

Music of the American Revolution

THE IRISHMAN'S EPISTLE TO THE OFFICERS AND TROOPS AT BOSTON

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"The Irishman's Epistle to the Officers and Troops at Boston" was written as a satirical poem to highlight the dismal circumstances under which the British found themselves after the Battle of Concord. The earliest known printing of the poem appeared in *The Pennsylvania Magazine* on 5 May 1775, approximately 2 weeks after the Battle of Concord and the commencement of the Siege of Boston.¹ It was subsequently printed in the *Connecticut Gazette* on 30 June 1775 and *The Essex Journal and New Hampshire Packet* in December of the same year.^{2,3}

The author of the poem was given as "Paddy" in its first printing in *The Pennsylvania Magazine*. Paddy was an obvious pseudonym meant as a vexation given the well-known British animosity towards the Irish. Some historians have credited Thomas Paine as playing a role in the lyrics as he served as editor of the magazine at this time. He is known to have written two other songs that appeared in the magazine between March and July 1775.⁴ However, no primary source has confirmed this leaving the identity of the poet in question.

The lyrics were written as an epistle to convey a message to the British officers and troops, which the satirical lyrics delivered in droves. The overarching message of the poem was that the British had not adequately assessed the volatile atmosphere in the colony of Massachusetts and had placed themselves in a situation way over their heads.

The lyrics consist of four stanzas. The opening stanza chastises the British for their foolish and irrational behavior. The opening line contains the phrase "makers of bulls". This was an old Irish phrase used to accuse someone of talking nonsense or making absurd, illogical claims. The stanza further points out that the British were deluded to have thought they could forcibly control the citizens of Concord and that they should return home and put away their weapons. The phrase "look in your books for the meaning of words" in the fourth line implies, indirectly, that as the British searched for an answer as to why they were trounced they would overlook the obvious. This stanza closes with an admonition in the form of the pun "Concord by discord can never be beaten".

The second stanza mocks the British for their bravado prior to the battle at Concord when they foresaw the colonists as being easily intimidated and contained. The lyrics in this stanza recount how the colonists' defiance, when encountered, induced the British troops to flee in an unbecoming and unceremonious manner whereby only their backsides were accessible as targets for the Americans.

The third stanza questions the British mindset for not having conceived the colonists would be as proficient in the usage of their weapons as the British soldiers. The last two lines of this stanza are especially convicting for the jejune instruction to the British on how a firearm functions.

The final stanza again reprimands the British for their misguided intentions to subjugate the colonists. Its overall message is that, for all their efforts, the British found themselves besieged in Boston with limited supplies. Line four of this stanza stands out for its reference to the account of the British fifers and drummers who played and the troops who sang "Yankee Doodle" during their outbound march from Boston to Concord. By 1775 this song was well established as a blatant British insult to the colonists who were described in the lyrics as "doodles" (i.e. trifling

fools). Numerous historical narratives have chronicled how colonists serenaded the British with “Yankee Doodle” as a repurposed taunt during the desperate retreat of the British back to Boston. Thus, the stanza’s fourth line serves as a rebuttal to the original insult by counterclaiming the British were in fact the “doodles” for having been defeated by the “Yankee” colonists. Several historians have put forward it was the inverted application of “Yankee Doodle” on this day that endeared the song to American colonists as a musical expression of national pride as its mocking lyrics became an aide-memoire of the haughty advance of the British followed by their humiliating and hasty retreat.

It has been commonly claimed the lyrics were initially set to the tune of “The Irish Washwoman”. This seems unlikely for the following reasons: 1) the existence of the tune at this time has been questioned as there are no extant references to “The Irish Washwoman” prior to its appearance in print in the 1790s, and 2) the lyrics of “The Irishman’s Epistle to the Officers and Troops at Boston” do not align well with the tune.⁵ Other historians attribute the tune “Dargason” to the lyrics which is regarded to be the tune from which “The Irish Washwoman” was derived. While similarities exist between the two tunes, significant variances remain. Dargason is a lively upbeat tune that goes along with the amusing lyrics of the poem, but it still does not perfectly align with the meter and tempo of the poem. However, only slight adjustments are required to adequately mate the lyrics and tune into a cohesive composition. One issue that complicates matching any tune to the lyrics is that the third stanza contains four lines as opposed to six lines for the other stanzas.

Dargason is an old tune dating back at least to the period of 1585-1595 when it was included in a lute manuscript copied by Matthew Holms. Subsequent printings of Dargason occurred in 1653 and again in 1670.^{6,7} The name “Dargason” is believed to have been derived from the Proto-Germanic word, “dwegaz” which means dwarf.⁸

While “The Irishman’s Epistle to the Officers and Troops in Boston” is not commonly known by the American public today, it remains unique for two reasons. First, it was written and printed with minimal delay after the events to which it pertained. This suggested urgency on the part of the author to get out his lyrically defiant message. Second, the song stands out for its satirical content. Other poems and songs written soon after the events at Concord and the siege of Boston maintained a level of gravity in that they reflected on martial achievements and the strife that lay ahead.

So did the poet feel a pressing need to get out his satirical message given the critical juncture of events at that time? Had the colonists relented and lifted the siege of Boston, all their efforts up to that point would have been for naught and the revolution might never have taken root. How better to instill one’s countrymen with confidence to move forward in the struggle than by deriding your oppressors for their ineptitude. While we may never know with certainty its underlying themes, “The Irishman’s Epistle to the Officers and Troops in Boston” provides a distinct perspective for the opening salvos of the American Revolution.

The Irishman's Epistle to the Officers and Troops at Boston⁹

By my faith, but I think you're all makers of bulls,
With your brains in your breeches, your guts in your skulls,
Get home with your muskets, and put up your swords,
And look in your books for the meaning of words.
You see now, my honies, how much you're mistaken;
For Concord by discord can never be beaten.

How brave you went out with your muskets all bright,
And thought to befrighten the folks with the sight;
But when you got there how they powder'd your pums,
And all the way home how they pepper'd your bums.
And is it not, honies, a comical farce,
To be proud in the face, and be shot in the A----!

How come ye to think they did not know how
To be after their firelocks as smartly as you?
Why, you see now, my honies, 'tis nothing at all,
But to pull at the trigger, and pop goes the ball.

And what have you got now with all your designing
But a town without victuals to sit down and dine in;
And to look on the ground like a parcel of noodles;
And sing, how the Yankees have beaten the Doodles.
I'm sure if you're wise you'll make peace for a dinner,
For fighting and fasting will soon make ye thinner.

¹ Aitken, Robert, printer. *The Pennsylvania Magazine*. 5 May 1775, p. 232.

² 'The Irishman's Epistle to the Officers and Troops at Boston.' *Connecticut Gazette and Universal Intelligencer*, Vol. XII, Numb. 607, 30 June 1775, p.4.

³ 'The Irishman's Epistle to the Officers and Troops at Boston.' *The Essex Journal and New Hampshire Packet*, 8 Dec. 1775, p. 4.

⁴ Schrader, Arthur. *American Revolutionary War Songs to Cultivate the Sensations of Freedom*. Folkways Records & Service Corp., 1976, p. 5.

⁵ Petrie, Robert. *Collection of Strathspey, Reels and Country Dances*. 1790, p. 9.

⁶ Playford, John. *The Dancing Master*. 2nd ed., London, 1653, p. 24.

⁷ Playford, John. *The Dancing Master*. 4th ed., London, 1670, p. 40.

⁸ Orel, Vladimir. *A Handbook of Germanic Etymology*. Brill, 2003.

⁹ Aitken, Robert, printer. *The Pennsylvania Magazine*. 5 May 1775, p. 232.