

The New York Irish and the Police: Will the Tradition Continue?

BY HUGH E. O'ROURKE

One of the enduring images of the New York Irish community is their representation in the New York City Police Department. During the past hundred years the department has been led by an almost

the new department. The first police officer to die in the line of duty was an Irish New Yorker, James Cahill, who was shot by a burglar at Tenth Street and Avenue B on September 29, 1854.¹



unbroken string of Irish-American commissioners, and popular opinion has long held that other ranks are dominated by members from the Irish community. Few Irish New Yorkers have not had a relative in the department, and the department continues to evoke a positive response among them.

The popularity of the NYPD among the Irish can be traced to the department's establishment in 1844. It was created on Sir Robert Peel's 1829 model of the London metropolitan police. The new department was to replace the ineffective watch system that was incapable of dealing with increasing crime and disorder in the city (exacerbated by an influx of poverty-stricken Irish immigrants fleeing the Famine). These immigrants contributed to the crime problem, but also to its solution, as they vied for appointments to

NOT A DESIRABLE OCCUPATION?

Police work in the nineteenth century was not, in some respects, a desirable occupation. It offered little pay and very long hours. It required a connection with the political system that was in power to obtain and maintain jobs. But poor Irish immigrants found the occupation with all its faults a great improvement over most other occupational choices which offered backbreaking work, low pay, and little security. The steady aspect of police work and civil-service jobs in general struck a chord in the Irish community, which had experienced little stable employment and income.

But the Irish sought police jobs for reasons that went beyond the security they offered. Employment by the city allowed immigrant families to sink roots into the community, rather than following construction projects around the

*Illustration:
Mounted officers
lead a parade.
Appointments to
mounted units were
sought after by some
Irish in the city who
had previous
experiences with
horses in Ireland.
Courtesy of New
York City Police
Museum.*

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country. And the Irish immigrants' attraction to the police department was part of the attitudes immigrants brought from Ireland, according to J.M. Levine. This attraction was based on the respect and envy of the power, authority, and status that police in Ireland had over powerless peasants. The police uniform was a symbol of the



*Illustration:
Early in the
twentieth century
some New York City
police officers
patrolled on bicycles.
Courtesy of New
York City Police
Museum.*

helplessness of the Irish and the power of the Protestant Anglo-Saxon government. To join the NYPD gave Irish immigrants the status, the security, and the power that had eluded them in Ireland. The occupation also implied that the police officer was now a part of a government, another impossibility for most in Ireland.²

Increasingly, the NYPD became recognized as an institution dominated by the Irish and their American-born children. The media soon noticed the influx of the Irish into the department. In an editorial on March 13, 1855 the *New York Times* asked, "Who are the new policemen?"³ The editorial listed many with Irish surnames, which caused a controversy in the more established New York community. Nativism was rampant in the early 1850s, and the Irish were viewed with suspicion. The controversy was heightened by a report from the Board of Aldermen in 1855 on the nativity of new police officers. It stated that, of the 1,149 members of the department, 718 were born in the United States and 305 were born in Ireland (among the 718 born in the United States many were undoubtedly children of Irish immigrants).⁴

The popularity of police work continued throughout the remainder of the nineteenth century. Of the 2,936 police officers in January 1886, 1,745 (or 59%) were American-born, and 974 (33%) were born in Ireland. Many of those born in America were undoubtedly second generation Irish Americans. *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* in an article on the New York Police Department noted, "The Hibernian element, including those born in this country, is decidedly predominant."⁵

IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

The identification of the NYPD with the New York Irish community remained strong throughout the first fifty years of twentieth century. Of course, members of other ethnic groups joined the department, and perhaps as a reaction to their perceptions of being in an organization with a dominant Irish subculture, the Italians in 1932, Jews in 1924, and African Americans in 1949 formed their own ethnic social organizations within the department. Apparently, the Irish felt no need to form any internal organizations in the very Irish police department of the early twentieth century. However, in 1953, long after some of other groups acted, the Irish recognized a change in the department and organized the Emerald Society.⁶

Consideration of this action raises the question of how long the Irish will remain a dominant ethnic presence in the NYPD. Some other departments and agencies in New York City were once overwhelmingly Irish but are no longer organizations with significant Irish members. For example, the City's Department of Corrections in the 1950s, and the Transit Authority through most of the 1960s, had sizable Irish representations. At the close of the twentieth century, however, both agencies were viewed as having mainly minority employees.

An interesting suggestion of ethnic trends in the NYPD is provided by the Police Academy class that graduated on March 27, 2002.⁷ A casual review of the 1,359 names of the graduates personnel orders suggests changes have continued to occur.⁸ There are fewer traditional Irish names than one would anticipate. Only 108 names were easily identifiable as Irish. There was one police officer named O'Rourke,

but three Ortizes; one Dillon, but four Diazes. In the past names beginning with "O" might fill a page listing academy graduates. But only nine of the new police officers in this group had names began with "O." And there were only two Murphys in the class.

This suggested trend is undoubtedly linked to shifts in the ethnic composition of the metropolitan New York City area. In 1860 the population of New York City included 25% who were born in Ireland and a large percentage of American-born children of earlier Irish immigrants. And the United States was still receiving annually relatively large waves of immigration from Ireland (eleven years later in New York City, some 30,000 people would march in the St. Patrick's Day parade, the largest ever up to that time).

By contrast, at the end of the twentieth century the total foreign-born population in the larger New York City area was 22.8% of the total population — but the waves of immigration were coming from different directions. Immigrant admissions for the years 1991 to 1998 were the following, listed in descending order:

1. Dominican Republic	191,905
2. Soviet Union	123,722
3. China	108,900
4. India	66,392
5. Jamaica	63,250
6. Poland	49,394
7. Guyana	44,846
8. Philippines	43,658
9. Colombia	34,645
10. Haiti	33,793
11. Ecuador	31,371
12. Bangladesh	25,861
13. Peru	23,746
14. Pakistan	22,799
15. Trinidad & Tobago	19,278
16. Ireland	17,665 ⁹

In immigration late in the last century, the shift was clearly toward greater immigration from the third-world countries and a limited immigration from Ireland.

A visit to the New York Police Department's website <www.ci.nyc.ny.us/html/nypd> shows the homepages of all the seventy-six patrol

precincts. Each precinct's homepage has the name and (usually) the picture of the commanding officer. In the seventy-six precincts recently reviewed, approximately 37% of the captains,

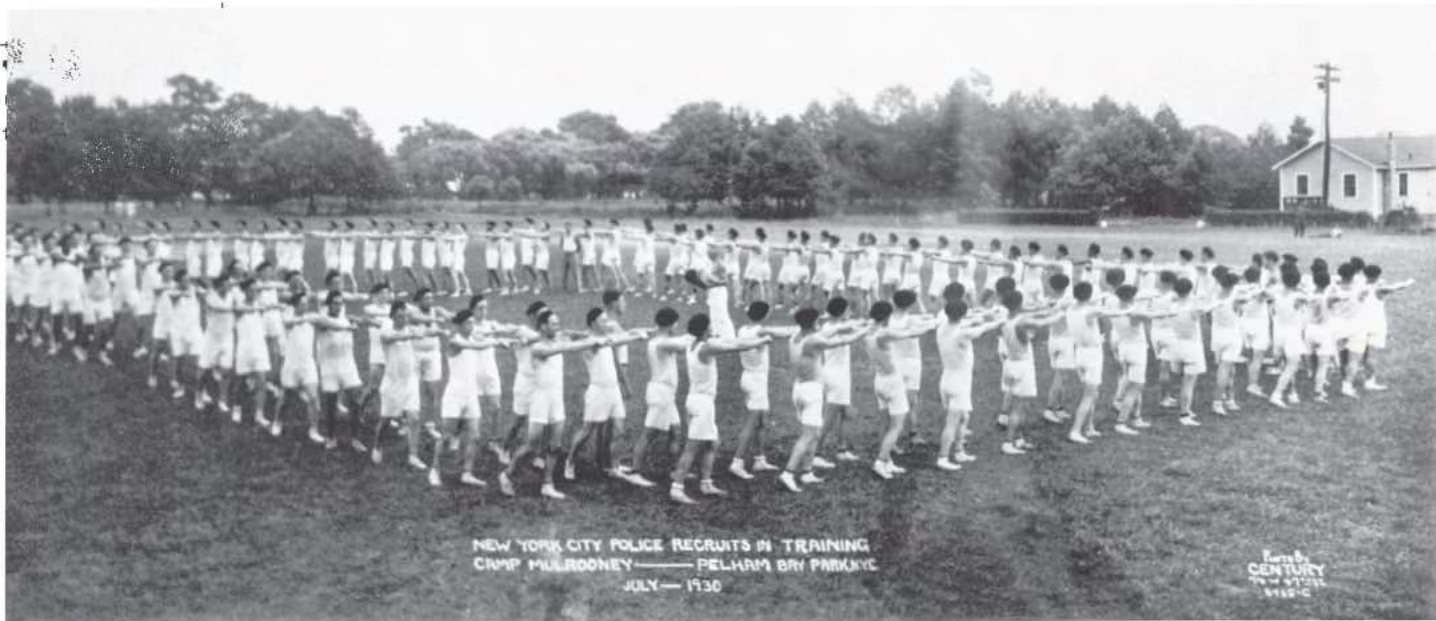


deputy inspectors, or inspectors serving as commanding officers have a readily identifiable Irish last name. In addition, there are two McCarthys and two Sheas serving as precinct commanders. But how long this significant Irish American presence will continue is in doubt for reasons that go beyond the demographic shifts just described.

CULTURAL BACKGROUNDS AND CHOOSING THE NYPD

The cultural backgrounds of ethnic groups influence their members, differentiate them from people of other backgrounds, and point members toward certain occupations. Glazer and Moynihan (1964) found that ethnic group members remain culturally linked to each other even past the third generation after immigration.¹⁰ The Irish American culture certainly influenced its members in choosing employment in the NYPD. However, the cultural connection between the Irish New Yorkers and the department may be at a turning point, as the children of the last great wave of Irish immigration of the 1950s and 1960s reach the retirement age in the department. Will this second generation influence the children of the third generation to continue the police tradition?

Illustration:
An early police car.
Automobiles used in the
department were first
equipped with radios in
1917. In the mid-
1930s two-way radios
connected police cars
with their precincts.
Courtesy of New York
City Police Museum
and the New-York
Historical Society.



*Illustration:
Police recruits in a
training exercise in
Pelham Bay Park
during 1930.
Courtesy of New
York City Police
Museum.*

There are indications that this may not happen. The pay of the department has lagged behind the pay of all the suburban departments. The NYPD has generally had problems during recent years in recruiting new members despite expensive advertising campaigns. Irish-American members of the department, as members of the middle class, have been able in many cases to provide further education for their children — and the police department may no longer look like the great opportunity that it once did.

Sociologists refer to civil-service jobs, such as policing, as “transitional occupations.” These occupations bridge the gap between the laboring jobs of new immigrants and the better paying, more prestigious occupations and professions of the third and future generations. It has been said that, on September 11, 2001, the New York Irish community met on the stairways of the World Trade Center: as Irish-American stock and bond traders fled downward, they passed Irish-American firefighters and police officers climbing upward to their deaths. Has the New York Irish community reached the point where the transitional occupations are no longer necessary? Will the Irish New York be more represented in Wall Street than in the fire and police departments?

A LOOK AT TRANSIT AUTHORITY WORKERS

An answer is suggested by reviewing who worked with the New York City Transit Authority during the twentieth century. In the years beginning

with the creation of mass transit in New York City during the 1920s until the 1970s, the Irish immigrants and their children were closely associated with employment in the mass-transit system. Joshua B. Freeman in his history of the transport workers’ union (TWU) stated that Irish culture permeated the industry. Many workers emigrated from Ireland in the first three decades of the twentieth century. Unskilled and poorly educated, they flocked to the transit system as a source of steady, if poorly paid, work. Living in heavily Irish neighborhoods, such as the South Bronx, Washington Heights, Inwood, the Fordham section, Bay Ridge, and Park Slope, transit jobs were conveniently located for many of them, and the income was steady.¹¹ For many years the Transport Workers Union was lead by Kerry-born Michael Quill. At the end of the twentieth century, however, the Irish-American presence in the transit system was insignificant, and the union was led by members of minority communities in New York.

There are several reasons for this shift, including the fact that Irish immigrant transit workers viewed employment with the New York police and fire departments as a step up the ladder of success. They were happy to see their second-generation high-school graduate sons entering into these occupations. It was a movement into higher-paid and more prestigious occupations. The Irish in New York viewed police work as a high-prestige blue-collar occupa-

tion. Police work was a “clean occupation,” as compared to the dirtier work in construction and, in many areas, in the transit authority. Even if police officers made no more money (or perhaps less) than some in the blue-collar occupations, the notion of not getting dirty at work was associated with higher prestige.¹² Better benefits and pensions made up for the sometimes lower pay than that in the construction trades.

The sons of the transit and construction workers who entered the police and fire departments in the late 1960s and 1970s were affected by the general American investment in upward mobility. For most, upward mobility was measured by the movement out of the city, increased income, and homeownership.¹³ (As a graduate of the Police Academy class of June 7, 1968, I can recall numerous discussions with fellow young police officers about the advantages of Rockland county over Nassau and Westchester county over Suffolk. The idea of buying a house in New York City was not an option in the turbulent years of the administration of John V. Lindsey. New York City was home to our immigrant parents; we were determined to live in the suburbs.)

This general move from the older Irish communities in the city left just a few areas that could still be considered Irish.¹⁴ The loss of the second generation to the suburbs opened up housing for the increasing numbers of new immigrants from third world areas and African-Americans who pushed out from their traditional neighborhoods. Irish community and cultural life continued as best it could in the suburbs. Irish clubs, music, bagpipe bands, the Ancient Order of Hibernians, and the *feis* were now found in Pearl River, Mineola, Babylon, and in Bergen County, New Jersey.

While movement to the suburbs brought improvement in housing and living conditions over those in old New York neighborhoods, there was some loss of Irish identity in the second and third generations.

THE NYPD AND FUTURE GENERATIONS

The question remains whether the Irish cultural connection to the police department will continue among the third and future generations of Irish Americans who have been raised in the suburbs. It is doubtful that they view the NYPD in as favorable a light as their parents. Never having



seen a relative coming home from work dirty from a physically demanding days work, will they view having a clean job as an advantage? The third generation was better educated than their parents and grandparents. Families asked if it was appropriate for college-educated children to join the police department, which in their eyes was still a blue-collar occupation. The low pay is also viewed as discouraging recruitment. Police departments in the suburbs are paid substantially higher salaries than police officers in New York City. Most suburban-raised Irish Americans also lack the nostalgic attachment to the city that their parents held. New York City is a different and uncomfortable place to many of the young who were raised in suburban communities. Many of the suburban Irish-American police officers seem to be accepting work with the NYPD only until they get the call from a more desirable suburban department.

Illustration:

Soon after immigrating from Co. Cavan, Patrick Leddy joined the police department in 1910 and remained on the force for over thirty-five years. Three years after he joined, the department had more than 10,800 members. Courtesy of Margaret Fitzpatrick Leddy.

In my suburban Irish-American family I have eight children, only one of whom has followed me into the NYPD. Of my sons, two are on Wall Street, and one is a nuclear engineer. One son is still in college, and he has expressed no interest in policing. Of my three daughters, one is an attorney, one a nurse, and one is completing her master's degree in elementary education. An informal survey of fellow retired police officers and firefighters reveals a similar trend. We no longer live in the city, and educational opportunities have opened up more lucrative occupational choices for our children.

While I am proud of my son's achievements (he is both a captain in the NYPD and an attorney), I realize that the world has opened up for the third generation. It is probable that the Irish Americans will never again make up the bulk of another Police Academy class and that in the future, as is the case in the New York City Transit Authority, members of minority groups will dominate the New York City Police Department.

Notes

- 1 *New York Times*, September 30, 1854, p. 1
- 2 E. M. Levine, *The Irish and Irish Politicians*, pp. 120–121
- 3 *New York Times*, March 13, 1855, p. 4
- 4 *New York Times*, March 20, 1855, p. 1.
- 5 R. Wheatley, "The New York Police Department," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, pp. 7–30.
- 6 Robert Hogan, "A History of the Pipes and Drums of the Emerald Society, New York Police Department." *New York Irish History*, Vol. 5, 1990–1991, pp. 21–27.
- 7 Jennifer Steinhauer, "So new, and so veteran, 1,359 police graduates are praised," *New York Times*, March 28, 2002.
- 8 Official records of the ethnicity of police officers are not kept. The department has statistics on the numbers of black, white, Hispanic and Asian officers, but further ethnic breakdowns are not readily available. An additional problem involves definition of ethnicity. Would a police officer with a mother born in Ireland and an Italian father be counted as Irish or Italian?

- 9 www.fairus.org/html/msas/042nynn/hmt
- 10 N. Glazer and D. P. Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting Pot*. Cambridge: (MIT University Press, 1964)
- 11 Joshua Freeman, *In Transit: the Transport Workers Union in New York, 1933–1966*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989)
- 12 Theodore Caplow, *The Sociology of Work*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1957)
- 13 Dowell Myers, "Upward Mobility in Space and Time: Lessons from Immigration." In *American Demographic Tapestry: Baseline for the New Millennium*, edited by James W. Hughes and Joseph J. Seneca pp. 135–158. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1999). Pp. 135–135.
- 14 Linda Dowling Almeida, *Irish Immigrants in NYC 1945–1995*, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001), p. 45.