



Poet of the Lost Cause: A Life of Father Ryan

Donald Robert Beagle, Bryan Albin Giemza

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Father Abram J. Ryan (1838–1886) held dual roles in the post–Civil War era: he was at once an architect of ascendant Lost Cause ideology and one of its leading icons. Among Southern sympathizers after the war, his celebrity placed him in a pantheon of Confederate figures that included Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson. Lee's surrender at Appomattox catapulted the then twenty-seven-year-old Catholic chaplain to regional and finally national fame. His verses, which investigated faith and propagated a romanticized view of the Southern cause, went through forty-seven editions by the 1930s, and Ryan himself became a near-mythical figure: the celebrated "Poet-Priest of the South." In his eulogy for Father Ryan, Hannis Taylor declared, "The lost cause became incarnate in the heart of Father Ryan, who cherished it as his forefathers had cherished the cause of Ireland."

Ryan's deep involvement in a variety of causes—Southern, Catholic, and Irish—brought him into dialogue with cultural movements ranging from Fenianism and public school debates to sentimentalism and female religious orders. He also edited two influential postwar newspapers, and his writings made him familiar to figures ranging from Orestes Brownson and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow to Jefferson Davis and John Mitchel. His posthumous influence extended to such writers as William Faulkner, Margaret Mitchell, O. Henry, and Flannery O'Connor. Praised by President William McKinley, who recited his favorite Father Ryan verses in the White House, and by Joseph Pulitzer, who made a bequest for a Ryan memorial, Ryan was well-loved by those who commemorated a nearly imagined antebellum South—so much so that the myth of Ryan sometimes rivaled the myth of the Old South. A lack of verifiable information about Father Ryan's life aided this mythologizing process. Biographical material lies scattered in archives around the nation and the world, and much is spurious or hagiographical, particularly concerning the nature of Ryan's military service, which has remained (until now) a mystery. The result of meticulous scholarship and decades of careful collecting to create a body of reliable information, this definitive, full-length biography of the enigmatic Confederate poet presents a close examination of the man behind the myth and separates Lost Cause legend from fact.

Scholars and students of the Civil War, of the Irish in America, and of American religious history will find this a fascinating examination of a controversial figure.

Donald R. Beagle is director of library services at Belmont Abbey College in Charlotte, North Carolina, and curator of the Father Ryan Archive. His many articles have appeared in journals such as *Catholic Library World*, *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, and *Libri: International Library Review*.

Bryan A. Giemza is currently the postdoctoral fellow at the University of South Carolina's Institute for Southern Studies. He is the assistant editor of *Southern Writers: A New Biographical Dictionary*, and his articles on American literature have appeared in a variety of journals.

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