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Gathering Antipathy:

Irish Immigrants and Race in America's Age of Emancipation

Brian Kelly, Queen's University Belfast

Historical commemoration is often fraught with tension between the demand for a faithful reconstruction of the past and the conflicting pressures of the present. In this sense, at least, there is nothing exceptional in the Irish state's attempts to claim its place in the 'reminiscence industry' that has grown up around the 150th anniversary of the American Civil War. In May of 2015 Taoiseach Enda Kenny, accompanied by the US ambassador and an entourage of lesser dignitaries, travelled to Sligo to unveil a monument to some 200,000 Irish immigrants who fought in that bloody conflict. Unexpectedly, perhaps, the ceremony was met by 'angry scenes' which erupted when protestors incensed over the government's imposition of water charges and its acquiesce in allowing US military flights through Shannon airport heckled Kenny and turned their back on the speakers' platform. Following clashes between protestors and gardaí, local politicians worried that the demonstration might spoil plans for 'annual festivities' at the site where, they hoped, 'busloads of American tourists' would '[swell] the crowds.' From New York, the influential newspaperman Niall O'Dowd bitterly denounced protestors for 'sullying the good name of Ireland' with their 'remarkable display of ignorance and arrogance' in disrupting an event 'held to honor the most poor and desperate of Irish people who fled famine and misrule and ended up fighting against slavery.'[1]

Though none of the officials involved in staging the Sligo commemoration seem dimly aware of it, their ceremony for 'soldiers who served on both sides' and the monument that will outlast it represent a transatlantic extension of a quite specific way of interpreting the meaning of the American Civil War—one in which, as David Blight has written, the demands for national reconciliation and healing between whites north and south 'overwhelmed the emancipationist vision' of a war that ended in the liberation of four million slaves. Outside 'the endearing mutuality of sacrifice among soldiers that came to dominate national memory,' Blight insists, 'another process was at work[:] the attempted erasure of emancipation from the national narrative'. (Blight, 2001, pps. 2, 5) It was not exactly true, as organizers at Ballymote solemnly declared, that the war was universally regarded as 'one of [America's] most painful periods'. For the country's most downtrodden it heralded instead 'the coming of the Lord'—a reckoning long overdue and an essential prelude to the 'slaves' jubilee'. Organised public remembrance is always and everywhere a selective exercise, and in analysing commemoration we need to be attentive not only to *what is included* in narratives constructed out of a broad range of possible renderings but also to *what is left out*.

Beyond the transparent manner in which the Ballymote ceremony was conceived as an endorsement of increasing political, economic and security cooperation between the US and the Irish state during a period of profound global turbulence, the event drew upon stock elements in a facile and well-worn, teleological narrative of Irish American success. Variations of this have circulated since the early 1960s, when the Kennedy presidency seemed to consummate the

ascent of Irish Catholics to the pinnacle of US society, but today a renovated version perfectly complements the entrepreneurial zeitgeist of the neoliberal age. The first of these themes, a Celtic variation on the 'rags-to-riches' fables that circulated widely in late nineteenth-century dime novels, emphasizes the famine-era immigrants' triumph over adversity. Though they arrived destitute and friendless, much of the standard literature insists, hard work in a land of opportunity won for the immigrant Irish ethnic and religious tolerance and material prosperity. (MacRaild, 2001) A second strand in popular representation stresses the Irish contribution to American freedom. O'Dowd's assertion that the famine Irish 'ended up fighting against slavery' falls within this category, though his case is undermined by the fact that up to a fifth of the 200,000 soldiers whose service is being marked fought in Confederate ranks, in an army organized to establish a slaveholders' republic. More than that, it requires an imaginative rendering of the historical record to suggest that the Irish soldiery in Union ranks were committed to ending slavery. Scholars have detected a 'palpable bitterness and hatred for African Americans' in the letters these men sent home from the battlefield, and their most prominent spiritual leader of the time explicitly warned the Lincoln administration that any attempt to compel Irish recruits to 'fight for the abolition of slavery' would make them 'turn away in disgust'. (O'Driscoll, 2016, p. 4; Zanca, 1994, p. 247)

Even a superficial familiarity with this tumultuous period in American history precludes the depiction of mid-nineteenth century Irish immigrants as ardent fighters for black emancipation who rose, as an undifferentiated bloc, to prosperity and acceptance in the aftermath of the Civil War. Turning this facile

story of hardship overcome and devotion to freedom on its head does not move us toward a closer approximation of the truth, however. The destitution and material hardship faced by those fleeing famine-era Ireland in their adopted homeland was real, as was the pervasive ethnic and sectarian hostility that confronted them. Relations between urban Irish immigrants and the smaller African American populations in cities like Philadelphia, New York and Boston were frequently tense and occasionally explosive. The Irish—who for reasons we will explore were heavily influenced by the intense racism circulating in the mid-century America—were prominent in some of the worst racial atrocities of the era, and widely portrayed as embracing a special animus toward blacks. But like all generalisations this concealed a more complicated and varied record of interaction with African Americans. This essay, focussed on the Irish immigrant experience in the antebellum North, explores the context in which famine-era immigrants' attitudes to race and the slavery controversy took shape.

Traveling across the eastern United States on a lecture tour in the early 1880s, the Oxford-trained historian and English Liberal politician Edward A. Freeman found it difficult to suppress his disdain for the promiscuous mixing of black and white, native-born and immigrant that confronted him in cities and towns along his itinerary. The 'really queer thing,' Freeman explained to friends at home, and that which more than anything aroused his 'Aryan prejudices,' was the frequent sight of 'the niggers who swarm here,' like 'big monkeys dressed up for a game.' It had been a mistake, he thought, to make citizens of the former slaves: 'I feel a creep when I think that one of these great black apes may (in theory) be

President. Surely treat your horse kindly,' he advised, 'but don't make him consul.'[2]

By the early 1880s, Freeman's coarse denigration of African Americans' capacity for participation in American life matched the disposition among many in his host country. White Northerners had by and large repudiated the abolitionist legacy of the Civil War years, retreating from the qualified embrace of racial egalitarianism that had begun, tentatively, to undermine northern prejudice during and just after the war. But the traveller's discomfort with America's changing ethnic composition also reflected a deep unease over immigration that had permeated national life since the late 1840s. In the mob violence then becoming rife against Chinese immigrants on the west coast, Freeman found 'an exact parallel to the Jews in Russia'—an eruption of tensions driven not by religious persecution, he insisted, but by the 'natural instinct of any decent nation to get rid of filthy strangers'. A cavalier proponent of the race-laden social Darwinism then becoming ascendant on both sides of the Atlantic, Freeman proposed a formula for American citizenship that reflected his convictions about Teutonic supremacy: 'Dutchmen, high and low' should be admitted 'at once', he suggested; '[o]ther Aryans' after three generations; and 'non-Aryans not at all.' Like many of his peers then engaged in concocting elaborate hierarchies of race and ethnicity, Freeman was confused about where America's large Irish immigrant population fit along this spectrum. But his antipathy was clear: 'This would be a grand land,' he wrote from New Haven in December of 1881, 'if only every Irish man would kill a negro, and be hanged for it.'[3]

In linking the 'low Irish' with descendants of African American slaves as undesirables, Freeman drew upon tropes that had exerted a powerful hold over Anglo elite opinion on both sides of the Atlantic at mid-century, but which by the time of his visit had fallen out of fashion in the United States. In the tumultuous years between mid-century—when an intensification of sectional tensions inaugurated the long descent into civil war—and the return of the white South to power in the late 1870s, ethnic and sectarian hostility against the Irish had abated, though they remained disproportionately confined to the urban working class and over-represented in the ranks of unskilled labour. Prejudice lingered, to be sure, and would surge again dramatically in the aftermath of World War I. But the intense aggression faced by famine-era immigrants at mid-century diminished over the war years, undercut in part by their military enlistment. Black Americans, by contrast, endured a humiliating and traumatic descent—from the high optimism of the immediate post-emancipation period to the terror attending the offensive waged by the Reconstruction-era Klan and, finally, their re-subjugation after 1876 in a 'redeemed', white supremacist-led South. This was true despite their having enlisted in Union military ranks in greater numbers than their Irish-born comrades-in-arms.[4] Though linked in mid-century as twin threats to Anglo-American civilization, by the late nineteenth century the relative position of blacks and the immigrant Irish in American society diverged sharply.

Freeman's gibe drew also upon the widespread perception of an unyielding antipathy among famine-era Irish immigrants toward black Americans. Here his assumptions rested on more solid ground, though even this generalization obscures a more uneven and contradictory experience. The assertion that the

Irish provided an important constituency for proslavery forces in the late antebellum and wartime United States, and that racial antipathy toward African Americans during wartime was most palpably manifested among the urban Irish poor, is largely accurate. Few recent studies succeed, however, in offering a convincing explanation for why that section of northern white society that stood closest, in social terms, to the slave was among the least inclined to take up the anti-slavery cause and the most receptive to demagogic appeals in defence of the South's 'peculiar institution'. The explanation which has become most influential over recent years, generated by proponents of 'critical whiteness studies', rests on the immigrant community's purported embrace of white racial identity—'becoming white', to borrow from the title of one influential study. Eager to grasp the 'public and psychological wage' associated with whiteness, this literature contends, the Irish immigrant community rejected the possibility of making common cause with slaves and free blacks and moved, instead, to align itself with the dominant white 'race' and assert its racial supremacy. (Ignatiev, 1995; Du Bois, 1935, p. 700)

At a very general level this is difficult to dispute. Certainly there is no shortage of evidence attesting to the prevalence of race prejudice among Irish immigrants during the years straddling the Civil War. Though they played a negligible role in actual slave owning, the small numbers of famine-era immigrants settling in the South had made their peace with the region's 'peculiar institution', demonstrating their wartime loyalty in the ranks of the Confederate military. In the North, the Irish were overwhelmingly loyal to the Democratic Party and prominent, during the tense period preceding the outbreak of war, in street

mobilizations against a rising abolitionist movement. During wartime, Irish immigrants in New York and elsewhere engaged in violent conflicts with black Northerners and explosive confrontations with the Lincoln administration—episodes sometimes heavily laden with the rhetoric of white supremacy and unconcealed racial hostility. This antagonism between the urban Irish and African Americans outlived the war, moreover, and persisted—or was perhaps resurrected—in clashes over de-segregation more than a century later. (Formisano, 2004) While we might question claims about the *special disposition* of the Irish to embrace white supremacy there is no disputing its strength or pervasiveness in the Civil War era.

Beyond this common acknowledgment of the depths of race prejudice, however, there are problems in studies constructed around racial identity that render their explanations for the Irish embrace of 'whiteness' deeply unconvincing. Anxious to demonstrate 'the agency of the [white] working class in the social construction of race,' (Roediger, 1990, p. 10) they systematically understate the much more impressive power of the dominant classes in shaping the environment in which their relatively powerless manoeuvred and, in so doing, downplay or ignore the context that generated such palpable friction. (Kelly, 2007, pps. xxix-xlviii) Few of these studies, for example, pay serious attention to pervasive and virulent nativism, which had the effect of alienating the Irish from the most important currents of progressive reform—including the labour movement and abolition—during the antebellum period. They seem anxious, as well, to dismiss labour competition between blacks and the Irish as a contributory factor, though it's bearing on events seems self-evident. Noel

Ignatiev's seemingly generous offer to 'make [the Irish immigrant working class] the actors in their own history' (Ignatiev, 1995, p. 3) in reality amounts to obscuring the greater agency of institutions like the Democratic Party and the Catholic hierarchy in shaping immigrants' racial attitudes. Gregory Meyerson notes the peculiar way in which the foundational text in the whiteness oeuvre, David Roediger's *Wages of Whiteness*, frames the role of these powerful institutions. At most the Church can be charged with 'not questioning the whiteness of the Irish'—'reflect[ing] the racial attitudes of its members' or 'reproduce[ing] existing white supremacist attitudes without challenging them.' Framing the relationship between powerful institutions like the Church and its flock in this way, Meyerson suggests, 'biases the argument about the construction of whiteness in favour of the Irish proletariat themselves, as if the Irish proletariat first asserted this whiteness and this was not questioned.'(Roediger, p. 140; Meyerson, 1997)

In light of these problems, this chapter attempts to follow through on Kevin Kenny's appeal for a 'better historical explanation [that] shifts at least part of the focus away from individual agency and toward the wider social and cultural structure in which both Irish immigrants and African Americans operated,' (Kenny, 2000, p. 68) advancing an alternative reading of the development of deep antipathy between blacks and famine-era Irish immigrants in the years approaching the American Civil War. In the absence of other feasible options, the hostility confronting the growing Irish immigrant population from the early 1830s onward—based in varying degrees on ethnic and sectarian prejudice, anxiety among native-born Americans about the profound social and economic

changes then transforming their republic, and plain contempt for the poor among the urban middle classes—compelled a retreat into ethnic politics.

The withdrawal into the boundaries of the urban ethnic ghetto encompassed also an embrace of the immigrant-friendly Democratic Party and its proslavery outlook, a new identification with the conservative leadership of the Catholic hierarchy, and—crucially—an estrangement from the rising antislavery movement and other currents of progressive reform. Underpinning this was a deep sense of class resentment—directed at employers and urban elites, occasionally during the war at the Republican Party and its draft agents, but also at black workers, with whom the Irish found themselves frequently thrown into competition at the bottom of the northern labour market. Understandably much of the recent literature has focused on the volatility of relations between city-dwelling black northerners and Irish immigrants, exploding occasionally into lethal episodes that sometimes—as with the New York Draft Riots of 1863—show all the earmarks of a racial pogrom. Horrific as this record is, it reflects both the virulence of racism and the fact that more than any other section of white northern society, it was the Irish who lived and worked in closest proximity to blacks, and whose desperate circumstances set them off from much of the white North. Without seeking to call into question the general perception of Irish racial antipathy toward African Americans, it has to be said that sometimes, at least, living and working in close quarters seems to have generated a substantial record of interracialism—socialising, camaraderie, and public intimacy; love and occasionally marriage across the colour line; and on rare occasions even combined resistance against perceived enemies.

Immigrants had, of course, been arriving into the United States from Ireland since the early colonial period. The profile of the pre-famine migrants differed significantly from the communities that began to take shape at mid-century, however. Ulster Protestants figured disproportionately in earlier waves of settlement, and by the revolutionary period many of the Scots-Irish had assimilated without difficulty into what was in many ways a familiar society—Anglo, English-speaking and Protestant. As David Gleeson suggests, having taken part in the Revolution and in the politics of the early republic, these were 'among the first "Americans"'. (Gleeson, 2001, p. 5) New York and other growing cities had seen a further wave of Irish migration after the failed 1798 Rebellion, and many of these newcomers—mainly though not exclusively Protestant—had been influenced by the egalitarian ethos of the United Irishmen. In expanding urban enclaves up and down the east coast Irish community life was dominated by émigrés influenced by non-sectarian and republican ideals. In several key urban areas—New York, Philadelphia and Charleston among them—a spirit of ecumenical cooperation prevailed among the still small numbers who traced their lineage to Ireland, and together the assimilated Protestant and Catholic middle classes oversaw the integration of new arrivals into the life of the young republic. Importantly, while the numbers of new arrivals remained low, this generation of republican-minded ethnic leadership promoted assimilation at the same time it was able to provide a buffer against nascent anti-immigrant and anti-Catholic agitation—including sectarian provocations by Orange mobs. (Walsh, 1996, p. 65; Gleeson, pps. 15-16; Rockman, 2009, pps. 31-32)

As the influx began to accelerate in the early 1830s, however, and as the composition of the immigrant community began to reflect increasing desperation among poorer Catholics from the rural south and west of Ireland, nativist hostility intensified dramatically. Well before the onset of famine, the men of '98 had lost their hold over urban Irish immigrant communities, and among newcomers a retreat was underway toward a more defensive ethnic politics that 'relied increasingly on the rough and tumble street tactics of machine politics.' (Gilje, 1996, p. 79; Gleeson, pps. 14-16) The parting of ways reflected not only sectarian divisions, but also growing social and economic cleavages between a prosperous, established elite and an incoming flood of rural poor who would, in many urban areas, find themselves confined to living in deplorable slum conditions and earning a meagre living at the lower end of the unskilled labour market. Significantly, tensions arose not only between the immigrant poor and middle-class Protestants, but between the labouring classes and Catholic elites as well: bitter confrontation erupted between church trustees and the 'lower-class Irish' over the selling of pews in Manhattan's St. Peter's Church, for example. (Gilje, p. 73)

Regional differences shaped the evolution of immigrant communities, and these became more pronounced with the flood of new, mostly destitute immigrants driven across the Atlantic by famine. Of the 1.2 million Irish-born living in the United States on the eve of the Civil War, less than 7 per cent made their homes in the slave South. (Gleeson, p. 2) North and south the Irish concentrated overwhelmingly in large towns and cities, though the demand for railroad, canal and mining labour brought significant numbers into the rural interior, the

Midwest and even the booming far West. Their presence as a cohesive ethnic group, however, was felt most acutely in the expanding industrial and commercial cities of the Northeast and the port cities of the South. New York had earned a reputation by the mid-1840s as 'most Irish city in the Union', though proportionally it lagged behind both Boston and Jersey City, with Philadelphia not far behind. New Orleans, Savannah, Charleston and Memphis in the South were each home to established Irish communities by mid-century. Throughout the antebellum period the region's growing obsession with abolition tempered nativist aggression below the Mason Dixon line, but relations between native-born southern whites and Irish immigrants remained volatile, with tensions exploding into street fighting in New Orleans during the mid-1850s. (Gleeson, pps. 107-120)

Famine-induced migration wrought dramatic transformations in the size and social weight of Irish immigrant communities, testing the already strained relations between mostly Anglo and Protestant city fathers and the new, overwhelmingly Catholic Irish in the North. The arrival of some fifty thousand destitute Irish immigrants to the city of Boston during the decade of the 1850s inaugurated a fundamental transformation in that city's economic and cultural profile. Before 1830, new arrivals had never exceeded two thousand annually. In 1840 their numbers had increased to just under four thousand, but by 1849—just two years after the onset of the potato blight in Ireland—that number had multiplied seven-fold to 29,000. An overwhelming majority of these immigrants were Irish-born, so that by 1855 Boston's Irish population had gone from a mere handful before the famine to over fifty thousand, or a third of the city's total

population. It was this meteoric rise that led Theodore Parker to complain that the city of the Puritan fathers was being transformed into 'the Dublin of America.' (Handlin, 1959, p. 56; Mulkern, 1990, p. 14) New York experienced similar growth: between 1847 and 1851 some 1.8 million immigrants disembarked there, of whom nearly 850,000 were Irish. By 1855 Irish immigrants made up 28 per cent of the population of Manhattan, and across the East River the Irish settled into Brooklyn in similar numbers. Philadelphia grew by more than 165,000 between 1850 and the eve of the war, with Irish immigrants making up the bulk of that expansion. (Diner, p. 91)

Though a considerable number of new arrivals eventually found their way into the interior, setting out on overland routes for Philadelphia and other interior cities and towns, canal and railroad work camps and coal-mining districts, many found themselves confined in overcrowded urban settings lacking the basic infrastructure necessary for absorbing them. Conditions were especially dismal in the overcrowded slum housing of Manhattan's notorious Sixth Ward—described by one journalist as a 'great central ulcer of wretchedness—the very rotting Skeleton of Civilization' where 'the scattered debris of the Irish nation' was herded into wretched tenement housing.[5] In Boston as elsewhere the rapid influx of tens of thousands of immigrants overwhelmed the housing supply. In the city's North End and in Fort Hill, vacant warehouse buildings were hastily partitioned to make room for the newcomers. Dank underground cellars previously deemed unfit for human occupancy became home to extended families, with flimsy "sheds" and "shanties" thrown up hastily to house those unable to secure proper housing. 'This whole district,' the City Health

Commissioner wrote in 1852, 'is a perfect hive of human beings, without comforts and mostly without common necessities.' On the eve of the war, authorities observed that newcomers were 'huddled together like brutes, without regard to sex, age or decency' in neighbourhoods where 'despair, or disorder, intemperance and utter degradation rule supreme.'[6] Philadelphia, by contrast, seems to have offered some relief: beyond the slums at the city's core, a patchwork of neighbourhoods served as 'cloistered way stations between urban and rural living,' where 'garden plots and a smattering of livestock came as standard accoutrement to the city scene.' (Wiebe, 1967, p. 3)

Health and sanitary conditions barely figured in the conversion of commercial buildings and other structures to make them suitable for accommodation, with the result that the most depressed immigrant neighbourhoods were inevitably hardest hit by illness and disease. Of 2742 New Yorkers who succumbed to cholera in 1850, 1086 were Irish-born. Overall the death rate among Irish immigrants between 1850 and 1859—mainly from consumption—was 21 per cent, while among non-Irish it stood at just 3 per cent, leading Bishop John Hughes to label the illness 'the natural death of the Irish emigrants.' (Hershkowitz, 1996, p. 21) When a cholera epidemic seized Boston in 1849, it left its mark almost exclusively among the immigrant poor. More than five hundred of the seven hundred fatalities in that year were among the Irish. Sea Street in the North End accounted for 44 deaths, and one particular address in an adjacent street suffered 'no less than thirteen casualties.' Another wave of cholera five years later showed the same pattern, though with fewer casualties,

and the difference attributed by authorities to the vacating of cellars 'which in the former years were crowded with inhabitants.'[7]

On the whole their poverty, their dense concentration in slum districts with few amenities, and the precariousness of life at the bottom made new immigrants predictably vulnerable to a range of social ills. In New York's slums the Irish 'succumbed by the thousands to the ill effects of long-term poverty, such as crime, insanity, domestic violence, prostitution, and alcoholism.' (Vodrey, 2003) Irish-born women made up a large proportion of the city's 50,000 prostitutes in 1850—many of them in their teen years and early twenties. In proportion far greater than their actual numbers, the Irish filled the hospitals and alms houses, jails and lunatic asylums, the workhouses and the morgues. (Hershkowitz, p. 21) By 1850 immigrants accounted for 97 per cent of the residents at Boston's Deer Island Almshouse, 75 per cent of the prisoners in the county jail, 97 per cent of the city's truants and vagabonds, and 58 per cent of its paupers. Newspaper accounts attributed the leap in crime rates to the arrival of the famine Irish, and the newcomers were castigated as immoral and uncivilised. The pressures of acculturation in unfamiliar and increasingly hostile surroundings took its toll on the mental health of many immigrants, forcing Massachusetts to build two new hospitals and the city of Boston to fund a new 'asylum of its own, largely to care for Irish laborers, for among other groups the incidence of lunacy was much lower.' (Ryan, 1983, p. 23; Handlin, p. 126)

An occasionally raucous anti-immigrant campaign that had been percolating since the 1830s needed little encouragement to see in these figures direct

confirmation of its worst fears that newcomers posed a threat to the republic. Nativism arose out of complex circumstances, coinciding with and drawing upon an intoxicating wave of evangelical revival (and a more sobering turn to temperance agitation), but it also represented a reaction against deep structural changes remaking the antebellum US economy. The declining status of (overwhelmingly Protestant) skilled artisans and the rise of a permanent class of wage earners in a rapidly industrialising North undermined popular confidence that the new republic was immune to the stark inequalities that riddled old Europe. In Massachusetts as elsewhere the Know-Nothing movement drew its strength from the ranks of native workers and mechanics who 'had to live cheek by jowl with impoverished foreigners, and daily face the challenge that the Irish Catholics posed,' blaming the Irish, along with 'the politicians and wealthy elites for having blocked "true reform" and for having forced American working people to seek employment under disadvantages.' (Mulkern, p. 67)

Steeped in populism and taking their stand insecurely on the bridge between the pastoral ideal of the artisan's republic and the creeping reality of industrial capitalism, nativists directed their venom more frequently against immigrants—as the most visible manifestation of republican declension—than against native-born elites. There was 'a disposition in the United States to use the immigrants, and especially the Irish, much as the cat is used in the kitchen to account for broken plates and food which disappears,' the British historian James Bryce observed, though, as he acknowledged, New York and the urban North were 'not an Eden before the Irish came.' (Bryce, 1920 rep., p. 241) The presence of a militant Orange constituency in major cities like New York and Philadelphia

enhanced the odds that incoming Irish Catholics would find themselves at the receiving end of mob violence; both cities were roiled by rioting and violent street confrontations from the mid-1830s onward.

Serious rioting between nativists and the Irish had erupted in New York during election season in the fall of 1834, coinciding with the burning of the Ursuline Convent just outside of Boston's city limits. A decade later Philadelphia was rocked by intense violence throughout May and June of 1844, and in the same year nativists succeeded in electing one of their own—James Harper—to the mayoral office in New York, where 'gangs of nativist brawlers fought often with the Irish.' (Vodrey, 2003) In the period approaching mid-century 'the no-Popery press sprang to life' (Walsh, p. 69) across the urban North: a steady stream of xenophobic pamphlets and broadsheets filled with lurid exposés of Catholic debauchery and papist designs against republican liberty circulated widely. Street violence represented the extreme end of a growing spectrum of nativist sentiment that not only gave rise to a powerful new political current—the 'Know-Nothings'—but which shifted the terms of political discussion across the North, injecting the 'immigrant question' into movements for social reform.

By 1850 this growing polarisation had been aggravated in cities like Boston, New York and Philadelphia both by the shattering of their earlier ethnic and religious homogeneity and the pressures that the famine-era influx brought to bear on an already overstretched social and economic infrastructure. Boston and New York were finance and commercial rather than industrial centres, and neither city could offer new arrivals economic stability, let alone prosperity. With a growing

industrial economy and expanding opportunities for employment in the outlying coal districts, Philadelphia seemed to offer brighter prospects, but even there the vast majority of Irish immigrants made their living through menial labour on the fringes of the economy. For many natives, the expansion of slum districts, the visible increase in desperate urban poverty became conflated with the immigrants themselves: the Irish were poor because they lacked the rudimentary elements of a civilized people. It was their deficiencies—perhaps intrinsic *racial* deficiencies, some insisted—that explained the moral and economic decline on display in the cities. 'The great and continual influx of Foreign Paupers among us,' Boston city officials complained in 1852, 'has become an alarming evil, and one which should arrest the attention of all citizens.' The city's fathers drew a distinction between 'the honest poverty of our own or our adopted citizens' and the 'poor, the vicious and the degraded, who are constantly being shipped like cattle to our shores, to become objects of charity and support.' The report ended with a lament that the city did not have the authority to deport these paupers back 'from whence they came.'[8]

One of the collateral effects of nativism was the atrophy it injected into still-fragile shoots of working-class organization. Even without the rise of anti-immigrant hostility the antebellum labour movement, such as it was, suffered severe disadvantages. Labour reform during the period before the Civil War was pre-eminently an expression of artisan discontent, expressing the backward-glancing frustrations of relatively privileged white male craft workers unable to hold off the oncoming wave of deep change brought on by industrialization. Even without the influx of the Irish, craft-rooted organised labour displayed a deep

ambivalence—bordering on outright hostility—toward the swelling ranks of women workers and unskilled factory hands. The populist sensibility underpinning the Know-Nothing movement directed its ire both upward, against Whig politicians and the business interests thought to dominate them, and downward against vulnerable immigrants. The effects in Massachusetts were profound. According to David Montgomery, '[t]he state's labor movement was thoroughly destroyed by the pitting of native trade unionist against immigrant factory hand and the divorcing of both from middle-class reformers'. (Montgomery, 1967, p. 120) When in 1856 Irish labourers in Boston organised a trade union they did so outside the ranks of established labour movement, and although largely excluded from the craft organisations that dominated the local scene, the Irish figured prominently in a number of strikes. Even the ultra-conservative Boston *Pilot* featured regular strike coverage, and its letters page was often filled with exchanges over the 'labour question', with one reader penning a vigorous defence of Lynn shoe strikers against 'the monopolists of this enlightened nineteenth century [who] consider the poor only as a stepping stone to palaces of grandeur and luxury.'[9]

Increasing competition between native and foreign-born workers and the lowering of wages due to a flooded labour market reinforced the perception among many that the Irish were to blame for the precarious position that native mechanics found themselves in. Everywhere in the 1850s the Irish found themselves confined to unskilled menial labour at the precarious margins of the economy: gruelling, low-paying and unsteady physical labour for men; lower-paid domestic work for women. Moreover, the prominent role assumed by the

Church hierarchy in blocking progressive legislation reinforced the popular association of Catholicism with despotism, and provided the pretext for an aggressive assault upon the Irish community. The prominent nativist minister Lyman Beecher, whose bellicose anti-immigrant sermon in 1834 was thought by some to have inspired the burning of the Ursuline Convent, referred to the Irish as a 'dead mass of ignorance and superstition' and 'priest-driven human machines'. Other nativists complained that men 'fresh from the bogs of Ireland' were 'led up to the desk like dumb brutes, their hands guided to make a straight mark' to 'vote down intelligent and honest native citizens.' (Wittke, 119, 116)

If the fledgling labour movement seemed an undependable ally for Irish immigrants, so too did the most important reform movement of the age: abolition. While it is unfair to lump antislavery activists in with nativists as consistently sectarian, there was enough of an element of truth in this to provide conservative Catholic clerics with a means of immunising their flock against their pernicious influence. Northern abolition drew its moral strength and early fervour from Protestant-led social reform, and while a minority in its ranks laboured vigorously to overcome the gulf dividing them from new immigrants, others were less energetic, resigned to accept the chasm as inevitable, or positively content with the exclusion of Catholics. William Lloyd Garrison, editor of the Boston-based *Liberator* and a severe critic of Christian complicity in the "sin" of slavery, was one of those troubled by the antagonism but unable to divine a path toward healing the rift. After a series of riots in Philadelphia in which Irish immigrants were conspicuous for their role in attacks on Blacks, Garrison noted the 'strange and shocking spectacle' of seeing 'those who have

been forced by oppression and want to become exiles from their native [land] combining to crush and drive out of our borders a portion of the native population.' By 1845, exasperated at the failure of the Irish in America to respond to Daniel O'Connell's powerful denunciation of slavery, Garrison concluded that the Irish were a 'mighty obstacle...in the way of negro emancipation on our soil.' (Osofsky, 1975, pps. 900, 906)

Garrison's frustration over the antislavery movement's lack of success in recruiting Irish immigrant support—widely shared by other abolitionists untainted by nativism—is understandable. But in their zeal to defend northern society against pernicious attacks from defenders of slavery many of them seem to have become defensive about its deficiencies and unwilling to acknowledge that the North, too, suffered increasingly from glaring inequalities. This rendered abolitionists unreceptive to valid critiques emanating from the labour movement, and hostile to any attempts to compare the plight of the slaves with that of impoverished and overworked northern free labourers, including the immigrant poor. In effect this left agitation over class inequality in the exclusive hands of Democratic Party demagogues who, as the escaped slave Frederick Douglass put it, 'harped upon the wrongs of Irishmen, while in truth they care no more about Irishmen...than they care about the whipped, gagged, and thumb-screwed slave.'[10]

Northern workers discerned a contradiction between abolitionist sympathy for slaves in the South and their indifference toward the poor in their midst, and some antislavery activists, at least, were willing to acknowledge this. 'I believe

that one reason the working classes of the whole country have not come up by instinct and in masses, to the support of [black] Freedom,' one speaker explained to a Boston audience in 1850, 'is that our Anti-Slavery friends have not gone far enough in showing that man is man everywhere. They have not carried their doctrine of equality in its application to our social usages.' Another suggested that 'if the working people of the states could be brought, by lectures delivered to them by working men...to understand [slavery's] encroachment upon their fair earnings, how few among them, *especially the Irish portion*, would by their votes sanction the longer continuance of slavery.' The historian Bruce Laurie writes that 'it was possible for some ordinary men and women to be aware of the injustice of the mill and of the plantation—to support one another and to sympathise with the slaves,' but the possibility seems to have escaped even advanced antislavery activists. (Kelly, 2007, p. xxxix)

The most obvious, if unanticipated effect of pervasive nativist hostility had been to push Irish immigrants into the close embrace of two powerful institutions: the Catholic Church and the Democratic Party. The impulse among an overwhelmingly rural people to hang on to the Church as a familiar point of reference in a disorienting new context may have been strong even in the absence of anti-immigrant mobilisation, but nativist agitation powerfully reinforced that tendency. As Hasia Diner has written, one of the stock elements of church discourse in pre-famine New York City was its disappointment with the lax religious devotion of their 'unchurched' Irish flock. (Diner, 1996, pp. 102-104) The complaint by one priest that 'half our Irish population here is Catholic merely because Catholicity was the religion in the land of their birth' gives some

indication of the frustrations endured by the hierarchy. The famine years, Diner writes, marked the transformation of the church from a folk institution in Ireland to an ecclesiastical one in the American setting. Jay P. Dolan concurs, arguing that the famine Irish arrived in the US 'as religious orphans—not well grounded in official Roman Catholicism and uprooted from their traditional popular Catholicism.' (Dolan, 1975, p. 57; Dolan, 2000)

In New York at the North and in Charleston to the south Bishops Hughes and John England 'succeeded in making the Irish devout' through their sympathetic defence of poor immigrants against external hostility and—in New York especially—the systematic construction of an array of Church-run institutions to oversee their spiritual, educational and material needs. One need not subscribe to the monolithic representation of the Irish community popularised by Beecher and others to allow that the Church hierarchy exerted tremendous influence in shaping the social outlook of lay Catholic immigrants; but that power derived in part from the closing down of other options by nativists. Diner concludes that 'the efforts of the clergy alone' cannot account for this transformation; the 'shrill anti-Catholicism' of the nativists 'heightened [immigrant] devotion to the Church'. (Diner, p. 103)

Critics were justified in charging that the Catholic hierarchy was consistent in its opposition to mid-nineteenth century social reform. North and South the Church urged 'acceptance of human institutions as God's revealed will.' Crucially, their acquiescence to the status quo made the Church complicit in slavery and opposed to the 'mischief' of abolition. Hughes insisted that 'the abolitionists have

not the right to touch slavery in the United States,' and the hierarchy's acceptance of slavery was but one element in a thoroughly conservative worldview. Critics who followed the tumultuous events in Europe during the 1840s were aware that the Church had positioned itself on the side of reaction and against attempts by republicans to secure democratic reform. Bishop Hughes—in his early American sojourn a forthright opponent of slavery—denounced reformers as 'infidels and heretics' and the editor of the Catholic-controlled *Boston Pilot* warned readers in 1851 that 'wherever you find a free-soiler, you find an anti-hanging man, women's rights man, an infidel frequently, bigoted protestant always, a socialist, a red republican[.]' Church opposition to free public education branded it an enemy of progress in the eyes of many, and on occasion the official response to Protestant charges of Catholic intolerance only fuelled nativist fears. 'The Church is of necessity intolerant,' a Catholic newspaper in St. Louis acknowledged in 1851. 'Heresy she endures when and where she must,' it warned, but if Catholics should gain a sufficient majority, 'religious freedom in this country is at an end—so say our enemies [and] so say we.'[11] (Gleeson, 92; Wittke, 129, 118)

Irish loyalty to the Democrats likewise resulted from a dearth of real options. The abstention of the existing labour movement from undertaking any action that might pull together native and foreign-born, skilled and unskilled, and the strength of anti-immigrant prejudice among both the Whigs and their Know-Nothing challengers left the Irish with little in the way of a viable political alternative. The barrier which nativism erected between the Irish and social reformers led Irish immigrants into a semi-formal alliance with the most

conservative current in American politics—embodied in the Democratic Party, and more particularly in its patronage-wielding urban political machines—which combined proslavery apologetics with an explicit appeal to immigrants and demagogic appeals to white workingmen. In Philadelphia and New York the Irish served as the 'pawns of the urban Democratic machine'. (Diner, 102) In Massachusetts, where the Know-Nothings wielded power, they 'initiated an attack on [immigrants]' that 'went beyond anything found elsewhere in the country'—initiating a highly sensationalised investigation into 'Nunneries' and deporting hundreds of Irish paupers 'across the Atlantic with less ceremony and formality...than goes to the sending of a tub of butter, or barrel of apples, from Fitchburg to Boston'. (Mulkern, p. 103) 'Abused, hounded, attacked by their neighbours in the name of saving the land from "Catholic bigotry",' David Montgomery writes, 'the Irish withdrew as far as possible from the community around them and dealt with it only through the mediation of the priest and the Hunker Democrat.' (Montgomery, p. 166)

In Boston, at least, this withdrawal from the ostensible pluralism of American life—the turn to a 'countercultural separatism', (Walsh, p. 96) as one scholar has put it—meant voluntary physical segregation, often in ethnically homogenous neighbourhoods. After 1850, Boston's Irish community was geographically confined in several densely packed districts. The insularity of these communities is illustrated by the fact that at mid-century the Boston Irish married outside in their own ranks even less frequently than African Americans. By the mid-1850s, '[t]wo distinct cultures flourished in Boston with no more contact than if three thousand miles of ocean...stood between them.' (Handlin, pps. 182, 146) Some

have argued that the city's smaller African American population (less than 2000 in 1850) fared better than the new immigrants in the local economy, and one historian recounts that 'Negroes joined Yankees in condemning the Irish for being Priest-ridden, paupers, drunkards, and rioters, and in an effort to protect what little property they owned [on Beacon Hill] some of them signed a petition in the 1850s to keep the Irish from encroaching on their neighbourhood.' (Ryan, p. 130) None of the major studies of Boston tell us much about those work and residential locations where the lives of Africans and Irish immigrants overlapped.

Elsewhere in the urban North and perhaps even more dramatically in the seaport South circumstances precluded the sharp delineation of immigrant turf from the rest of the city, making promiscuous interaction between Blacks and the Irish routine rather than exceptional. The Sixth Ward in Mobile, Alabama, included the largest Irish and the largest slave population in the city, David Gleeson reminds us. Railroad expansion from the early 1850s brought an influx of Irish to Memphis, until by the outbreak of war Irish immigrants constituted a third of its white population. (Gleeson, p. 124; Robinson, 1982, p. 79) In New York's densely packed Sixth Ward where 'blacks and Irish brushed regularly against one another,' a turbulent, ambiguous interracialism developed on the squalid edifice of the city's worst slums. In the notorious Five Points neighbourhood, Graham Hodges argues, relations between African Americans and Irish immigrants were 'polyvalent:' despite living cheek-by-jowl in sometimes intense economic competition, 'Irish and black coexisted far more peacefully than historians have suggested.' Despite the regularity with which

rioting erupted in the district, 'strikingly little violence occurred between Irish and blacks,' and on at least one occasion both groups found themselves the victims of an incursion emanating from outside the neighbourhood. In Philadelphia, as well, many of the Irish 'settled in neighbourhoods…populated by African Americans,' and were 'often closely associated with free blacks, both in terms of their perceived racial attributes [and] their patterns of work.' [12]
(Hodges, 1996, pps. 112-113, 124, 115-116)

Workplace interactions, though frequently marked by racial antipathy and violence, were more complicated and uneven than studies constructed around the Irish embrace of 'whiteness' suggest. While the recent scholarship has focused on Irish immigrants' defence of 'their' jobs from African American competitors in the North, in many places the Irish staked a claim on particular sectors of the labour market only by driving out the (far less numerous) black workers who had occupied them previously. In antebellum New York and Boston, African Americans had dominated the service sector and menial labour—working as waiters, domestic servants, cooks and common labourers—until an influx of immigrants willing to undercut their wages began to dislodge them. (Diner, p. 100) Some occupations—porters and washerwomen—remained fairly mixed, and in others—notably along the docks—control over specific wharves changed hands frequently among competing ethnic and racial blocs (Germans, Irish, African Americans), and often under the deliberate manipulation of employers. Even in the slave South, there were contexts in which Irish free labourers and black slaves worked side-by-side: universally their paths crossed while performing 'monotonous physical labor'—unskilled

work, often along the docks or in gruelling ditch-digging, levee building and canal labour. At New Orleans and at Savannah Irish dockworkers organised the cities' first trade unions, which in a new post-emancipation context following the war would be transformed by the sheer necessity of interracial cooperation. Among white artisans at the South, however, wherever they could their efforts were aimed at excluding slave competitors. The essential point in understanding this record of conflict is that, as James Barrett has argued, the 'functioning of the market, carefully cultivated by [employers], virtually guaranteed ethnic [and racial] competition over jobs[.] Whatever conflicts rose over cultural tensions, employers' habits of hiring outsiders at lower wages and breaking up labor organizations reinforced Irish hostility toward newcomers'. (Barrett, 2012, p. ??) On the whole, black labour's hold over occupations which they'd previously dominated was not dislodged by force or intimidation (though that certainly occurred) so much as overwhelmed by sheer numbers: just 12,000 Blacks lived in all of Manhattan (population 630,000) in 1855, for example, as compared with over 175,000 Irish immigrants. In Boston at the same time two thousand African Americans shared the city with more than 50,000 newcomers from Ireland who by then made up a third of the city's population. (Gleeson, pps. 123-124, 52, 46; Starobin, 1970, pps. 211-214)

Both aspects of this contradictory record of interaction between the Irish poor and African Americans in the workplaces and neighbourhoods of the urban North are worth bearing in mind as we consider the hardening of racial divisions that coincided with the descent toward war. The Church's opposition to antislavery agitation was well established by the outbreak of hostilities, though

the hierarchy bent, temporarily, to accommodate the popular outrage that shook the urban North in the wake of the Confederate attack on Sumter in April 1861. The Democratic Party carried on a relentless campaign during the build-up to war and well into the conflict to inoculate white workers in the North against support for emancipation, with its press warning incessantly of the spectre of black hordes coming northward with emancipation. (Man, 1951) Such fear-mongering was aimed directly at exploiting the insecurities of their immigrant supporters: '[H]undreds and thousands, if not millions of [freed] slaves will come North and West,' the *Cincinnati Enquirer* warned readers, 'and will be either competitors with our white mechanics and laborers, degrading them by their competition, or they will have to be supported as paupers as public expense.' (McPherson, 1982, p. 274)

Together their desperate economic predicament, their estrangement from the most progressive currents of the day, and their continual exposure to the anti-abolitionist propaganda of the Democratic Party and the Catholic hierarchy generated, among famine-era Irish immigrants, a toxic antipathy to the cause of the slaves and their free black allies in the North. They were easy fodder for the designs of proslavery Democrats in the urban North, who agitated throughout the early stages of the war against the Lincoln administration. If we add to these conditions the inequities of the draft and the added privations of wartime, it is unsurprising that their early support for the Union gave way among the immigrant poor to seething, unfocused resentment. The 1863 New York Draft Riots—easily the most horrific episode to shake the northern home front during the Civil War—combined all of these elements (including as its backdrop a

simmering labour dispute) to produce an explosive wave of lethal rage—directed early on against federal military officials, Republican authorities and symbols of wealth in the city, but later, notably, in pitiless attacks on defenceless African Americans. (Bernstein, 1990) Though there was nothing ‘rational’ in this orgy of violence, its trajectory had been shaped by the long history of Irish immigrant alienation in the years since mid-century.

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