

“Honest” John Kelly: Democrat to Autocrat of Tammany Hall

BY ANNE SOLARI



Today most modern high school history books describe Tammany Hall with but a brief passage focusing on the corruption of the Hall's most infamous boss, William M. Tweed, and usually accompany the section with one of Thomas Nast's scathing editorial cartoons. With the notoriety of Boss Tweed's corruption tainting all his successor's actions, it is hard to imagine that the next man to take the leadership of Tammany was deserving of the nickname "Honest" John Kelly. Indeed, the complexity of "Honest" John Kelly is that he is beyond deserving the label of "honest" or dismissing the moniker as sarcastic; one must resist the temptation to insert him into the category of pure reformer or pure con man. Rather, through his leadership he showed himself willfully self-righteous, impulsive, and autocratic while, at the same time, essentially the honest man he claimed to be. Referring to Kelly's brashly vindictive side, Tweed's secretary made the comparison that

"Tweed was not an honest politician, but a level one. Kelly is honest but not level."¹

KELLY AND THE POLITICAL SYSTEM

In the six score years since these words were spoken, Kelly has fallen from public recollection. Authors of many general texts on Tammany virtually ignore Kelly, and those addressing Tammany bosses in particular do little more than concisely credit Kelly with restoring the Hall and reorganizing the structure of the party machine after the Tweed scandals. Most devote fewer pages to Kelly than virtually any other boss, favoring the sensational corruption of Tweed and Kelly's successor, Richard Crocker, as their topic. However, by examining reactions to John Kelly by his contemporaries, one can analyze the dual attitudes of respect and resentment for Kelly that grew out of his fourteen-year reign over Tammany Hall and conclude that he merits close treatment as an individual whose

Illustration:

Drawing by Thomas Nast late in 1871 illustrates effects of that year's election on William Marcy Tweed's control in the State legislature. The sole successful candidate from Tammany was the Boss himself, shown at center.

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experience with and within Tammany elucidate the broader political system. A closer examination of “Honest” John Kelly allows an opportunity to recognize the impact of the social and political forces upon Kelly’s career and the way in which he, in turn, left his mark upon the system.

In looking to accounts of John Kelly written around the time of his death, one must concede a certain air of reverence is inherent in the nature of obituaries and of eulogizing by his peers; however, it is extremely useful to look at the specific locus of admiration as implicative of values within the political world of nineteenth century New York City. One such example is the discussion of Kelly’s ascent from the poverty of his childhood. His various obituaries, which were published in virtually every New York City paper upon his death on June 1, 1886, portray Kelly’s ambition during his early life as a nascent indication of the characteristic qualities of tenacity and determination evident in his adult life. *The New York Herald* comments that Kelly “rose to wealth and great political influence through the force of will and indomitable perseverance,” and goes on to describe Kelly’s birth in the predominately Irish Fourteenth Ward and his parents’ Irish heritage.² Sketches of his childhood point to the death of his father, Hugh Kelly, when John was only eight, as an event that strongly effected Kelly’s development. Because of the financial strain on his widowed mother, Kelly left school at the age of ten to earn money for his family. The *New York Times*’ obituary describes the way “he contributed to the family support small sums that he earned as a newsboy selling the *Courier* and *Enquirer* and the *Herald*,” and later as a “fly-boy” on a printing press for the *Herald*.³ Newspapers generally acknowledge Kelly’s ability to “make the most of his opportunities,”⁴ as the *Irish World and American Liberator* phrased it. After his time with the



Illustration:

Early in 1871

Thomas Nast depicted Boss Tweed, Mayor A. Oakley Hall, and City Chamberlain “Brains” Sweeney as vultures waiting for the storm of public indignation and protest to blow over.

Herald, Kelly apprenticed himself to a soapstone mason and grate setter. *The New York Daily Tribune* emphasized Kelly’s self-sufficiency and sagacity, remarking “Devoted to business and displaying a mechanical skill of considerable extent, the young man made steady progress, saved money by his thrift and shrewdness and in 1842, although still a boy, he went into the business for himself.”⁵ At twenty, Kelly may not have been considered a boy by all, but throughout most accounts he is shown as an intelligent and ambitious young man, a portrayal bolstered by his pursuit of further education by attending evening classes and teaching himself in his leisure time. The newspapers’ focus on Kelly as a self-made man is indicative of a more wide-

spread “American” regard for “pulling oneself up by one’s bootstraps.” Some portion of Kelly’s popularity among the voters, and thus his political success, can be attributed to his conformity with this American ideal; in this way, he both contributed to the persistence of the ideal and benefited from it.

“Honest” John Kelly’s ambition was recognized by a large audience, including founder of the *New York Tribune*, Horace Greeley, who described Kelly’s method of educating himself as mastering subjects by “throttling them and tearing their vitals out.”⁶ Greeley’s figurative language for describing John Kelly’s approach to his studies is particularly fitting for its use of very physical imagery. Kelly was often described as a big, burly man, standing six feet tall and weighing at least two hundred pounds. His obituaries closely tie his strong persona to his physical presence. His *Tribune* obituary stated, “Inheriting a rugged constitution, young Kelly’s trade was akin to develop it, and he was brought to manhood a full measure of muscular strength. While utterly devoid of a quarrelsome disposition, he found not a few occasions when his prowess came properly into play.”⁷ The *New York Times* directly con-

nected “Honest” John Kelly’s strength to his rise to power within his community in the Fourteenth Ward. The obituary explains that politics of Kelly’s youth were different from that of



his death, stating that in Kelly’s youth local politics were directed by factions of young men, “each with a leader who had to prove his title to leadership by overcoming or overawing his fellows with brute force.” Moreover, it explains, “By exercise of his ponderous arms and massive frame John Kelly obtained command over one of these factions, and he maintained it by shrinking from no adversary that presented himself.”⁸ The *Irish World* pointed to strength as a means for Kelly to gain fame in his community, specifically through his involvement in the local fire department; it stated “He was a well-known figure in the old Volunteer Fire Department, which was then in its zenith and his herculean strength and great courage were frequently talked of by the entire town.”⁹ In the larger context of New York City politics, emphasis upon Kelly’s physical prowess links the body, masculinity, and political success. Kelly’s experience implies that masculine stature is an asset, if not a prerequisite, for success at the ward level of the New York City political system.

Images of “herculean strength” and amazing feats of bravery garnered John Kelly a certain amount of regard from his peers, but at the same time the iconic value of his reputation is undermined by the partiality of the source of many of the incredible stories, J. Fairfax McLaughlin. McLaughlin wrote the only biography of John Kelly, publishing it in 1885, the year before Kelly’s death. Instead of an objective depiction of the details of Kelly’s life, McLaughlin takes the role of an apologist. By McLaughlin’s suggestion, stories of Kelly’s brute strength take on an almost

mythical, more literally Herculean, heroic quality. One such tale published in McLaughlin’s *The Life and Times of John Kelly, Tribune of the People* is told as follows:

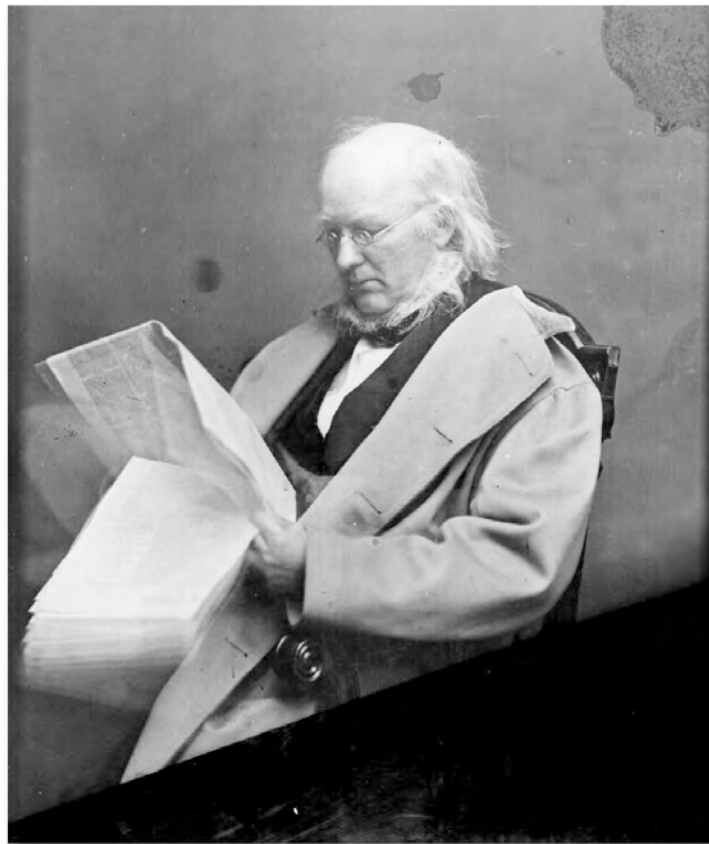
*At a fireman’s parade, while he was in line of March, a burly truckman attempted to drive through the ranks. Kelly was near the horses and kept them back. The driver sprang to the ground, and made a furious attack on the young fire laddie. He received in return a blow from Kelly’s fist which ended the battle by rendering the truckman insensible.... For two or three days the truckman was disabled. Kelly, who had acted strictly on the defensive, nevertheless was greatly distressed for his antagonist.*¹⁰

McLaughlin allows little room for interpretation of the events, and his book plays out very much like a hagiography. Kelly is advocated as the protector of the integrity of the parade, dispatching punches as they are deserved; McLaughlin emphasizes that Kelly’s concern for the injured man was a sign of his great kindness, rather than a

Illustrations:

(Left) Tammany Hall’s headquarters moved from time to time, and were located in this building at Nassau and Franklin Streets in between 1812 and 1868. When Kelly became leader, the headquarters were on East Thirteenth Street, near Irving Place.

(Below) Horace Greeley used his *New York Tribune* to oppose nativism and support social reforms in New York. He described John Kelly as educating himself on various subjects by throttling them and “rearing their vitals out.” Courtesy of New York Public Library.



customary reaction, thus endowing him with a superior understanding of the proper means for the restoration of order through strong, yet civilized means. Clearly, McLaughlin is a biased source, but what makes his biography more important was the reaction it evoked, as it was not fully rejected, but instead parroted in some of Kelly's obituaries. For example, the parade anecdote is repeated almost verbatim in the *Tribune's* article.¹¹ Meanwhile, the *Irish World and American Industrial Liberator* praises Kelly, but pointedly refers to McLaughlin directly and somewhat derisively as "[Kelly's] favorite protégé," calling his motives into question.¹² Overall, McLaughlin's biography takes the respect Kelly rightfully gained from his colleagues and inflates it to an unreason-

Illustration:

In the Fall of 1855 a huge torchlight meeting of Know Nothings and their supporters was held in Manhattan. The New York Herald reported it to be "one of the largest mass meetings ever held in the city." Courtesy of New York Public Library.



able proportion; in this sense, *The Life and Times of John Kelly, Tribune of the People* self-destructs despite its well-intentioned efforts.

KELLY AND THE NATIVISTS

McLaughlin's biography aside, the New York area newspapers report the political rise of Kelly without much negative commentary. Historian Harold Zink, writing nearly a half-century after the death of Kelly, comments that Kelly's "political career received impetus from the fire department and military associations, and his antipathy for the 'Know Nothings' who at the time controlled the politics of the [Fourteenth] ward and was actively hostile to the foreign population immediately caused his entrance into politics."¹³ This is a position generally supported by the obituaries' sketches of his career without reference to the value of such a platform for an ambitious, aggressive young man. His heroism during his time with the Fire Department was coupled with his ascent through the ranks of the Emmet

Guards, a prominent New York City Irish-American militia organization. Kelly seems to have defined himself within his community through an episode in which he knocked down a partition in the voting area that concealed the voting inspectors, who had been "at liberty to throw into the waste basket all the votes they did not approve of."¹⁴ The incident degenerated into a brawl between the Irish-Americans, led by Kelly, and the nativists. His victory was another example of his physical strength contributing to his power, but more importantly his victory built his reputation as a champion of the anti-Know Nothing campaign. *The Tribune* claimed, "The battle ended the reign of the Know Nothings. Thenceforth the foreign voters held supremacy and John Kelly was the hero of the Democrats. In November 1853, he was elected a member of the Board of Aldermen, receiving 1,697 out of a total of 1,938 votes."¹⁵ As a defender of an immigrant population only recently discovering its voting power, Kelly demonstrates the opportunity underlying the unchampioned platform of opposing nativists. In fact, his success works as an appropriate precursor to the "naturalization mill" tactics of Tweed in the middle of the following decade. While it is difficult to quantify the way Tweed and Kelly benefited from the immigrant vote, electoral turnout more generally did skyrocket during their periods as Boss, increasing 89.7% and 67.6% respectively between the first and last elections of their term, to say nothing of the great opportunity for fraudulent voting often associated with this kind of mass registration in late nineteenth century New York.¹⁶ Without attempting to assign a viable exact measurement to the extent of Kelly's use of immigrant support, one can return to the text of the accounts of his life to simply observe the way in which Kelly relied on this segment of the vote more generally.

Once elected, John Kelly quickly moved up the ranks of the Democratic Party. In 1854, Kelly challenged the long-time local incumbent, Mike Walsh, for his New York State seat in the House of Representatives; Kelly won by a matter of eighteen votes and dispelled doubts about the validity of his victory with his discovery that Walsh had never been naturalized as a citizen of the United States.¹⁷ Regardless of the small margin of his election, Kelly's growing popularity is

evident in the 1855 race; the *New York Herald* claimed that “It was understood that no man but Kelly had a possible chance of beating the popular Walsh.”¹⁸ After election, Kelly quickly turned his attention to his constituents within the political world. *The Times* claimed that “Men who would otherwise not have noticed him courted him as the special representative to the Irish Roman Catholic interests. He was the only Roman Catholic in the House.”¹⁹ The extent to which an Irish Catholic would find himself “courted” in Congress should be questioned, as this era is not known for its acceptance of either Irish or Catholics.²⁰ In contrast to the *Times*’ account, the *Tribune* acknowledged that Kelly was forced to defend his religion, depicting his Catholicism as a matter of debate instead of an asset to his political career; the *Tribune* noted:

*Naturally the successor of ‘Mike’ Walsh was indignant at the intolerant attacks which were often made in suspicion upon his religion and the country of his father’s nativity, and he delivered a number of speeches in defense of his relations of his Church to the political world.*²¹

Indeed, in the world of New York politics, the failed presidential campaign of 1928 of Irish-American Roman Catholic candidate Al Smith attests to the continued anti-Catholic sentiment present well into the twentieth century. Meanwhile, Kelly’s impassioned speeches only boosted this stature among his Irish and Catholic voters at home. Brought up with a strong Catholic ethos and included in the intimacy of the Archbishop of New York’s social circle through relation by marriage, Catholicism was surely a major influence in Kelly’s life. Where his strong religious beliefs were valuable in the Irish Catholic Fourteen Ward, he would indubitably face a mixed reaction on a larger scale.

KELLY AND PARTY LEADERS

Whether the *Times* or the *Tribune* depicted the more accurate perspective on Kelly’s position when he took office, Kelly found a means of bypassing religious issues in his quest for political power by ingratiating himself with his party leaders. Specifically, the *Times* reported that Kelly “had become known to President Pierce as the President

of the Pierce and King Club in New-York [sic], and the Chief Magistrate felt grateful to him.”²² Additionally, the *Tribune* pointed out that “Mr. Kelly was the principal defender of the President,” at the 1855 Democratic Convention in Syracuse.²³ Kelly was duly rewarded for his loyalty. *The Times* explained: “Thus supported in Washington, Kelly became an important factor in local politics. He had but to ask for patronage from the Pierce Administration to get it, and he had acquired influence in the way of ladling out State and municipal ‘pap.’ It is doubtful if any other Congressman up to that time ever had so much patronage to dispose of.”²⁴ The *Herald* emphasized the same point when it stated that at that time, “Mr. Kelly controlled nearly all the national patronage in the State of New York. No appointment was made without consultation with him.”²⁵ The obituaries seem fairly neutral about this part of Kelly’s life, likely indicating that the distribution of patronage was largely accepted as a political reality, rather than an object of debate. The aim of these passages is more to prepare the reader for Kelly’s great power when he took the helm of Tammany Hall nearly twenty years later. His dispensation of patronage suggests that his days in Congress function as a logical precursor to his time in what is generally termed a despotic reign over Tammany in the 1870s and the first half of the 1880s. Also, their descriptions of Kelly building a power base by trading loyalty for position under Pierce clearly parallels Kelly’s position later when, as Tammany head, he generously rewarded absolute loyalty and viciously punished any action he viewed as betrayal or neglect of his interests.

By 1858, Kelly turned from Congressional life to the draw of the position of Sheriff of New York City, winning the Tammany nomination and the higher income associated with his new title. The three-year period marked one of the last in Kelly’s life in which he enjoyed strong support and almost uncritical popularity. The *New York Herald* stated “It was generally conceded at the time that the Sheriff’s office, under Mr. Kelly’s administration, was better managed than by any of his predecessors.”²⁶ Indeed, praise of Kelly’s conduct was wide spread. The *New York Daily Tribune* added “Mr. Kelly filled the place with credit to himself and benefit to the city... [He] achieved an enviable reputation for ability,

capacity, fairness and honesty.”²⁷ This marked the zenith of his popularity. Just over a decade after he left the position, Mayor W. F. Havemeyer accused him of fraudulently obtaining \$84,482 at the post. Though Havemeyer and Kelly often clashed, they had kept these disagreements relatively private—that is, until most major New York newspapers ran an extensive open letter to Kelly in which Havemeyer vehemently criticized Kelly’s career as Sheriff in their September 18, 1874 editions. The letter challenged all the previous praise and honor Kelly had received in the position and attacked from every conceivable angle; the letter includes such aggressive charges as:

*You say with emphasis in your letter you are an ‘honest man,’ and you have repeated that statement so many often heretofore that you might almost believe it to be true. I shall show that you are a very dishonest man; that you defrauded this city and county of large sums of money....*²⁸



Illustration:
John Kelly was a burly man who was six-feet tall and weighed at least two-hundred pounds. According to the New York Tribune in 1886, Kelly had inherited a “rugged constitution... and a full measure of muscular strength.”
Courtesy of Harvard College Library.

Kelly responded with his own letter of denial and a lawsuit against Havemeyer for libel. The suit was dismissed, though, as Havemeyer died the day the trial was to begin.²⁹ The matter seemed to fade from the collective public consciousness. In fact, a 1913 *New York Times* retrospective on Tammany leadership said of Kelly, “During his leadership, which lasted about fourteen years, many charges were made against him, but nobody ever charged him that his hands were soiled with money.”³⁰ The *Times* reporter’s omission strengthens the idea that Havemeyer’s accusation was widely disregarded and was a reflection of the wider hostility Kelly faced after he took over as head of Tammany Hall.

LEADERSHIP OF TAMMANY

“Honest” John Kelly’s leadership of Tammany began after the fall of Boss William Marcy Tweed, who was arrested on October 26, 1871, after the discovery that he and other members of

his ring were responsible for the theft of somewhere between ten and one hundred million dollars.³¹ The reform faction of Tammany had taken control of the society, including many friends of Kelly, such as Samuel J. Tilden, Charles O’Conor, Andrew H. Green, and Augustus Schell. Kelly left active party life in 1868 to travel abroad because of his own declining health, as well as the poor health of his family, but the *Times* noted that by 1872 “They [the reform faction] were in search of a leader for a new Tammany General Committee, and Mr. Kelly’s

arrival [from Europe] was opportune for them... Like the men who put him forward, Mr. Kelly believed in party lines.”³² The *Times*’ suggestion that Kelly was chosen on grounds of his proven loyalty to the party and his previous relationship with the reformers are among the few reasons offered throughout Kelly’s obituaries. Secondary sources, on the other hand, suggest those who put Kelly in power may have recognized Kelly’s brand of loyalty as good motivation to nominate him County Leader and chairman of the Tammany Committee on Organization. A week after Tweed’s indictment Kelly replaced Tweed’s Council of Sachems with the same men who brought him back into the organization upon his return from Europe.³³ Historians Alfred Connable and Edward Silberfarb describe Tammany’s organization with the following:

Its bureaucracy was rigid but intimate, as in an old world family where the rights and responsibilities of each member are carefully protected. The Boss was the father, who ran the family affairs fairly and firmly, giving each son his due, teaching and enforcing the children now and then, but more often he rewarded them for good behavior. It was all in the family.

Connable and Silberfarb’s metaphor of the family is apt for the kind of insularity it implies.

The phrase “all in the family” evokes a fitting sense of Kelly’s level of commitment to those he could rely upon.

Reactions to Kelly’s rise to power published in his obituaries reflect the bitterness he evoked as time went on. The *Times* account seems to tie the reasons for his selection—his commitment to the party line—to the problems that arose under his leadership:

In this his first campaign as the Tammany leader Mr. Kelly began to show those qualities of self-reliance and unwillingness to subordinate his personal conclusions to the results of the honest thought of others that subsequently caused him to be dubbed ‘Boss’ Kelly. He believed in party government, and his strong personality, sustained by opportunity, made him, unconsciously perhaps, substitute his will for party will. It did not take him long to make enemies.³⁴

Indeed, many accounts of Kelly’s life from this point forward center around elements of this *Times* passage: his willfulness, his demand for conformity, and his quarrelsome relations with other political leaders. One of the first enemies he made was Samuel J. Tilden, formerly one of his closest friends from his days in Congress. Once Tilden was elected governor, the two began a life-long feud. The *Times* explained:

Kelly had turned against the Governor because the latter had refused to approve, in his official capacity, of a plan which Tammany men say, he had prepared before election, for the removal of the Fire Commissioners, who were strongly anti-Tammany in their sympathies and because he kept Kelly and the late Edward L. Donnelly cooling their heels in the anteroom of the Executive Chamber.³⁵

Kelly’s feud with Tilden was just one example of what was popularly interpreted as Kelly’s blatant inability to work with other politicians. When Tilden’s successor, Governor Lucius Robinson, attacked Kelly by removing a Tammany county clerk, Kelly had his men withdraw from the senate Democratic convention. The *New York Daily Tribune* referred to

the incident as “the famous bolt of 1879, which earned Mr. Kelly lasting opprobrium among most of the Democrats of the country.”³⁶ This was in part because after the bolt Kelly ran against Robinson, splitting the vote and allowing the Republican candidate to take the election. Kelly drew a lot of criticism for not hesitating to hurt the Democratic Party as a whole in his display of Tammany—or, rather, his own—dissent.

One of the most prominent images of John Kelly upon his death was that of the autocrat working at the head of Tammany without much regard for the opinions of his peers. This was decidedly also a factor during his lifetime, as he faced allegations of dictating appointments and nominations in an 1875 interview with the *New York World*. Kelly acknowledged his public reputation, but defended himself claiming, “Men are not elected by my consent nor defeated by my dissent. That, I supposed, is one of the delusions that various people are under. Whenever my opinion is asked in relation to the nominations of men for office, I give my opinion freely and candidly, and nothing more.”³⁷ Clearly, though, the popular interpretation of his leadership remained. Upon his death, Deputy Assistant District Attorney John M. Coman, former Secretary of the Tammany Society, told the *Evening Post*:

At the time his followers in Tammany Hall chafed at his power, and the manner in which he wielded it, but with a few words he disarmed opposition.... If any of his lieutenants wished to have their own way, he would first try to persuade them to adopt the plan he had decided on. If they still persisted in their opposition, he would say, ‘Well, I want to have it done this way and that settles it,’ and it generally did.³⁸

Coman’s words illustrate the way Kelly provoked resentment within the organization, but others, who were not so close to Kelly, put the situation more bluntly. The *New York Times* obituary flatly stated that, “Those who did not choose to obey [Kelly] had to get out,” and “[Kelly] demanded a kind of absolute obedience that very few were willing to concede.”³⁹ Any way it was put, Kelly was plainly seen as a dictator of

Tammany Hall by the end of his political career. Years later, twentieth century historians such as Alfred Connable and Edward Silberfard would see Kelly more as a pope than any other figure. Many modern historians credit John Kelly with structuring Tammany Hall after the model of the Catholic Church, with the voter as the parishioner, the block captain as the parish priest, the election district captain as the bishop, the executive committee as the college of cardinals, and the county leader as pope. The key to Kelly's autonomy was that he essentially chose members of the executive committee. His executive committee nominees needed only to be ratified by assembly district conventions and he did not have seek votes of confidence from the committee, thus he felt the ability to speak infallibly as anyone who questioned his authority could be dismissed.⁴⁰

Kelly's political philosophy was often perceived as a strict loyalty to his "friends," which often sounded like a euphemism for those who would obey his authority. Deputy-Sheriff Joel O. Stevens, one of Kelly's closest friends and staunchest supporters, said of Kelly:

*Politically he was an autocrat, working zealously for those who were his friends, but never forgiving treachery or deceit, and a most persistent fighter against those opposed to him politically.*⁴¹



Illustration:
Samuel J. Tilden, shown with his wife, was a leader in attacking the Tweed Ring and establishing John Kelly as leader of Tammany Hall. He was elected governor of New York State in 1874, but was soon feuding with Kelly over Tammany preferences. Tilden lost the presidential election of 1876 to Rutherford B. Hayes. Courtesy of New York Public Library

It was this sort of loyalty and inflexibility that caused criticism. The *Times* explained that "He would go to any length to oblige a friend, and he often stood low in the estimation of politicians because he insisted on forcing unpopular candidates on the people. But these candidates were his friends. That was reason enough for him."⁴² Kelly trusted these friends precisely because of his exacting definition of his friends as loyal to his will, a quality vital to his style of politics and, hence by definition, those of the period.

Some of Kelly's most vocal critics were those

whom he had at one time supported, but then perceived to have disobeyed and as such suffered his wrath. One such instance appeared in the *Times* late in 1881, as the Purroy faction of the New York Democrats was reported to have been "contriving plans for the dethronement of John Kelly." The article relayed numerous allegations of mismanagement by Kelly, blaming him for the recent political failures of the Party. However, while the *Times* chimed in with its own objections to Kelly, including "aggrandizing himself at the expense of the party," it also pointed out that the Purroy faction was guilty of a sort of political sour grapes. The article asserted "The Purroy faction knew just as much of Kelly's mismanagement and viciousness before they were kicked out of Tammany Hall as they now know. Why did they wait until Kelly vented his humors upon them before they spoke out? Why did they not reveal the secrets of the prison-house when they were 'hall [sic] fellows and well met' with Kelly...."⁴³ Kelly was never so reprehensible as to be beyond minimal defense even by his critics.

PRAISE AND CRITICISM

This ambiguous mix of attack and defense of John Kelly was not limited to members of the press. His political adversaries went on record with the same sort of ambivalence. In his book *Boss Tweed's New York*, Seymour Mandelbaum gives a prime example of this. He relates the accusations of Abram Hewitt, who was denied the Tammany nomination for Congress in 1878:

*'The fact is,' charged Abram Hewitt... 'John Kelly has become as absolute a dictator as was known in the history of Rome; and if his power is not broken in the coming election, it is almost impossible to say where it will end.' Hewitt conceded that Kelly was both 'pure and honest.' 'I have no doubt,' he went on, 'that he thinks he is performing his patriotic duty and wielding his vast power for the public good....'*⁴⁴

In fact, what Mandelbaum hits upon through Hewitt is a highly representative opinion of "Honest" John Kelly. Over and over again, Kelly is praised for his integrity but criticized for his style of leadership. The *Irish World* put it succinctly when

it said “We did not approve of Mr. Kelly’s politics, but that fact never prevented us from recognizing and appreciating the man’s moral worth.”⁴⁵

In the introduction to his essay, “The Impact of Tammany Hall on State and National Politics in the Eighteen-Eighties,” historian Leonard Dinnerstein calls “Honest” John Kelly’s sobriquet “none-too-accurate.”⁴⁶ However, as his essay continues, Dinnerstein makes allegations against Kelly’s pride, his temper, his need for revenge, and his love of power—but not his honesty. Though this may seem like a minor mistreatment on Dinnerstein’s part, it is all the more revealing in examining reactions to Kelly by his peers and the press at the time of his death. Dinnerstein’s slip betrays his mistake: he is too dismissive in his simplification of Kelly, instead of recognizing the complexity of Kelly’s role in the intricate political life of New York City. Upon Kelly’s death, Sheriff Hugh Grant commented that, “[Kelly] may have been a bitter foe, but he was always an honest one.”⁴⁷ In his dealings with his political counterparts John Kelly was attributed a variety of roles: he was a spiteful enemy who damaged his opponent’s political career at the expense of the party as a whole; he was the autocrat who held the movements of Tammany under his strict control; and, he was also the tyrant who demanded the total obedience of his men. However, he was no hypocrite, and lived up to his own standards. Kelly grounded his reputation in the nickname he gave himself, and no one proved he deserved otherwise. John Kelly was contrary, controversial, and domineering, but he was shaped by his place and time, by his political world, and his in turn shaped the political life of the City. His historical obscurity is undeserved and his eclipse by the historiography of Boss Tweed warrants reassessment.

Notes

- 1 Alexander B. Callow, Jr., *The Tweed Ring* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), 12.
- 2 “John Kelly Dead,” *New York Herald*, 2 June 1886, p.5.
- 3 “Tammany’s Leader Dead,” *New York Times*, 2 June 1886, p.1.
- 4 “The Late John Kelly,” *Irish World and American Liberator*, 12 June 1886, p.6.
- 5 “Calm Death of John Kelly,” *New York Daily Tribune*, 2 June 1886, p.2.
- 6 *New York Daily Tribune*, 2 June 1886, p.1.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 *New York Times*, 2 June 1886, p.1.
- 9 *Irish World and Industrial Liberator*, 2 June 1886, p.6.
- 10 J. Fairfax McLaughlin, *The Life and Times of John Kelly, Tribune of the People* (New York: The American News Company, 1885), p.25-26.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 *Irish World and American Industrial Liberator*, 12 June 1886, p.6.
- 13 Harold Zink, *City Bosses of the United States: A Study of Twenty Municipal Bosses* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1930), 115.
- 14 *Irish World and Industrial Liberator*, 12 June 1886, p.6.
- 15 *New York Daily Tribune*, 2 June 1886, p.2.
- 16 Steven Erie, *Rainbow’s End: Irish-Americans and the Dilemmas of Urban Machine Politics, 1840–1985* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1988), 52.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 *New York Herald*, 2 June 1886, p.5.
- 19 *New York Times*, 2 June 1886, p.1.
- 20 Alfred Connable and Edward Silberfard, *Tigers of Tammany Hall: Nine Men Who Ran New York* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1967), 177.
- 21 *New York Daily Tribune*, 2 June 1886, p.2.
- 22 *New York Times*, 2 June 1886, p.1.
- 23 *New York Daily Tribune*, 2 June 1886, p.2.
- 24 *New York Times*, 2 June 1886, p.1.
- 25 *New York Herald*, 2 June 1886, p.5.
- 26 *New York Herald*, 2 June 1886, p.5.
- 27 *New York Daily Tribune*, 2 June 1886, p.2.

- 28 *New York Herald*, 2 June 1886, p.5.
- 29 *New York Daily Tribune*, 2 June 1886, p.2.
- 30 "Tammany's Century-Long Battle for City Offices," *New York Times*, 2 November 1913, p.SM5.
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