

"History as a Weapon for Social Advancement: Group History as Told by the American Irish Historical Society, 1896-1930"

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The following article is excerpted from Professor Moynihan's doctoral dissertation, "History as a Weapon for Social Advancement: Group History as Told by Jewish, Irish, and Black Americans, 1892-1950." Completed at Clark University in 1973, the dissertation compares the strategies and goals of three historical societies founded between 1892 and 1915. This selection focuses primarily on the work of the American Irish Historical Society. Dr. Moynihan's dissertation is included in the bibliography produced by Roundtable members, which is how we became aware of it. Dr. Moynihan is a history professor at Assumption College in Worcester, Massachusetts and is currently working on a history of Worcester.

This study examines the uses of organized group history by the principal members of the founding generations of the American Jewish Historical Society (1892-), the American Irish Historical Society (1896-), and the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History (1915-). It investigates the assumptions about history which they brought to their work, the characteristics they chose to emphasize about themselves and about America, and the over-all motivation which brought these laborers to their tasks.

The three societies responded to the assumption that colonial American roots conveyed respectability by documenting the early arrival of their ancestors. For obvious reasons, the Blacks pursued this course less vigorously than the others.

Accepting also the proposition that equal rights as Americans had to be "earned" by "contributions," the three groups demonstrated that their own forebears had done their share and more. The Jews stressed economic contributions, moral teaching, and military service. The Irish emphasized their loyalty and proficiency as soldiers. The Blacks felt the more drastic need to show that they merited inclusion in the human family itself.

Writers for the three societies emphasized liberty as the essential meaning of America, but sensed in different ways the incompleteness of American liberty for themselves. Carter G. Woodson, founder of the Black association, was unique in that he developed by the 1930's an extensive critique of American society. He promulgated a program of Black psychological and intellectual regeneration through Black studies.

Exhibiting the predictable tensions between their identities as Americans and as Jews, Irish, or Blacks, the members of each group presented certain repeated images of their own distinctiveness. The Jews emphasized religion as their common link, though they sometimes spoke of themselves as race or nation. They returned repeatedly to the themes of Jewish loyalty to their adopted homes, Jewish persecution through the ages, and the value of Jewish moral teachings. The Irish generally claimed a fighting spirit, geniality, and political genius as their distinguishing characteristics. The Black society's publications tended to depict a struggling people, victims of enormous injustice, psychologically rav-

aged, but plodding with determination toward the American middle class.

Born of the struggle for social equality, the three societies sought through history to overcome the hostility of outsiders and the sense of inferiority exhibited within their respective groups. Assuming that an honorable past would convey respectability, they made it their mission to document their honorable past, usually employing American middle-class standards of respectability.

The Irish

The invitation to organize the American Irish Historical Society closely linked the concerns with ancient origins and earned rights. Immediately after pointing out Irish presence in America since "its earliest settlement," the invitation complained that "while they have been a valuable addition to colony and republic in all departments of human activity, their work and contributions have received but scant recognition from chroniclers of American history." To rescue these contributions from obscurity and place them with "the lawful owners" was "not only in the interest of historical truth, but of racial fair play."¹

The Irish often discovered that the total of their contributions to America reached almost incalculable proportions, even "more...than has been furnished by every other nationality of the world combined."² "Our civilization," one writer concluded, "owes an incalculable debt to Irish hands and Irish heads."³

The Irish could be most explicit about the object of the search for Irish contributions. A speaker noted "the feeling and experiences and slurs cast upon every school child of Irish parentage in the past, and to some extent today."

We were foreign. We did not feel at home. But we began to know. We began to feel at home. We learned of our race's participation in the up-building of the nation. We will prove our part in America's history; then the children as Americans can feel as Americans.⁴

Celebration of the Lexington battle necessarily included the roster of Irish names. "With the evidence of participation indisputable, cannot we of Irish lineage feel the glory of this day as our own right, purchased by the self-sacrificing effort of our predecessors?"⁵

The Irish faced an "image" problem, which the American Irish Historical Society had great difficulty dealing with. The stereotype of the "fighting Irish" was one they gloried in, yet one which they also recognized as a sometimes negative and dangerous stereotype. In their eagerness to assert Irish "contributions," the Irish found themselves irresistibly drawn to military service, but on occasion took pains to emphasize the presence of Irish successes in other fields of American endeavor, particularly in politics.

Like the other two groups, the Irish continuously stressed the loyalty of their group to America as one of its outstanding contributions and one basis of their claim to full equality. Former senator Patrick Walsh of Georgia, encouraging the society to write the

"history of the Irish race in America," added simply: "In peace and in war citizens of Irish birth have always been faithful to the United States."⁶ The establishment of this fact would apparently be for him the goal and the substance of American Irish historiography. Another speaker concluded a sentence which began at Valley Forge and carried "Irish boys" to the "fields of France," with the observation that this was a nation "that no Irishman has ever failed to serve, that no Irishman has ever betrayed! (loud applause)"⁷

But it was not only through their military fervor that American Irish proved their American allegiance. Loyalty could be fostered by the Irish in many ways, in parochial schools, for instance.

In this respect the deeply religious training and severe discipline of so large a percentage of the American-Irish are no small advantage to American Democracy. It will never need to appoint a committee to root out Bolshevism among their teachers or to secure from them respect for and allegiance to their country's flag. (applause.)⁸

This blustering patriotism, closely associated with tales of military exploits, characterized the Irish phase of the quest to list contributions which earned for the group the rights of American citizens. And the goal was unmistakable.

We...desire that as our young men grow up they may feel that they inherit the right of ownership in our great country; that their ancestors have done their part towards the up-building of the grandest nation upon earth—a part not surpassed by any other element of our people, and therefore that they should always exercise the right of citizenship as a sacred trust transmitted to them for the glory and welfare of their country.⁹

Or, more simply put, "We claim our place in this Republic."¹⁰

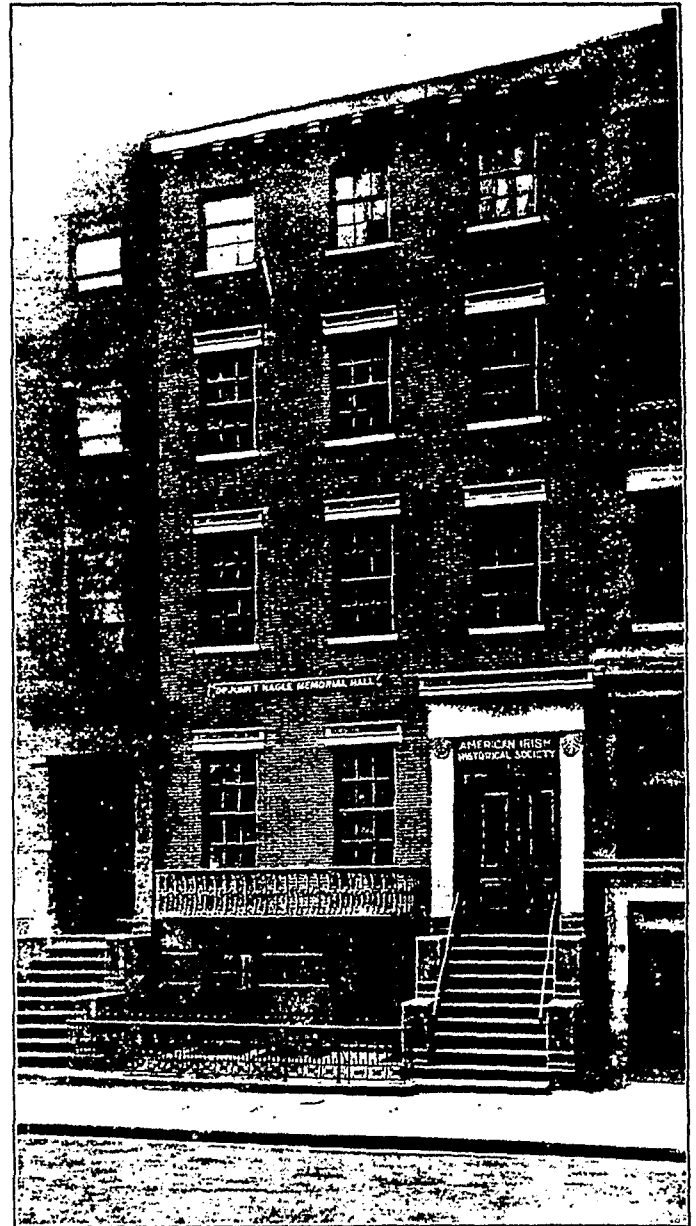
Views of America

The three historical societies projected, on the surface at least, similar views on the nature of America. The single most important element in their notion of the meaning of America was freedom. The concept of America as the land of freedom was always qualified, however, with a sense of the continuing inequality and therefore incomplete freedom of the Jewish, Irish, or Black elements of the population. If they held in common this qualified vision of America as the land of the free, the three historical societies dealt with both the concept and the qualifications in strikingly different terms.

The Irish expression of their image of America concentrated on the idea of freedom. But in the Irish instance the perception and expression of that image was deeply influenced by Irish feelings for their homeland. In an interesting paradox, loyalty to old Ireland, and to the ancient Irish desire for independence from Great Britain, nursed an emerging American patriotism among the Irish. Shannon's summary of the syndrome has already been quoted, but it bears repeating:

The Irish nationalists wanted, in other words, to make Ireland over and to make it over largely in the image of America. They wanted the old country to have its own George Washington, its own constitution, its own republican institution, its own universal education, its own independent farmers in place of a rack-rented

peasantry. This transference of values was an understandable, natural way for millions of uprooted people to assimilate themselves to a new country—that is, by transporting the strange values of their new country back into the familiar setting of the old country. The American Irish could relate themselves to these values more easily in an Irish than in an American context, and in so relating they might not free Ireland but they would do much to educate themselves as Americans.¹¹



Headquarters of the American Irish Historical Society on East 16th Street as it looked in 1923.

The members of the American Irish Historical Society linked Irish and American loyalties in many ways. One of the founders told an early meeting that "a man who cannot love his mother cannot love his wife, a man who is false to the land of his birth can never be true to the land of his adoption."¹² This formulation neatly reversed the standard contemporary charge that immigrants who did not give up their ties to the old country could never be loyal Americans. In this expression, immigrants who did cut those ties could never be true Americans.

The tendency to draw analogies between the Irish and American historical experiences was, of course, encouraged by the facts of American colonial dependency on Great Britain and the subsequent American success in winning "home rule." Thus, the proprietary period of colonial New Hampshire could seem "strangely like a page from Ireland's annals describing landlord rule."¹³

But the Irish treatment of the colonial period tended to stress the concept of ancient Irish roots in America rather than analogies to Irish subjugation. With the coming of the American Revolution, however, the impulse to link the American and Irish struggles held full sway.

Irish support for the cause of American independence was not, the writers stressed, limited to Irish Americans. Records of Parliamentary debates were proudly displayed to show British acknowledgement that "three-to-one of the people of Ireland are on their [the Americans'] side."¹⁴ As one might probably have expected, the Irish showed much more enthusiasm for the fight than certain other Britishers: "The Irish Presbyterians and Catholics were in full sympathy with this country during the American Revolution, while in Ireland or elsewhere there were very few Scotch who favored the American cause."¹⁵

The Irish-American sympathy for the American Revolution was only natural because, wrote these members of the Society, the cause of American independence and the cause of Irish freedom were parts of one great whole. When Irishmen in colonial America heard the call to arms, "when the country announced that it was menaced with danger, in that Irish boy's ears rang the traditions and the wrongs of ages."¹⁶ The struggle had preceded the American Revolution, and it would continue long after it. "It is impossible for Irishmen to think of Lexington without the associated thought of the United Irishmen, 'who fears to speak of '98'"¹⁷ The great post-World War I struggle, too, was part of the whole. Ireland was in revolt, and "the 'crime' of which Ireland at this moment stands guilty is thus laid at the door of America herself. If she is guilty, Jefferson is guilty."¹⁸

Seen in this revolutionary-or perhaps more accurately anti-British-tradition, the Irishman became the consummate American. If the struggles of the Revolutionary era remained at the core of the nature of America, then the Irishman was among the most dedicated keepers of the flame. When America rose up against England, America became, in fact, spiritually indistinguishable from Ireland.

Of all those who by immigration have helped to people our country, the Irish have come imbued with the most intense feeling of loyalty towards our institutions, and it may be safely asserted that, since our independence of English rule was proclaimed, every true

Irishman has felt, on landing in America, that the American shore was not foreign shore for him.¹⁹

This passage links the Irish and American identities so thoroughly that it deserves some added emphasis. The Irish are depicted as arriving in the United States already "imbued with the most intense feeling of loyalty towards our institutions." America has become "not a foreign shore." And this common identity of America and Ireland was achieved when "our independence of English rule was proclaimed."

The capacity of the Irish to identify their loyalties to Ireland with those to America naturally spilled over into the members' sentiments on the conduct of American foreign policy. In the early years this concern manifested itself especially in opposition to a feared alliance between the United States and Great Britain and in support of the Boers in their struggle against the Empire. One speaker reminded his colleagues that

We have only one living thought at present. Our faces are set against any alliance with the hereditary enemy of Ireland and America. That feeling is not Irish alone, it is American...The American, and especially the Irish American, who would favor an alliance with England would be unworthy of Heaven, unwelcome in Purgatory, and lonesome in Perdition.²⁰

The prospect of America in alliance with the "hereditary enemy" led the Society to take extraordinary measures. The executive council voted, for example, to express the Society's solidarity with the "German-American, anti-British alliance movement."²¹ The membership also adopted a resolution expressing the Society's inflexible opposition "to any entangling foreign alliances, and particularly to any alliance between the United States and the government of England, which has so frequently sought by war and intrigues to destroy this Republic." Demonstrating their sense of where leverage might best be applied, the members also pledged to "strive to curtail the political career of any public official who formulates, advocates, counsels, aids, or abets any such alliance."²²

Meanwhile, the Boers of South Africa were the most painful thorn in the British side, and the Society did not fail to rally to their support, nor did it hesitate to cover their struggle with the same rhetorical mantle used for the Irish and American Independence movements. The Society resolved to

send greeting and sympathy to the embattled farmers of the South African republics; that we express admiration for the courage, faith, and manhood of a race which has thrown down the gage of battle to a rich and powerful aggressor to maintain its freedom; and that it is our earnest prayer that the God of the weak, the righteous, and the brave may crown their heroic struggles with glorious victory and political independence.²³

A leader of the Society addressed pro-Boer meetings around Massachusetts. Another member was cited for his refusal to drink an anti-Boer toast proposed by "a British baronet" aboard an ocean liner. One of the Society's founders was "chairman of the Boston citizens committee to receive the Boer envoys."²⁴

Identifying the cause of Ireland with true Americanism even provided the Society with an explanation for anti-Irish prejudice in

America. Much of it could be attributed to British propaganda, many believed. The object was to "wean America away from herself." That could only be done if America turned on the Irish, because "the Irish element in America is what in the main has kept America to her original ideals; it is what has preserved her as America, and saved her from becoming English." This fact, therefore, should encourage the American Irish, for they and America were one and inseparable. The anti-Irish propaganda was anti-American; it could not "hit us without at the same time hitting America."²⁵

The blending of Irish and American identities emerged as the theme of an address to the Society just after World War I. The speaker was "the gallant, the fine, learned, the eloquent and Reverend Chaplain of the 69th, Father Francis Patrick Duffy." The Chaplain opened with a story about a teacher who "once called upon a child with a name like O'Brien or O'Ryan, to answer the question: What are the Chief exports of Ireland? Quick came the answer, 'American citizens, ma'am.'"

Duffy made reference to the then popular concept of "Americanizing" immigrants. "They never had to worry about Americanizing the Irish," he boasted. "In fact, there came along an Irishman here about two hundred and forty years ago named Dongan, who began Americanizing New York by introducing a charter of civil and religious liberties."²⁶

Again, the conventional slur against the group was reversed upon itself. Rather than the Irish needing Americanization, the Irish emerge from Duffy's story as more American than the Americans; in fact, Americanizing the Americans.

If to be an American was to uphold the values of republican and democratic government, then no Irishman could fail the test. "The children of Ireland in the new world, and particularly in the United States, are natural-born democrats, or republicans, if you will," Duffy went on. Such principles came naturally to them because "for long centuries they have been on a war footing with English monarchy and aristocracy and oligarchy their only resources being in themselves," and because Providence had brought their forefathers to these shores "just when they were needed, and badly needed, to turn the tide of battle in favor of American Democracy..."²⁷

Let it be said that America was won by Irish emigrants, won through gratitude for a new, immense, and glorious freedom, won through hatred of oppression and injustice, won for the struggling minority of brave men who followed Washington through all the dark vicissitudes of his military career, won for all humanity, for all the millions who since that day have entered fearlessly through the gates which Irish valor held open until Divine Providence secured them with its blessing and its protection.²⁸

Providence and the Irish deserved about equal credit for the creation of America as the land of liberty. The Irish stamped *their* identity upon American institutions, and thus the identification of Irishness and Americanism was completed.

The process was paradoxical, but it had a logic of its own. Traditional Irish hostility toward Great Britain was the clear and indispensable starting point. That hostility was directed toward one goal, political independence for Ireland.

That anti-British hostility found, in the experience of the American Revolution, what it took to be a counterpart to the Irish struggle. That it was a war for political independence from Great Britain was enough. The details in which the Irish and American situations might have differed were of no interest. The Irish Americans could thus immediately find meaning for themselves in one of the momentous episodes in American history. With the distinctions between the two struggles blurred, the additional values—values other than independence—associated with the American Revolution lost their exclusiveness in the Irish consciousness and came to be associated with the Irish struggle as well.

The historical accuracy of all these perceptions, of course, was often highly questionable or completely absent. But the point, after all, was not historical accuracy. It was the creation of a useful mythology, useful to the Irish immigrant and his descendants in their subjective quest for an American identity and in their struggle against all who would challenge it.

It may be difficult for the historian to imagine Washington marching under the banner of "American Democracy," but such undoubtedly was the popular interpretation of the Revolution, and such was the interpretation learned by the Irish Americans. It was just as farfetched to imagine the ancient Irish struggle always adorned with the trappings of nineteenth century liberal democratic ideology, but once again the facts did not get in the way of a satisfying way of looking at the past.

The American Irish thus found themselves in the position from which they created the paradox. Everyone, friend and enemy alike, identified them as Irish. Their goal was recognition as Americans. By associating the Irish struggle for independence with the values of the American Revolution they magically transformed themselves into the most American folk of all. If their Irishness was beyond dispute, then they could emphasize that Irishness as the very quality which made them most American. For their Irishness implied a hostility to Great Britain which, through association with the American struggle against Great Britain, became not only hostility to England but more importantly devotion to liberty, republican government, and democracy. Irishness became Americanism.

To return at last to the theme of this paper, the Irish perception of the meaning of America, like that of the Jews, emphasized liberty as the distinguishing national characteristic. As they worked out their expression of what that liberty meant, however, the Irish emphasized the dimension of political independence, and could hardly conceive of independence except as independence from England. That meaning of American liberty allowed them to develop an image of America as Ireland Redeemed, a sense of ownership and belonging in America. America turned out, after all, to be home.

Who We Are

Just as the writings of the three historical societies provide evidence concerning their perceptions of the meaning of America, they also contain evidence concerning the groups' perceptions of their own identities. All three groups began with the fundamental duality of being Americans *and*...They all, by their very natures, emphasized the distinctiveness of their particular groups, and they simultaneously strove to portray their groups as an integral part of the American whole.

But the common issue of being both American and Jewish, Irish,

or Black may suggest a similarity in the three cases that should not be overdone. The three groups often sounded very similar when emphasizing their Americanism, but when they examined their distinctiveness, they moved in very different directions.

The Irish

The analysis of the Irish expression of their American and Irish identities might begin with the question of race. In general, the tone of the Irish writing on this question was again set in terms of a response to attacks against them. Two categories of humanity were, as the Irish saw it, continually being contrasted to themselves, with the Irish always emerging as distinctly inferior. The first was the Anglo-Saxon; the second, the Scotch-Irish.

The first response of the writers was generally to deny the validity of both categories. Mixed in with this response, however, was a recurring willingness to deal with the enemies on their own terms, to accept the "racial" categorizations, and to present the Celt as the superior breed among English-speaking peoples.

In the first volume of their *Journal*, one of the Society's founders presented a paper on "The Irishman Ethnologically Considered" which illustrated the confused state of the matter in the minds of many of the members. Joseph Smith began with the frank confession that "it is almost as hopeless a task to define an Irishman as it is to give the dimensions of a perfume; for the Irishman is as evasive and delusive [sic] as pervasive and variable in type and character as the sweetness rising from the glowing bed of flowers."²⁹

Unwilling, however, to leave this hopeless task undone, Smith launched his quest for "an acceptable definition of what is an Irishman." He began by distinguishing race from nation: "the terms Celtic and Irish are not synonymous." Briefly tracing the migrations of Northern European tribal populations, he concluded that several "racial elements" had come together in the Irish people, the same elements, in fact, as constituted the English people.³⁰

It was necessary, however, to account for the obviously "tremendous difference in the two nations." Smith looked to Irish history for what he took to be strong Irish—though not exclusively Irish—characteristics, "wit, humor, poesy, melancholy, loyalty to faith and fatherland, patience under trial and hardship, daring in adventure, valor in battle."³¹ He added hope, faith in God, and courage, relating them all to centuries of Irish oppression.

So the direction of his argument was clear. Environment, culture, not biological heredity, defined the Irishman. "Conditions, climate, environment are more potent than blood; they are the instruments with which God works. The man born on Irish soil and growing to manhood on it is an Irishman."³²

Then, inexplicably, Smith abandoned his environmentalism to add, "Carry him to the most remote quarter of the earth, and he is still Irish, and his children even to the tenth generation."³³

The usefulness of this reversal in an address meant to please a gathering of Irish Americans was undoubtedly considerable, but its consistency was something else again. This apparently unconscious shifting from environmental to biological definitions of group identity became characteristic of the Irish Society.

In 1899 their president-general, Edward A. Moseley, told the Society to disdain the claims to superiority of the "Anglo-Saxon." "There never was an Anglo-Saxon race—that being a term which designated two German tribes." It was absurd, he insisted, to claim "that any of the Caucasian peoples are in any degree inferior in

race to any other." The Irish should insist on their just place among White people, and "assert that all European nationalities have contributed to our advancement and magnificent citizenship."³⁴

If some racial distinctions were absurd, clearly others were not. All Moseley wanted was the inclusion of the Irish within the superior Caucasian branch of the human family. But Moseley went on to encourage the Society to actively combat "this Anglo-Saxon fetish." If one were to look closely, in fact, one would "demonstrate beyond question that men of the supposed Anglo-Saxon type are the rare exceptions in our make-up, and are often very far from being at the top of the scale in any respect; while on the other hand, men of the received Celtic type compose the overwhelming majority in this country and in the British Isles."³⁵

Moseley was warning to the game, too, though he had just repudiated its meaning. "The truth is," he wrote, "that among all those who have achieved great prominence in the English-speaking world, the Anglo-Saxon type is conspicuous by its absence." There could be but one conclusion: "Tell the clown who calls himself an 'Anglo-Saxon' that he is an ass!"³⁶

William McAdoo of New York, among the most prominent of the Irish politicians of the time, made clear why the Irish so resented the "Anglo-Saxon" concept: "If an Irishman becomes distinguished at home or abroad, in field, forum, market or shop, he is immediately made an Anglo-Saxon; but if he brings up in the police court he is simply a common Irish Celt."³⁷

This complaint, that every successful Irishman ceased in the public mind to be considered Irish, was also the source of the Society's obsession with the category of "Scotch-Irish." "Through prejudice or through gross ignorance there has grown up a myth about the Scotch-Irish," said a speaker at the organizational meeting. "Of all the myths that have crept into history this is the most mythical."³⁸ "If we do our work, the American people, of whatever birth, will put the present Scotch-Irish myth where it belongs."³⁹

A supporter of the Society dealt more gently with the problem. "Many Protestants of Irish derivation are claiming a Scotch lineage for their immigrant ancestor, which he would have repudiated; and yet they are often innocent of intent to mislead; so thoroughly in certain quarters has the theory been nursed, that Protestant Irishmen, particularly those from the northern province, are invariably descended from the Scotch blood."⁴⁰ But another of the founders angrily insisted that "we respect the Germans, the French, the Italians, and the genuine Scotchman; but for that masquerading misnomer, the Scotch-Irishman, who claims no ancestry and no country as his own, we have only contempt."⁴¹

The attack on the Anglo-Saxon and the Scotch-Irish was a response to what the Society's members perceived as efforts to belittle the Irish. The response led the Society's speakers and writers to emphasize the intermixture of the blood of the various northern European peoples in the Irish nation and in all of the English-speaking world.

This premise of intermixture also produced in the literature of the Irish Association a comfortable acceptance of the notion that the Irish-American, too, would pass away. Formed as it was to discover and defend the proud historical record of the Irish American and to pass the benefits of those discoveries on to succeeding generations, the Society nevertheless seemed to accept the inevitable disappearance of the Irish as a distinctive American group.

Though they often spoke of the Irish "race," the Irish writers could just as comfortably project an "American race," of which the Irish would be a contributing "element."⁴² The preamble to the Society's constitution, in fact, asserted that

in the days to come, that lie in the womb of the future, when all the various elements that have gone and are going to make the republic great are united in the American—the man who in his person will represent the bravest elements of all the old races of the earth—we desire that the deeds and accomplishments of our element shall be written in the book of the new race, telling what we did, and no more; giving us our rightful place by the side of others.⁴³

This ready acceptance of the group's ultimate disappearance seems to have resulted both from the logic of the Irish argument concerning the already advanced mixture of European peoples, as well as from the eagerness to be accepted as fully American. Thomas Gargan emphasized that "this American republic is a mighty crucible," and he reminded his colleagues that "while we are proud of our origins and our ancestry, we do not forget that, above all, we are American, that we earnestly desire that all the different elements that go to make up this nation shall be blended together."⁴⁴

One would search in vain for such expectations or such desires in the works of the Jewish and Black historical societies. On the part of the Jews, the desire for complete absorption was obviously absent. On the part of the Blacks, the very possibility was so much more remote than it was for the Irish, that the prospect doubtless hardly seemed worth discussing. To appreciate that fact, one need only imagine Gargan's reaction had anyone suggested that he include Blacks among the elements he hoped to see "blended together."

The presence of this expectation of absorption also raises a possible explanation for the fact that, in the 1970's, the Irish American Historical Society is virtually defunct, while the Jewish and Black groups are more active than ever. For all their complaints about the very real discrimination practiced against them, the Irish were closer than the other two groups to more or less complete acceptance into the American mainstream, and they seem to have been aware of that fact. Put differently, it became more and more possible to lose consciousness of one's Irish identity, while it remained all but impossible to forget that one was Jewish or Black. And a consciousness of group difference has been indispensable for the creation and maintenance of these historical societies.

Whatever their expectations of the future, the Irish speakers and writers sensed that, for the time being at least, it mattered whether or not one was Irish. Like the other two groups, the Irish Society sought to define those virtues characteristic of themselves, and occasionally dealt with their real or supposed deficiencies.

The characteristic most often emphasized was what might—depending upon one's point of view—be termed belligerency or martial valor. The Irish saw themselves as fighters, boasted about it, analyzed it, joked about it, and defended themselves from those who used the characteristic as a slur. William McAdoo roused his auditors with glowing tributes to men who combined "the hot blood of the Celt and the high patriotism of the American." The

recent American war with Spain, he boasted, had seen the valor of "the historic Irish soldier." In fact, when all was said and done, "you find the most loyal and valorous American in the sons of expatriated Irishmen."⁴⁵

But the orator hurried on to explain this Irish characteristic and to defend the group against the charge that fighting was all they were good for. If the Irish race's "more acknowledged glories are of the more sanguinary fields," McAdoo explained, "...it is not because of any undue pugnacity, any animal ferocity, but because the Irish Celt, threatened with an extermination more cruel than those of our red Indians, with the schoolhouse closed to his intellect, and the church to his conscience, had to take down the stainless and invincible sword of his fathers and become a universal soldier."⁴⁶

Another writer proudly listed seven American Presidents as "more or less" members of the "fighting race."⁴⁷ This surely was an "amazing record of Celtic leadership." But this author, too, went on to emphasize other Irish virtues. They turned out to be very American virtues. In fact, "in the traits of our national character...we Americans are more Irish than we realize." The traits in question were "versatility and buoyancy, our quickness of initiative, our free and unconventional ways, and the sporting instinct that leads us to take chances and beat records."⁴⁸

Others provided other lists, and they often contrasted strikingly with one another. Where the author above, for example, noted the "free and unconventional ways" of the Irish, another praised "the sturdy virtues of the Irish people in America, their patient industry, their obedience to constituted authority, their domestic constancy, their desire to provide homes for their families, and education for their children."⁴⁹

Another characterized the Irish record in America as one "of honest toil, of love of freedom and religion, of devotion to God and country."⁵⁰

G. Stanley Hall, President of Clark University, after acknowledging "that among his ancestors was a Mary Hennessy of Limerick, Ireland," cast his vote for the gay rather than the sober Irishman. He distinguished three "characteristics of the Irish race, which are most to be commended when rightly directed." The first was "their heartiness, geniality, enjoyment of life." Secondly, it was good that the Irishman was "not always a man of peace," although it was important that this impulse be "rightly trained and directed." Third was "a veritable genius for politics."⁵¹

Hall's last two categories were almost universally accepted by the Society's members as Irish characteristics. One speaker attributed "the political genius of our countrymen" to the highly developed "interdependence of men in social and family relations" in tribal Ireland.⁵² The Irish poet Padraic Colum assured the Society that the Irish "have captured largely municipal politics in the United States" because "we have that kindly, genial spirit that enables us to get around in a good way all the other people and weld them together...We have the kindly spirit of the Gael—a spirit of broad sympathy for others."⁵³

The characteristics that emerged, then, from these self-examinations, were those of belligerency, geniality, and political genius. These were the traits the Irish of the Society presented as distinctive of themselves. As the selections above indicate, any given virtue could be—and probably was—attributed to the Irish on the appropriate occasion. But in general the definition of Irish virtue came down to these three. They could be combined to infer any number of meanings, but probably the simplest interpretation is

most accurate. Geniality bespoke an ability and willingness to get along with other Americans in the friendliest of worlds. The fighting instinct was available when the going got rough, a message of hope to the Irish and warning to others. And politics was the avenue, already recognized, through which both geniality and the fighting spirit could carry the Irish toward what always remained the goal, full acceptance in the mainstream of American life.

These three [historical] societies demonstrated a special sense of the potency of history. They understood that what people believe to be true about the past served as their material for organizing their individual mental realities. Jews, Irishmen, and Blacks confronted unexplainable hostility because some people had a perception of the past which produced that hostility. Nobody with absolutely no information concerning the past of Black people could be prejudiced about Blacks. He could not even think about them. Similarly, someone with only positive information about the past of Blacks as a group, could only be positively prejudiced toward any Black individual. And someone with only negative information would necessarily be negatively prejudiced.

What these societies sought to do—though they did not express it in these terms—was either to produce positive prejudices or to counter-balance negative prejudices to theoretically produce an unprejudiced mind. They never explicitly claimed to be seeking to achieve positive prejudice, of course, but rather to be seeking the “truth,” which would show both the good and the bad in the past, hopefully leaving the individual with no bias, and the ability to judge individuals on their own merits. But as we have demonstrated in different language, much of the production of the societies was indeed designed to produce positive prejudices to counter-balance the negative ones already rampant in the larger society.

Their reliance on truthful history to change society, then, was not so far-fetched. And their conception of history was both broad and deep. They sensed history—the perceived past—as the essential material of human thought. They knew that correction of harmful notions about groups would necessarily mean a correction of notions about their past. Perhaps they often underestimated the difficulty of the task of correcting popular misconceptions, or perhaps they mistook their own enthusiasm for their “new truths” as indicators of how rapidly the public would be re-taught. The Irish “historians” were perhaps most guilty of this over-optimism. But the Jewish and Black historians seemed to understand that their work would be, in fact, endless. As Woodson wrote without despair, “It requires centuries for truth to overcome error.”⁵⁴

The truth they individually sought to proclaim was, fundamentally, that the members of their group were people like all others, against whom discrimination was unjustified. They cast it in terms of American identity and American values, appealing for their rights as Americans as well as their rights as human beings. In the course of it they stumbled into the notions that Americans were superior to other people, or that their individual group was superior to other Americans or other groups, or into the multiplicity of prejudices which infected the society they sought to become equal members of. In their attempt to assert their fundamental truth they stumbled into a variety of other errors. They even rejected one another's claims to equality. But the very existence of these institutions and the dedicated labors of their members represented a commitment to the efficacy of the truth and the necessity for rea-

son in the conduct of human affairs, whatever their failures to live up to those ideals might have been.

Footnotes

¹*Journal of the American Irish Historical Society (JAIHS)*, Vol. 1 (1898), p. 2

²*Ibid.*, p. 25

³*JAIHS*, Vol. VI (1906), p. 85

⁴*JAIHS*, Vol. I (1898), p. 18.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 50.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 27.

⁷*JAIHS*, Vol. XX (1921), p. 141.

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 151.

⁹*JAIHS*, Vol. 1 (1898), p. 64.

¹⁰*JAIHS*, Vol. VIII (1908), p. 56.

¹¹William V. Shannon, *The American Irish* (New York, 1963), p. 133.

¹²John C. Linehan, *JAIHS*, Vol. I (1898), p. 17.

¹³*JAIHS*, Vol. I (1898), p. 35.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 49.

¹⁵*JAIHS*, Vol. II (1899), p. 70.

¹⁶*JAIHS*, Vol. VIII (1908), p. 54.

¹⁷*JAIHS*, Vol. II (1899), p. 109.

¹⁸*JAIHS*, Vol. XX (1921), p. 163.

¹⁹*JAIHS*, Vol. I (1898), p. 64.

²⁰*JAIHS*, Vol. II (1899), p. 91.

²¹*Ibid.*, p. 111.

²²*Ibid.*, p. 119.

²³*Ibid.*

²⁴*JAIHS*, Vol. III (1900), pp. 8, 9, 13.

²⁵*JAIHS*, Vol. XX (1921), p. 156.

²⁶*JAIHS*, Vol. XIX (1920), p. 47.

²⁷*JAIHS*, Vol. XX (1921), p. 152.

²⁸*Ibid.*

²⁹*JAIHS*, Vol. I (1898), p. 51.

³⁰*Ibid.*, pp. 51–52.

³¹*Ibid.*, p. 52.

³²*Ibid.*, p. 54.

³³*Ibid.*

³⁴*JAIHS*, Vol. II (1899), p. 54.

³⁵*Ibid.*

³⁶*Ibid.*, p. 55.

³⁷*Ibid.*, p. 100.

³⁸*JAIHS*, Vol. I (1898), p. 14.

³⁹*Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, p. 24.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, p. 68.

⁴²*Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁴³*Ibid.*, pp. 19–20.

⁴⁴*JAIHS*, Vol. II (1899), p. 95.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, p. 103.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*

⁴⁷*JAIHS*, Vol. VI (1906), p. 85. The Presidents were Monroe, Jackson, Buchanan, Polk, Arthur, McKinley, and Roosevelt.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 85–86.

⁴⁹*JAIHS*, Vol. I (1898), p. 73.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, p. 75.

⁵¹*JAIHS*, Vol. III (1900), p. 38.

⁵²*JAIHS*, Vol. II (1899), p. 109.

⁵³*JAIHS*, Vol. XXI (1922), p. 54.

⁵⁴*Journal of Negro History*, Vol. XIV (1929), p. 367.