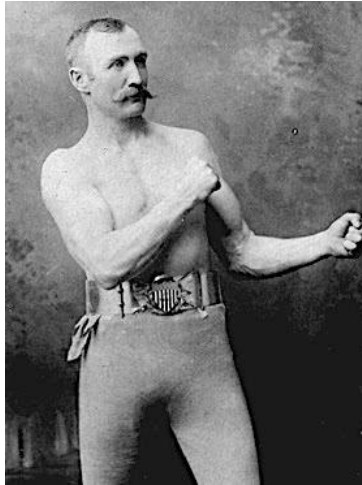


# PROFESSOR MIKE DONOVAN AT WAR

VERIFYING THE CIVIL WAR STORIES OF A BOXING LEGEND

By Kenneth Bridgham



He was America's bare-knuckle middleweight champion. He shared the ring with John L. Sullivan, Jim Corbett, Bob Fitzsimmons, Nonpareil Dempsey, Jem Mace, Jake Kilrain, Charlie Mitchell, and George Rooke in either official matches or exhibitions. He knew Buffalo Bill Cody, Wyatt Earp, General William T. Sherman, and August Belmont personally, and he was buddies with President Theodore Roosevelt. He was the boxing instructor at the New York Athletic Club for years. He was inducted into the International Boxing Hall of Fame's "Pioneer" category in 1998. His son, Arthur Donovan, Sr., was the most respected boxing referee of his generation and is also in the Hall. His grandson, Art Donovan, Jr. of the Baltimore Colts, is in the Pro Football Hall of Fame. But before all that, Professor Mike Donovan was a diminutive teenager fighting for survival in the Union Army during the Civil War.

"You feel sure you are going to be killed," he told his biographer Marshall Stillman of the fear he experienced in the war. He scoffed at the notion that soldiers don't experience fear in battle, calling those men liars.<sup>1</sup>

Stillman's book recounting Donovan's memories, entitled *The Making of a Man*, was published shortly after Donovan's death in 1918. Donovan was not alive to verify if every word of Stillman's book was true, nor did Stillman seem to do much to try and verify his friend's claims. If Stillman's account of Donovan's memories are verbatim, the old fighter was quite the storyteller. However, tales of the war are recounted over the course of only a few pages in vague sketches of mostly anecdotal memories. Details of places and times are sparse, and no information is given as to what fighting units Donovan belonged to.

To my knowledge, no historian has worked on verifying the Professor's accounts of his service or on finding out what units he belonged to during the war. With Memorial Day approaching, I thought it

---

<sup>1</sup> Stillman, *The Making of a Man*, 36

appropriate to dig into *The Making of a Man* as well as what Civil War records I could find to uncover just what the future Hall of Famer experienced as a Union soldier.

According to his obituary in the *New York World*, “He was at Antietam, was at the fall of Vicksburg, fought with the famous Irish Brigade at Gettysburg, and then was with the army that marched with Sherman from Atlanta to the Sea. He was in practically in every one of the dozen or more pitched battles around Atlanta, and was in the assault on Fort McAllister on the Ogeechee River, near Savannah.” However, not all of this could have been true, for the Battle of Gettysburg and the Fall of Vicksburg occurred over the same days.<sup>2</sup>

“It is hardly necessary for me to go into the detail concerning the various battles I was in,” Donovan told Stillman, figuring that everyone of their generation knew the dates, places, and details of Civil War. It seems strange, then, for him to have told someone he was at both Gettysburg and Vicksburg. Such intentional lack of details about the war in *The Making of a Man* makes it difficult for someone in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to confirm which parts of his tales are embellished and which are true.<sup>3</sup>

What follows is my research into the soldier’s life of Professor Mike Donovan.

Born Michael O’Donovan on September 27, 1847 in Chicago, he claimed to have joined the Union Army at just 14 years of age on the day after Independence Day, 1862. “The army was full of youngsters,” Donovan told Stillman, “young kids of the same age as I.” According to the Civil War Muster and Descriptive Rolls, a Michael Donovan enlisted in the Union Army in Chicago, Illinois on July 5, 1862, the exact date that Stillman gives for his enlistment in *The Making of a Man*. Giving his age as 18, Private Donovan was a machinist in the 71<sup>st</sup> Illinois Infantry mustered at Camp Douglas on July 22, 1862 (July 26 according to [civilwararchive.com](http://civilwararchive.com)). This is confirmed by his obituary in the *New York Times*, which states he was in the 71<sup>st</sup> Illinois Infantry, though it says he joined in 1861. He was recorded as standing 5’1” tall, having light hair, blue eyes, and a fair complexion.<sup>4</sup>

“Nothing really very exciting happened to me during the war,” Donovan told Stillman. “It was fight and wait and fight and march until we were mustered out.” Their commanding officer was Colonel Othniel Gilbert. According to Donovan, the unit’s first duty was “fighting the guerillas at Bird’s Point, Columbus, Kentucky, Paducah, and other points on the Mississippi,” but in reality, the 71<sup>st</sup> spent what remained of the Summer and all of the Autumn of 1862 guarding railroads and bridges in Illinois and Kentucky. During that time, they lost 23 men, but all died of disease, not combat. They are not known to have participated in any fighting.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Donovan, *The Fighting Donovans*, 117

<sup>3</sup> Stillman, *The Making of a Man*, 35

<sup>4</sup> Stillman, *The Making of a Man*, 34-35. / Donovan, *The Fighting Donovans*, 113. Ancestry.com. Web: *Illinois, U.S., Databases of Illinois Veterans Index, 1775-1995* [database on-line]. Lehi, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2015. Accessed May 22, 2024.

<sup>5</sup> Stillman, *The Making of a Man*, 35. / [Civilwararchive.com](http://Civilwararchive.com). Web: *Union Regimental Histories, Illinois*. Accessed May 22, 2024. / [Civilwarindex.com](http://Civilwarindex.com). Web: *71<sup>st</sup> Illinois Infantry in the American Civil War*. Accessed May 22, 2024.



***Color-bearers of the Union Army's 71st Illinois regiment. Illinoisstatesociety.typepad.com.***

The 71st mustered out in Chicago on October 29, 1862, three months after their formation. However, Donovan claimed he remained in the Army for the duration of the war and was with a unit that reinforced General Ulysses S. Grant's troops during the late 1863 Chattanooga Campaign in Tennessee. There is record of a Michael Donovan of Chicago joining the 23<sup>rd</sup> regiment, but he is listed as born in Ireland, 31 years old, and did not join until 1865. There is another Private Michael Donovan listed among the unassigned Illinois volunteers by the National Park Service. No details are given of the soldier's appearance or age, nor any dates and locations. Perhaps this is our young man, having mustered out of the 71<sup>st</sup> but stayed in the Army.<sup>6</sup>

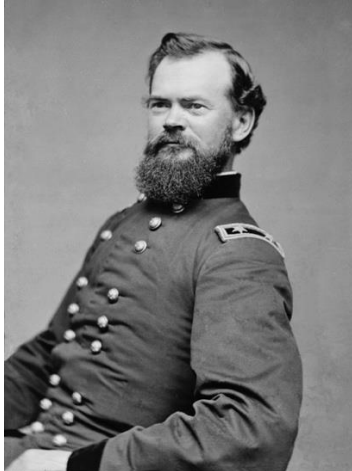
"In 1864 my regiment joined Sherman's command in his march to the sea – the Atlanta campaign," Donovan told Stillman. He does not specify which regiment this was, nor does his obituary in the *Times*. However, Mike does relate an anecdote about stealing money from his fellow soldiers on the eve of the battle at New Hope Church in Georgia, which occurred between May 25 and 26, 1864 between Union General William T. Sherman's forces and those of Confederate General Joseph E. Johnston.

Among those participating at the Battle of New Hope Church was the 15th Corps under the command of Major General James B. McPherson. Later in the narrative, Donovan says he watched McPherson and Sherman review a map together during the Battle of Atlanta on the day of McPherson's death, July 22, 1864. This provides circumstantial evidence that Donovan was in McPherson's 15th Corps, which also happened to be under Grant's command in the Chattanooga Campaign back in 1863, lending further credence to the likelihood that Donovan was in some unit of the 15th Corps after leaving the 71<sup>st</sup> Illinois. The 15th Corps would indeed participate in Sherman's March to the Sea in November, 1864, as Donovan relates.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Civilwarindex.com. Web: *71<sup>st</sup> Illinois Infantry in the American Civil War*. Accessed May 22, 2024. / Nps.gov. Web: *Soldier Details: Donovan, Michael*. Accessed May 22, 2024. / IIsos.gov. Web: *Illinois Civil War Muster and Descriptive Rolls*. Accessed May 23, 2024.

<sup>7</sup> Archive.org. Web: *The Civil War Archive, Union Corps Histories, 15<sup>th</sup> Corps*. Accessed May 22, 2024.



***Donovan claimed to have seen General James McPherson (above) moments before the General's death in Atlanta.***

So far, this part of Donovan's tale matches up with history, but which of the corps' sixty regiments was he with? Reviewing the histories of all of the Illinois Civil War regiments in the *Report of the Adjutant General of the State of Illinois*, the mostly likely regiment was the 90<sup>th</sup> Illinois Infantry regiment. Though it was mustered in September of 1862, a month before the disbandment of the 71<sup>st</sup>, the 90<sup>th</sup> regiment stayed at Camp Douglas in Chicago until November 27, 1862, giving Donovan ample time to sign up with them. 300 of the regiment's men deserted during their stay in Chicago, which means Donovan would have been a welcome addition. The 90<sup>th</sup> Illinois was part of McPherson's 15<sup>th</sup> Corps, was in Tennessee in late 1863, was at the Battle of New Hope Church, and was under McPherson's command in Atlanta. Their description of the battle for the Adjutant General's report specifically makes mention of the General's death. They participated in Sherman's March to the Sea in November, 1864 and occupied Savannah in late December. Donovan tells of stealing a thoroughbred horse while in Savannah during the war.<sup>8</sup>

The 90th participated in the Grand Review and arrived in Chicago on June 9, 1865. Donovan mentions his pride in participating in the Grand Review and specifically recounts getting out of the Army in Chicago that June. This makes them the closest of all the regiments to Donovan's memories, as none of the other regiments listed match every one of his memories and would have been in Chicago at the time he got out of the 71<sup>st</sup>. As companies F, G, and H were all recruited in Chicago, it's most likely that Mike was in one of them.<sup>9</sup>

Interestingly, Donovan told Stillman, "There were not many Irish in my regiment, and I was called upon to fight with my fists a number of times." Yet, the 90<sup>th</sup> regiment was specially known as the Irish Legion, as most recruits were either Irish or Irish-American. It was recruited and organized by a Reverend Dunne, an Irish Catholic priest. Irish-born Colonel Timothy O'Meara, a veteran of the Mexican War of Reform, was their original commanding officer after Dunne turned down a colonel's position. O'Meara's brief life was full of adventure. The Irish Brigade were apparently elated to have him installed as their commander. Mike's claim that there were few Irish in his regiment is curious. This, and the fact his name is not listed on the muster roll for the 90<sup>th</sup> are the only discrepancy between his stories and the

---

<sup>8</sup> Archive.ph. Web: *Civil War Flags of Illinois*. Accessed 5/22/2024.

<sup>9</sup> Archive.ph. Web: *Civil War Flags of Illinois*. Accessed 5/22/2024.

history of the 90<sup>th</sup>. It is possible that Mike lied about his name along with his age when mustering into this second unit after leaving the 71<sup>st</sup>.<sup>10</sup>



***Colonel Timothy O'Meara, a hero to his men, died while commanding them at the Battle of Mission Ridge.***

Now that we have a pretty clear idea of the regiment in which Professor Mike Donovan spent most of the Civil War, what follows is a timeline of some of the major events in the 90<sup>th</sup> Illinois's history, to give an account of the battles and places Donovan likely experienced as a teenager. What follows is culled from the *Report of the Adjutant General of the State of Illinois* with some embellishments from Mike's recollections in *The Making of a Man* supporting his presence in the 90<sup>th</sup> regiment.

**September 7, 1862** – 90<sup>th</sup> Illinois regiment mustered in Chicago, IL.

**October 29, 1862** – Mike Donovan mustered out of the 71<sup>st</sup> Illinois regiment in Chicago, IL. Likely joins 90<sup>th</sup> Illinois, the Irish Legion.

**November 27, 1862** – 90<sup>th</sup> Illinois ordered to the front. Leaves Camp Douglas, Chicago, headed South.

**December 20, 1862** – Attacked by Confederate forces under Major-General Earl Van Dorn while guarding General Grant's railroad supply lines at Cold Water, Mississippi. Successfully repel the enemy.

**May to July 4, 1863** – Stationed around Vicksburg, Mississippi under General William S. Smith until fall of Vicksburg on July 4, 1863.

**July 4, 1863 – July 17, 1863** – Engaged in fighting around Jackson, Mississippi.

**October 11, 1863** – Traveled by train to Colliersville, Tennessee to rescue General William T. Sherman and troops, who were surrounded by Confederate cavalry under command of General James R. Chalmers. The enemy withdrew upon arrival of the reinforcements. The 90<sup>th</sup> regiment then rejoins the 15<sup>th</sup> Corps in march toward Chattanooga. From *The Making of a Man*: "In 1863 we went down to reinforce Grant at Chattanooga."

**November 25, 1863** – Battle of Mission Ridge. Union victory. 90<sup>th</sup> regiment suffers nearly 100 casualties. Colonel O'Meara and Lt. Col. Owen Stuart both killed in action. A Captain Flynn takes temporary command.

**May 1864** – Begins March from Chattanooga, TN to Atlanta, GA.

---

<sup>10</sup> Archive.ph. Web: *Civil War flags of Illinois*. Accessed 5/22/2024 / Chickamaguablog.wordpress.com. Web: *Colonel Timothy O'Meara: An Unknown Hero of the War*. Accessed 5/22/2024 / IIsos.gov. Web: *Illinois Civil War Muster and Descriptive Rolls*. Accessed 5/23/2024.

**May 25 – 26, 1864** – Battle of New Hope Church. Confederate victory. From *The Making of a Man*: “The night before the battle at Newhope [sic] Church the Eastern fellows were chucking dice. They had a big pot of money in front of them, and three of us got together and we decided to raid them.”

**July 22, 1864** – Battle of Atlanta. Union victory. Donovan watched McPherson and Sherman pouring over a map together. From *The Making of a Man*: “They heard heavy firing on our left, and McPherson jumped to his feet. I saw him shake hands with Sherman, mount and ride away as fast as he could. A half-hour afterward he was killed.” From the regiment’s report: “The Ninetieth lost a considerable number of men taken prisoners, who were taken to Andersonville. This was the day General McPherson was killed. He was a man admired and loved by all who knew him.”

**July 27 – 30, 1864** – Further fighting around Atlanta. Afterward, encamped at East Point, GA.

**November 16, 1864** – Joined Sherman’s March to the Sea as part of the 15<sup>th</sup> Corps under the command of General William B. Hazen.

**December 13, 1864** – Assault and takeover of Fort McAllister outside of Savannah, GA with the 2<sup>nd</sup> Division. 90<sup>th</sup> regiment is the first regiment inside the fort.

**December 20, 1864 – January 15, 1865** – Union forces take Savannah. The 90<sup>th</sup> afterward splits its time between Fort McAllister and Savannah. From *The Making of a Man*: “I remember having a good time at Savannah racing horses. I captured a full-blooded Kentucky mare, leaving a mule in its place.”

**February 17, 1865** – Present at the burning of Columbia, South Carolina.

**May 24, 1865** – Participates in the Grand Review of Sherman’s Army in Washington, D.C. From *The Making of a Man*: “Nothing further of interest occurred in my life till the close of the war, when we came on to Washington for the rally of the Army, and all were dismissed to go back to their homes.”

**June 9, 1865** – 90<sup>th</sup> regiment returns to Chicago. From *The Making of a Man*: “I went back to Chicago in June, 1865.”

If Donovan was indeed in the 90<sup>th</sup> Illinois Infantry, as seems almost certain, then he was not at Antietam or Gettysburg, as the *New York World* claimed. But most of Mike’s stories in *The Making of a Man* certainly match up, albeit with some possible embellishment.

A year after getting out of the Army, almost to the day, 18-year-old Mike Donovan engaged in his first official prizefight in St. Louis, losing by 59<sup>th</sup> round disqualification to Crowley Davis of Pittsburgh, PA. Fighting on for more than two decades, he would build one of the most impressive records of the bare-knuckle era, and earn regard as an oracle of the manly art until his death on March 24, 1918 at age 70.<sup>11</sup>

**Kenneth Bridgham is the author of *The Life and Crimes of John Morrissey* and *Homicide Hank: The Life of Boxing Legend Henry Armstrong*. He is also a contributor to [thefightcity.com](http://thefightcity.com).**

---

<sup>11</sup> Cyberboxingzone.com. Web: “Professor” Mike Donovan. Accessed 5/23/2024.