Oct. 1876). The *Lancet*, in addition to highlighting his considerable achievements in the field of medicine, also recalled O’Leary’s ‘high chivalric feeling...’ (*Lancet*, 25 Aug. 1876), adding that:

when Austria and Prussia united their forces to despoil the little Danish kingdom, The O’Leary was the *Cente Garde* Colonel who offered to bring to the standard of the King of Denmark 100 men, mounted and accoutred at their own expense. After this he was a welcome guest at the courts of Sweden and Denmark, and received the order of the ‘Dannebrog’, which order he alone in Britain possessed, with the exception of the Prince of Wales.

Conclusion

In a postscript to his report from the Swedish court in 1864 (*Glasgow Daily Herald*, 22 Oct. 1864), O’Leary seemed confident in the long-term benefit that his *Alexandra Cent Gardes* scheme might have brought to Ireland:

I thought that as an Irishman you would be pleased to hear that my wise idea, deemed by many at home Quixotic, has been at least in the North received in its proper light, and that another Irish name has been added to those that have made our country known throughout Europe.

The name of the *Alexandra Cent Gardes*, of course, does not resound throughout Europe in the twenty-first century. There are no monuments to The O’Leary as there are to foreign volunteers and their generals in many different parts of the world. It seems quite certain that, if the Corkmen had actually travelled to Denmark, and especially if they had been present in the battles at Dybbøl or Als in the darkest days of the war, they would have been celebrated in song, story, art and monument.

The sincerity of O’Leary’s offer to Christian IX cannot realistically be gauged. Had O’Leary simply gone by himself to Denmark, maybe with a handful of other Irishmen, and fought on his own account—just as Finns, Swedes and Norwegians did in 1864—there would have been little that the British could realistically have done to prevent him, and his name may have rung through the ages. There

was certainly an impetuous side to his character that would have been at home charging across a Danish battlefield, simultaneously channelling the spirits of his grandfather, and his much more distant ‘Viking’ ancestors. By making the project such a very public spectacle, he also arguably doomed any chance it might actually have had of succeeding. In claiming that a large and well-organised force of one hundred cavalry (none of whom were ever named, other than the leader) was going to participate in a war against Prussia, and moreover in the name of the Princess of Wales, O’Leary effectively forced the British government to veto the intervention.

What O’Leary’s story does provide, however, is a colourful example of a nineteenth-century Irishman with a host of overlapping identities: a proud Irish ‘gentleman’ ready to sport the ‘national colours’ in foreign fields, and using all kinds of Celtic imagery in his doggerel poetry; a Corkman who seemed to possess sincere affection and respect for the British royal family, apparently a nationalist but not a separatist, who bore concentric Irish and Imperial identities lightly; and in claiming to be a possessor of Ireland’s ‘best blood’, he provides an insight into a Scandinavian element of Irish history and identity that was often ignored or subsumed in the development of ‘Celtic Ireland’ as a key component of nationalism.

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