



MAJOR DICK DOWLING PLAQUE, TUAM

Tuam, Galway, Ireland

53.514768, -8.851352



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Executive Summary

Richard 'Dick' Dowling was an Irish-born emigrant to the United States who became famous for his military exploits for the Confederacy in the American Civil War. In 1998, his American descendants unveiled a plaque on the wall of Tuam town hall to commemorate him in his place of birth. In 2017, following increased scrutiny of the continued presence of Confederate war memorials in southern cities of the United States, local Councillor Shaun Cunniffe called for the plaque's removal. This was debated by Tuam Municipal Council, who ultimately decided the plaque should remain in place, pending its potential future removal to a proposed – but, as yet, unbuilt – Town Museum.

Introduction

In 1998, the family of Major Richard 'Dick' Dowling – a man born in Tuam, Co. Galway in 1837 who had later served in the Confederate Army in the American Civil War – commissioned a memorial plaque to hang on the wall of the town hall.

Following the deadly protests in Charlottesville, Virginia, against the removal of a statue of Confederate General Robert E. Lee from a city park in 2017, protests erupted across the United States. Campaigners for the removal of Confederate memorials faced off against white-nationalist groups who articulated their opposition to the removals in terms of preserving history. In the summer of 2017, following correspondence from American citizens who had become aware of the plaque's existence, local Councillor Shaun Cunniffe began a campaign to have the plaque removed on the basis that it could be offensive. Following debate – but no vote – on the local town council, the decision was made to maintain the plaque in its current position, with the possibility of relocating it to a town museum in the future. This case study examines the tension between locally commemorating a native son who had made a success of himself abroad and being seen to celebrate the causes for which that same man had fought so famously.

Background

Richard 'Dick' Dowling

Richard ('Dick') Dowling was born in January 1837 at Knock, near Tuam, Co. Galway. His parents had a ninety-three-acre farm in Knock, but they sent their children to the USA during the Great Famine (1845 - 52).¹ In July 1846, Richard arrived in New Orleans, Louisiana, with his eldest sister, Honora, joined there in 1850 by their parents. By 1857 he worked in a bar in New Orleans but decided to move to Houston, Texas. In October 1857, Dowling opened his own bar, 'The Shades,' and began buying property in the city, soon amassing a large amount of real estate. He was a founding member of the No. 1 Ladder Company of the Houston Fire Department and also joined the Houston Light Artillery. He expanded his business interests throughout this period, buying a half-share in a steamboat while also becoming a partner in a liquor import business. During the turbulent months that preceded the Civil War, he became a prominent figure at political meetings. In September 1860, he joined the Jeff Davis Guards, a predominantly Irish militia artillery unit. He was commissioned lieutenant in the Confederate army and, in January 1863, took part in the recapture of Galveston Island.²

Battle of Sabine Pass

In the summer of 1863, the federal fleet and army commanded by Gen. William B. Franklin arrived in force and planned to invade Texas by sailing through the Sabine Pass. Although Fort Griffith, guarding the pass, was not completed, Dowling and his men volunteered to man its guns. During the federal reconnaissance of September 7, 1863, and the initial assault and bombardment on

¹ A succession of crop failures of the potato harvest between 1845 and 1849 which led to the reduction of Ireland's population from 8.4 million in 1854 to 6.6 million in 1861, with death from starvation related diseases and poverty-induced emigration the leading causes of the decline. For more see Joel Mokyr, "Great Famine." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, July 27, 2021.

² David Murphy, "Dowling, Richard ('Dick') William," *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, October 2009.

September 8, he ordered his men to hold their fire. The federal commanders assumed that Fort Griffith was unmanned, and it was not until late in the afternoon, when the attacking ships closed inshore, that he gave the order to fire. His men disabled and drove two gunboats (the Clifton and the Sachem) ashore in just over forty minutes and captured over 300 men. In Fort Griffith, only three men were slightly wounded. The assembled invasion fleet scattered and never returned. At the same time, the value of Confederate government stock soared.³

Dowling became an overnight hero for his leadership at Sabine Pass, with Jefferson Davis later comparing his victory – favourably – with the stand of King Leonidas of Sparta against the Persians at Thermopylae.⁴ He was promoted to captain and presented with a memorial address. A special silver medal was issued to him and his men, suspended on a green ribbon to acknowledge their Irish ancestry. In early 1864, he was appointed as a recruiting officer for the Confederate army and, by the end of the war, had been promoted to major.

Post-War Fame, Death and Legacy

After the war, he returned to running his bar while also developing shareholdings in a brick-making company and an oil and gas partnership. In August 1866, he was appointed a director of the Houston Railway Co. and was later a founder of the Houston and Harrisburg Turnpike Co. He remained keenly interested in Irish politics and is believed to have been a member of the Fenians. In June 1866, he hosted Col. Patrick Condon, inspector-general of the IRB, during his recruiting trip to Houston. During the summer of 1867, there was a yellow fever outbreak in Houston, and Dowling was prominent in relief efforts. He eventually contracted the disease and died on 23 September 1867.⁵ Due to the significance of the battle of Sabine Pass, he became a well-remembered Texas hero – although, in the judgement of Edward T. Cotham Jr., he might well have become even more famous were it not for his premature death.⁶ Dowling Avenue in Houston was dedicated in his honour, as was one of the city's schools. There are no less than five monuments dedicated to him in Texas, including the first-ever civic monument in Houston, erected in 1905, and a portrait of Dowling hangs in the Texas statehouse. Another statue of Dowling was raised in 1936 at the Sabine Pass National Park, where there is an annual commemoration in honour of him and his men. In 1998 a memorial plaque, commissioned and paid for by Dowling's descendants, was unveiled on the wall of the town hall in Tuam, Co. Galway.⁷ The Text of the Plaque reads:

Major Richard W. (Dick) Dowling, C.S.A., 1837-1867
Born Knock, Tuam; Settled Houston Texas, 1857; Outstanding
business and civic leader. Joined Irish Davis Guards in
American Civil War. With 47 men foiled Invasion of Texas

³ Ibid.

⁴ Edward T. Cotham Jr., *Sabine Pass: The Confederacy's Thermopylae*, (New York: University of Texas Press, 2021), p. 3

⁵ Murphy, 'Dowling, Richard ('Dick') William', *Dictionary of Irish Biography*.

⁶ Cotham Jr., *Sabine Pass*, p. 186

⁷ For a fuller list of memorials to Dowling see Ann Caraway Ivins & Timothy Collins, "Dick Dowling, Galway's Hero of Confederate Texas" in *Journal of the Galway Archaeological and Historical Society*, Vol. 57 (2005), pp. 133 – 135 and Cotham Jr., *Sabine Pass*, pp. 196 – 200.

by 5000 federal troops at Sabine Pass, 8 Sept. 1863,
a feat of superb gunnery, formed first oil company in Texas.

Died aged 30 of yellow fever.

This plaque was unveiled by Col. J.B. Collerain

31 May 1998



Figure 1: 'Close-up of the text of the plaque in honour of Dick Dowling on the wall of Tuam Town Hall'. Image by ClintMalpaso via Wikimedia Commons CC BY-SA 3.0.

History of the Contestation

Before 2017

The memorial plaque to Dowling in Tuam is the only known public memorial to a Confederate States of America soldier in Ireland.⁸ There appears to be no publicly available evidence to suggest that the plaque was contested before the summer of 2017. As Councillor Shaun Cunniffe (Independent) - who led the efforts to remove the plaque - noted: 'It was put up in 1998...The focus from the Tuam Town Council was really on the enormous effect that this guy had, Dick Dowling, in Houston [Texas] - there were streets named after him, parks named after him.'⁹ In this context, a plaque to honour a local man who had done well in America seemed uncontroversial. However, in the summer of 2017, events in Charlottesville, Virginia, sparked a nationwide debate in the United States about the appropriateness of public memorialization of the Confederacy.¹⁰ This debate would ultimately force the town of Tuam to consider whether the public

⁸ Caraway Ivins & Collins, "Dick Dowling, Galway's Hero of Confederate Texas," p. 134.

⁹ Irish Examiner, "Tuam residents call on Council to remove plaque honouring Confederate leader," Irish Examiner, August 22, 2017.

¹⁰ Jessica Suerth, "Here are the Confederate memorials that will be removed after Charlottesville," cnn.com, August 22, 2017.

commemoration of a leading military figure of the Confederacy was appropriate in 21st-century Ireland.

Charlottesville

The event which directly precipitated renewed scrutiny of Dowling's career was the fallout from the 'Unite the Right' rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, in August 2017. This was one of a succession of events held by far-right groups in protest at the city council's decision in April of that year to remove a statue of Confederate General Robert E. Lee from the city centre.¹¹ The weekend of August 11th-12th was particularly violent as far-right protesters confronted hundreds of counter-demonstrators, with running battles in the street and the killing of one woman in a hit-and-run by a white supremacist in what was later officially found to be an act of domestic terrorism.¹² In the wake of such violent scenes, cities across the United States began to reckon with the presence of prominent monuments to the confederacy in their own memorial landscapes. A wave of removals followed, geographically spread across the entire country ('From Baltimore and Florida to Texas and California, memorials came down' as [cnn.com](#) put it).¹³ In this atmosphere of heightened tension, memorials to Major Dowling in Texas became targets. On August 22, Andrew Schneck was arrested in Houston, having been found near the Dowling monument in Hermann Park armed with explosives. A Houston park ranger had discovered Schneck holding two boxes with duct tape and wires as well as a bottle and a small tube containing compounds that tests later revealed were explosive materials.¹⁴ This incident followed the renaming the previous year of both Dowling Middle School (changed to 'Audrey H. Lawson Middle School') and Dowling Avenue (which became 'Emancipation Avenue').¹⁵

Renewed Scrutiny of the Dowling Plaque

In the aftermath of the events in Charlottesville, Councillor Cunniffe would tell media interviewers that he received calls from Americans who had become aware of the existence of a memorial to Dowling in Tuam. In an interview with CNN, Cunniffe reports, "The difficulty that they [the callers] had is that it is on our Town Hall," and explains that the callers felt the plaque's location amounted to town leaders' 'tacit approval' of the Confederacy and what it stood for.¹⁶ Cunniffe told the Irish Times that he intended to raise the matter of the plaque's removal at the September 11th meeting of councillors of the Tuam Municipal Area. Further, he anticipated that there would be 'unanimous agreement' that the plaque should be relocated.¹⁷ The proposal attracted some support and positive media attention, with an opinion piece in *thejournal.ie* stating that:

To allow a shiny celebration of Dick Dowley's [sic] destruction of Union fleets to stand proudly in a place where freedom and tolerance is encouraged is contradictory in light of decades of action both the United States and Ireland have taken to fight violence and hostility and support liberty, equality,

¹¹ Oliver Laughland, "White nationalist Richard Spencer at rally over Confederate statue's removal," *The Guardian*, May 14, 2017.

¹² Jamiles Lartey, "We are unbreakable: Charlottesville survivors applaud guilty verdict," *The Guardian*, December 8, 2018.

¹³ Elliott C. McLaughlin, "Confederate monument controversy makes way to Ireland," [cnn.com](#), August 25, 2017.

¹⁴ Emily Crane & Snejana Farberov, "PICTURED: Man with chemistry degree 'who tried to blow up a Houston Confederate statue' was ALSO arrested four years ago at his parents' house for stockpiling explosives," [dailymail.com](#), August 22, 2017.

¹⁵ Ronan McGreevy, "Calls to remove only Confederate memorial on Irish soil," *The Irish Times*, August 23, 2017.

¹⁶ McLaughlin, "Confederate monument controversy makes way to Ireland," [cnn.com](#). In an interview published after September 11 meeting, Cunniffe would offer a different figure of 16 for the number of calls he had received on the matter. See Ciaran Tierney, "Irish town refuses to remove Confederate plaque," [irishcentral.com](#), September 13, 2017.

¹⁷ McGreevy, "Calls to remove only Confederate memorial on Irish soil," *The Irish Times*

and peace.¹⁸

Nevertheless, opposition to the proposed removal was voiced from several sides even before the meeting. Donagh Killilea (Fianna Fáil) - then serving as chairman of the Municipal District Council - told *cnn.com* that debating the Dowling memorial was a waste of time, offering the opinion that 'The majority (of Tuam residents) are not interested in the subject... getting on with everyday life is too important.'¹⁹ The efforts of Councillor Cunniffe aroused opposition in the United States too, where Major Dowling's American descendants, who had paid for the erection of the plaque in 1998, described the controversy over the memorial as 'insanity beyond belief'.²⁰

Decision-Making Processes

Municipal Council Meeting of September 11, 2017

As he had sign-posted in media interviews beforehand, Councillor Cunniffe used the September 11th meeting of councillors of the Municipal District of Tuam to advise his colleagues that he had:

received correspondence from people in America who were offended by the fact that there was a plaque in honour of Mr Dick Dowling on the wall of Tuam Town Hall and that they would like to see it removed. He was asked to share their concerns with his Council colleagues. He stated that Mr Dick Dowling was a successful businessman and Senator in Texas who joined the confederate army during the civil war. He said that he personally would like to see the plaque placed in a local museum.²¹

In the discussion that followed, only two of the eight councillors present are recorded as having contributed. Councillor Tom McHugh (Fine Gael) stated that, following planned road upgrades, 'the next project that should be pursued would be a museum, and if this was realised, he would support Councillor Cunniffe's proposal.' Councillor Pete Roche (Fine Gael) stated that he would be opposed to removing the plaque and that 'it would be wrong to offend the family of Mr Dick Dowling.' Cllr Cunniffe closed the discussion by stating that:

He was of the opinion that he should bring this request to the attention of his Municipal District colleagues, when he had been contacted and requested to do so. He also said that he would support the possible removal of the plaque to a museum in the future.²²

The meeting ended without any decision being taken on removal. The minutes of the subsequent meeting of the council on the November 13 record shows no further discussion of the matter.²³

Aftermath

In comments to the media after the September 11th meeting, Cllr Donagh Killilea said there was no support for Cllr Cunniffe's proposal. As *The Irish Times* reported the story:

"[Killilea] suggested that objections to the plaque came from the US and not from the local area. [Cunniffe] was more or less a lone voice," he said. "We all felt that it was not a top priority for the town. There are more important things going on." Cllr Killilea said Dowling only spent three years in the Confederate army and may have joined up simply to survive in the US. He suggested there were

¹⁸ Katherine Brewer, "Tuam's Confederate monument: 'Put this ugly part of history in a museum'," *thejournal.ie*, September 2, 2017.

¹⁹ McLaughlin, "Confederate monument controversy makes way to Ireland," *cnn.com*

²⁰ Bernie Ní Fhlatharta, "If Dowling plaque comes down, we want it back, say family," *Tuam Herald*, September 6, 2017.

²¹ 'Minutes of the Meeting of the Municipal District of Tuam meeting held on September 11, 2017', pp. 5 - 6

²² 'Minutes of the Meeting of the Municipal District of Tuam meeting held on September 11, 2017', p. 6

²³ 'Minutes of the Meeting of the Municipal District of Tuam meeting held on November 13, 2017'

other aspects of his life which were more noteworthy. He was a state senator and a successful businessman though he died aged 30 in 1867. “It may cause offence to a small number of people who don’t live in the town. Our view is that it should be left where it is to celebrate a guy who got on well in business in the United States. He managed to survive like most people did 180 years ago by joining an army,” he said. “He is not being celebrated in Tuam because he was a major in the Confederate army.”²⁴

In a separate interview, Killelea stated that the town’s representatives “should have far more important issues to deal with than the removal of a plaque which was erected in the 1990s,” adding that “Cllr Cunniffe said he got sixteen calls from 363 million people in America and none at all from the 4.7 million in Ireland. I think that tells you all you need to know about the feeling here on the ground.”²⁵

Defending his raising of the matter, Cllr Cunniffe – referring to the calls he had received from concerned Americans – said:

These people had genuine concerns about Dowling’s links to the slave trade and some of them asked me how a Black tourist from America would feel if he or she saw this plaque on the Town Hall. I told these people that I respected their concerns, and I would seek to have the plaque moved to a more appropriate setting. A memorial at a Town Hall should only honour somebody a town is proud of. People have no problem with the plaque, but they are really surprised we have it at the Town Hall.²⁶

Providing something of a final word on the matter, Cllr. Killelea stated that the meeting concluded that ‘It was agreed...that we would look into moving the plaque to a museum if one opens in the future. This plaque was not put up to offend anyone, and this controversy does not mean anything to the people of the town.’²⁷

Black Lives Matter Protests, Summer 2020

In the light of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests that erupted globally following the killing of George Floyd and protests across Ireland in support of BLM, People Before Profit Galway spokesperson Kiran Emrich made a renewed call for the Dowling plaque to be removed.²⁸ Tuam town council did not consider the matter at either of its meetings on June 25 or July 6.²⁹ No subsequent further action has been taken, and the plaque continues to stand in its original position.

Summary and Conclusions

The controversy of 2017 had an inconclusive outcome. The objections to the plaque were raised and discussed at the town council but without any concrete resolution. The determination to remove the plaque to a town museum – with the caveat that this would only be done ‘if one opens in the future’ – kicked the issue down the road. The revived interest in the plaque following the

²⁴ Ronan McGreevy, “Proposal to remove Tuam plaque to Confederate soldier rejected,” The Irish Times, September 11, 2017.

²⁵ Tierney, “Irish town refuses to remove Confederate plaque,” irishcentral.com

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Kernan Andrews, “Calls for Columbus monument in Galway and Confederate plaque in Tuam to be removed,” Galway Advertiser, June 11, 2020.

²⁹ ‘Minutes of the Meeting of the Municipal District of Tuam meeting held on June 25, 2020’, ‘Minutes of the Meeting of the Municipal District of Tuam meeting held on July 6, 2020’

George Floyd protests was short-lived, with demands for its removal made only by the small People Before Profit party, who were without representation on the town council. In response to future outbreaks of racial protest in the United States – or Ireland – the presence of a memorial to a senior Confederate soldier will likely attract attention, comments, and appeals for removal. However, until such a future incident, there appears to be no groundswell of support or political will - locally or nationally - for the plaque's removal.

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Figures

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Figure 1)

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Many contestations have been over memorials, street names, and other physical representations of historical legacies in public spaces in recent years. These contestations often reflect deeper societal tensions, whether triggered by political transitions, demographic shifts, inter-ethnic strife, or a growing awareness of unaddressed historical injustices.

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The Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation (IHJR) is a research centre at the European Association for History Educators (EuroClio) in The Hague, The Netherlands. The IHJR works with educational and public policy institutions to organise and sponsor historical discourse in pursuit of acknowledgement and the resolution of historical disputes in divided communities and societies.

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