



# Wines down South



## ATLANTA'S IRISH HERO

### Father Thomas O'Reilly

By Doc Lawrence

Since childhood days, I've known about the incident. Every word is true and remains one of the most fascinating stories I know about the Civil War and St. Patrick's Day.

This wasn't about battlefield courage, a strategy that resulted in a monumental victory, or a stirring, inspirational speech. No, it was about how an Irish immigrant priest acting alone on behalf of God and innocent civilians, confronted a mighty warrior, faced impending execution squarely in the eye and peacefully won a victory that somehow escaped history books.

A native of County Cavan, Ireland, Thomas O'Reilly, appointed as pastor of Immaculate Conception Catholic Church, arrived in Atlanta in 1861. Atlanta was a strategic transportation center for the Confederacy, and in 1864, the Union army, commanded by Gen. William T. Sherman, held Atlanta under siege with intense artillery bombardment.

During the horror of Sherman's extended assault, Father O'Reilly ministered to the wounded and dying of both armies, along with civilian casualties.

After the Battle of Atlanta, the city fell, and the decision was made to destroy Georgia's infrastructure as part of Sherman's well-known "March to the Sea." Sherman issued the order for Atlanta to be burned, including all homes and churches. Enraged, O'Reilly gained an audience with Sherman at his headquarters, which is now the site of the Carter Center and Presidential Library.

The confrontation was unpleasant. O'Reilly, failing in his efforts to persuade Sherman to spare the city, was told by Sherman that he was pondering whether to have the priest summarily executed by firing squad.

Undeterred, O'Reilly reminded Sherman that his army was substantially Irish Catholic conscripts who would likely mutiny before burning a Catholic church. O'Reilly also informed Sherman that, in the event of the destruction of churches, he would take official measures to have every Irish Catholic soldier in Sherman's army excommunicated.

Sherman relented. Although the city was destroyed, five Atlanta churches were spared—three (Immaculate Conception, Trinity Methodist and Central Presbyterian) remain active today. O'Reilly was not executed. Upon his death in 1872 at age 41, he



*Fr. Thomas O'Reilly*



*Original Immaculate Conception*



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2009-2010



was buried in the basement of his church. A few possessions are on display. His resting place, which may be viewed by appointment emits the feel of a sacred shrine. I have visited there regularly over the years.

Each year, at the end of Atlanta's St. Patrick's Day parade, the Hibernian Benevolent Society of Atlanta places a wreath at the memorial for Thomas O'Reilly, which stands on the corner of Atlanta's city hall. It was erected long ago by the congregations of the churches he saved.

The courage and tenacity of Father Thomas O'Reilly embody the ecumenical spirit that continues to make Atlanta an international beacon for human rights.

Happy St. Patrick's Day!

*The Tombs of Fr. O'Reilly (L.) and Fr. Cleary (R.)  
who served as Pastor in 1881.*

Mouse over the image to see the tombs when discovered during the clean-up following a fire in 1982.