

# The Green And The Black

## Irish Nationalism and the Dilemma of Abolitionism

By John Wertheimer

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We will do all that in us lies . . . to overthrow the most execrable system of slavery that has ever been witnessed upon earth.<sup>1</sup>

During the course of . . . the most flagrant and flagitious misrule that is recorded in history, there has accumulated in Ireland a colossal mass of injustice; which Fenianism, like a new Hercules, has resolved to sweep away.<sup>2</sup>

At first blush, the two above statements appear to have much in common. Each advocated the liberation of an oppressed people from the bonds of social and political injustice. Each was extreme in its moral reasoning and passionate in its articulation. Thus it is something of a paradox that for as long as the movement championed in the first of these statements, abolitionism, was conspicuous in the public life of the United States, the primary American proponents of the movement championed in the second, Irish nationalism, were among its most consistent opponents.

To William Lloyd Garrison, the reluctance of Irish-Americans to give "even the slightest countenance to the anti-slavery movement" was as "strange and shocking" as it was "deplorable."<sup>3</sup> Well over a century later, the phenomenon remains better known than understood. Historians have explained Irish-American views in various ways. One interpretive school maintains that Irish immigrants, being conservative, ritualistic Catholics,<sup>4</sup> were culturally deaf to the call of reforms such as abolitionism—reforms which allegedly bloomed only in progressive, Protestant minds.<sup>5</sup> A second group of historians argues that Irish-Americans opposed abolitionism because they feared that it would loose a flood of ex-slaves, swamping northern labor markets and taking jobs away from Irish laborers.<sup>6</sup> Others believe that the barriers separating the Irish-American community from the antislavery movement were primarily ones of ideology and class. They argue that middle-class abolitionists failed to attract the Irish because their individualistic notions of freedom, their focus on self-ownership, did not resonate with the social experiences of Irish and other northern workers.<sup>7</sup>

Each of these approaches is instructive. But questions remain. For instance, if, as some have argued, Irish-American Catholics were inherently insensitive to the reform ethos, how can we account for the persistent and at times fanatical zeal that Irish-Americans displayed for various reform causes, especially Irish liberation? Furthermore, while the *perception* of Irish-black labor competition is undeniable, the actuality is less obvious. A much greater threat of competition than that posed by blacks came from other immigrants—especially other Irish immigrants. Yet this more serious "objective" threat caused Irish-Americans no concern whatsoever; perhaps instead of merely assuming that their shared position in the ranks of unskilled labor necessarily prejudiced the Irish against efforts to improve the status of blacks, we might explore why it seems to have worked out in this way.

Finally, if it was the reformers' middle-class individualistic ideology that initially alienated the working classes from the anti-slavery movement, how can we account for what happened in

the 1850s? Long after the free labor program of the early Republican party had, in Eric Foner's words, "solved" the "ideological debate between labor and abolitionism"<sup>8</sup> and had attracted the support of large segments of the non-Irish working class, Irish-Americans of all classes remained firmly opposed. What explains the peculiar persistence of Irish-American anti-abolitionism?

In part these questions arise from the common assumption that the Irish understood "abolitionism" much as the abolitionist did, and simply disagreed with the reformers about its desirability. This image of shoulder-to-shoulder opposition over a fixed question obscures the possibility that the two groups may have divergent notions about what precisely was at issue. In fact, an examination of the views of an Irish nationalist hero named Thomas Francis Meagher and the influential New York newspaper he founded, the *Irish News*, reveals that their understanding of abolitionism—and not just their opinions with regard to it—differed considerably from that of the abolitionists. Stated briefly, while antislavery reformers understood abolitionism to be the movement to contain and extinguish slavery, the Irish-American New Yorkers under study saw abolitionism as a spurious pretext which intolerant Yankee reformers hoped to use to gain national power in order to stamp out the rights of the foreign-born. Recognizing these very different perspectives, we see that the Irish may well have resisted the antislavery impulse for reasons having little to do with religious temperament, economic interest, or social theory—for reasons, in fact, having little to do with slavery.

While they opposed abolitionism, Irish-Americans of the mid-nineteenth century were avid champions of a different liberation movement: the drive to free Ireland from English rule. The great popularity of Irish nationalism had two bases in the Irish-American mind. First, Irish immigrants carried with them powerful memories of the poverty, deprivation, and oppression they had left behind in Ireland. They blamed these problems in large measure on English domination and misrule. Concern over the plight of their homeland, combined with guilt about having left,<sup>9</sup> fueled a lasting hatred of England in the hearts of almost all Americans who drew their "first sustenance . . . from the breast of an Irish mother."<sup>10</sup>

Secondly, Irish-American nationalism reflected social conditions in America. The fight for Irish independence was inextricably linked to the ongoing fight for Irish self-esteem in the New World. By attacking British rule across the ocean, Irish-Americans hoped also to attack the "floating prejudice in this country, imported from England[,] that the Irish are an inferior race."<sup>11</sup>

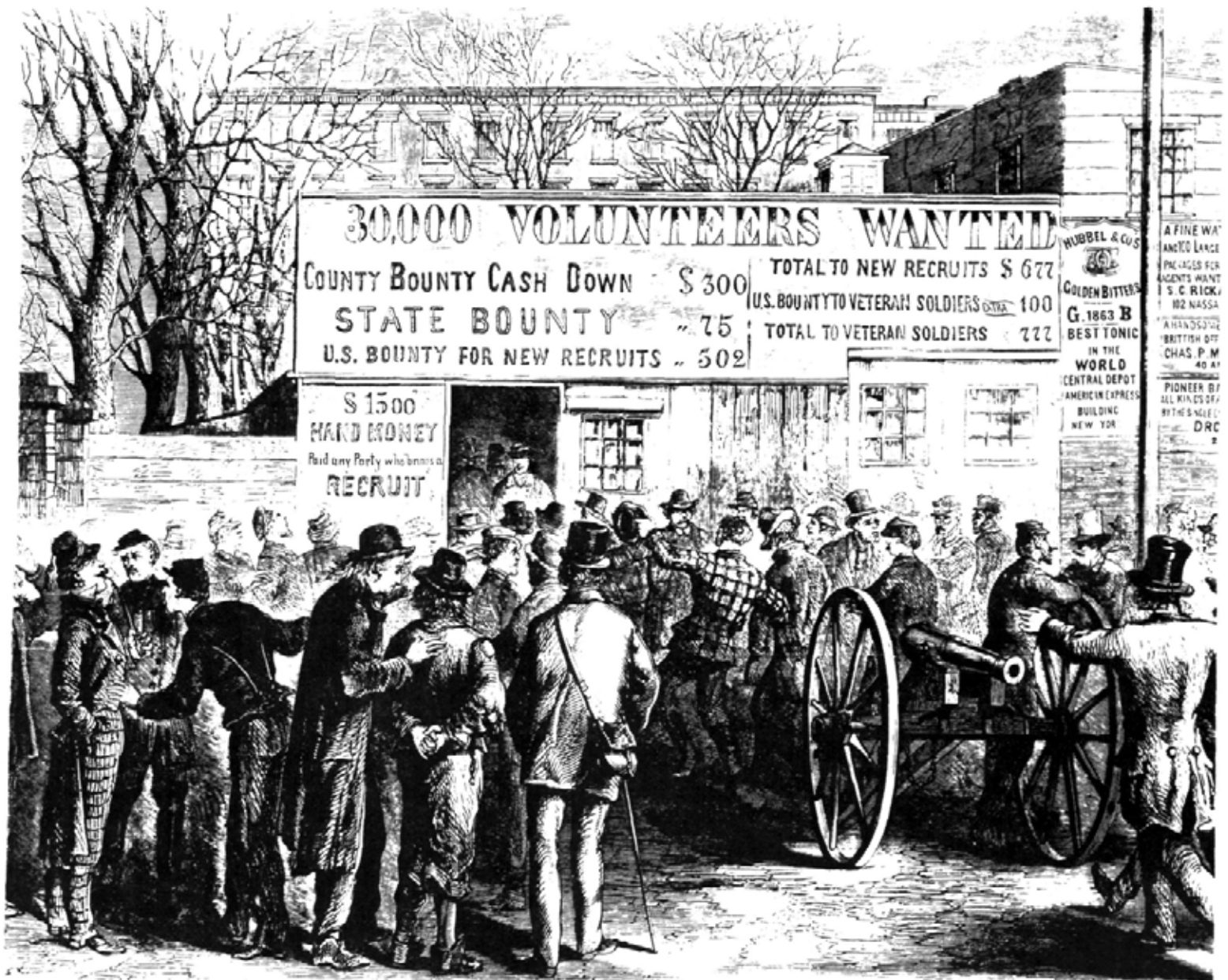
The mixture of old-world and new-world impulses was potent. The conviction that "Ireland must be ruled by the Irish" came to be held more persistently and passionately in America than in Ireland itself. Nationalism became the "ruling passion" for many second- and third-generation Irish-Americans who had never even laid eyes on their ancestral homeland. Irish-American newspapers and community leaders constantly asserted their hatred of England and their hopes for a liberated Ireland. These developments did not go unnoticed across the Atlantic. Nationalists in Ireland recognized that, at least in terms of patriotic zeal, Irish-Americans were "even more Irish than the Irish"; similarly, observers in London noted that in some ways "the Irish question is mainly an Irish-American question."<sup>12</sup>

Around the 1830s and 1840s, when Irish-Americans and their

nationalism were playing increasingly prominent roles in American public life,<sup>13</sup> the American antislavery movement was also coming into its own. It did not take long for abolitionists to perceive what they took to be a natural harmony between their own cause and that of the Irish. The peasants of Ireland faced an oppressive, unjust order that seemed in some respects to be analogous to the situation blacks faced in the American South. Abolitionists also found inspiration in the Irish agitation for self-government. They saw the Irish nationalist movement as being one part of a great, international reform crusade in which they themselves played leading roles. Early in the 1840s American abolitionists attempted to hitch the two movements together in what they hoped would become a unified struggle against oppression.<sup>14</sup>

Nationalists in Ireland were all for it. The movement's most prominent leader during these years, a charismatic Catholic named Daniel O'Connell, became a spirited ally of American abolitionists. The same beliefs that informed O'Connell's quest for liberation at home led him to become a staunch opponent of American slavery. "I am the friend of liberty in every clime, class, and color," the "Irish Liberator" proclaimed, adding that his "sympathy with distress is not confined within the narrow bounds of my own green island."<sup>15</sup>

O'Connell and his followers in Ireland worked together with American abolitionists to encourage Irish-Americans to join the fight against slavery. The two groups collaborated on a pamphlet, the "Address from the People of Ireland to their Countrymen and



"Despite the fighting reputation of the Irish Brigade, the Irish were the most under-represented group [in the Union Army] in proportion to population, followed by German Catholics. . . . The under-representation of Catholic immigrants can be explained in part by the Democratic allegiance of these groups and their opposition to Republican war aims, especially emancipation."

—James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era*, pp. 606-7

Countrywomen in America." The address implored Irish-Americans: "Continue to love liberty-hate slavery-CLING BY THE ABOLITIONISTS-and in America you will do honor to the name of Ireland." Daniel O'Connell was the first to sign the appeal; according to the printed form of the pamphlet, sixty thousand of his countrymen and countrywomen followed him in doing so.<sup>16</sup>

Sent across the Atlantic, the "Irish Address" became the spearhead of a broad campaign to woo Irish-Americans to abolitionism. Black abolitionists sought to win Irish-American trust, proclaiming their "hearty sympathy" with the people of Ireland and wishing them well in their struggles in "the cause of liberty."<sup>17</sup> Antislavery agitators lashed out against English tyranny in Ireland, while suggesting that slavery was America's version of the same phenomenon. Abolitionists planned meetings to unveil the "Irish Address" and convert Irish-Americans to antislavery.

But despite the trans-Atlantic crusaders' spirited pitch, Irish America was not buying. Far from flocking to the antislavery standard, Irish-Americans gave the abolitionists a most "unkind and insolent reception." When the reformers tried to broadcast O'Connell's appeal, the American Irish, in the words of one exasperated reformer, "avoided our meetings as though the pestilence (instead of the Irish Address) were to be uncovered."<sup>18</sup> Abolitionists were confused and discouraged by their lack of success. They resigned themselves to the "strange and shocking" prospect that Irish-America henceforth could be expected to stand as a "mighty obstacle . . . in the way of negro emancipation." "Truly," a despondent William Lloyd Garrison moaned, "they know not what they do."<sup>19</sup>

While most Americans became accustomed to the sight of Irish immigrants pushing for Irish liberation abroad while pushing against black liberation in the United States,<sup>20</sup> observers back in Ireland, unfamiliar with the American context, were continually puzzled. Because the Irish in Ireland tended to support the abolitionist movement while the Irish in America tended to oppose it, the question at times chilled trans-Atlantic Irish relations. For instance, when Mary Thompson of Ireland corresponded with Jane Verner Mitchel, a friend who had emigrated to America, the two, while generally agreeing on Irish nationalism,<sup>21</sup> split on the slavery question. When Thompson persisted in attacking slavery, her American friend, who opposed abolitionism, chafed. "[E]nough of this black question," she wrote sharply, "I hate it because it has vexed you and another dear friend of mine."<sup>22</sup>

The experiences of other Irish nationalists reveal similar themes. Travelling to America in 1858 to raise funds for the Irish Revolutionary Brotherhood, James Stephens applauded the Irish-Americans' commitment to Irish liberation, but was disturbed by their complicity with the system of American slavery. Being prudent, however, Stephens kept his opinions to himself, for he sensed that when talking to Irish-Americans, the one point on which it was "absolutely necessary to be guarded was the *slave question*."<sup>23</sup> Had he spoken up his words might have resembled those of Daniel O'Connell: "Sir," the Irish Liberator exclaimed when contemplating the anti-abolitionism of the new-world Irish, "they are not Irishmen! They ar[e] bastard Irishmen!"<sup>24</sup>

Thompson, Stephens, Garrison, O'Connell—all were perplexed by the seeming incongruity between the Irish Americans' thirst for liberty in their old home and their indifference to slavery in their new one. Why was it, reformers on both sides of the Atlantic wondered, that the passage to the United States seemed to produce, as one American abolitionist put it, "the same effect upon the exile of Erin as the eating of the forbidden fruit did upon Adam and Eve"?<sup>25</sup> To make sense of these questions we must first in-

vestigate the political context in which Irish-American New Yorkers apprehended issues and made political decisions.

A brief exploration of New York political history reveals that the roots of the dilemma reach back to a time before the great waves of Irish migration even began. The problems of slavery and race in New York have existed virtually as long as there has been a New York. The first African laborers landed on New York's shores as early as 1626; and by 1790 the young state's black population—consisting mostly of slaves—exceeded twenty thousand.<sup>26</sup> After this time, however, slavery became less and less profitable. It also became increasingly unacceptable to the moral sensibilities of some New Yorkers, and a movement to abolish slavery gathered momentum. Abolitionist sentiment was strongest among the elite classes who came to make up the core of the Federalist party and who, ironically, tended to be among the state's principal slave owners. In the words of Dixon Ryan Fox, it was "the Federalist masters who set their Negroes free, and led the movement in New York state for their betterment." At the head of this movement stood the Society for Promoting the Manumission of Slaves and Protecting Them as Have Been or May Be Liberated, a group whose first two presidents were also prominent New York Federalists: John Jay and Alexander Hamilton.<sup>27</sup>

From the late-eighteenth century forward, issues of bondage and race played a constitutive role in New York political alignments. Federalist opponents of slavery led a successful, step-by-step struggle to legislate the peculiar institution out of existence in New York during the half-century following America's Revolution.<sup>28</sup> But even after emancipation questions regarding the status of blacks in New York remained. Before 1870, when the Fifteenth Amendment outlawed racial discrimination in voting, the question of black suffrage cropped up repeatedly in New York. Almost without fail, the issues of black rights divided New Yorkers along relatively straight party lines. Based on a mixture of humanitarianism, noblesse oblige, and electoral self-interest, New York's Federalist party, which in most other instances favored government by the "worthy few," generally supported the rights of blacks. The Jeffersonian Republicans, self-styled champions of the common (white) man, invariably set themselves against black causes. Free blacks, who in the early years of statehood faced no special voting restrictions, understandably sided with their "Federalist friends" on election days.<sup>29</sup>

Aware that black votes could tilt close elections against them, Jeffersonian Republicans set out to curtail black voting power. In 1811 Republican lawmakers muscled a bill through the legislature requiring blacks, and only blacks, to obtain special identification certificates before voting. Amendments in 1813 and 1815 further complicated matters for black citizens wishing to cast ballots.<sup>30</sup>

The New York State Constitutional Convention of 1821 formed something of a model for the potential alignment in which racial issues were debated in the North during the antebellum and Civil War eras. New York electoral law prior to 1821 grouped all potential voters, black and white alike, according to their ability to meet a fixed property requirement. The Republicans, many of whom would go on to become Jacksonian Democrats later in the decade, sought in the convention to tear down the anti-democratic property qualification, leveling the suffrage in the name of the common man—the common white man, that is. For while pushing to extend equal voting rights to all "white male citizens," the Democratic Republicans simultaneously attempted to take the vote away from all black New Yorkers, rich, poor and middling. The Federalist party (the core of which would soon evolve into the Whigs and, later and less directly, the Republicans) favored maintaining the limits

on democracy that came with property restrictions. At the same time, Federalists argued righteously against the "unjust and odious discrimination of color" proposed by the Republicans. The Republicans got the better of the ensuing struggle. They managed to abolish all economic restrictions facing white male citizens, while simultaneously raising to \$250 the level of property required of would-be voters "other than white." During the next half-century this inequitable arrangement withstood the repeated assaults of justifiably outraged black New Yorkers and their white political allies, and was overturned only by the Fifteenth Amendment in 1870.<sup>31</sup>

Subsequent developments concerning the political status of blacks in the North echoed this pattern. When the issue of black suffrage arose in 1846 during New York's next constitutional convention, the Democrats, the Jacksonian champions of the common man, urged the complete exclusion of blacks from the state's "proscriptive and anomalous Property Qualification." In as straight a party vote as one is likely to find (and this despite factional splits within Democratic ranks), the proposal to equalize the suffrage went down to defeat.<sup>32</sup> Blacks and their Republican allies managed to force the question onto the state's agenda again in 1857, 1860 and 1869; each time the issue of black suffrage cleaved New Yorkers fairly cleanly along partisan lines, with Democrats opposed and Whigs, then Republicans, in favor.<sup>33</sup> Both in terms of its partisan alignment on the issue and in the outcome that saw its black citizens denied equal political rights, New York exemplified the general pattern of racial politics in the antebellum North.<sup>34</sup>

As Irish immigrants entered the world of American politics, the Democrats—who supported immigrant rights and also opposed black rights and the antislavery movement—succeeded in winning their support. The American Irish found the Democratic party attractive for several reasons. First, whereas Federalists, Whigs and Republicans in turn tended to appeal strongly to native-born, established northerners, the Democrats were more hospitable to society's newcomers. Like many other Democrats, the Irish resented the perceived aristocratic pretensions of their political opponents and feared that the latter would use the power of government to aggrandize themselves and to undermine the social equality that should naturally exist among white Americans.<sup>35</sup> Also, and perhaps most importantly, from the early days of the American party system forward, the party of Jefferson and Jackson had defended immigrant interests against periodic nativistic attacks in such areas as voting rights, office-holding rights, and naturalization.<sup>36</sup> This factor weighed especially heavily in Irish-American minds during times of heightened nativist activity, such as the Know-Nothing years of the 1850s.

Furthermore, Irish-Catholic immigrants brought with them from Ireland bitter attitudes toward England. Ever since the late eighteenth century, the question of Anglo-American relations had provoked sharp partisan divisions; and from the outset the party of Hamilton had sided with England, the party of Jefferson against.<sup>37</sup> Needless to say, this split recommended the Democrats to Irish voters. Through the Civil War and beyond, Irish-Americans continued to sneer at Republicans for being the "English Party."<sup>38</sup>

A third reason why Irish-Americans found the Democrats so attractive involved that party's stance on the proper role of government. Throughout the century Irish-Americans battled against attempts to legislate morality.<sup>39</sup> The "hands-off" stance of the Democrats, the political descendants of Thomas Jefferson, concerning such issues as temperance and religious observation appealed to Irish-Americans as the best political defense against intrusive "Puritanism."

These factors combined to extraordinary effect. By one conservative estimate, about eight in ten Irish-Catholic-American voters generally cast Democratic ballots—a figure which increased as one moved east and into the cities.<sup>40</sup> Although the Democrats' opponents recognized and periodically tried to loosen the Democratic hold over the Irish, the bonds of allegiance during the antebellum years were too strong. As one Irish-American recalled later on: "Some of us [American Irish] were led to believe that we were bound, morally and religiously, to support the Democratic party."<sup>41</sup> For the most part, then, to be Irish and Catholic in mid-nineteenth-century America was to be a Democrat.

Such was the basic political alignment in which the future of slavery was discussed. Although abolitionism was by no means strictly a partisan movement,<sup>42</sup> the same sorts of factors that separated Irish-Americans from Whigs and Republicans also separated them from most antislavery reformers. As we shall see, the antislavery crusade seemed to the Irish to be the work of the same sorts of affluent, powerful, teetotaling, nativistic, Anglophilic elements that threatened Irish interests in America.

In 1852 a twenty-eight-year-old Irish nationalist hero named Thomas Francis Meagher escaped his banishment in Van Dieman's Land and headed for America. Meagher had been serving English time, punished for playing a leading role in the failed Irish insurrection of 1848. After three years of exile the young revolutionist gave his captors the slip and, leaving behind his new and pregnant wife, sailed off to New York. He was an instant sensation. The Irish element in New York "went into a frenzy over its newly found hero," and before long Meagher's fame spread "to national dimensions."<sup>43</sup> By the mid-1850s Thomas Francis Meagher was a leading figure in New York's Irish community;<sup>44</sup> by the Civil War, he was among the best known of all Irish Americans.<sup>45</sup>

No evidence seems to have remained regarding Meagher's pre-exile views on American slavery, but once in America he soon found that one could not easily be a public figure and remain silent on the question. As happened with many other Irish emigrants, Meagher's first confrontation with the slavery issue was provoked by a voice from home. Early in 1854 a Dublin merchant named James Houghton sent the exiled revolutionary a public letter urging him to come out against slavery: "Be consistent, then," wrote Houghton,

and while you are in a land of slave-drivers sanction not their denial of civil and social rights to the colored people by your silence, or you will become a participator of these wrongs.<sup>46</sup>

Now Meagher, if his eulogizers are to be believed, was an "impassioned advocate of revolution" whose "entire life was dedicated to the cause of liberty" and who "died going after more guns to fight again."<sup>47</sup> In short, "Meagher of the Sword" did not build his reputation on caution or equivocation. But in this case he paused. Sensing the touchiness of the slavery issue in America, especially among the Irish-American community upon whose patronage he relied, Meagher thought it best to sidestep the Irish merchant's challenge. He had to wait three years yet before becoming naturalized as an American citizen, Meagher explained; perhaps it was best to put off until that time any "declararion of opinion regarding African slavery in America."<sup>48</sup> As it happened, he would not wait that long to come out on the slavery issue. But his opinion, when declared, was not one to please Mr. James Houghton or his American sympathizers.

In 1856 Meagher founded a newspaper dedicated to "the service of the Irish people at home and abroad"—the *New York Irish*

*News*. A big story for the fledgling weekly was that autumn's presidential election pitting John C. Fremont, the young Republican party's first candidate for the presidency, against a Pennsylvania Democrat named James Buchanan. The overwhelming majority of New York's Irish population backed Buchanan. Young editor Meagher, who was steering his paper towards a position of leadership in circles of Irish opinion, joined his readers by coming out editorially for the Democrat. His stated reasons for doing so reveal much about the lens through which he and other Irish-Americans viewed the world of American politics, including the slavery issue.

The chief issue dividing the two tickets that fall was the fate of slavery in the western territories and the proper scope of congressional authority regarding the same. The Republicans were for "free soil," by which they meant the exclusion of slavery from the western territories. The *Irish News* discussed national issues—in light of its relationship to nativism and Irish-American rights, matters very much on the minds of Meagher's readers at the time. Anti-foreign sentiment was not new to American political life in the 1850s. But its intensity during that decade was unprecedented. As the Whig party began to disintegrate early in the decade, it left a political vacuum which the anti-foreign American (or "Know-Nothing") party and the newly born Republican party both rushed to fill. In the elections of 1854, Know Nothings, with nativist planks undergirding their platforms, ran strongly.<sup>49</sup> By the following year, the Know Nothings had established themselves as the main alternative to the Democrats in about half of the states in the North.<sup>50</sup> No Irish-American Catholic witnessed these developments without trepidation.

In 1856 the center of Know Nothing strength drifted southward, leaving the Republicans clear to challenge Buchanan in the North. But Irish worries persisted. Irish-Americans sensed that Republicanism was not entirely free of nativism, and that the constituencies of the two movements overlapped. Meagher made this point repeatedly in his newspaper by portraying the Republican party as a political Trojan Horse: free soilism on the outside, concealing armed ranks of nativists in the belly.

Whatever its merits as a matter of history,<sup>51</sup> this was hard political reality according to the *Irish News*. At the outset of the 1856 presidential campaign, Meagher informed his readers that behind the Republican candidate the anti-slavery element and the anti-foreign element had joined ranks: "Fremont and No Foreigners! That's the cry," reported the *Irish News*. "[T]he Free-Soilers and Know-Nothings [have] cordially embraced. They are one and the same from this out."<sup>52</sup> Meagher's analysis was easy to follow: those who opposed slavery or its spread also opposed the foreign-born.

Not surprisingly, the *News* explained its support for Buchanan in terms that mirrored its opposition to Fremont. The Pennsylvania Democrat was the man in '56 because he "depreciates the bigotry of Know-Nothingism," and "insists upon the integrity of American citizenship irrespective of creed or birth-place." To the *Irish News*, a victory for Buchanan would mean nothing less than the triumph of tolerance and "the defeat of rude bigotry."<sup>53</sup>

Opposing the Republicans, of course, meant more than opposing their candidate; it also meant opposing their free-soil aim of keeping slavery out of the western territories. This the *Irish News*, like all other Democratic organs, did. But while the *News*' indictment of the anti-slavery movement overlapped in places with traditional Democratic arguments,<sup>54</sup> overall it rang out with a distinct Irish-American accent. For example, the peculiar hatred of England and all things English that pulsed through Irish-American veins throughout the century found expression in the

paper's views on antislavery. Yankee reformers, the *News* observed, had "caught the abolition fever" from their English cousins. Abolition appeared to be "one of the results of [the] excessive reverence" some Yankees felt for the "Anglo-Saxon race."<sup>55</sup> In so formulating the issue, Meagher differed from other Democrats. The mainstream of the Democracy accused England—when bothering to mention it at all—not of inspiring American abolitionism, but rather of "fasten[ing] the institution of slavery upon the colonies" in the first place.<sup>56</sup>

A second, equally distinctive facet of the *News*'s indictment of anti-slavery Republicans showed up the next year, and derived from the lowly position the Irish occupied in American society. Themselves members of a despised minority group, Irish-Americans understood the subtle workings of prejudice and patronization. "The Black Republican party in this State profess[es] to entertain a holy horror of the institution of negro slavery," wrote the *Irish News* in 1857. "How does their practice agree with their principles?" In answering this question the paper told of a banquet thrown by the New York Republicans in 1856 to celebrate their party's strong showing in the elections that fall. While the white diners "devoured a sumptuous repast," they were served by a "corps of . . . colored gentlemen." The paper's editors argued that the Republicans' conduct "in obtaining by extensive promises the menial services of these free negroes" was hypocritical, not differing dramatically from the conduct of the Mississippi planter, "who at least gives to his slave in return for his labor, bread, lodging, and clothing." The paper had a similar interpretation of John Brown's raid two years later: "Whites risked their lives for negroes with whom they would not sit, eat, sleep or intermarry."<sup>57</sup>

The *Irish News*, besides viewing abolitionism as an English import, and as being insincere ("It is not a true thing," the paper quipped in 1860, "unless you should say it is true to the natural desire to have office and emoluments!"<sup>58</sup>), viewed it as a threat. This fear sprang from strongly held ideas about Irish and American history. Irish-American memories of Ireland were ones of oppression at the hands of the English. "It was the zealot, the fanatic, the morose and gloomy Puritan," Meagher's newspaper explained, who rendered Ireland "a prostrate and bleeding victim." And after travelling to America and toiling for its glory, what should Erin's exiles find? "From Massachusetts, from the spot where the Puritan Pilgrim first made himself a home, the same Puritanical spirit rises after years of dormant life." "[T]rue to its former instincts," Meagher the Irish-American nationalist believed, this new incarnation of "Cromwellian Puritanism" preached intolerance "in the name of righteousness<sup>2</sup>—in the name, that is, of antislavery."<sup>59</sup>

This vision helps explain Irish-America's staunch opposition to the free-soil movement, the campaign which anchored abolitionism during the 1850s and which attracted considerable support from the non-Irish working class.<sup>60</sup> Irish-Americans, if Meagher and his colleagues were at all representative, objected not so much to the free-soil reforms themselves as to the free-soil reformers. The American Irish found the anti-slavery movement distasteful not because they thought slavery a good thing—in fact, the *Irish News* conceded that slavery was an ugly institution, allowing that "it would be well, perhaps, if we could get rid of it"<sup>61</sup>—but rather because its success seemed likely to be come only "at the dictation of that old Puritanism that lives again in the guise of modern Abolitionism." The fledgling Republican party, the fear went, sought to use free soilism as a stepping stone to national power; if it succeeded, it surely would "rule this country with a rod of iron, reviving the persecutions of the past." The "Abolitionist Puritans," then, were using their opposition to slavery as a "specious pretext

for [their] sinister aims." True, the abolitionist movement had "an intelligence suited to the Spirit of the Age; but it has the same bigotry at heart, the same unconquerable lust for dominion." And Irish-Americans like Thomas Francis Meagher would not be duped this time around; "Irishmen have suffered too keenly from this spirit of old, not to know it now, in whatever garb it chooses to appear."<sup>62</sup>

Meagher and company at the *Irish News* were not the only Irish-Americans to blend a love of Ireland with an abhorrence of abolitionism. Across the North, Irish-Americans shared both Meagher's fear and hatred of the Yankee-the "Abolition Puritan"-and his association of this figure with anti-slavery and the early Republican party. One Irish-American summed up this

set of ideas in the following way:

We are sick of those mean, heartless white-livered Yankees-and they are generally steeped in Abolition schemes-seeking to exalt the Negro and debase the Irishman . . . seeking to give the vote to the negro and take it away from the Irishman.<sup>63</sup>

Here as elsewhere, it is abolitionists more than abolitionism that drew Irish fire.

What sense can we make of such pronouncements? We might begin by recognizing the various levels on which the words operated. Within Irish-American communities, the statements considered here undoubtedly served functional ends. For instance, by warning of an abolitionist/nativist conspiracy,



In July 1863, New York City protested the implementation of the Conscription Act. "As a Northern city with longstanding ties to Southern slavery and as the national capital of both the abolitionist and anti-abolitionist press, New York was a place acutely sensitive to racial issues. . . Many white New Yorkers felt that the consequences, if not the explicit intent of the draft law, was to exacerbate racial tensions and degrade the status of white labor."

—Iver Bernstein, *The New York City Draft Riots*, pp. 9-10

Meagher and his staff on the *Irish News* could hope to consolidate their claim to moral authority and leadership within the Irish-American community. They could also hope to boost their paper's circulation.

In addition, the words functioned on the level of Irish relations with the wider society. In pushing the issue of nativism as hard as possible, Irish polemicists like those at the *News* played the squeaky wheel. Their intent was to keep Irish-American concerns alive and on the public (especially the Democratic) agenda. By piggybacking the issue of immigrant rights onto the debate over the future of slavery—the day's hottest issue—Irish-Americans were able to have a broader impact than they might have had by denouncing nativism alone.

But in interpreting the editorials of the *Irish News* we need not confine ourselves to such roundabout analyses. The Know Nothings of the 1850s, after all, actually *had* posed a serious threat to Irish political rights; and while not all abolitionists were nativists, northern nativists on the whole held anti-slavery views.<sup>64</sup> The Irish-American worry that the free soil movement, which was proving to be more popular than nativism alone, might serve to enhance the power of the anti-immigrant faction, was not entirely fanciful. The *Irish News* may have exaggerated the threat somewhat (this, of course, would hardly make it unique in the world of nineteenth-century polemical writing) but the paper did not make it up from scratch.

Neither was the *Irish News* alone in drawing connections between abolitionism and nativism. Both Democrats and Republicans presented abolitionism and related issues in ways that reinforced the Irish-American perspective described here. When addressing Irish-Americans, northern Democrats tried to cultivate the notion that Republicans were at the same time friends of black Americans and enemies of Irish-Americans. The Democratic press warned that anti-slavery Republicans sought not just to liberate and enfranchise the black population but also to “disgrace and crush the foreign population.” Democratic functionaries accused Republicans and abolitionists of believing that blacks were “better qualified to cast an intelligent and independent vote than a great majority of the Irish,” and of being motivated in part by “the hatred against the foreign born class.”<sup>65</sup> Democrats continued to encourage the belief that “today's abolitionists are yesterday's anti-foreign, anti-Catholic Know-Nothings” through the Civil War years and into the early 1870s.<sup>66</sup>

Democratic leaders realized that their open courtship of the immigrant vote might have a dangerous flip side: some nativist whites might align with the Republicans out of a distaste for foreigners.<sup>67</sup> While in actuality anti-foreignism played a relatively minor role in Republican thinking as a whole, and while some Republican leaders boldly condemned this as other prejudices, some opportunistic Republicans did seek to take advantage of nativist sentiment, especially when attempting to make potentially diverse issues like black suffrage acceptable to a wide range of Republican voters. For example, before a vote in 1860 on the repeal of the \$250 property requirement that disfranchised most New York blacks, expedient Republicans tried to make equal suffrage more palatable by framing it in terms of opposition to Irish-Americans rather than in terms of support for blacks: “The question to be submitted to the Christian people of this State,” explained one Republican polemicist, “[is] whether this State shall continue to exact of its native colored citizens a money qualification for voting, which it does not demand of the ignorant, foul, priest-ridden Paddy just landed upon the dock.”<sup>68</sup> This same theme emerged after the Civil War when Republicans again were pushing for black

rights: “Make citizens of the negroes,” a nativistic Republican predicted, “and the Hibernian [Irish] element goes to the wall.”<sup>69</sup> While such expressions of nativism were hardly central to Republican thinking, they rang loudly in New York Irish ears. Like the Democratic propaganda of the same period, the Republicans' use of nativism reinforced Irish opposition to the abolitionists' agenda.

Two final aspects of Irish-American anti-abolitionism merit further comment. First, the *Irish News* perspective, focusing its venom as it did on the figure of the oppressive Yankee, is notable for its *relative* lack of anti-black racism. Historians generally agree that during the Civil War era the mainstream of the Democratic party was unabashedly and unrelentingly racist. (Salmon P. Chase, a leading Republican of the day, said this of the Democrats: “All that they seem to say is ‘nigger, nigger, nigger.’”<sup>70</sup>) In striking contrast, the *News* not only went easy on the overt expression of racial hatred, but actually took the trouble “to emphatically and indignantly deny” that its views on abolitionism were based in any way on racial antipathy.<sup>71</sup> This is not to say that Meagher and his fellow Irish-American nationalists were champions of racial justice. They were not. But it is to point out that the usual image of the Irish as perennial super-racists may be in need at least of qualifications.

A second point concerns the underlying instability of Irish-America's antebellum blend of nationalism and anti-abolitionism. Recall that many American abolitionists supported the liberation of Ireland, while many nationalist agitators in Ireland were outspoken abolitionists. In endorsing one liberation movement and opposing the other, the Irish-American editors of the *News* had at times to engage in some fancy footwork. For example, John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry, Virginia in 1859, being just the sort of action that Irish-American nationalists like Meagher dreamed about in the context of Ireland's struggle for liberation, posed a dilemma: how to reject John Brown without rejecting his tactics. The *Irish News* tried to twist out of this problem by dismissing Brown as a phony, mindless militant: “We have not been accustomed to denounc[ing] anything in the shape of rebellion,” the paper admitted. “But here it takes the false, repulsive shape of fanaticism and has nothing genuine in it.”<sup>72</sup> In later years, as we shall see, a new generation of Irish-American nationalists, one that no longer perceived a strong and united abolitionist/nativist threat, would reevaluate the unyielding agitation of abolitionists like John Brown, coming finally to see abolitionist agitation as a legitimate and even laudable model of social resistance on which they might pattern their own movement.

On the eve of the Civil War, however, Irish-Americans firmly opposed abolitionism. In forming their opinions, the Irish did not merely line up against the anti-slavery program as packaged by abolitionists and Republicans; rather, they apprehended the debate over abolitionism in terms that reflected their own concerns and viewpoints. To members of the antislavery movement, “abolitionism” meant variously the fight against slavery, the drive to preserve the West for free labor, and, in some cases, the struggle for racial justice. To Irish New Yorkers like Thomas Francis Meagher, the word conjured up entirely different worlds of meaning. To them it conveyed images of intolerant, self-righteous Anglophiles who were trying to use antislavery as a pretext to grab national power so that they might force their will on others. (Perhaps this explains why the *News* considered “abolitionism” to be “the dreariest word in all the language.”<sup>73</sup>) The understanding described here shone through in January of 1861, just months before the outbreak of the Civil War, as the *Irish News* reflected

upon the electoral triumph of Abraham Lincoln's Republican party:

[T]he party we speak of has two great purposes in view. One of them is the crushing out of the system of Southern slavery. The other is the setting aside of 'the foreign element' of this country. . . We [Irish-Americans] are in the same boat as our Southern fellow-citizens. Their opponents are our opponents, and the same conspiracy is working against us both. . . If by any evil chance the Southern States should be forced to stand apart from us, we believe the Anglo-maniacs and Brownists would soon deprive the foreigners of their present 'franchise' and reduce them to something of the old insular condition.<sup>74</sup>

As an afterthought we might consider what became of the Irish-American hostility toward abolitionism. Up until the early 1870s, the forces separating Irish-Americans from the antislavery movement and its legacy persisted. For a time after the Civil War, as questions of race and reconstruction became the dominant issues in American public life, Irish resistance to the abolitionists' agenda endured. As before the war, votes on race-related measures tended to split the electorate cleanly along partisan lines; and on the whole the most heavily Irish areas continued to vote most solidly against proposals intended to ameliorate the condition of blacks.<sup>75</sup>

The basis of Irish-American opposition to abolitionist initiatives followed the antebellum patterns once traced on the pages of the now-defunct *New York Irish News*. The post-bellum Irish press warned readers that although slavery had been abolished, the faction "which made abolition its shibboleth" still harbored nativist designs and was "alive and in operation."<sup>76</sup> "The 'abolition' cry has proved too profitable to be abandoned," one Irish journal quipped in 1865, adding that the "very men who, today, would deny the right of voting to the [foreign-born] white soldier" were also the "most zealous advocates of negro suffrage."<sup>77</sup> Another Irish-American paper, employing a revealing string of associations, warned New Yorkers in 1872 that if the Radical Republicans won at the polls they would claim "the victory of the North over the South—of the Saxon-American element over the Celtic-American element—of Protestantism over Catholicity."<sup>78</sup>

In forming these views Irish-Americans drew upon their deeply felt ideology of Irish nationalism; but they did so in ways that in later years would seem odd indeed. The editors of the *New York Irish World*, America's most popular Irish newspaper during the post-bellum years, opposed Republican Reconstruction policies.<sup>79</sup> Early in the 1870s the paper likened the occupied South to Ireland, the occupying North to England. Ireland, the fiercely nationalistic *World* wrote, suffered under the domination of "the same Anglo-Saxon race that has forced the yoke on the necks of Southerners in the shape of carpet-bag rule."<sup>80</sup> Both England and the Radical Republicans had "sent out scalawags and carpetbaggers. . . to foment discord and mischief," and when the people of the occupied lands attempted resistance "they were accused of insubordination and violence, and the military were precipitated upon them."<sup>81</sup> In the *World's* trans-Atlantic analogy, bands of indomitable Irish rebels became the Ku Klux Klan, valiantly resisting tyrannical occupation; Irish hero Hugh O'Neill became Robert E. Lee; Ulysses S. Grant, meanwhile, appeared in the role of that most dastardly of Puritans, Oliver Cromwell.<sup>82</sup> To Irish-Americans the message of all this was clear and somber, but not without hope: "Centuries of reconstruction laws and repression acts failed there [in Ireland],

as they will fail here. And heaving beneath the repression of. . . carpet-bag insolence," Irish nationalists, like their southern counterparts, would surely keep "the protest of the people alive against the slanderers and oppressors."<sup>83</sup>

But this view would not last. The political shake-ups of the mid-1870s began jarring loose the joints where the Irish-American nationalists had welded their cause to that of the southern rebels. By mid-decade, the *Irish World* had abandoned the South in favor of other historical partners.

Major shifts in the political landscape during these years underlay the change. In the 1870s, after years as leading members of the dominant Republican party, the radical abolitionists faded from view. Moderate Republicans, weary of Reconstruction, shaken by the prospect that radicalism might slip out of hand, withdrew their support from the radical wing of their party. By the mid-1870s, most Radical Republicans either had died, had been voted out of office, or had lost all but token influence within their party.<sup>84</sup> At the same time, the issue of nativism subsided. Republican leaders, sensitive to the large and growing body of naturalized voters in the ranks of the opposition began to tone down their party's stance on divisive cultural issues.<sup>85</sup>

Meanwhile, the Democratic party was also altering its course. "New Departure" Democrats of the early- and mid-1870s were quiet on issues of race and Reconstruction, nominally accepting the political equality of blacks. By emphasizing other issues, the new breed of Democrats hoped to prod the nation's attention away from the memory of the great slaveholders' rebellion.<sup>86</sup>

All of this affected Irish-American thinking. With "the war issues. . . now settled,"<sup>87</sup> and with antislavery agitators receding ever further from national view, Irish-American nationalists began to consider abolitionist reforms without regard to the ethnic identity or supposed nativism of the abolitionist reformers. Impressed by abolitionist successes, the editors of the *Irish World* began to highlight similarities between their own struggles for political rights and those of black Americans. They noted that the racist "slaveocracy" of the South, "which sold human beings like chattel on the auction block," was akin to the nativist "codfish aristocracy" of the North, "which attempted to disfranchise men because of their religious belief or the accident of birth." "The man who would be a Nigger-driver in the South would be a Know-Nothing here in the North," the *World* wrote in 1875. This observation led the paper to advocate racial tolerance: "We Irish cannot afford to array ourselves against any lowly race," the editors reasoned, for every Irish expression of prejudice "is an argument furnished to England."<sup>88</sup>

Along with this change in sensibility, the Irish-American nationalists at the *World* began to rethink the historical analogies they had drawn just a few years before. If the story of the South had been one of oppression (not to mention military defeat), that section's history would no longer serve as a useful allegory for Ireland's struggles. "It was the aristocracy of the South, not the people of the South," the *Irish World* pointed out in 1876, "that plunged that section into rebellion. In this respect Ireland and the South are very dissimilar. . . Ireland battles for Liberty; the South warred for Slavery."<sup>89</sup>

Having cut loose from the South, Irish-American nationalists turned to hitch their movement to a cause less lost, to the memory of abolitionism, itself marooned by the refashioned Republican party. "For a long time. . . the Abolitionists were everywhere jeered at as 'enthusiasts,' 'demagogues,' 'fanatics,'" wrote the *Irish World*. "So is it always with those who stand firm



for the poor, the weak, and the oppressed, in defiance of wealth, and caste, and privilege." But abolitionism, once a "small and despised shrub," gradually struck root and grew "until the protecting shadow of its foliage stretched from ocean to ocean."

What most impressed Irish-American nationalists about the abolitionists were the strength of their convictions and their dogged persistence: "The Abolitionists had faith in the justice of their cause; they had also a grand capacity for *patient, persevering work*; and herein lay the secret of their success." Irish polemicists meant all of this, of course, to serve both as an analogy for and as a guide to the desired emancipation of Ireland. The *Irish World* followed a discussion of the trials and triumphs of the antislavery movement with the following proclamation: "The men who are to-day working for the abolition of serfdom and tyranny in Ireland have an equally just cause; stubborn resolve and patient, energetic work must result in their ultimate triumph."<sup>90</sup>

In 1871 the *Irish World* had likened Robert Emmet, a martyred Irish nationalist hero, to a valiant southern rebel; seven years later Emmet reappeared in the journal's pages, this time cast as—who else?—the Irish version of John Brown.<sup>91</sup> The intellectual transformations revealed by this shift are not trivial. By moving to embrace the legacy of abolitionism—nineteenth-century America's most significant reform movement—Irish-Americans began to break down the ethnic and ideological barriers that had isolated them from native-born American reform traditions. This facilitated Irish-American involvement in subsequent movements ranging from the Irish Land League of the late 1870s and early 1880s—a radical group dedicated to addressing Irish and American social problems and championed both by Irish-American nationalists and by some radical veterans of the antislavery movement<sup>92</sup>—to the Knights of Labor.<sup>93</sup> Of course, not all Irish-Americans dropped their old hostilities, embraced the memory of abolitionism, and joined the American reform tradition. But many did. One wrote in to the *Irish World* that unlike in times past he now felt "none but the kindest sympathy for the oppressed of all nations and colors."<sup>94</sup> Daniel O'Connell would have been proud.

### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> The American Anti-Slavery Society, Philadelphia, quoted in Hugh Hawkins, ed., *The Abolitionists: Means, Ends, and Motivations* (Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath and Company, 1972), p. 56.

<sup>2</sup> *The Irish People*, April 27, 1867.

<sup>3</sup> William Lloyd Garrison to Theobald Mathew, October 12, 1849; Garrison to Richard V. Allen, July 2, 1842; and Garrison to Richard D. Webb, March 1, 1845; all in William Lloyd Garrison, *The Letters of William Lloyd Garrison, 1841-1849*, vol. III (Cambridge, Mass: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1973), pp. 281, 292, 285; *The Liberator*, September 2, 1842.

<sup>4</sup> Despite the presence of small numbers of Irish Protestants in America, Catholics predominated and came to represent the core identity of Irish America. The Protestant Irish in the United States felt little cultural affinity with their Catholic compatriots, and the two groups lined up on opposing sides of American political divisions with remarkable consistency. For an analysis of Catholic and Protestant Irish political alignments in New York see Lee Benson, *The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy: New York as a Test Case* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961), pp. 167, 171-173. Henceforth the term "Irish" when describing immigrants in America, shall, following the custom of the day, refer to the Catholic element alone.

<sup>5</sup> Oscar Handlin has argued that Irish Catholic immigrants held a conservative, fatalistic outlook that rendered them "completely alien to the idea of progress and necessarily antagonistic" to abolitionism and other reforms. Handlin, *Boston's Immigrants: A Study in Acculturation* (New York: Atheneum, 1975), pp. 131-35. See also Paul Kleppner, *The Cross of Culture: A Social Analysis of Midwestern Politics, 1850-1890* (New York: The Free Press, 1970).

<sup>6</sup> While not usually analyzed rigorously, this view, which focuses on the insecurities felt by unskilled Irish laborers in the boom-and-bust northern economy, appears in the works of many historians. See, for example, David J. Hellwig, "Black Attitudes toward Irish Immigrants," *Mid-America* 59:1 (1977), pp. 39-50; Carl

Wittke, *The Irish in America* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1956), pp. 125-26; and Dennis Clark, "Urban Blacks and Irishmen: Brothers in Prejudice," in Miriam Ershkowitz and Joseph Zikmund II, eds., *Black Politics in Philadelphia* (New York: Basic Books, 1973); Leonard Patrick O'Connor Wibberley, *The Coming of the Green* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1958), p. 54.

<sup>7</sup> Gilbert Osofsky writes that middle-class abolitionists adopted an individualistic definition of "freedom" that focused on self-ownership, including the ability "freely" to contract for wages. He and others argue that this formulation, which underlay, for many abolitionists, the moral assault on slavery, did not appeal to Irish or other northern workers. Gilbert Osofsky, "Abolitionists, Irish Immigrants, and the Dilemmas of Romantic Nationalism," *American Historical Review*, 80:4 (Oct. 1975) pp. 889-912. See also Eric Foner, *Politics and Ideology in the Age of the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), esp. ch. 4, "Abolitionism and the Labor Movement in Antebellum America"; and John Ashworth, "The Relationship between Capitalism and Humanitarianism," *American Historical Review* 92:4 (October 1987), pp. 813-28.

<sup>8</sup> Eric Foner, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

<sup>9</sup> Kerby Miller argues that throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Irish and Irish-American commentators portrayed emigrants as "exiles" forced to leave their homeland by "English tyranny," and this despite the fact that most were voluntary emigrants who left in search of economic opportunity. According to Miller, the power of the exile motif sprang largely from the emigrants' guilt over having broken traditional patterns and ties by leaving their communities. The exile motif contributed to the survival of Irish identity and to the intensity of Irish nationalism in the New World. See Kerby A. Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

<sup>10</sup> *New York Irish World*, Oct. 10, 1874, p. 5.

<sup>11</sup> *Irish World*, March 11, 1871. The editor of the *New York Irish World*, Patrick Ford, "saw the solution to the problems of Irish-American subservience in a rectification of the relationship between England and Ireland." See James R. Rodechko, *Patrick Ford and his Search for America: A Case Study of Irish-American Journalism, 1870-1913* (New York: Arno Press, 1976), pp. 56-57.

<sup>12</sup> *Irish World*, Sept. 7, 1872; Lawrence J. McCaffrey, *Irish Nationalism and the American Contribution* (New York: Arno Press, 1976), esp. introduction; Thomas N. Brown, "The Origins and Character of Irish-American Nationalism," *The Review of Politics*, Vol. XVIII, No. 3 (July 1956): pp. 327-58; Charles Stewart Parnell, quoted in Eric Foner, *Politics and Ideology*, p. 153; London Times, quoted in Thomas N. Brown, "The Origins and Character of Irish-American Nationalism," *The Review of Politics*, Vol. XVIII, No. 3 (July 1956), p. 327.

<sup>13</sup> From 1815 to 1844, close to one million Irish men and women—about double the total for the preceding two-hundred years—migrated to North America. See Kerby Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles*, pp. 193-97.

<sup>14</sup> In fact, the issue of Ireland became a point of tension between English and American abolitionists. American antislavery reformers were known to rebuke their English counterparts for "pretend[ing] to love freedom and humanity" when considering slavery across the ocean while being "indifferent to the suffering of Ireland" next door. *National Anti-Slavery Standard* (Oct. 8, 1840). For more on Irish nationalist sentiment among American abolitionists see Gilbert Osofsky, "Abolitionists, Irish Immigrants, and the Dilemmas of Romantic Nationalism," *op. cit.*

<sup>15</sup> Daniel O'Connell to the Loyal National Repeal Association, Dublin, Sept. 29, 1845, from *Miscellaneous Pamphlets on the Civil War*, Vol. 10.

<sup>16</sup> "Address from the People of Ireland to their Countrymen and Countrywomen in America," from *Miscellaneous Pamphlets on the Civil War*, Vol. 10.

<sup>17</sup> National Negro Convention, 1843, 30th resolution, passed unanimously.

<sup>18</sup> William Lloyd Garrison to Richard Allen, July 2, 1842 in Garrison, *The Letters of William Lloyd Garrison*, pp. 92-93.

<sup>19</sup> Garrison to Richard D. Webb, March 1, 1845, *The Letters of William Lloyd Garrison*, p. 85; *The Liberator*, Sept. 2, 1842.

<sup>20</sup> See, for instance, Arnold Shankman, "Black on Green: Afro-American Editors on Irish Independence, 1840-1921," *Phylon* 41:3 (1980), 284-99. Shankman describes how antebellum black Americans came to differentiate between old-world from new-world Irish, considering the former kindred souls and the latter bitter rivals.

<sup>21</sup> True to form, the writings of the emigre Mitchel reveal, overall, the more avid nationalism.

<sup>22</sup> Jane V. Mitchel to Mary Thompson, Dec. 2, 1854, April 20, 1854, Maloney Collection, New York Public Library.

<sup>23</sup> Diary of James Stephens, Manuscripts Collection, New York Public Library.

<sup>24</sup> Recounted in letter from Garrison to Theobald Mathew, Oct. 5, 1849. Garrison, *The Letters of William Lloyd Garrison*, p. 671. For more on the context of Garrison's letter see John F. Maguire, *Father Mathew: A Biography* (London:

- Longman, Roberts & Green, 1863), pp. 469-77.
- <sup>25</sup> D. S. Grandin, letter to *The Liberator*, Aug. 4, 1854, p. 124. Grandin lamented that he had "never heard of one [Irish American] opening his mouth against slavery on this side of the Atlantic."
- <sup>26</sup> Thomas J. Davis, "New York's Long Black Line: A Note on the Growing Slave Population, 1626-1790," *Afro-Americans in New York Life and History* Vol. 2, No. 1 (Jan. 1978), 41-59.
- <sup>27</sup> Dixon Ryan Fox, "The Negro Vote in Old New York," *Political Science Quarterly*, 32:2 (June 1917), 252-275. Quotation is from 253-54.
- <sup>28</sup> Charles Z. Lincoln, *The Constitutional History of New York*, Vol. 1, (Rochester, NY: The Lawyers Co-Operative Publishing Company, 1906), p. 257.
- <sup>29</sup> Jeffersonian Republicans tried to use this to discredit their rival party. After black voters in a New York City meeting in 1808 voiced unanimous approval for the Federalist party, the Jeffersonian Republicans prepared a derogatory campaign song beginning "Federalists with blacks unite." Dixon Ryan Fox, "The Negro Vote in Old New York," p. 256. The Democratic party repeated this tactic relentlessly later in the century.
- <sup>30</sup> Edwin R. Lewinson, *Black Politics in New York City*, (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1974), pp. 25-26.
- <sup>31</sup> The patrician basis of the Federalists' position shined through in their opposition to the discriminatory measure of 1821. It was not the principle of exclusion from political life that rankled, but rather exclusion incompletely achieved. "Let us attain this object of exclusion," suggested one prominent Federalist, "by fixing such an [sic] uniform standard of qualification as would not only exclude the great body of freemen of color, but also a large portion of ignorant and depraved white men, who are as unfit to exercise the power of voting as the man of color." See Lincoln, *The Constitutional History of New York*, pp. 665, 514-15, 518-519, 661-64.
- <sup>32</sup> Fox, "The Negro Vote in Old New York," pp. 264-65, 271-72; Lewinson, *Black Politics in New York City*, p. 31. Foreshadowing one political strategy that would surface in subsequent battles over black suffrage, Whig polemicists in 1846 argued that blacks were as intelligent as immigrants from foreign countries and therefore as much entitled to the vote.
- <sup>33</sup> See Phyllis F. Field, *The Politics of Race in New York: The Struggle for Black Suffrage in the Civil War Era* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982).
- <sup>34</sup> Only four states, Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont and Massachusetts, allowed black men equal political rights. By 1840, 93% of northern free blacks lived in states which completely or practically denied them the right to vote. See Leon Litwack, *North of Slavery: The Negro in the Free States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), pp. 74-93.
- <sup>35</sup> For more on this theme see John Ashworth, "Agrarians" and "Aristocrats": *Party Political Ideology in the United States, 1837-1846* (London: Royal Historical Society, 1983).
- <sup>36</sup> Philip Henry Dudley, *The American Irish and their Influence on Irish Politics* (Boston: Roberts, 1882), p. 128.
- <sup>37</sup> Some maintain that this was the crucial issue dividing the parties. See Robert Kelley, "Ideology and Political Culture from Jefferson to Nixon," *American Historical Review*, 82:3 (June 1977), 531-62.
- <sup>38</sup> *Irish World*, June 1, 1872.
- <sup>39</sup> This, of course, does not mean that Irish Americans were cultural libertarians. They merely opposed Protestant-led attempts to enforce their particular moral code through legislation.
- <sup>40</sup> Paul Kleppner, *The Third Electoral System*, p. 153. Other estimates are even higher. Edward F. Roberts calculates in *Ireland in America* (New York: The Knickerbocker Press, 1931) that nine in ten Irish voters cast Democratic ballots (pp. 110-11). Lee Benson counts 95% of New York's Irish-Catholics supporting the Democrats in 1844. Benson, *The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy*, pp. 171-73.
- <sup>41</sup> *Irish World*, Oct. 24, 1874, p. 6. Teddy, the author of this letter to the editor, proceeds to note that some Irish-Americans before the Civil War believed that "they could not live as Catholics should they adhere to the Republican party." Irish-Americans also believed that some Republicans prided themselves on "belonging to a party that didn't have the Irish." *Irish World* (Jan. 31, 1874), p. 4.
- <sup>42</sup> It is true, however, that for the most part neither early nor later abolitionists came from the party favored by Catholic immigrants. Garrison, Phillips, the Tappans and others came from Federalist backgrounds; Stephens, Seward, Sumner and other antislavery men of that generation became Republicans.
- <sup>43</sup> Robert G. Athearn, *Thomas Francis Meagher: An Irish Revolutionary in America* (Boulder, CO: University of Colorado Press, 1949), pp. 28-31. Irish-Americans formed "Meagher Guards," the "Meagher Rifles" (of Boston), and "The Meagher Club of United Irishmen." Athearn, pp. 40-41.
- <sup>44</sup> *The Dictionary of American Biography* reports that Meagher became the "virtual leader of the Irish element" in New York by mid-decade. D.A.B. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1933), Vol. XII, pp. 481-82.
- <sup>45</sup> Paul Jones, *The Irish Brigade* (Washington: Robert B. Luce, Inc., 1969), p. 34. For biographical information on Meagher, in addition to Jones, *The Irish Brigade* (1969), see Michael Cavanagh, *Memoirs of Gen. Thomas Francis Meagher* (Worcester, MA: Messenger, 1892); Gwynn, "Thomas Francis Meagher" (1961); and Athearn, *Thomas Francis Meagher* (1949).
- <sup>46</sup> James Houghton to Thomas Francis Meagher, quoted in Cavanagh, *Memoirs*, pp. 342-43.
- <sup>47</sup> Athearn, *Thomas Francis Meagher*, "Preface" (first and third quotation); Claude G. Bowers, *The Irish Orators: A History of Ireland's Fight for Freedom* (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1916), p. 362.
- <sup>48</sup> Thomas Francis Meagher to Mr. [James] Houghton, March 24, 1854, printed in Cavanagh, *Memoirs*, p. 343.
- <sup>49</sup> Know-Nothing platforms included proposals to increase the amount of time immigrants must wait before becoming naturalized (read: "voting") citizens; to restrict office-holding privileges to native-born Americans; and to place legal curbs on alcoholic beverages. The temperance movement had unmistakable anti-immigrant—especially anti-Catholic—overtones throughout the nineteenth century and on into the twentieth. In the 1854 elections the Know-Nothings came close to winning New York and did win in Massachusetts, where they elected the governor, the bulk of the state legislature, and all of the congressmen as well. James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988) pp. 138-39.
- <sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 138-140; Samuel Eliot Morison, *The Oxford History of the American People*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 590. In the other half of the northern states Republicans were the Democrats' main rivals.
- <sup>51</sup> Historical debate over the extent to which the early Republican party actually embraced nativism still simmers. Eric Foner has argued that leading New York Republicans like William H. Seward and Thurlow Weed were principled opponents of nativism, insisting that the Republicans, even in their desire to attract Know-Nothing support, make no concessions regarding the rights of foreigners. More recently, other historians have shown, I think persuasively, that the influence within the party of anti-nativists like Seward and Weed was limited, and that, as Joel Silbey writes, "not only did the Know-Nothings go over to the Republicans to form a substantial and crucial component of the final coalition, but that the Republicans paid a price for their acquisition by making themselves attractive to the Know-Nothings on the latter's terms." Arguing against Know-Nothing influence on the Republicans are: Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969); and Dale Baum, "Know-Nothingism and the Republican Majority in Massachusetts: The Political Realignment of the 1850s," *Journal of American History* 64 (March 1978), pp. 959-86. Arguing for strains of Republican nativism are: Joel H. Silbey, *The Partisan Imperative: The Dynamics of American Politics Before the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); Michael F. Holt, *The Political Crisis of the 1850s* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1978); and William E. Gienapp, "Nativism and the Creation of a Republican Majority in the North before the Civil War," *Journal of American History* 72:3 (Dec. 1985), pp. 529-559.
- <sup>52</sup> *Irish News*, July 5, 1856.
- <sup>53</sup> *Irish News*, June 14, 1856; August 23, 1856. Buchanan's alleged Irish ancestry—much noted in Irish-American circles—was, of course, icing on the cake. Significantly, though, the rumors—loudly whispered by members of the withering Know-Nothing party—that the Republican Fremont was a closet Catholic drew little response from the Irish. See "The Duty of Native Americans in the Present Crisis," 1856, pamphlet #14 in *Fremont Campaign Literature*.
- <sup>54</sup> For instance, *News* editorials opposed anti-slavery on the grounds that "negro servitude is not a lot worse than that of white labor" in the North; they also explained their opposition to free soil laws by arguing, in true Jacksonian tones, that "the wisdom of human legislation is too narrow-sighted to determine what would be the ultimate result of even honestly-intended benefits to Free or Slave labor by arbitrarily restricting their limits." They also viewed anti-slavery activists as threats to the Constitution. *Irish News*, Sept. 6, 1856, p. 345; *Irish News*, Nov. 1, 1856, p. 56.
- <sup>55</sup> *Irish News*, July 19, 1856.
- <sup>56</sup> Democratic National Committee, "The Issue Fairly Presented: Black Republicanism versus Democracy: Law, Order, and the Will of the Majority of the Whole People, against Usurpation, Anarchy, Revolution, and the Voice of a Meager Minority . . ." (New York, 1856), p. 3.
- <sup>57</sup> *Irish News*, April 18, 1857, p. 25; Oct. 29, 1859, p. 56
- <sup>58</sup> *Irish News*, December 22, 1860, p. 584.
- <sup>59</sup> *Irish News*, Nov. 1, 1856, p. 56.
- <sup>60</sup> See Eric Foner, "Abolitionism and the Labor Movement in Antebellum America," in *Politics and Ideology in the Age of the Civil War*.
- <sup>61</sup> *Irish News*, October 18, 1856.
- <sup>62</sup> *Irish News*, Nov. 1, 1856.

- <sup>63</sup> Samuel Lumsden to Robert Tyler, June 5, 1856, quoted in Robert G. Athearn, *Thomas Francis Meagher: An Irish Revolutionary in America* (New York: Arno Press, Inc., 1976), p. 53.
- <sup>64</sup> William E. Gienapp states that "[t]he vast majority of Northerners who joined the Know-Nothing lodges in 1854 and 1855 were anti-slavery extension as well as nativist in sentiment." William E. Gienapp, "Nativism and the Creation of a Republican Majority in the North before the Civil War," *Journal of American History* 72:3 (Dec. 1985), pp. 558-59.
- <sup>65</sup> *Brooklyn City News*, Oct. 31, 1860, *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, Nov. 3, 1860, quoted in Kenneth L. Roff, "Brooklyn's Reaction to Black Suffrage in 1860," *Afro-Americans in New York and History*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (January 1978), pp. 29-39.
- <sup>66</sup> Democratic writer and lecturer William D. Northend in 1868, quoted in Forrest G. Wood, *Black Scare: The Racist Response to Emancipation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), p. 91.
- <sup>67</sup> New York Democratic leader Samuel J. Tilden similarly feared that Republican proposals for black suffrage in New York would win nativist supporters who figured blacks to be "a counterpoise to the adopted citizens." John Bigelow, ed., *Letters and Literary Memorials of Samuel J. Tilden*, Vol. 1, (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1908), p. 220.
- <sup>68</sup> *New York Independent*, quoted in Field, *The Politics of Race in New York*, p. 123.
- <sup>69</sup> *New York Times*, May 10, 1865. Warning of Irish designs to subjugate America "to the service of the Pope," this Republican suggested "equalizing the political power of Catholics by giving 'The African' the right to vote."
- <sup>70</sup> Quoted in Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men*, p. 264. Foner writes that at times during the 1850s "it seemed that the only weapon in the Democrats' arsenal was the charge that the Republicans were pro-Negro" (p. 263).
- <sup>71</sup> *Irish News*, Dec. 22, 1860, p. 585.
- <sup>72</sup> *Irish News*, Oct. 29, 1859.
- <sup>73</sup> *Irish News*, Dec. 10, 1859.
- <sup>74</sup> *Irish News*, January 19, 1861, p. 648.
- <sup>75</sup> For New York see Phyllis Field, *The Politics of Race in New York*, pp. 183, 209.
- <sup>76</sup> *New York Irish-American*, May 27, 1865; *New York Irish World*, Nov. 12, 1870.
- <sup>77</sup> The paper also suggested that abolitionist concern for blacks was insincere, lasting only while it helped them retain power, and only so long as blacks could be "conveniently used and kept at a respectable distance." *Irish-American*, May 27, 1865, quoted in Florence E. Gibson, *The Attitudes of the New York Irish Toward State and National Affairs, 1848-1892* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1951), p. 209.
- <sup>78</sup> *New York Irish World*, Sept. 28, 1872.
- <sup>79</sup> Eric Foner has described the *Irish World* as the voice of the nationalist, Catholic, Irish-American working class. The driving force behind the *World* was Patrick Ford, a Galway native who had moved to America for good at the age of eight. In an unusual twist, Ford had learned journalism as a teen-ager working as a printer's devil on William Lloyd Garrison's abolitionist paper, *The Liberator*. As he encountered "No Irish Need Apply" signs and other examples of nativist prejudice, Ford put the political passion he had learned from the antislavery movement to work on the issues of Irish-American rights and Irish nationalism. Ironically, this unyielding devotion to Irish causes led him to oppose the abolitionists' Reconstruction agenda in his *Irish World* editorials of the early 1870s. For more on Patrick Ford see James R. Rodechko, *Patrick Ford and his Search for America: A Case Study of Irish-American Journalism, 1870-1913* (New York: Arno Press, 1976); and Eric Foner, "Class, Ethnicity, and Radicalism in the Gilded Age: The Land League and Irish America," in his *Politics and Ideology in the Age of the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), pp. 157-158.
- <sup>80</sup> *Irish World*, May 20, 1871.
- <sup>81</sup> *Irish World*, April 8, 1871.
- <sup>82</sup> *Irish World*, April 8, 1871; March 11, 1871.
- <sup>83</sup> *Irish World*, March 11, 1871.
- <sup>84</sup> The beleaguered surviving radicals, in Eric Foner's words, seemed increasingly to be "relics of a bygone era." Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), p. 527.
- <sup>85</sup> See Paul Kleppner's discussion of the Republican national platform of 1872 in *The Third Electoral System*, p. 134; on the decline in nativism in the 1870s and 1880s see John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860-1925* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1955), 12-34.
- <sup>86</sup> Lawrence Grossman, *The Democratic Party and the Negro: Northern and National Politics, 1868-92*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1976), p. 15-59.
- <sup>87</sup> *Irish World*, Nov. 14, 1874, p. 4.
- <sup>88</sup> The *Irish World*, March 22, 1873; February 13, 1875. The *World*, the voice of "radical" Irish-American nationalism, was not alone in the Irish community in its change of heart on racial issues. John Boyle O'Reilly, the editor of the Boston *Pilot*, mouthpiece of more conservative Irish-American nationalists, followed a similar pattern. O'Reilly's paper began the 1870s firmly opposed to Reconstruction, but gradually overcame its "traditional doubts."

By decade's end, the *Pilot* was hailing the "growing reciprocity between Irish-Americans and colored Americans." O'Reilly himself became a "persistent critic of racism" who won the affection and respect of Boston's black community. See John R. Betts, "The Negro and the New England Conscience in the Days of John Boyle O'Reilly," *The Journal of Negro History*, 51:4 (1966), pp. 246-261. A sense of improvement in Irish-Black relations following the era of Reconstruction also emerges in Arnold Shankman, "Black on Green: Afro-American Editors on Irish Independence, 1840-1921," *Phylon*, 41:3 (1980), pp. 284-99.

<sup>89</sup> *Irish World*, April 1, 1876.

<sup>90</sup> *Irish World*, May 1, 1875; July 1, 1876.

<sup>91</sup> *Irish World*, March 11, 1871; March 4, 1878.

<sup>92</sup> For more on the Irish Land League see Eric Foner, "Class, Ethnicity, and Radicalism in the Gilded Age: The Land League and Irish America," in *Politics and Ideology in the Age of the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), pp. 150-200.

<sup>93</sup> Among the many Irish-American members of the Knights of Labor was the group's leader, Terrence V. Powderly. On the connections between Irish nationalism and the labor movement see David Montgomery, "The Irish and the American Labor Movement" in David N. Doyle and Owen D. Edwards, eds., *America and Ireland, 1776-1976: The American Identity and the Irish Connection* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1980), pp. 205-18.

<sup>94</sup> *Irish World*, March 5, 1881, quoted in Foner, *Politics and Ideology*, p. 184.

Copies of John Wertheimer's bibliography are available by writing to the Roundtable at P.O. Box 2087 Church Street Station, New York, NY 10008.

### THE BROOKLYN IRISH

NYIHR member Steve Sullivan is working on "A Social History of the Brooklyn Irish, 1840-1900." He would like the assistance of Roundtable members in locating and obtaining copies of, or access to, any letters, memoirs, diaries, payroll logs, etc. related to the Brooklyn Irish. He asks for any help: "No matter how insignificant it may seem, I might be able to use it." He is also looking for information on Brooklyn Firefighters, 1840-1900. If you have any information or can help, contact Steve Sullivan, 3168 Whitney Avenue, Brooklyn, New York, 11229 or call 718-769-2515.

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