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Irish Catholic Recruitment into the British Army during the American Revolution: A Case Study of the 46th Regiment of Foot

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(Received 26 February 2024; accepted 13 August 2025)

Abstract

This article looks at military history through a social lens, focusing on the identity and experiences of the Irish Catholics recruited for service in the British army during the American Revolution, a conflict which occurred before Catholics were legally permitted to serve, but during which significant numbers were recruited nonetheless. Using Irish Catholic recruitment and subsequent service in the 46th Regiment of Foot as a case study, this article will discuss the integration of this group into a regular regiment on the British establishment, arguing that despite contemporary anxieties to the contrary, the incorporation of Irish Catholics into the British army happened smoothly and without negative impact on regimental cohesion and discipline. They became well-integrated, and while their loyalty to the British state can never be definitively proven, they certainly became effective participants in its army and empire. This provides a compelling viewpoint from which to discuss the integration of ‘others’ into Britishness and the imperial apparatus during this period.

Keywords: Irish history; British Empire; British army; Catholic relief; military history

The late eighteenth century saw both a demand for rapid expansion of the British military establishment in order to secure and protect imperial territory, and a need to integrate into the growing empire subjects seen traditionally as ‘others’, those who did not fit into traditional conceptions of ‘Britishness’. In a classic article, Linda Colley used the concept of ‘othering’ to explore the development and maintenance of a distinct British identity during the eighteenth century. Colley’s work is more detailed in terms of Scottish and Welsh impact on or integration into Britishness, but tends to relegate Ireland, and particularly Irish Catholics, to the category of an ‘other’ against which

Britishness and British identity was defined due to its majority Catholic population.¹ However, the increasing demands of the British fiscal-military state in the latter half of the eighteenth century led to the need for British and Irish officials to address uncomfortable questions about the place of Irish Catholics within the empire, as well as how they could be of use.² One facet of this discussion, pushed to the forefront by the outbreak of the American Revolution, was whether or not Irish Catholics could serve within the British army. Though it remained controversial and technically illegal, Irish Catholic recruitment into the British army during this period was both consistent and significant.³

The quiet recruitment of Irish Catholics during the late eighteenth century suggests that they could exist within conceptualisations of Britishness or British institutions through their service in the British army. This is not to say that they became British or embraced a British identity in addition to or despite their Irish or Catholic identities, but rather that the circumstances of the late eighteenth century provided an avenue by which they could assert belonging within the British Empire and reap the benefits of doing so without being excluded offhand based on their religious identity. Colley has asserted that the concept of Britishness was neither culturally nor politically homogeneous, as it did allow for some level of regional difference, but those who espoused British identity generally subscribed to a set of common themes, notably Protestantism.⁴ However, as argued by Tony Claydon and Ian McBride, 'Protestant nationality' was more of an 'unrealised objective' than an actualised feature of British society.⁵ Imperial subjecthood and expansion further complicated this narrative. During the eighteenth century British subjecthood became an active process in which both 'natural-born and adopted British subjects' asserted themselves as such in order to obtain the corresponding rights, respect and privileges that belonging to this group entailed.⁶ The British army was a space in which this occurred, where 'others' could assert or earn these rights through military service. Catriona Kennedy's work on the British military as a site of the development of ideas of Britishness in which 'component patriotisms' could exist without overriding or corrupting each other emphasises this, arguing that these identities were not necessarily 'an inevitable source of cognitive dissonance', and 'were by no means in tension'.⁷ Colley has made a similar argument in terms of Scottish integration into the British Empire, observing that it 'was quite possible for an individual to see himself as being, at one and the same

¹Linda Colley, 'Britishness and Otherness: An Argument', *Journal of British Studies*, 31 (1992), 309–29.

²John Brewer, *The Sinews of Power: War, Money and the English State, 1688–1783* (1989); Thomas Bartlett, *The Rise and Fall of the Irish Nation: The Catholic Question* (Dublin, 1992).

³Bartlett, *Rise and Fall of the Irish Nation*, 45–65.

⁴Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707–1837* (New Haven, 1992).

⁵Tony Claydon and Ian McBride, 'The Trials of the Chosen Peoples: Recent Interpretations of Protestantism and National Identity in Britain and Ireland', in *Protestantism and National Identity: Britain and Ireland, c.1650–c.1850*, ed. Tony Claydon and Ian McBride (Cambridge, 1998), 28.

⁶Hannah Weiss-Muller, 'Bonds of Belonging: Subjecthood and the British Empire', *Journal of British Studies*, 53 (2014), 8.

⁷Catriona Kennedy, "'True Brittons and Real Irish": Irish Catholics in the British Army during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars', in *Soldiering in Britain and Ireland, 1750–1850: Men of Arms*, ed. Catriona Kennedy and Mathew McCormack (Basingstoke, 2013), 38–40.

time, a citizen of Edinburgh, a Lowlander, a Scot, and a Briton' and recognising the utility of the British army in curating and shaping this sense of belonging.⁸ The army was a place where intermingling of different sorts of people was required; thus it provides an avenue for the study of the articulation and formulation of Britishness during this period as a site where British subjects interacted with each other and navigated just how fluid or rigid Britishness could be within this institution.

This article will focus on Irish Catholic recruitment and integration into the 46th Regiment of Foot using the official records of the British War Office as a data set. Identifying Irish Catholic recruits and tracking their careers through these records allows us to get a sense of their experience and treatment in a regular regiment in the British army. Analysis of these recruits indicates that Irish Catholics integrated quickly and unproblematically into the 46th Foot. This shows that, despite contemporary stereotypes and prejudices, Catholic identity did not inherently prove detrimental to a recruit's ability to belong within the army. Other identities such as those of an effective soldier or comrade, could be more significant, illustrated by the fact that many of these men became career soldiers and some were able to rise in rank. As Stephen Conway suggests, by subscribing to and participating in British military structures, they became part of a pre-existing 'military fraternity' and occupational solidarity within the army as an institution, which provided them with an avenue for belonging despite their Catholic identity.⁹ Wayne Lee reached similar conclusions, arguing that that their role 'as labor in a uniform military system' allowed Irish Catholics to become 'progressively more acceptable' by performing their role as effective soldiers.¹⁰ This indicates that quiet toleration of Irish Catholics in the British army was possible based on their utility as soldiers, but the lack of substantial reform relating to the legality of Catholic recruitment, or any religious apparatus to support them within the regiment, suggests that this was the result of pragmatic acceptance rather than active assimilation or accommodation of Irish Catholics. This article will discuss contemporary anxieties and debates about Irish Catholic recruitment in Protestant circles to demonstrate its widespread reality, as well as its connection to the process of Catholic relief, then use official documentation to explore how integration of Irish Catholic soldiers functioned in practice in the 46th Foot.

The use of the 46th Foot as a case study for this subject is significant for several reasons. First, it shows that Irish Catholics were not just being sent to separate regiments or corps which were constructed for their integration, they were also actively incorporated into the rank and file of existing regiments.¹¹ Their assignment to the 46th Foot, a regular regiment, shows that many Irish Catholics were being treated the same as other recruits, at least bureaucratically. While this is not evidence of toleration per se,

⁸Colley, 'Britishness and Otherness', 315, 323.

⁹Stephen Conway, 'The British Army, "Military Europe", and the American War of Independence', *William and Mary Quarterly*, 67 (2010), 70–1, 96–100.

¹⁰Wayne Lee, *The Cutting-Off Way: Indigenous Warfare in Eastern North America, 1500–1800* (Chapel Hill, 2023), 159.

¹¹Both the Loyal Irish Corps and the Roman Catholic Volunteers were short-lived independent corps which were associated with Catholic recruitment. Seely Advertisement, in Blaquiére to Captain William Dalrymple, 27 Feb. 1776, London, The National Archives (TNA), State Papers Ireland (SPI), SP 63/452, fos. 140–4, at 144; Robert Mackenzie Esqr to Alfred Clifton, 7 Oct 1777, TNA, Carleton Papers, PRO 30/55/6/105, 698.

it does support the conclusion that laws which restricted Irish Catholics from service were not being adhered to in any consistent fashion – this to reap the benefits of their quiet recruitment. Additionally, the 46th is well-known to modern scholars for its participation in many important events during the American Revolution (1775–83), and the Seven Years War (1756–63), yet its connection to Irish Catholic recruitment and service has thus far been unexplored.¹² Also of interest is the fact that the formative years of the 46th were spent fighting the Jacobites, which suggests possible connections between regimental identity and anti-Catholicism, though this is difficult to confirm.¹³ Finally, the service records of Irish Catholics who served in the 46th support the assertion that while both contemporaries and modern scholars see Irish Catholics during this period as an ‘other’, they appear to have integrated into the 46th without incident. There is no evidence that they caused significant dissonance in the regiment, or of patterns of behaviour which led to disciplinary action. This combats negative stereotypes assigned to this group in contemporary discussions, such as their being unreliable or disloyal soldiers or more trouble than they were worth. Such stereotypes have been increasingly viewed as unjustified by modern historiography.¹⁴

This article builds on recent efforts to personalise the experience of common soldiers in the early modern period. Ilya Berkovich’s volume on common soldiers in old-regime Europe has brought forward a wide variety of sources which detail the experiences of such men, and Don Hagist has made similar progress through use of diaries written by British soldiers who served in the American Revolution.¹⁵ Narrative sources like these are invaluable, but not consistently available. This could be due to archival priorities or, more likely in terms of the Irish Catholic recruits discussed here, to widespread illiteracy. Kirby Miller has argued that during this period Irish Catholics were ‘not illiterate but preliterate’, relying on oral media to communicate ‘a rich, robust traditional culture’, but most could not read or write.¹⁶ This is illustrated by their deeply rooted traditions of songs, poetry, ballads, and storytelling, which certainly persisted into the eighteenth century, but were overtaken by anglicisation.¹⁷

¹²Richard Cannon, *Historical Record of the Forty-Sixth or South Devonshire Regiment of Foot* (1851).

¹³Richard Cannon’s 1852 history of the 46th Foot provides substantial detail on the movement and service of the 46th, as well as discussion of casualties or comments from letters where applicable, but did not provide analysis of regimental community, cohesion or conflict during this period in his narrative. In addition, there is minimal discussion in Cannon’s narrative about individuals recruited into the 46th, and certainly no mention of Irish Catholic recruits. This is unsurprising, as regimental histories were not consistently maintained or recorded until the mid-nineteenth century. Cannon, *Historical Record of the Forty-Sixth*, iv, 2.

¹⁴For contemporary discussions see ‘Parliamentary Diary’, *Freemans Journal*, 28 Oct. 1775, 3; Major-General Cunningham to Lord Barrington, 19 May 1776, TNA, War Office Papers (WOP), WO 1/991, fo. 9; Peter Way, “‘The Scum of Every County, the Refuse of Mankind’: Recruiting the British Army in the Eighteenth Century”, in *Fighting for a Living: A Comparative Study of Military Labour 1500–2000*, ed. Erik-Jan Zürcher (Amsterdam, 2014), 291–330. This has also been discussed in relation to Irish Catholic service in the British army and navy in later conflicts. For the army, see Kennedy, “‘True Brittons and Real Irish’”, 37–55. For the navy see Sara Caputo, *Foreign Jack Tars: The British Navy and Transnational Seafarers during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars* (Cambridge, 2023), 103–16.

¹⁵Ilya Berkovich, *Motivation in War: The Experience of Common Soldiers in Old-Regime Europe* (Cambridge, 2017); Don Hagist, *British Soldiers American War: Voices of the American Revolution* (Yardley, 2012).

¹⁶Kirby Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America* (New York, 1985), 71.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 71–5.

Even by 1841, statistics showed that less than half of the population of Ireland could read or write, and only about a quarter could do both. Literacy rates also varied based on geographic location and type of community in which one lived. Urban areas tended to be more literate than rural ones, and illiteracy rates were highly variable depending on province: 40–44 per cent in Ulster and Leinster, 61 per cent in Munster and 72 per cent in Connaught.¹⁸ Literacy rates among Irish Catholic recruits were also likely to be low because most recruits came from the lower classes, many listing their occupation as ‘labourer’.¹⁹ Sources from those who interacted with these soldiers, such as their officers, British army officials, or other soldiers who may have mentioned them in their writings have been used to combat this lack of personal voice, providing at least another person’s perspective on their service or character where possible. However, given that the presence of Catholics was deliberately obscured because their recruitment was not legal, I have found little to no commentary of this sort. Additionally, most personal sources tend to be procedural rather than reflective, discussing which regiments went where, or battle structure and strategy. None that I have seen except one, the journal of Thomas Sullivan, mentioned whether other soldiers were Irish, let alone Catholic. Sullivan enlisted in the 49th Regiment of Foot in Dublin in February 1775 and served in the American colonies until his desertion in July 1778.²⁰ An Irishman himself, but not a Catholic, Sullivan seems keen to mention if relevant groups or people were Irish throughout his journal. That said, he never made mention of any Irish Catholics, in the military or otherwise.

The integration of Irish Catholics into the British army as an institution, however, means that even when their own voices are not present, a record of their military careers is available. Maintaining a global army and empire meant the generation of a great deal of paperwork relating to when and where troops were recruited, which regiments and companies they were placed in, where they went, if they were injured, and when they were discharged. In some cases, we even have information relating to their pension applications post-discharge. The main documents discussed here will be recruiting returns, muster lists and pension applications. When the information from all these sources is combined, it ideally provides a clear service record of the soldier in question which can help reveal their level of success as a soldier and whether or not they assimilated favourably into their assigned post.

Although these sources are invaluable for this subject, there are several problems which occur when working with them and using them as a basis of analysis. As already noted, they do not in any way provide a direct voice of Irish Catholic recruits. Additionally, it must be stated that this is the official record, so military and government officials could decide what was included and what was left out. There are also clerical challenges to overcome. Because they were generated by different officers and officials over time, variant spellings of names and locations recur throughout the paperwork. One soldier who will be discussed at length, Barnabus O’Brien, is referred to

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 70–1.

¹⁹For example, over half of the recruits listed on the recruiting return for the 46th Foot used later in this article listed their profession as ‘Labourer’: ‘List of Recruits Rais’d for the 46th Regiment of Foot Commanded by the Hon’ble Brigadier General John Vaughan’, 9 Feb. 1776, TNA, WOP, WO 1/992.

²⁰Joseph Lee Boyle (ed.), *From Redcoat to Rebel: The Thomas Sullivan Journal* (Westminster: MD, 2006), iv.

as 'Bernard O'Brien', 'Barnabus Bryon', 'Barⁿ Bryan', Bar^y Bryan' and 'Barny Bryon'.²¹ In this example we can see nicknames being used, as well as inconsistent spellings for his surname. Abbreviation for common names was also used to make the record writing process faster, but again these can vary. For example, the name 'John' was consistently recorded as 'J^{no}' when abbreviated, but 'James' could be abbreviated as either as 'J^{ms}' or 'J^{as}'. There is no uniformity in the decision to abbreviate or not, some writers chose to do so and some did not, and others seem to have done so on a case-by-case basis without any sort of consistency. The anglicisation or misspelling of traditional Irish names in these records also leads to spelling inconsistencies which makes tracking individual names difficult. All this needs to be considered when making generalisations based on these records, as well as when tracking individuals through them. Despite these caveats, however, analysis of the military records used in this research does yield a surprising amount of information about the experiences of Irish Catholic recruits, as well as the toleration of their presence and patterns and continuity of Irish Catholic service during this period.²²

Military recruitment and Catholic relief

Recruitment of Irish Catholics into the 46th Foot was part of a larger policy created by the British government to increase the size of the British army to quell the rebellion in the American colonies.²³ This extensive augmentation required more recruits than could be obtained were Irish Catholics to continue to be excluded from eligibility, making their recruitment at least pragmatically appealing. In a letter to Harcourt, Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, Lord Rochford succinctly observed that His Majesty was 'desirous to draw all the advantages He can from every part of his Dominions', including Ireland, which 'should contribute some proportion in the present exigency, when the necessity of recruiting the army is so very pressing'.²⁴ This lifted the previous restrictions on recruitment in Ireland at large which were consistently enforced during the preceding conflict, the Seven Years War, which had ended twelve years before in 1763.²⁵ Under pressure to find more troops, the British turned to Ireland as a

²¹All muster lists referenced are from '46th Foot 1st Battalion Musters 1761–1776', TNA, WO 12/5796/1–2, and '46th Foot 1st Battalion Musters 1777–1788', TNA, War Office Papers, WOP, WO 12/5797/1. All pension records are from Royal Hospital, Kilmainham: Pensioners' Discharge Documents (Certificates of Service), TNA, WOP, WO 119.

²²A similar method was suggested by Arthur Gilbert related to substantial analysis of recruiting returns, which will be used in this work in tandem with the muster lists and other War Office documents and correspondence. Arthur Gilbert, 'An Analysis of Some Eighteenth-Century Army Recruiting Records', *Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research*, 54 (1976), 38–47.

²³This augmentation was carried out in Ireland through four waves of recruitment between January and October 1775. See Rochford to Harcourt, 19 Jan. 1775, TNA, SPI, SP 63/445, fos. 17–20; Rochford to Harcourt, 10 Feb. 1775, TNA, SPI, SP 63/445, fo. 94; Rochford to Harcourt, 27 Feb. 1775, TNA, SPI, SP 63/445, fos. 179–80; Rochford to Harcourt, 1 Aug. 1775, TNA, SPI, SP 63/448, fo. 9; Rochford to Harcourt, 19 Oct. 1775, TNA, SPI, SP 63/449 fos. 129–31.

²⁴Rochford to Harcourt, 16 Mar. 1775, TNA, SPI, SP 63/445, fo. 265.

²⁵Rigby to Barrington, 23 Dec. 1757, TNA, SPI, SP 63/418, fo. 15; Bartlett, *Rise and Fall of the Irish Nation*, 57–60.

'nursery of soldiers'²⁶ and recruited heavily from its populace, whether Protestant or Catholic, despite continued mistrust, or fear, of the Irish Catholic population. This combination of illegality and necessity led to a system of recruiting Irish Catholics and encouraging their recruitment while not referring to it directly. This first involved approving recruitment in Munster, Leinster and Connaught. These provinces had significantly larger Catholic populations than Ulster, which was the only location previously approved for recruiting in Ireland in part for this reason.²⁷ The British establishment also took advantage of offers from local Irish Catholic elites, most notably Lord Kenmare, to help facilitate and encourage the recruitment of men under their influence, meaning those upon whom these elites were felt to be able to exert social or economic pressure.²⁸ This could include those living on their estates, or in their local community. In the case of Kenmare, it was also thought to include the Irish Catholic community as a whole because at this time he was recognised by many as the voice of all Irish Catholics.²⁹ Engaging with these Catholic elites was not a direct statement that Catholics were being recruited, as their orders did not explicitly ask for Catholic recruits, but it was clear to both those involved in the recruiting project and its critics that their involvement implied that Catholic recruitment would be utilised.³⁰ This policy of concealment and implicit rather than explicit Catholic recruitment allowed for significant numbers of Irish Catholics to be recruited to fulfill Ireland's role in the growth of the British army now required for the war in America.

Although the inclusion of Irish Catholic recruits was essential to the success of the army's expansion, the social and political climate in Ireland was not suited to, nor was it entirely prepared to embrace, this change in policy. This was due to the assumption that Irish Catholics could not be trusted in social and political roles, let alone as trained soldiers. The penal laws which had limited their social, political and economic standing throughout the eighteenth century were both a manifestation and a consistent reminder of this mistrust.³¹ The relaxation of the penal laws in Ireland in the late eighteenth century, which allowed for the recruitment of Irish Catholics, was a signal that this climate was changing. However, this was not the result of sudden widespread toleration of Catholics. Jacqueline Hill and Robert Burns have argued that an increase in toleration was evident during this period, but both offer criticism of the idea that this was the main reason Catholic relief occurred at this juncture. Hill contends that historians have rightfully endeavoured to moderate the significance of this factor, noting that 'even in the 1790s ... there were limits to "the growth of toleration" and to the

²⁶Three letters from Sir John Dalrymple, Bart., one of the Barons of the Exchequer in Scotland, to the Right Honourable Lord Viscount Barrington, Late Secretary at war, on his Lordship's Official Conduct (1778), 2.

²⁷Rochford to Harcourt, 19 Jan. 1775, TNA, SPI, SP 63/445, fos. 17–20.

²⁸Rochford to Harcourt, 2 Aug. 1775, TNA, SPI, SP 63/448, fos. 15–18.

²⁹The reality was of course more complicated, as there were certainly divisions among the Irish Catholic community. Patrick Fagan has identified three main divisions; within clergy 'between seculars and regulars', 'between the clergy and ... the laity', and class-based divisions. So while certainly, and as recognised by Fagan, Kenmare had emerged 'as a principal Catholic leader', he was one of several; and he spoke more for Catholic elites rather than representing everyone within those divisions. See Patrick Fagan, *Divided Loyalties: The Question of the Oath for Irish Catholics in the Eighteenth Century* (Dublin, 1997), 137.

³⁰*Ibid.*; *St James Chronicle* or *British Evening Post*, 12 Sept. 1775, 4.

³¹Bartlett, *Rise and Fall of the Irish Nation*, 22–4.

emergence of “non-sectarian nationality”.³² Similarly, Burns agrees that an increase in toleration was a contributing factor but argues that this tolerance was not universal, observing that displays of tolerance caused ‘both suspicion and alarm’ within the Irish Protestant parliament.³³ Further, the negative reactions of the public to Catholic relief show that anti-Catholicism persisted as a feature of British and Irish Protestant society. This was illustrated in a letter written by an anonymous Scotsman in 1778 in reaction to talk of Catholic relief in which the author argued that those showing public support for Catholic relief should be ‘disgraced to be called Protestants’.³⁴ The Gordon riots of June 1780 also demonstrated that the British public was not prepared to accept bills relating to Catholic toleration. As observed by Brad Jones, such measures ‘threatened to undermine a widely shared Protestant British patriotism that defined itself against Catholicism and France’.³⁵ Thus we can see that toleration was certainly not comprehensive, and as such could not by itself lead to substantial Catholic relief and reform, nor be the sole reason that Irish Catholic recruitment was now possible.

The role of Catholic recruitment in the process of Catholic relief has been recognised and discussed by several modern historians. Robert Kent Donovan argued that recruitment of Irish Catholics into the British army was the most compelling factor which led to Catholic relief, calling it the ‘hidden agenda’ behind this process.³⁶ Although the law which prevented Catholic service was not removed until 1795, the process of Catholic relief was underway in the 1770s and provided a sort of soft legality for admitting Irish Catholics to the British military on what amounted to an early modern ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ basis in which as long as a recruit was not loud about their religious identity, they could be admitted to the army.³⁷ The military incentives for Catholic relief were more substantial and less idealistic, showing that the British government saw relief as a means to an end – larger recruitment for their military establishment – rather than a move towards Catholic toleration enacted because it was morally right to do so. The significance of the military rationale is widely accepted, but the historiography has so far failed to study the men being recruited and their experiences during service, rather than the political motivations or processes which led to their inclusion in the British army.

While there was not really a question of whether Irish Catholic recruitment was necessary, opinions as to whether Catholics would be loyal or trustworthy, and if it was proper to recruit them, varied. In his survey of the penal laws in Ireland, Ian McBride argued that ‘the religious and political leaders of Protestant Ireland subscribed to a pessimistic reading of Irish history as a recurrent, unending cycle of rebellion and

³²Jacqueline Hill, ‘Religious Toleration and the Relaxation of the Penal Laws: An Imperial Perspective, 1763–1780’, *Archivum Hibernicum*, 44 (1989), 99.

³³Robert E. Burns, ‘The Catholic Relief Act in Ireland, 1778’, *Church History*, 32 (1963), 181.

³⁴*A Letter from a Gentleman in The Country, to His Friend in Edinburgh. Occasioned By the Late Act for Repealing the Penal Laws Against Papists* (Edinburgh, 1778), 1.

³⁵Brad A. Jones, “‘In Favour of Popery’: Patriotism, Protestantism, and the Gordon Riots in the Revolutionary British Atlantic”, *Journal of British Studies*, 52 (2013), 79.

³⁶Robert Kent Donovan, ‘The Military Origins of the Roman Catholic Relief Programme of 1778’, *Historical Journal*, 28 (1985), 84.

³⁷Britt Zerbe, ‘A Bridge Between the Gap: The Martial Identity of the Marine Corps, 1755–1802’, in *Soldiering in Britain and Ireland, 1750–1850: Men of Arms*, ed. Catriona Kennedy and Mathew McCormack (Basingstoke, 2013), 100.

deliverance, perhaps predicated upon a fundamental incompatibility between the two populations'.³⁸ There were also class-based concerns which have been explored by Vincent Morley, who observed that the British hierarchy recognised the loyalty of Catholic elites by the 1770s but, at the same time, also recognised the 'implacable hostility of the bulk of the Catholic population'.³⁹ This environment of scepticism and distrust meant that if this recruitment was to occur, a broader discussion of whether or not Irish Catholics could be integrated into the realm of British subjects, as people who belonged and who could be trusted as soldiers, needed to be had.

The issue of trust was a topic of discussion in contemporary newspapers. One writer argued that large numbers of Catholic recruits could be obtained with 'uncommon alacrity', especially through use of the influence of Catholic elites. However, this was followed by disparaging comments about their quality as men or soldiers and their motivations for service. The writer referred to Roman Catholic recruits as 'ignorant Natives who do not understand a word of English'. In discussing their motivation for service, the writer asserted that Irish Catholics were only volunteering to take revenge on the English and Protestants for their oppression of and violence against Irish Catholics by fighting and killing the American colonists, who could be considered transplants from this group.⁴⁰ This implied their loyalty was to themselves and their ideas of historical mistreatment rather than to the British army or state. In this writer's view, both their presumed 'ignorance' and this need for revenge meant that Irish Catholics could be easily manipulated into service.

Other sources also called their quality as soldiers into question, suggesting they would be ineffective during service or even disloyal, either of which would make them prone to desert. A section of parliamentary minutes published in *Freeman's Journal* in October 1775 discussed assumptions about the efficacy of specifically Irish Catholic soldiers.⁴¹ In these minutes MP Barry Barry of County Cavan expressed concerns about Catholic soldiers being raised for American service. He argued 'that the report that a number of Papist soldiers were to be raised, gave grounds for jealousies and discontents amongst the people' and commented about 'how dangerous it would be to put arms in the hands of those very men, who by the present system of laws, were prohibited from bearing any'. Colonel Arthur Browne, representative of the Borough of Gowran, stated that he was certain – on the basis of his experiences serving in America in the Seven Years War – that 'the Papists made as good soldiers as Protestants', and Major Boyle Roche made similar remarks about their loyal service.⁴² This discussion illustrated that while some politicians questioned Irish Catholic reliability, the military men more directly involved in serving with the Catholics knew them to be dependable.⁴³ This seems to have become a more common opinion by the middle of

³⁸Ian McBride, *Eighteenth Century Ireland: The Isle of Slaves* (Dublin, 2009), 197.

³⁹Vincent Morley, *Irish Opinion and the American Revolution, 1760–1783* (Cambridge, 2002), 63.

⁴⁰'Extract of a Letter from the Hague, Sep 2', *Middlesex Journal*, 7 Sept. 1775, 3.

⁴¹William Hunt, ed, *The Irish Parliament 1775 from an Official and Contemporary Manuscript* (1907); 'Parliamentary Diary', *Freemans Journal*, 28 Oct. 1775, 3.

⁴²'Parliamentary Diary', *Freemans Journal*, 28 Oct. 1775, 3.

⁴³Roche would later be very involved in Irish Catholic recruitment through his role as agent to Lord Kenmare. See 'Letter from Major Boyle Roche enclosing a recruiting poster', 18 Aug. 1775, London, The British Library, Barrington Papers, Add MS 73648, fo. 21.

the American Revolution. Commenting on desertion rates of Irishmen serving abroad in a letter to the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland in January 1780, Hillsborough remarked 'that the Irish out of their Country do not desert more than others'.⁴⁴ While this was not in reference to Irish Catholics in particular, it does illustrate that the British administration was less concerned about Irish desertion from regiments abroad by this point.

Irish Catholic recruitment and integration into the British army during this period can thus be seen as playing an integral part in the decision to pursue Catholic relief at this time. It also provides us with an opportunity to explore the degree to which the motivations of toleration, pragmatism and loyalty were embraced. This recruitment was surely driven by pragmatism but required the presence of the other two components in order to be posed as a plausible solution to the problem of military expansion. The inclusion of Irish Catholic recruits demonstrates that at least some level of toleration and trust was being extended to them, but the way they integrated into their assigned regiments is revealing. It illustrates how these men were received during their service and highlights the extent to which they were tolerated or trusted in practice as individuals, rather than merely counted as numbers toward a recruitment quota.

Irish Catholic recruitment and service in the 46th Foot

It is within this wider conversation relating to Catholic relief and integration of this 'other' into the British army that the 46th Foot received its assignment to the American colonies. The 46th was tasked with increasing its manpower in July 1775 as part of the third wave of regiments which were ordered for service in the American colonies.⁴⁵ King George III had authorised Lord Barrington to strengthen several corps which were then to be sent abroad to serve under the command of General Gage.⁴⁶ Barrington sent a circular to the corporals of the chosen regiments at the end of the following month which provided instructions for carrying out the recruiting process in Ireland.⁴⁷ Each recruiting officer would receive five guineas for each approved recruit, of which the officer kept two and the recruit received three. It was normal for the officers in the recruiting service to be paid per recruit and for recruits to be paid upon agreeing to serve; this motivated recruiters to fill their quotas and men to volunteer. Each of the officers was also allowed to recruit three contingent men, meaning an extra three recruits per officer over and above what would bring the regiment to the required 477 men in total.⁴⁸

These orders meant that the recruiters needed to garner a substantial number of men, and fast. They had been given about a month to obtain the necessary recruits, but were also in competition with the other four regiments which had received the same orders; the 55th, 17th, 27th and 28th Regiments of Foot.⁴⁹ There was no mention in

⁴⁴Hillsborough to Buckingham, 17 Jan. 1780, TNA, SP 63/468, fo. 23.

⁴⁵See footnote 23.

⁴⁶Barrington to General Gage, Jul. 1775, TNA, Carleton Papers, PRO 30/55/1, 27.

⁴⁷Barrington, 'Circular Letter to the Corporals of the augmented regiments from the War Office', 26 Aug. 1775, TNA, Carleton Papers, PRO 30/55/1, 29.

⁴⁸Barrington to General Gage, 26 Aug. 1775, TNA, Carleton Papers, PRO 30/55/1/29, 2.

⁴⁹Rochford to Harcourt, 1 Aug. 1775, TNA, SPI, SP 63/448, fo. 9.

the circular from Barrington about whether or not Irish Catholics could be recruited, either because he had assumed the recruiting officers would not do such a thing as the law stated they could not, or because he had deliberately left it out, continuing the policy of not discussing the religion of the recruits. However, in other documents we can see permission being given to recruit men in locations where Catholics were the majority of the population. In a letter to Harcourt of January 1775, Lord Rochford wrote:

Regiments might be directed to get as many recruits as they can as supernumeraries, till they can be proportioned afterwards to each Regiment in North America, and as in the present exigency, the necessity of recruiting is so pressing your excellency will authorise the recruiting parties to raise recruits in the Provinces of Munster, Leinster, and Connaught.⁵⁰

Authorising recruitment in these provinces can be taken to mean that Catholic recruitment was possible and encouraged, though not openly so.

To identify potential Irish Catholics in the 46th Foot, I will now focus on one recruiting return from 9 February 1776.⁵¹ This return is the result of the efforts of three officers, Captain Duff, Lieutenant Bathurst and Ensign Danby, during their time with the recruiting service in Ireland. Recruiting returns are lists of men who were recruited for service in the army, usually for a specific regiment. These documents provide descriptive and biographical information about each recruit such as age, height, physical characteristics, parish and county of birth, place of enlistment as well as when and by whom they were enlisted, and their profession. Such details helped physically identify recruits and could be used to confirm that they had reported to their assigned company or regiment; they could also be used to help find deserters.

All recruiting for the return took place between December 1775 and February 1776. To address the raw data of this return: seventy-one names are listed as recruits. About half the recruits were aged in their twenties, a quarter under twenty and a quarter over thirty. Fifteen of the listed recruits deserted before the regiment set sail for the American colonies. This left fifty-six for further investigation. Desertion at or before embarkation was common, so a 20 per cent desertion rate out of these recruits is not surprising. The embarkation returns of other regiments which were recruiting in 1775 illustrate this trend. For example, recruiting parties under the command of Major Bruce reported that they had raised 195 recruits, 41 of whom had deserted.⁵² Reasons for desertion varied, but generally were related to being ordered on foreign service, deciding not to commit to military service, or because a better opportunity was available. Five of the deserters from this recruiting return for the 46th Foot were listed as holding a skilled profession, arguably making them less likely to serve in the military, as they had other career options. Six of the deserters were labourers, while the other four had no job listed.

⁵⁰ Rochford to Harcourt, 19 Jan. 1775, TNA, SPI, SP 63/445, fos. 17–20.

⁵¹ 'List of Recruits Rais'd for the 46th Regiment of Foot Commanded by the Hon'ble Brigadier General John Vaughan', 9 Feb. 1776, TNA, WOP, WO 1/992.

⁵² 'A Return of Recruits Raised for the Army in [North] America under the Command of Major Bruce at Cork', 6 Mar. 1775, TNA, SPI, SP 63/447, fo. 19.

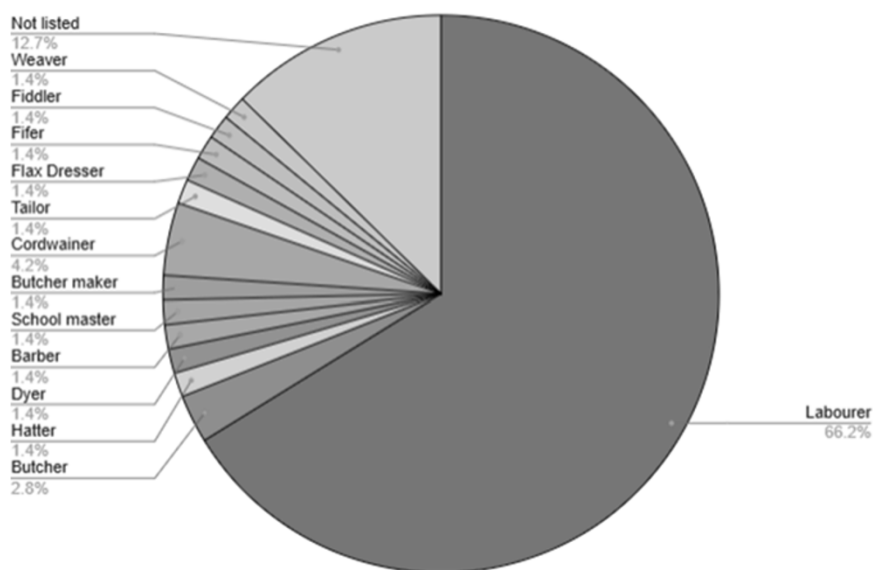


Figure 1. Trades of the seventy-one men listed in the recruiting return.

As Figure 1 below shows, 66 per cent of the recruits were labourers, 12 per cent did not list professions, and the remaining 21 per cent held skilled positions such as hatter, weaver and schoolteacher. The proportion of labourers within the non-deserters is even higher, coming in at 73 per cent labourers, 9 per cent no profession listed and almost 18 per cent listed with a skilled profession (see Figure 2).⁵³ According to Kirby Miller, labourers made up about ‘56% of the pre-famine rural population’ of Ireland, and that this percentage was ‘almost exclusively Irish Catholic’.⁵⁴ The winter season would have made it hard to find employment in the agricultural sector, sending many labourers to urban centres to look for work. Local positions would not have been available for all who needed them, making the military an appealing option. However, a stable source of income was not the only reason that enlistment was appealing. Ilya Berkovich has explored the motivations behind enlistment in old-regime Europe and has found that while financial matters were certainly a factor, ‘military service held an appeal not only as a profession, but also as an institution’ in which adherence to ‘established group standards’ or goals could be the determining factor in whether or not a soldier belonged.⁵⁵ This may have been particularly attractive to Irish Catholic recruits looking for a place to belong which was increasingly accepting of ‘others’, in contrast to the Protestant-dominated society at home, which was not.

⁵³Here the proportions in the figures have been rounded to the nearest whole number for clarity. This will also occur in the discussion of Figure 3. All figures were created by the author based on data recorded in ‘List of Recruits Rais’d for the 46th Regiment of Foot Commanded by the Hon’ble Brigadier General John Vaughan’, 9 Feb. 1776, TNA, WOP, WO 1/992.

⁵⁴Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles*, 51.

⁵⁵Berkovich, *Motivation in War*, 16.

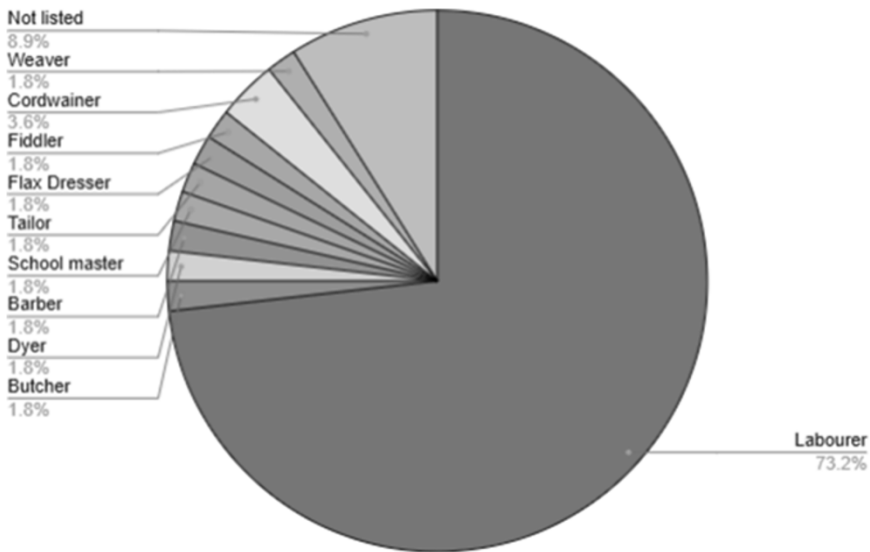


Figure 2. Trades of non-deserters.

Discussions of the religious identities of recruits are not present in the records of the 46th. Indeed, religious identity was not an officially required category in the military records of the time. That said, the geographical details included in the recruiting return are a key factor in determining the likelihood that any given recruit was Catholic. The exact proportion of Catholics and Protestants in Ireland in the late eighteenth century is not known, but it is estimated that at least 80 per cent of the overall population of Ireland during this period was Catholic.⁵⁶ The approval of recruitment outside Ulster certainly implied that Catholic recruitment was to be utilised. It would be problematic, though, to assert that any and all recruits who listed birthplaces outside Ulster were Catholic, as would claiming that those recruited in Ulster were exclusively Protestant.⁵⁷ By applying the findings of two religious censuses of Ireland to the biographical data available on the recruiting return, we can identify Irish Catholic recruits from among those listed based on their birthplace information, then establish any patterns which emerge about their treatment and service in the 46th Foot. Those recruited from counties or parishes with a significant Catholic majority are likely to have been Catholic themselves. Further, given that Harcourt was concerned that recruiting Protestants *en masse* would decrease the already precarious power of the Protestant minority in Ireland, it is even possible that Protestants born in areas with high Catholic populations would have been encouraged not to enlist in order to

⁵⁶Donovan, 'Military Origins', 92.

⁵⁷The 1766 religious census data that survives lists data collected from 311 parishes in the province of Ulster, and of this 311 about half of the parishes reported Protestant proportions of under 50 per cent, including the birth parishes of four of the seven recruits from the February 1776 recruiting return. See Brian Gurrin et al., *The Irish Religious Censuses of the 1760s: Catholics and Protestants in Eighteenth-Century Ireland* (Dublin, 2022).

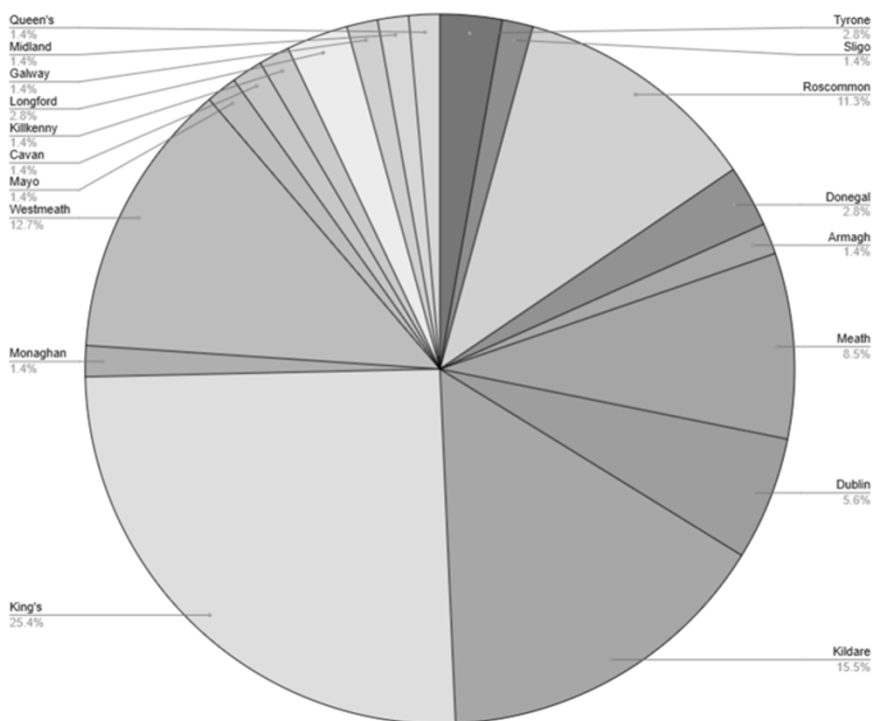


Figure 3. Birth counties of the seventy-one men listed in the recruiting return.

maintain their presence in those communities.⁵⁸ The first data set of use for identifying Catholic recruits is the 1766 religious census of Ireland, called for by the Irish House of Lords on 5 March that year.⁵⁹ This census was done at the parish level and covers reports from 1,271 civil parishes and around 460,000 households.⁶⁰ The second data set, the 1834 census, is the most complete census taken closest to the time period considered in this article.⁶¹ The spatial analysis of the 1834 census presented in the monograph *Troubled Geographies* will be used to discuss religious proportions at a county level, as well as to offer more broad conclusions when parish data from the 1766 census are unavailable. When used in tandem, the data on religious proportions

⁵⁸Rochford to Harcourt, 16 Mar 1775, TNA, SPI, SP 63/445, fo. 265.

⁵⁹The data from this census was compiled in a volume published by the Irish Manuscripts Commission in 2022 and contains surviving records of this census, as well as any transcriptions or copies made that can help fill the gaps in what is extant. Unfortunately, much of the original census data was lost in the 1922 Public Records Office fire, making this reconstruction necessary. For methodology of how this data was reconstructed and the sources used to fill the gaps, see Gurrin et al., *Religious Censuses of the 1760s*, Part II.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, 120.

⁶¹Ian N. Gregory et al., *Troubled Geographies: A Spatial History of Religion and Society in Ireland* (Bloomington, 2013), ch. 3.

from these censuses provide a strong method of determining likely religious status of a recruit from the February 1776 recruiting return using their birthplace information.

When applying the census data to the birthplaces on the recruiting return, a strong pattern of recruitment from majority Catholic areas emerges. Of the seventy-one names on the return, sixty-seven include birth parish information. However, only thirty-six of the sixty-seven names with parish information can be tracked using the 1766 census, as data for the parishes of the other thirty men is not present in the extant 1766 census data. Of the thirty-six men whose birth parish can be found in the 1766 census, twenty-nine were born in areas which reported a Protestant population proportion of under 20 per cent. Further, of those twenty-nine men, thirteen were from areas which reported a Protestant proportion of under 10 per cent. The remaining seven men were from areas with higher Protestant proportions, with five from 20–50 per cent areas and only two from over 50 per cent areas. On a county level, the spatial analysis of the 1834 census showed that Galway, Mayo, Roscommon, Sligo, Longford, Laois (then known as Queen's county), Kilkenny, Tipperary, Waterford, Offaly (King's county), Meath, and Westmeath all had a population which was 90 per cent or more Catholic.⁶² Of the seventy-one men listed on the recruiting return, 68 per cent were recruited from these counties, which suggests that these recruits were probably Catholic (see Figure 3). The other 32 per cent were recruited from areas which reported a population of Catholics of between 60 and 90 per cent.⁶³ This makes establishing their religious identity more difficult, but it also solidly supports the idea that some of that remaining 32 per cent was still very likely to be Catholic. When considered together, the analysis of the birthplaces of these recruits at the parish and county level shows that around 80 per cent of the men trackable via the 1766 census and almost 70 per cent of the men trackable via the 1834 census had been born in areas with Catholic populations of above 80 per cent. This illustrates that Irish Catholic recruits were certainly present on the February 1776 recruiting return and likely made up a large proportion of their number.

While not definitive in their own right, genealogical sources and surname analysis can further strengthen religious identifications based on geography. If a man is noted as coming from an area with a predominantly Catholic population and bears a traditional Irish surname, it becomes even more likely that he was Catholic. When searching for men with such surnames in genealogical databases, the results were mostly Roman Catholic marriage or death records. However, given the limited biographical information available on the recruiting return, it is difficult to confirm if the person found in a genealogical database is indeed a match to the person on the recruiting return. This can be addressed to some degree by calculating their birth date based on their age of enlistment in 1776, or by looking for entries associated with the birthplaces listed on the recruiting return. The former can help identify matches based on birthdate, and the latter can help identify either the recruit themselves, or potential relations in the same region with the same surname. Once the name or family is connected to a Catholic marriage or death record, it can then be argued that the recruit in question was probably Catholic as well. Surname analysis through use of Edward MacLysaght's

⁶²*Ibid.*

⁶³*Ibid.*

Guide to Irish Surnames has also been considered but has not led to concrete conclusions.⁶⁴ MacLysaght lists Irish surnames and the origin of each as well as how the spelling of the names has changed over time, due either to natural linguistic drift or to anglicisation. He also discusses the geography of surnames in terms of where they are commonly found and where they have been most prevalent. MacLysaght's entries do not comment on the religious connections of the surnames, but rather the nationality or regional significance. Applying his guide to this research shows just how difficult it can be to use surname analysis to assert geographic or religious origins based on their surname alone.

Use of the Catholic Qualification and Convert Rolls has been similarly problematic. An act passed in 1774 allowed for subjects of any religious status to take an oath declaring their loyalty to the British crown, and these rolls list those who did so. The entries include geographic area or parish of conversion, full name, and the date the oath was taken, all of which does not provide much to go on in terms of ensuring accurate identification of specific people from the recruiting return. Searching for the names from the recruiting return in these records yields anywhere from zero to ten results, with some outliers producing around fifty.⁶⁵ Only three of the men from the recruiting return had possible matches on the qualification rolls which predate their recruitment and make sense based on their age, but none have enough information to confirm that they are the same person as listed in the recruiting return. This and the aforementioned difficulties mean that the research presented here relies on the birthplace information analysis in relation to the religious census records to determine whether or not any given recruit was likely to have been Catholic.

Once potential Irish Catholic recruits have been identified, we can use the muster lists of the 46th Foot to chart their individual service record, as well as to see if any overall patterns in Irish Catholic service emerge. The General Muster Books from the Commissary of Musters Office within the War Office Papers at the British National Archives contain ninety-one muster lists for the 46th during their service in the American colonies from 1775 to 1783.⁶⁶ These documents serve as a status update and an inventory of personnel for each company. They list the place and date the document was generated, the names of the officers and men of the company, and any accompanying notes such as illness, casualties, desertion, imprisonment, discharge or transfers. The consistency of these records is invaluable for tracking Irish Catholic recruits over time, as they provide continuous documentation of their presence in the regiment. The first appearance of most of the recruits from the recruiting return is in the musters taken at Perth Amboy in 1777. These names were accompanied by a note to the left of their name which stated they had entered the army on 4 July 1776.⁶⁷ Some of the men from the recruiting return are not present in this set of muster lists, possibly due to

⁶⁴Edward MacLysaght, *A Guide to Irish Surnames* (Dublin, 1964).

⁶⁵For example, the name 'Thomas Fitzgerald' yielded 52 results in the database. Catholic Qualification Rolls, 1700–1845, National Archives of Ireland, <https://census.nationalarchives.ie/search/cq/home.jsp>.

⁶⁶46th Foot 1st Battalion Musters 1761–1776', TNA, WOP, WO 12/5796/1–2 and '46th Foot 1st Battalion Musters 1777–1788', TNA, WOP, WO 12/5797/1.

⁶⁷46th Foot, all companies, Perth Amboy, 5 May 1777, TNA, WOP, WO 12/5796/2.

death at sea or reassignment to another regiment either before shipping out or upon arrival in the colonies.⁶⁸

What follows will discuss the thirty-seven men who appear in the musters of the 46th Foot and what their record can tell us about Irish Catholic service. Twenty-five of these thirty-seven came from counties which were 90 per cent or more Catholic in the 1834 census, with the remaining twelve men hailing from counties which were between 60 and 90 per cent Catholic. At the parish level, data on religious affiliation are only available for twenty-one of these men. Of those twenty-one, five were born in parishes with a less than 5 per cent Protestant population, three in areas with between 5 and 15 per cent, and nine (all born in Geashill parish in King's County) with a population of 17.8 per cent Protestant. Two, Thomas Waide and Henry Owens, were from parishes with higher Protestant proportions, 35.1 and 55.9 per cent respectively.⁶⁹ In sum, nineteen out of the twenty-one men were born in parishes where the Protestant proportion of the population was under 20 per cent. Thus the numbers from both the 1834 and 1766 censuses suggest that a large portion of these trackable recruits were Irish Catholics.⁷⁰

Only four of these recruits had any sort of noted disciplinary issues, all of whom were listed as 'deserted' somewhere in these documents: William Coffey on the February 1776 recruiting return, William Clarke in April 1776, Lawrence Allen in September 1777, and Mathew Dalton in August 1778. All of these desertions occurred within the first two years of service. Coffey is unique in that he was listed as a deserter on the recruiting return, but was subsequently recorded as a private in Ferguson's company in the muster lists from 5 May 1777. His appearance in the musters suggests he was caught after attempting to desert, as he was noted to have entered the regiment on 4 July 1776 along with the other men from the recruiting return. Given that the 1776 musters lists put the recruits' arrival in the colonies at Staten Island in August 1776, William Clarke must have deserted before the ships left Ireland or immediately upon arrival in the colonies. Allen and Dalton both deserted after arrival in the American colonies.⁷¹

Coffey and Clarke were born in counties that reported a 90 per cent or more Catholic population on the 1834 census, Meath and King's, respectively.⁷² Both Allen and Dalton listed Kildare as their birthplace, which was one of the counties in the 60–90 per cent Catholic bracket.⁷³ The 1766 census data allows for more specificity on these two men, as records for their birth parishes were available and both were born in parishes which reported high Catholic proportions. Allen's birth parish, Ballindag, was 87.5 per cent Catholic; while Dalton's, Kildangan, was 97 per cent Catholic.⁷⁴ These four examples

⁶⁸Rochford to Harcourt, 19 Jan. 1775, TNA, SPI, SP 63/445, fos. 17–20.

⁶⁹Gurrin et al., *Religious Censuses of the 1760s*, 156, 407.

⁷⁰Gregory et al., *Troubled Geographies*, 24.

⁷¹Vaughan's Company, 5 May 1777, '46th Foot 1st Battalion Musters 1777–1788', TNA, WOP, WO 12/5797/1; Leighton's Company, 8 Aug. 1778, '46th Foot 1st Battalion Musters 1777–1788', TNA, WOP, WO 12/5797/1.

⁷²Gregory et al., *Troubled Geographies*, 24. Additionally Clarke's birth parish, Geashill, reported an 82.2 per cent Catholic population. Gurrin et al., *Religious Censuses of the 1760s*, 188.

⁷³Gregory et al., *Troubled Geographies*, 24.

⁷⁴Gurrin et al., *Religious Censuses of the 1760s*, 161, 165.

illustrate that some Irish Catholics did indeed desert, but they certainly do not suggest that the majority did so. No other disciplinary issues were noted on the muster lists, and none of the men I have been able to track through these lists were present in the records of the General Courts Martial, which are the records of court martials carried out in a public and official capacity. That said, regiments could and often did handle problems and offences internally without keeping a record of them.⁷⁵ So while it is significant that there is no evidence which shows that Irish Catholic soldiers were consistently subject to court martials, which should have been the case if the stereotypes that they were ineffective, disloyal or hostile towards British soldiers were true, any disciplinary issues or even anti-Catholic sentiment or hazing could have been handled internally in the regiment or even within the company in which the soldier was serving. In such cases, records may not have been kept.

Those four deserters aside, that leaves us with thirty-five men to account for. Seven are listed as casualties. Five of these died within their first year of arriving in the colonies. The only information available for them is their entry into the regiment on 4 July 1776, and their names noted as a casualty with the date of death on the muster list corresponding to the period in which they died. No cause of death was listed. There is not much to learn from these small bits of information, other than that they did not desert and were killed in action. There is also minimal information available for the other two listed casualties, Barnaby Rourk and John Bigly, but we do know that both served until their deaths in the spring of 1780. John Bigly served in three different companies during his time as a soldier, under Captain Leslie, Captain Bell, then finally Captain Morden. No other notations accompany his name, so it is impossible to determine why he bounced around three different companies. Barnaby Rourk was also in Morden's company when he died. He was sick upon his arrival in the colonies and initially served in Leslie's company as well.⁷⁶ In a disciplinary sense, both men seem to have served unproblematically until their deaths, or at least there are no notes on the muster lists which would indicate otherwise.

Now that we have accounted for the casualties we are left with twenty-eight men. Twenty of these have minimal information available; the muster lists only note when they joined the regiment and contain one or two other references to their presence in a company. The other eight are consistently present throughout the muster lists. Their continuous service implies that they were effective and able soldiers, as they were not killed in action and were kept within the regiment. Of these eight men, six stand out as particularly significant. Four of them were noted as transferring to the 55th Regiment of Foot at the end of 1783 when the 46th Foot was reduced. Many transfers from the 46th to the 55th occurred during this reduction and only a select group of private men was kept with the 46th, though most of the officers were retained.⁷⁷ The four transfers in question, Patrick Carney, Edward White, John Dempsey and Patrick Bourke, continued their military service in the West Indies after their experience in the 46th, which indicates that they had become career soldiers. Both Dempsey and Bourke were born in parishes which reported a Protestant proportion of 17.8 per cent, and White was from

⁷⁵Arthur Gilbert, 'The Regimental Courts Martial in the Eighteenth Century British Army', *Albion*, 8 (1976), 50–66.

⁷⁶Leslie's Company, 5 May 1777, '46th Foot 1st Battalion Musters 1761–1776', TNA, WOP, WO 12/5796/2.

⁷⁷All companies, 1 Apr. 1783, '46th Foot 1st Battalion Musters 1777–1788', TNA, WOP, WO 12/5797/1.

an even more Catholic area, his birth parish being listed as 9.8 per cent Protestant.⁷⁸ Carney's likely denomination is harder to determine, as the surviving data from the 1766 census for Galway are very incomplete. Of the eighteen parish reports which are available for Galway, the maximum reported Protestant proportion was 22.4 per cent, which suggests Carney was probably Catholic as well.⁷⁹ This is supported by the 1834 census data which shows the overall Catholic population of Galway was 90 per cent or more.⁸⁰ The fact that these men were not discharged when the regiment was reduced and were instead passed on to another regiment shows that their effectiveness as soldiers was recognised by their commanding officers. It also shows that they were either lucky or skilled enough to not have any sort of injury which would have prevented them from further service.

The other two men of note, John Coughlin and Charles Flood, were both listed as holding rank above private during their time with the 46th Foot. Given the restrictions on recruiting Catholics, it was very rare that an Irish Catholic recruit would be promoted to the rank of non-commissioned officer. Coughlin is listed as having been born in King's County on the initial recruiting return, which makes the likelihood he was Catholic very high.⁸¹ The 1766 census data reinforce this: his birth parish, Geashill, was 82.2 per cent Catholic.⁸² Coughlin served in Captain Enoch Markham's company until his appointment as a corporal in Mathew Johnson's company on 25 September 1782, where he remained until his discharge on 27 March 1783. The fact that Coughlin was internally promoted after a consistent record of service shows his value as a soldier, as well as his potential as an effective leader.

Charles Flood was never listed as a private; his first appearance in the muster lists was as an ensign in Captain Johnson's company on 11 October 1775.⁸³ He was subsequently listed as a lieutenant in Captain Downes's company in 1777 before being transferred to Captain Hall's company in the same year. This transfer was successful. Flood appears as a lieutenant in Hall's Company in all musters for 1778, then continued in the same position when Captain Kemble took over the company for the 1780 musters.⁸⁴ Flood listed County Kildare as his birthplace, which makes determining if he was a Catholic more difficult when looking at the 1834 census data.⁸⁵ That said, the 1766 census data suggest that Flood was probably Catholic, as his birth parish of Naas was overwhelmingly Catholic, at 90.2 per cent of reported households.⁸⁶ The fact that Flood was immediately made an officer upon his arrival in the American colonies, however, would tend to suggest either that he was from the Protestant minority of his

⁷⁸Gurrin et al., *Religious Censuses of the 1760s*, 188, 167.

⁷⁹*Ibid.*, 126–7.

⁸⁰Gregory et al., *Troubled Geographies*, 24.

⁸¹*Ibid.*

⁸²Gurrin et al., *Religious Censuses of the 1760s*, 188.

⁸³Johnson's Company, 11 Oct. 1775, '46th Foot 1st Battalion Musters 1761–1776', TNA, WOP, WO 12/5796/2.

⁸⁴Downes's, Hall's and Kemble's company musters in '46th Foot 1st Battalion Musters 1761–1776', TNA, WOP, WO 12/5796/2; '46th Foot 1st Battalion Musters 1777–1788', TNA, WOP, WO 12/5797/1.

⁸⁵Parts of Kildare as it existed in the 1770s are in places the 1834 census listed as 90 per cent Catholic, but other parts are shown in the 60–90 per cent category. Gregory et al., *Troubled Geographies*, 24.

⁸⁶Gurrin et al., *Religious Censuses of the 1760s*, 166–7.

parish, or that the Charles Flood on the recruiting return and the Charles Flood on the musters were not the same man.

Pension applications

In addition to the muster lists for the 46th Foot, the other main source of information about the careers of these soldiers is provided by the few existing pension applications from Irish Catholics who served in the regiment during this period. These contain some biographical information, as well as lists of the various regiments or corps in which each applicant served. Further, the applications are sometimes accompanied by personal notes in their favour from officers, or a bit of text stating that the soldier in question is recommended for a specified pension institution for either an in- or out-pension. Receiving a pension was desirable, but not a guarantee associated with discharge. As argued by Caroline Nielsen, though the opportunity to receive a pension after service was a helpful incentive during recruitment ‘for many it was only ever a promise’ rather than a reality, as no soldier was ‘automatically entitled’ to receive a pension of any type until 1807.⁸⁷ A successful application was dependent on a variety of factors including length of service, the disability or medical condition of the applicant, the social status of the applicant and the regiment in which they served, and the inclusion or lack of recommendations from officers or officials writing on the soldier’s behalf.⁸⁸ In tandem, these factors had to make the case that the applicant had served the army well or had received a significant injury or illness as a result of their service and was thus deserving of the long-term benefits a pension provided. The pension records discussed below are applications to Kilmainham Hospital in Ireland. Most Irish soldiers would have been sent to Kilmainham for the application process rather than Chelsea Hospital, as Kilmainham was a similar institution based in Ireland. The competition for these pensions was high, and any evidence that Irish Catholics were receiving them is inherently an admission of their effectiveness and usefulness as soldiers, or at the very least an indication that they could successfully navigate the bureaucracy relating to pension applications.

At least twelve men whom this research has identified as Irish Catholic soldiers from the 46th Foot applied for pensions from Kilmainham. This section will discuss two of these applicants, Bernard O’Brien and Mathew Stewart, who both applied for pensions at the point of their discharge. Stewart is of particular significance not only because he was a non-commissioned officer at the end of his career, but also because his application occurred before the Act of Union in 1801 and around the time of the 1793 Catholic Relief Act, which removed all further restrictions from Catholic military service (he applied in 1795). It is important to note that almost all pension records I have found relating to Irish Catholics who served in the 46th Foot during the American Revolution occurred after the institution of the 1793 Relief Act. This may have provided a sort of retroactive legitimacy to the service of these men which allowed them to apply

⁸⁷Caroline Louise Nielsen, ‘Disability, Fraud and Medical Experience at the Royal Hospital of Chelsea in the Long Eighteenth Century’, in *Britain’s Soldiers: Rethinking War and Society, 1715–1815*, ed. Kevin Linch and Matthew McCormack (Liverpool, 2014), 183.

⁸⁸*Ibid.*, 190.

for pensions without fear of rejection due to the religious restrictions in place at the time they enlisted.

Analysis of Bernard O'Brien's pension application reveals that he was a soldier with a long and successful military career. Born in the parish of Cappagh, near the market town of Omagh in County Tyrone, O'Brien entered the British army on 4 July 1776. Tyrone falls in the 60–90 per cent Catholic bracket on the 1834 census. The 1766 census data for Cappagh is 40.7 per cent Catholic, 11.8 per cent Church of Ireland and 59.3 per cent Dissenter.⁸⁹ Given this, it would appear that O'Brien was probably not Catholic. However, surname analysis has proven helpful in this instance. A search of the digitised records of the 1901 and 1911 Irish census database generated for the National Archives of Ireland yielded 481 people with the surname 'O'Brien' in County Tyrone. All but one of those individuals identified themselves as members of the Catholic faith. Further, when the search parameters were extended to all counties, 97 per cent of persons with the surname 'O'Brien' identified as Catholic.⁹⁰ These data are chronologically distant from the period of study here, but that almost all Tyrone O'Briens and O'Briens across all counties identified as Catholic makes it likely that Bernard O'Brien was Catholic as well.

Bernard O'Brien was placed in General Vaughan's company upon his arrival in the American colonies, where he stayed until mid-1778.⁹¹ He was then briefly transferred to Captain May's company, before being sent to Captain Mathews's company.⁹² After falling ill, he was then transferred to Captain Bell's company in 1782. From there he was drafted into the 55th Regiment of Foot on 6 July 1782 but was 'subsisted' by the 46th until 24 August 1782, meaning the 46th provided for his basic needs until that date. According to his pension application, dated 23 October 1804, O'Brien was discharged at age forty-four after twenty-eight years of service and recommended for pension at Kilmainham. Attached to the application is a petition signed by George Mathews, 'late captain of the 46th reg.mt'.⁹³ The petition states that O'Brien had served for eight years in the 46th Foot, then seven years and six months in the 55th regiment, followed by five years in the Queen's County regiment of Militia, and finally almost two years of service in the Royal Veterans Battalions. Pointing to O'Brien's three years in the American colonies and five years in the West Indies, Mathews recommended him as 'deserving the proper increase in pension due' to those who served in the West Indies. Mathews added that O'Brien 'behaved himself in every respect as a good soldier', a sentiment he echoed in an additional note included with the application.⁹⁴ O'Brien's application was also endorsed by an official from the Royal Hospital in Dublin, who recommended

⁸⁹Gurkin et al., *Religious Censuses of the 1760s*, 404.

⁹⁰1901 and 1911 Census of Ireland Records Online Database, The National Archives of Ireland, Available at <https://nationalarchives.ie/collections/search-the-census/>.

⁹¹See General Vaughan's muster lists, '46th Foot 1st Battalion Musters 1761–1776', TNA, WOP, WO 12/5796/2; '46th Foot 1st Battalion Musters 1777–1788', TNA, WOP, WO 12/5797/1.

⁹²See Mathews' and May's company musters, '46th Foot 1st Battalion Musters 1761–1776', TNA, WOP, WO 12/5796/2 and '46th Foot 1st Battalion Musters 1777–1788', TNA, WOP, WO 12/5797/1.

⁹³Note from Captain Mathews in Discharge and pension application for Bernard O'Brien, 23 Oct. 1804, TNA, WOP, WO 199, box 0006, 23, fo. 37.

⁹⁴*Ibid.*; Second note from Captain Mathews in Discharge and pension application for Bernard O'Brien, 23 Oct. 1804, TNA, WOP, WO 199, box 0006, 23, fo. 37.

O'Brien 'be admitted as a Pensioner having served above 20 years' service'.⁹⁵ He was not injured or discharged due to being 'worn out', as was common parlance for when a soldier was let go from the army and no longer fit to serve. The only reason for his discharge is that he had put in his time, and he qualified for a pension because that time had shown he was an effective soldier. The comments included in the application illustrate that O'Brien left a lasting positive impression and had found success as a soldier in the British army.

Mathew Stewart's pension indicates that his entire career was spent serving only in the 46th Foot, from his enlistment in 1776 to his discharge in 1795. Stewart was born in Clonmel in County Tipperary in 1749. Tipperary falls into the 90 per cent or more Catholic category based on the 1834 census data.⁹⁶ The town of Clonmel was part of the data for St Mary's parish in the 1766 census, which reported that 22.1 per cent of the parish was Protestant.⁹⁷ Stewart was not present in the 1776 recruiting return but did join the 46th Foot at a similar time to the recruits studied above. According to his pension application, Stewart entered military service in the 46th in 1775 and then served with this regiment for twenty years.⁹⁸ This can be confirmed using the 46th Foot muster lists. A 'Math[e]w Stewart' is listed in Captain Leighton's Grenadiers on the muster list which was taken on board the ship *Argo* on 11 October 1775.⁹⁹ Stewart remained in Leighton's company until 1780, when he was transferred to Captain May's company. The muster lists are silent on his service in Leighton's company, other than that he was reported as sick at the time of the 1777 muster list.¹⁰⁰ After his service in May's company, Stewart moved to Captain Morden's company, where he was promoted to the rank of corporal. He was subsequently listed as a corporal in Morden's company on both musters taken in 1783. His presence as a corporal in 1783 shows that he was being retained by the regiment after its service in the American colonies. He remained with the 46th Foot until 1795, by which time he was forty years of age. He was discharged and 'recommended for the bounty of Kilmainham Hospital' 'by reason of having an incurable Dropsy'.¹⁰¹ Stewart's pension application was supported by the Physician General, signed 'M Quinn', who declared that Stewart had been ill and under his care 'for a considerable amount of time in the King's military infirmary', and that different remedies had been tried but he remained 'quite unfit for service'.¹⁰² Stewart worked his way up to the rank of corporal in the 46th Foot, until he was invalided out.

⁹⁵Hospital note, 5 Aug. 1800, in Discharge and pension application for Bernard O'Brien, 23 Oct. 1804, TNA, WOP, WO 199, box 0006, 23, fo. 37.

⁹⁶Gregory et al., *Troubled Geographies*, 24.

⁹⁷The data for St Mary's parish was listed in the County Waterford analysis in Gurrin et al., *Religious Censuses of the 1760s*, 331. The parish boundaries included areas in both Tipperary and Waterford. The portion in Tipperary included the town of Clonmel (*ibid.*, 319, 331).

⁹⁸Discharge and pension application for Mathew Stewart, 1795, TNA, WOP, WO 199, box 0006, 237, fo. 442.

⁹⁹Captain Leighton's company, 11 Oct. 1775, '46th Foot 1st Battalion Musters 1761–1776', TNA, WOP, WO 12/5796/2.

¹⁰⁰Captain Leighton's company, 1777, '46th Foot 1st Battalion Musters 1777–1788', TNA, WOP, WO 12/5797/1.

¹⁰¹Discharge and pension application for Mathew Stewart, 1795, TNA, WOP WO 199, box 0006, 237, fo. 442.

¹⁰²Accompanying note to Stewart pension application, *ibid.*

His career as an effective soldier earned him both a promotion and a pension recommendation upon his discharge, illustrating that effective and long-term service could be the determining factor in a military career regardless of religious affiliation.

Conclusion

Political sensitivities have led to the omission of Irish Catholics' military service from official records, resulting in it being overlooked by historians. The methodology employed in this article helps address this omission, providing a way to identify Irish Catholic recruits and assess their military careers. Given the information from the recruiting return, muster lists and pension records, some generalisations about Irish Catholic service in the 46th Foot are possible. First and foremost, Irish Catholic recruits were indeed present during this period and served during the American Revolution, before they were legally permitted to join the army. Second, several Irish Catholic recruits became career soldiers, which suggests that Irish Catholics were a continuous presence within the British army during this period and beyond. Third, the desertion rates among recruits from the 1776 recruiting return indicate that Irish Catholics were not prone to deserting in large numbers. There is similarly no evidence that Irish Catholic soldiers were more rowdy, ill-tempered or misbehaved than any other sort of soldier. In fact, once recruited there was no mention of their Catholic identity in any document I have encountered. Further study of the other names present on the muster lists but not reflected on the 1776 recruiting return is needed to establish what proportion of the regiment might have been Irish Catholic, but this research clearly shows that Irish Catholics were present in the 46th Regiment of Foot and became part of the British military, and by extension the British imperial structure, through their soldiering activities.

Irish Catholic recruitment provides a compelling vantage point from which to view the development and redevelopment of ideas of who belonged within the British Empire, as well as ideas about Britishness –in terms of British versus Irish authority on the macro level, and the identities of individual Irish recruits on the micro level. As Kennedy has argued, the British army provided a 'crucial arena in which national identities were formed and articulated', generating and testing ideas of whether Britishness, Irishness and Catholicism could exist in tandem.¹⁰³ While still controversial, Irish Catholic recruitment between 1775 and 1783 was active, significant and multifaceted, but the criticism it generated, as well as the continued public mistrust of Catholics, shows that toleration was neither widespread nor uniform. However, the recruitment of Irish Catholics does show that the British definition of belonging could bend when larger, more global, political and economic ambitions were at stake. Othering based on either Irishness or Catholicism was no longer helpful or practical, nor was anti-Catholicism a necessary ingredient for the cohesion of British identity.¹⁰⁴ The pragmatic integration of Irish Catholics into the army, though certainly a step forward and an indication of the changing relationship of the British state and anti-Catholicism, was still a far cry from the actual integration or assimilation of Irish

¹⁰³Kennedy, "True Brittons and Real Irish", 38.

¹⁰⁴Owen Stanwood, 'Catholics, Protestants, and the Clash of Civilizations in Early America', in *The First Prejudice*, ed. Chris Beneke and Christopher Grenda (Philadelphia, 2010), 238–9.

Catholics in an open and consistent fashion. That said, it did provide footing for further Catholic relief, as Catholic elites had taken this chance to assert their loyalty via their addresses and offers to assist in recruitment efforts, and Irish Catholic recruits had at the very least been quietly useful on the battlefield. However, the issue of loyalty and identity remained complex. Participation in the British military does not necessarily mean that these men saw themselves as loyal subjects of the British state. It instead suggests the existence of layers of loyalty or identity in which Irish Catholic recruits did not have to label themselves as 'British' or subscribe to all facets of Britishness but could still navigate the framework of subjecthood and soldiering in a British institution with success.

Cite this article: Sadie Sunderland, 'Irish Catholic Recruitment into the British Army during the American Revolution: A Case Study of the 46th Regiment of Foot,' *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* (2025), 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0080440125100352>