

Irish Collective Violence and the New York Catholic Church

BY HUGH O'ROURKE, PH.D.

During the period of Famine and post-Famine immigration from 1845 to 1875, New York City experienced a large number of riots involving newly arriving Irish immigrants. The popular press and official records indicate the Irish community was more likely to riot than the German immigrant community that also began arriving in the 1840s. German immigrants were less likely to engage in primitive rioting than the Irish because they arrived in America with a more modernized social status than the impoverished rural Irish. This article sees the traditional culture of the pre-Famine Irish as responsible for over-representation of the Irish immigrant community in collective violence, and it focuses on the effects of the New York Catholic Church on that traditional culture. As the effects of modernization—which can be measured in the increased stature and influence of the Church in the immigrant community (as well as by other factors, including growth of political power and occupational advancement)—were felt in the last quarter of the century, the Irish community left behind the more problematic aspects of the traditional culture, and collective violence declined.

Although the impoverished Irish immigrants found their new surroundings harsh and the economic structure exploitive, their quick resort to collective violence was not always caused by these factors. The crowded urban environment of the Irish immigrants placed them close to other rural Irish people. Living together in crowded slum neighborhoods facilitated and continued traditional

culture and behaviors in the community. The formation of factions, which in America were represented by neighborhood gangs, fire and target companies, and local political organizations, continued in New York as they had in Ireland. When problems arose, these new groups responded with the traditional faction-fight response. As faction fighting in Ireland had a strong recreational component, collective violence in New York was an appealing technique to Irish immigrants.¹



IRISH GANGS IN NEW YORK

While the study of modern urban gangs includes a variety of definitions mainly associated with forms of utilitarian criminality, the social history of the Irish immigrants included the faction tradition, which viewed fighting as a recreational activity, and New York's Irish immigrant gangs can be

understood as a continuation of this tradition. This ethnic tradition reflected the long historical experience of the rural Irish peasant. The continuation in New York of the faction tradition was influenced by innovations and responses to changing social conditions experienced in America. (Clark, 1991, p. 3).

In the turbulent Five Points and adjacent Bowery areas, Irish gangs had a history of fighting each other and nativist gangs. An early Irish-nativist gang fight occurred in 1835 when tensions were increased by the plan to raise an Irish militia company, the "O'Connell Guards." Nativists feared that a foreign armed group would put them at risk. On June 21, 1835, a nativist gang, the American Guards, attacked Irish immigrants in Chatham Square. During the melee, a passerby was killed (Burrows and Wallace, 1999, p. 545).

Illustration:
Member of the Dead Rabbits as depicted in Frank Leslie's popular illustrated newspaper during July, 1857.

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Gang activity increased with the population in the Five Points. Grocery stores sold alcohol and became meeting places. Many became the headquarters of local gangs such as the Kerryonians, the Forty-thieves, the Shirt Tails, and the Plug Uglies. The most famous of the gangs were the Roach Guards, known for their uniform of blue striped pantaloons, and an allied Five Points gang, the Dead Rabbits, with red stripes. (Harlow, 1931, pp. 186–189).

The Dead Rabbits were described as having a regular organizational structure with a president, secretary, and other officers. The group at the time of the

riot consisted of approximately 100–200 members, ranging in age from 18 to 25. The Dead Rabbits could be augmented by community members during times of

stress. The July 4th and 5th riots of 1857 united community members who had heard rumors “...that the Know-Nothings and the black Republicans were coming down to destroy the Catholic Church in Mott Street” (“The Dead Rabbits,” 1857, July 7, p. 1). The rumors of attacks on the Catholic Church may have been a technique used by the gang to rally the community (Sante, 1991, p. 202).

Gang violence was also associated with political and election violence, as gangs were often used by political leaders as enforcers. Gangs were also often associated with violence among volunteer fire departments. The volunteers were recruited from the neighborhood, and the members often became of fighting gangs.

Weinbaum (1975) believes that gang rioting in the nineteenth century can only be understood by examining the political connection (pp. 246–270). Malachi Fallon was a typical Irish politician of the era with connections to many community organizations. He was a volunteer fire leader and was the warden of the

Tombs jail. He was also the owner of the Ivy Green saloon, a Tammany leader and foreman of the Black Joke Engine Number 23. In addition he commanded two target companies with 1,000 members, the Baxter Blues and the Black Joke Volunteers. Fallon and the Black Joke Engine Company were dismissed from the fire department after a battle involving more than 600 firemen from several other fire companies (Limpus, 1940, chap. 5).

The Chief Engineer of the Fire Department, Alfred Carson, in 1850 reported that it was difficult to discipline his members

as they were so politically powerful that he was unable to force them to comply with regulations.²

Gang activity existed long before the arrival of Irish immigrants. However, with the Irish

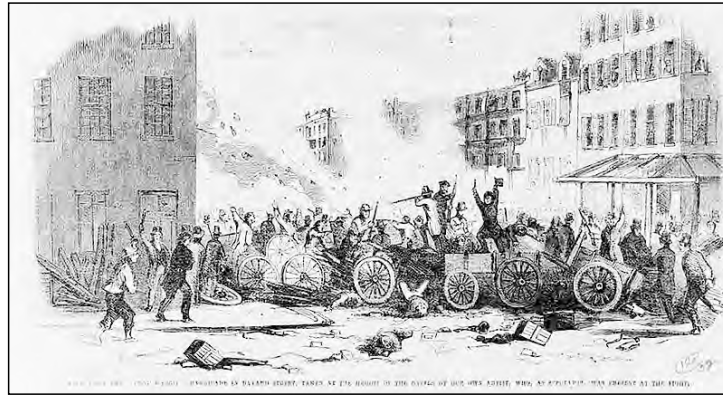
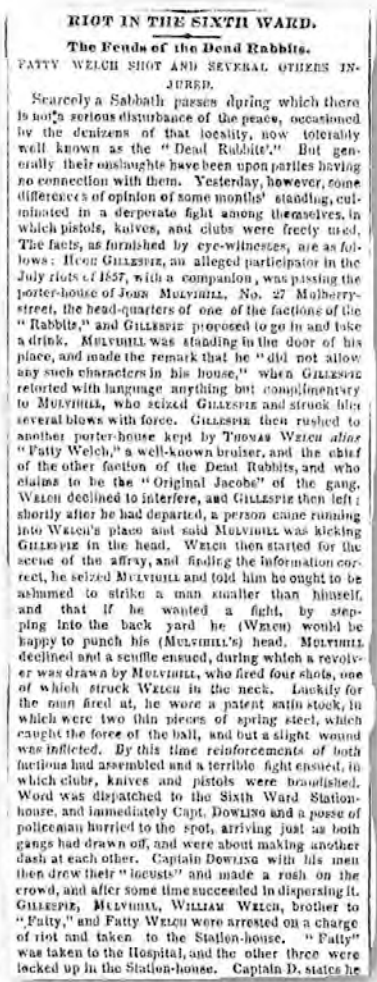


Illustration:
Contemporary drawing of a barricade on Bayard Street erected by the Dead Rabbits during a street fight in the 1850s. Courtesy of Library of Congress.

faction tradition the gang violence increased dramatically in the Irish neighborhoods. Mayor Philip Hone continually commented in his diary of Irish gang activities. On July 4, 1838, he commented on “...dreadful accounts of a riot and battle between the Irish and the natives in the Sixth Ward...” and “...riot, disorder and violence increase in our city: every night is marked by some outrage committed by gangs of young ruffians who prowl the streets insulting females, breaking into the houses of unoffending publicans, making night hideous by yells of disgusting inebriety, and unchecked by the city authorities-commit every sort of enormity with apparent impunity” (Hone, 1970, p. 451).

While the Irish Sixth Ward had a more homogeneous Irish population, the adjoining Bowery neighborhood was mixed with Irish, German, native born, and African American groups (Sante, 1991, p. 13). Bowery gangs included the Bowery Boys, the Atlantic Guards, the American Guards, and the True Blue Americans.



and political enforcer, was associated with the Bowery Boys and the Atlantic Guards until he relocated to the west side (Beals, 1960, pp. 2–5). The Bowery Boys may have consisted of Irish Protestant youths. The headquarters of the gang was in a saloon at 40 Bowery. The Loyal Orange Institute established meeting rooms nearby in 193 and 327 Bowery. Apparently, the organization felt comfortable in that neighborhood, as a large number of its Irish Protestant members lived nearby (“Riot in the Bowery,” 1869, July 13, p. 7 and “The Orange Parade,” 1872, July 13, p. 8).

News accounts frequently identified arrested suspects as gang members. A fight between a small group of Bowery Boys and Dead Rabbits at Centre and Worth Streets caused the death of a sixty-year-old passerby (“Murder in the 6th Ward,” 1858, August 2, p. 8). A fight between The Blues and the Forty Thieves in the Eleventh Ward was reported (“Another Riot,” 1857, July 9, p. 1). An attack on Engine Company Eight in Chatham Street by the Dead Rabbits left one fireman shot through the ear and three others stabbed. One Dead Rabbit was arrested (“Shooting Affair,” 1857, November 20, p. 1). Peter Young, a leader of the Dead Rabbits, was arrested for the attempted murder of his brother (“A Vile Wretch,” 1858, August 17, p. 8).

Illustration (left): Newspaper report on Sixth Ward riot and feuds published in February, 1859. Courtesy of the New York Times.

Gangs of troublesome young men existed in New York before the influx of the Irish Famine immigrants. However, the Famine immigrants with their traditional faction traits and recreational violence exacerbated the problem. Acting as they had in rural Ireland,

The most powerful and influential gang was the Bowery Boys. It was a nativist faction, closely linked to anti-Catholic and anti-Irish violence (Harlow, 1931, p. 189). William Poole, the nativist leader, volunteer fireman,

ARRESTS BY NATIVITY 1861–1865³

Nativity	1861	1862	1863	1864	1865
Ireland	24,275	25,371	18,350	17,740	19,636
USA	9,932	10,477	8,754	8,848	12,310
Germany	3,592	2,876	2,773	2,580	4,405
England	1,450	1,164	1,025	955	1,636
Scotland	623	550	431	363	540
Others	1,575	861	1,259	745	1,089
Total	41,447	41,299	32,592	31,231	39,616

the gangs fought faction fight style battles with other Irish or native gangs. As in Ireland these battles tended to occur during the traditional celebrations associated with Irish life. In America the Irish added the Fourth of July to their holiday calendar.

POPULAR IMAGES OF IRISH IMMIGRANTS

The popular press, which was almost universally critical of the new immigrants, reported many instances of collective violence by the Irish from 1845 to 1875. Editorial writers lamented and condemned the behavior of the new immigrants who seemed responsible for a great increase in the disorder of the city. From 1861 to 1865 Irish immigrants who were 25% of the city population represented 50% of the inmates of the city prison.

In examining the over-representation of the Irish immigrant in the nineteenth-century riots, a fundamental question becomes apparent. The most basic question was, “why the Irish rioter and not the other immigrant groups?” Of course some riots had participants from other groups, but overall, the popular view of the nineteenth century riot was that it was usually an Irish affair. Germans who arrived in large numbers at the same time as the Irish Famine immigrants were rarely involved. Jewish or Italian immigrants, who were not present in great numbers during this period, were not regular participants in collective violence.

Newspapers consistently complained of the riotous behavior of the Irish. The *New York Times* was particularly harsh in its treatment of the Irish immigrant community. However, the popular accounts were often ideological repre-

sentations of the reality of New York life instead of objective news accounts. In an editorial, “Irish Character and the Late Riot” the writer, commenting on the Orange Riots of July 12, 1871, described the Irish as having “Fondness for glare, glitter, and noise, for somewhat puerile forms of excitement, and for fighting considered as some pastimes are equally distinctive of the Celt of remote history and the nearest approach we have to his lineal descendants” (July 16, 1871 p. 4).

COLLECTIVE VIOLENCE

Collective violence is an all-encompassing term that includes such activities as riots, multiple murders, revolutions, coups d'état, insurrections, and guerrilla warfare (Rule, 1988, pp. 11–12). It can also include minor violence such as large scale barroom fights, tenement house battles, neighborhood and gang fights, and brawls between workers on a construction site. I use the term collective violence to describe those forms of violence with multiple participants. Although many definitions of riots or collective violence exist, I use the definition that describes collective violence



Photo:
Orestes Brownson referred to some Irish immigrants as “miserable rabble” and contended the Irish should emphasize becoming more like mainstream Americans.
Courtesy of Lamb Archives, University of Notre Dame.

as “events having many people engaged, often resulting in injuries and property damage, and presenting a great threat to public order.” These collective events are not attempts to take over the power of the state. Although many of these incidents appear unplanned, they often include planning that has taken place out of the view of the authorities. Discerning the motivations of rioters is problematic and opens a methodological Pandora’s Box. Did Irish voters riot in the Election of 1834 to achieve greater political empowerment or as a form of

traditional recreational violence? The danger is in imputing a motivation that was not there (Bowen and Masotti, 1968, pp. 10–14).

An extensive history of American rioting in the nineteenth century exists. Much of it is associated with economic grievances; electoral disputes; anti-African-American, and religious prejudices; and moral fears over prostitution, drinking, and gambling. However, Irish immigrant riots are more difficult to interpret. Although the poverty-stricken Irish had much to be unhappy about, their collective violence was rarely a response to injustice. They appear not to have been appeals for justice, but attacks on a variety of rival groups. The immigrants may have engaged in these actions as a historic clan or geographical rivalry. Often riots by Irish workers on canals, railroads, and construction projects were often not against unfair wages or treatment, but attacks on other Irish workers from other parts of Ireland (Grimsted, 1972, pp. 390–393). Other riots that may have appeared to be based on elections, industrial strife, or on gang warfare were in fact based on ethnic, religious, or racial antagonisms (Hofstadter and Wallace, 1970, p. 13).

Collective violence seemed a possibility wherever a group of immigrants gathered. Violence occurred at labor confrontations in the era before unions. It also occurred when nativist groups confronted the Irish immigrant. These instances of violence perhaps could be considered justifiable. However, there is evidence of a great deal of violence at gatherings that lacked a hostile undertone. Parades, picnics, target shooting excursions, political meetings, and elections often resulted in riotous behavior. Collective violence also marred St. Patrick's Day and the Fourth of July celebrations. The Irish often celebrated with drinking which resulted in brawls, often with fatal results. Of course, Irish criminal gang activities often resulted in gratuitous violence.⁴

IRISH VIOLENCE AND TRADITIONALISM

Orestes Brownson examined the connection between Irish immigrant collective violence and modernization. Brownson, a nineteenth century convert to Catholicism of English

heritage, was uncomfortable with the common connection of Roman Catholicism and the Irish immigrants. To increase the acceptance of the Catholic religion, the Irish would have to improve their traditional behaviors. He recommended that the Irish give up their neighborhood gangs, target companies, brawls, faction fights, political violence, and support for Irish nationalist causes. In short, the Irish should stop being so Irish and become more like the more modernized Protestant New Yorkers. He urged the Irish, if they wanted to be accepted in America, to become less "Irish" and more American. He used the unfortunate term "miserable rabble" to describe the more undesirable among the Irish immigrants. The controversy that followed alienated him from the bulk of the American Catholics (Holden, 1958, pp. 195–198).

Brownson's idea on the proper manner to integrate the Irish into American society was sometimes referred to a "Catholic Know-Nothingism." Although he made an ally of the editor of the *Boston Pilot*, a paper that supported the Irish immigrants, he was attacked by the Irish community and was forced to leave Boston for New York (Potter, 1960, pp. 589–591).

Thomas D'Arcy McGee, a leader of the Young Irelander movement and rebellion of 1848 also blamed the Irish for incurring nativist resentments by their poor behavior, bad habits, and their refusal to be assimilated into the American scene. McGee and Brownson criticized the Irish for being too "Irish" and not modernizing (Shaw R., 1977, p. 304).

THE MODERNIZED GERMANS

Nineteenth-century social scientists Emile Durkheim, Henry Maine, and Ferdinand Toennies have popularized this dichotomous conception of modern and traditional societies. The view holds that *Gemeinschaft* or traditional societies are stable. Personal contacts among all members mark agrarian societies. Traditional societies are static, hierarchal, homogeneous and ritualistic. This is in contrast to the *Gesellschaft* or modern society that we describe as highly organized and based on a functional social structure. Industrial society

NEW-YORK CITY.

Laying the Corner-stone of the New St. Patrick's Cathedral.

We have been favored with the following statement of the arrangements for laying the corner-stone of St. Patrick's Cathedral, which will take place on Sunday next;

"This grand and impressive event, to which our Roman Catholic citizens have looked forward with a high degree of interest ever since the promulgation of the venerable Archbishop's plan for the erection of the sacred edifice, will take place on Sunday, the 15th inst., at 4 o'clock in the afternoon. The ceremony has been chosen to occur on that day, it being the festival of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin. The Rev. Dr. McNISSEN has issued the following order of ceremonies by direction of the Most Reverend Archbishop:

The corner-stone of the new St. Patrick's Cathedral will be laid by the Most Rev. Archbishop on Sunday next, the 15th inst., festival of the Assumption of Our Blessed Lady, at 4 o'clock P. M.

All the clergy of the diocese, both secular and regular, not prevented by their duties, are invited to be present at the ceremony. This invitation is extended to the clergymen of the neighborhood dioceses, who can conveniently attend. They are requested to meet at 3 1/4 o'clock P. M., in the Rectory of the Church of St. John the Evangelist, Fifth-street, near the Fourth-avenue.

The procession will move at 3 1/4 o'clock P. M., up Fifth-street towards Fifth-avenue, and thence to the stand erected for the Right Rev. Prelates of the Province and the Clergy, where the sermon will be preached by the Most Rev. Archbishop.

The procession will move in the following order:

1. Fifty members of the different Conferences of St. Vincent de Paul, five abreast.
2. Acolyte with Holy Water Vase.
3. Procession Cross between two Acolytes carrying lighted tapers.
4. One hundred boys in red cassocks and surplices.
5. The Right Rev. Bishops, in cope and mitre, attended by their Chaplains.
6. The Archiepiscopal Cross borne by a Sub Deacon in dalmatic.
7. The Most Rev. Archbishop with Assistant Ministers.
8. The Archiepiscopal Insignia bearers.
9. The Rev. Clergy, in cassock, cap and surplice.
10. Fifty members of the different Conferences of St. Vincent de Paul, five abreast.

This order will be preserved during the whole time of the ceremony, and until the procession will have returned to the rectory by the same way it came.

Immediately after the address of the Archbishop, the ceremony of laying the corner stone will be begun according to the rites prescribed in the Roman Pontifical.

Illustration:
An announcement in August, 1858 of laying the cornerstone for the new St. Patrick's Cathedral on Fifth Avenue. The Cathedral opened almost 21 years later and was, among other things, a manifestation of growing Irish influence in New York and the nation. Courtesy of the New York Times.

demanding worker discipline and a strict division of labor. The social structure, government, and religion supported the modern industrial society (Stewart, 1978, pp. 507–508).

The more modern Germans were less likely to riot and they also were less involved in overall criminality. In 1859, 23% of all arrests in New York City were of native New Yorkers, 55% were born in Ireland, 10% in Germany, 7% in England and Scotland, and 5% in other countries. Ernst (1994) stated that Germans were known for their lack of involvement with crime. Also, the Jews during this period had low crime rates and were usually classified as Germans in the crime statistics (p. 58).

The traditional Irish culture of the Famine immigrants also lacked elements of social control

that would prevent collective violent behavior in his new setting. In fact there is evidence that the culture encouraged or accepted violence as an acceptable problem-solving technique by a colonized people with little access to governmental assistance in Ireland. This is especially true when the Irish immigrants confronted American Protestants who reminded them of their oppressors in Ireland.

CHANGING BEHAVIORS AND CULTURE

Many traditional behaviors and cultural characteristics brought by the immigrant Irish changed at the end of the 1845–1875

The anthems, psalms, and other portions of the service will be chanted alternately by the choir of one hundred boys, and by the clergy.

In order that the march of procession may not be impeded during the ceremonies, a space will be reserved for making the circuit of the foundation wide enough to allow seven abreast. This space will be kept clear by the members of the various Conferences of St. Vincent de Paul, who, as well as the other members who form the guard of the procession, will be known by their badges.

The ceremony will be closed by the solemn Pontifical benediction, and by the chant of the *Te Deum*, after which the procession will return to the rectory in the same order it came.

According to an ancient Catholic custom, the faithful are in the habit, on such occasions, of making a spontaneous offering. In order to facilitate their complying with this custom, the members of the Conference of St. Vincent de Paul, after having aided in preserving order during the ceremony, will form in procession passing by the east end of the foundation along Fifty-first-street to Fifth-avenue, and down Fifth-avenue, so close to the corner-stone that each one may easily place his offering.

The ceremonies will be conducted by the Rev. F. McNISSEN, assisted by the Rev. Messrs. BRENNAN, SLAVIN and CONNOR.

The first lay patrons of the new Cathedral are requested to meet the Archbishop at the rectory on return of the procession.

By order, F. McNIERNY,
Master of the Ceremonies.

A CARD.

The Archbishop is deeply obliged to those Catholic Benevolent Societies of whatever name, that have manifested a desire to be present at laying the corner stone of the new Cathedral in all the force of their numbers, and to contribute their mite towards the carrying out of this great work.

This they will have an opportunity of doing, by depositing on the corner stone, as an offering to God, whatever sum they may be pleased or able to offer, either in their aggregate capacity or as individuals. But the Archbishop would think it inexpedient, if not imprudent, for them to appear in their organized character with banners, music, &c. There will be occasions hereafter in which it will be lawful for them to form such processions in connection with the progress of our new Cathedral.

But for laying the corner stone, the Archbishop thinks that none but the clergy and the boys who shall chant the service should appear in procession.
New-York, August 9th, 1858.

period. Increased social control with the more industrialized and commercialized New York society after 1875 affected the Irish immigrants. And, as the Roman Catholic Church grew in stature and power, it could shape and affect traditional behaviors as it socialized its members. The increased efficiency of the expanded New York City Police Department helped prevent or control collective violence and other unacceptable behaviors. The increased status of the Irish community after the Civil War pressured the newest and more traditional immigrants to adjust to the norms of the modernizing Irish community. Sports grew in importance and offered alternate means of dealing with youthful aggression. Finally, the economic success in the industrial city changed traditional behaviors that were incompatible with the new society.

THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH IN IRELAND AND AMERICA

The Roman Catholic Church had a particularly powerful role in the modernizing and in assisting



the assimilation of the Irish immigrant community. While helping the immigrants to establish a Catholic identity, the church diminished the immigrants' Irish national identity. The Catholic identity replaced

the Irish traditional culture of the Famine immigrants. The Church both in Ireland and America attacked traditional culture and replaced it with a system that eased the immigrants into a more modern or civilized culture.

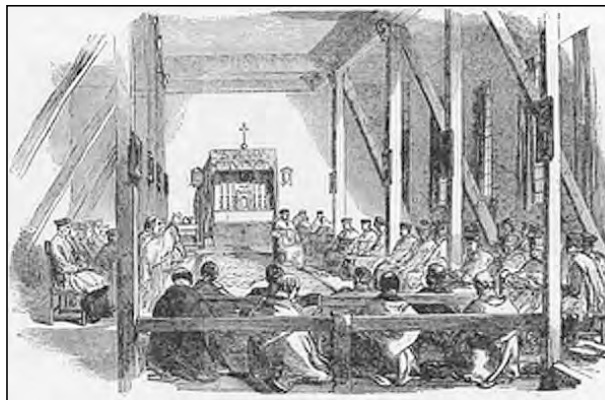
E. P. Thompson found that the growth of Methodism had the same effect in nineteenth century England. The growth of Methodism supported the industrialization of the lower classes. The religion supported the established order and drew attention to "...raising the standard of public morals, and in promoting loyalty in the middle ranks as well as subordination and industry in the lower orders of society" (1963, p. 350).

The ceremonies associated with the opening of the new St. Patrick's Cathedral on May 25, 1879 symbolized the rapid advances of the Irish and their Church. Attesting to the growth of the Roman Catholic Church in America was the presence of seven archbishops and 36 bishops from throughout the United States and Canada. Also present were 116 priests ("The Marble Temple," 1879, May 26, p. 3; "An Imposing Ceremonial," 1879, May 26, p. 5; "The New Cathedral," 1879, May 26, p. 1).

Perhaps more significant was the attendance of notable lay persons at the ceremony. Successful Irish-born Catholics were prominent among the well-known citizens on the dais. William

Grace, a shipping and mining entrepreneur and future Mayor of New York City, was present. Chief Justice Charles P. Daly and Judge James T. Brady represented the judiciary. Attorney Charles O'Connor, former United States Attorney and adviser to Samuel J. Tilden, governor of New York and 1876 presidential candidate, was but one of the political leaders present. Founder of the Emigrant Saving Bank and board member of the Equitable Life Assurance Company, Eugene Kelly, and his associate Henry Hoguet, president of the Emigrant Savings Bank, and bankers William and John O'Brien, were in attendance. Merchant Thomas O'Donoghue and immigration commissioner James Lynch were also on the dais.

These prominent members of the community were typically young children when they immigrated to New York City with their families who were fleeing the Famine. Several prominent Protestant New Yorkers accepted an invitation to sit on the dais as guests of the Roman Catholic Church. Cornelius Vanderbilt and the widow of the Irish-born Protestant merchant, A. T. Stewart, were honored guests.



While anti-Catholic prejudice did not end, Catholics were becoming more accepted as their status increased (Morris, 1997, pp. 1-15).

The effect of religious belief as a control of criminal activity has long been of interest to criminologists. Evans, Cullen, Dunaway, and Burton (1995) found that participation in religious activities was a persistent inhibitor of adult crime (pp. 207-209). The New York Irish community was becoming a community closely

Photo (left):

William Grace was one of the personages participating in celebrations of the new Cathedral's opening in 1859. He was born in Ireland, founded what would become W.R. Grace & Company, and was the first Catholic to be elected mayor of New York City. Courtesy of New York Public Library.

Illustration:

The Synod of Thurles, which represented a major step in formation of modern Catholicism among the Irish. It was the first such gathering in Ireland since the Middle Ages. Courtesy of Multitext Project in Irish History, University College, Cork.

PRIESTS-TO-POPULATION RATIO

Year	Priests	Population Ratio Nuns
1800	1,850	3,900,000 1:2100 122
1840	2,150	6,500,000 1:3025 N/A
1850	2,500	5,000,000 1:2000 1,500
1870	3,200	4,000,000 1:1250 3,700

linked to the Roman Catholic Church and its religious influences.

The Roman Catholic Church in both Ireland and in the United States had evolved by 1875. The popular conception of “Irish Catholicism” includes strong images of a community of pious communicants closely supervised by a stern and overbearing clergy. In this society the priest was the final font of wisdom with the keys to eternal salvation. The image also includes many religious practices centered in the parish church. Rosaries, Stations of the Cross, parish missions, and devotions to the Blessed Virgin Mary in a dark church with flickering candles are images associated with Irish Catholicism. So strong are these images that many believe that this was the way it always was. However, this image is of the newer reformed post-Famine Irish Catholic Church.

THE DEVOTIONAL REVOLUTION AND THE IRISH IMMIGRANT

Larkin’s (1972) description of an Irish national movement that he called a “devotional revolution” fits into the period between the national Synod of Thurles in 1850, establishing the administration of the sacraments and the regulation of the lives of the clergy, and the second national Synod of Maynooth in 1875, which increased Irish Episcopal control and authority. The Archbishop and later Cardinal, Paul Cullen, dominated the period. Church historians credited Cullen with reforming the Irish church and influencing the Church in countries of the Irish Diaspora. His reforms, which occurred during and after the stressful years of the Famine, changed the Irish from nominal Catholics to

perhaps the most observant of all Catholic national groups (pp. 635–643).

Larkin described a pre-Famine Irish Church that suffered several defects. The most serious problems were with the clergy. The British Penal Laws had outlawed the Church until 1790 and consequently Ireland suffered a great shortage of priests and ecclesiastical administration. The number of clergy was clearly inadequate to serve the population (Larkin, pp. 625–627):

Ironically, the Famine, which greatly reduced the population, improved the ratios. The combination of lives lost and the effects of immigration reduced the population while the number of priests began to increase. By 1850 the number of priests increased to 2,500 and the population decreased to 5,000,000, creating a ratio of one priest per 2,000 Catholics. In subsequent years the ratio of priests to population continued to increase.

Not only was there a shortage of priests in pre-Famine Ireland, but also problems emerged concerning the quality of the clergy. Larkin in reading the *Achieves of the Society for the Propagation of the Faith (Propaganda Fide)* found continual complaints of priests who were drunken, disorderly, immoral, or who possessed a combination of deficiencies. The greatest complaint of the Irish peasants concerned priestly avarice. Many priests considered it an obligation to give money to their relatives, who may have sacrificed to pay for their priestly education. To raise money sacraments were administered for a fee, which often was more than the local population could afford. Because of these fees, many poor had little contact with the Church. The Church also ordained many

poorly educated priests who were not able to instruct their congregations in the tenets of the Catholic religion. This was especially true in rural parishes. The Church often assigned more educated priests and those from substantial families to larger towns or cities (p. 631).

The rural Irish needed instruction in the Catholic religion. The Church built Irish Catholicism on top of an elder folk religion with its foundations in pre-Christian paganism. Some of the people held onto their ancient beliefs and traditions. Traditional religion included belief in the magical properties associated with stone, wood, and water. The peasants held that festivals celebrating Celtic holidays such as Beltane and Samhain, which herald the coming of summer in May and the dying of the year on November 1. A variety of rites insuring fertility and protection continued as games and customs associated with wakes and weddings (Johnston, 1983, pp. 22–23).

Larkin estimated that only a third of the population attended Mass in pre-Famine Ireland. Post-Famine Ireland long enjoyed an attendance rate of more than 90% that extended for over a century. The Church contained a body of poverty stricken, illiterate, and superstitious peasantry. The Irish Catholics who did attend Mass were from the more middle class elements of society, mainly substantial farmers and small merchants. Tenant farmers and landless laborers were swept out by starva-

tion, disease, eviction, and mass immigration.

Therefore, at the end of the darkest years of the Famine, the Catholic Church was in a stronger devotional position than in 1840. The remaining poor tenant farmers continued to die or emigrate, leaving a more affluent and more doctrinaire church with a pliant membership.

Paul Cardinal Cullen, who lived in Rome from his ordination in 1821 to 1850, could take advantage of the psychological impact of the Famine on those who remained in Ireland. Cullen was able to reform the post-Famine Church and created a modern and vigorous version of Catholicism.

The Irish emigrants and the better educated clergy carried the reformed Church with them to America, England, Scotland, Canada, and Australia. Cullen stressed the issue of sin and God's wrath in explaining the cause of the disaster. The Irish were psychologically and socially receptive for an evangelical revival. A guilt ridden and frightened population was prepared to turn to the Church for comfort and salvation. The Church looked powerful with mysterious and solemn ceremonies that offered hope to the downtrodden. The Church offered explanations, identity, direction and order in a fast changing world. Under Cardinal Cullen, the Church, with its organizational and liturgical reforms, could provide the religious direction required to offer hope in a changing world (Larkin, 1972, p. 639 and Morris, 1997, pp. 41–46).



Illustration:

Paul Cardinal Cullen, as represented in nineteenth-century drawing. His influence and reforms were powerful in shaping the practice of Catholicism among the Irish. Courtesy of Multitext Project in Irish History, University College, Cork.

Photo (below):

Archbishop John Ireland, supporter of the Catholic Total Abstinence Union in America. He was born in Ireland and served as the first archbishop in St. Paul, Minnesota. He had significant influence in establishing enduring church-state institutions nationally.



However, other factors beside the negative issues of fear and guilt were involved in the devotional revolution. The Irish rural traditional culture was under attack. The Irish people had been losing their language and culture for more than a hundred years before the Famine. British economic and political controls led to a process of Anglicization. Clearly, this process included forces of modernization as a more advanced social model replaced a more primitive culture. As the Irish lost their cultural identity, they turned to the Roman Catholic Church, which cooperated with the modernization of the Irish culture. The Church provided the Irish with a substitute symbolic language and offered them a new Catholic cultural heritage with which they could be identified. The terms Irish and Catholic became interchangeable.

Despite nationalist attempts to stress "Irish" as the inclusive term rather than "Catholic," the two terms have been linked to such a degree that they have been viewed as bound together and inseparable (Larkin, 1972, p. 649). Nationalists would have to fuse their ideals to Catholicism to have the Irish accept them. It was not always successful as the Church leadership occasionally condemned nationalist movements. Eventually, however, the concept of nationalism joined with ideas of Irish and Catholic to form a single unit (Gilley, 1984, pp. 192–193).

The Catholic Church also attacked Irish traditional practices. It controlled rowdy behavior at wakes and fairs. It attacked bowdlerized folk songs and prevented crossroads dancing where young rural people met and danced to a local fiddler or piper. Francis O'Neill (1913), an Irish traditional musician and superintendent of the Chicago police department, claimed that the Church's condemnation of traditional crossroads dancing was so damaging to Irish traditional music that he believed that the music would disappear (p. 417). The Irish began to view all things Gaelic and Irish as degraded and embarrassing. Cullen attacked drunkenness and preached that it was a sin on the level of fornication. The Church became as passionately in favor of temperance as the English evangelicals

(Gilley, 1984, p. 190). In America, Irish clerics continued the attack on alcohol. Seeing alcohol as hindering acceptance in American society, Archbishop John Ireland campaigned for the Catholic Total Abstinence Union. He viewed temperance as an important component of a prosperous and civic minded Catholicism (Rowland, 1996, p. 6).

The Church in New York attacked Irish organizations for unacceptable behavior. Father Sylvester Malone, who served as pastor of Sts. Peter and Paul Church in Williamsburg from 1840 to 1894, was a critic of the Ancient Order of Hibernians and its tendency toward violent behavior. The Williamsburg AOH was involved in the St. Patrick's Day riot of 1867 in Manhattan. In 1878 the Williamsburg AOH was again involved in a small St. Patrick's Day riot in Brooklyn. Father Malone attacked the AOH for causing "...St. Patrick to be the object of newspaper criticism and mockery" ("St. Patrick's Day," March 18, 1878, p. 8). Armed Irish immigrants during the nationalist disorders saved Father Malone's church in Williamsburg from destruction in 1854. However, he was embarrassed by the traditional resort to violence in the modernized Brooklyn of 1878. The AOH units in Williamsburg and Greenpoint both died out by 1900 (Ridge, 1966, p. 16).

What is important to consider in analyzing the Irish immigration to New York City, is the fact that most of the 2,000,000 Irish who emigrated from 1847 to 1860 were a mainly non-practicing Catholics, if they could have been even considered Catholics. As they congregated in ghettos in England, Canada, and America, their reputation was of ignorance, violence, and drunkenness. In Ireland and in America before the devotional revolution many priests were of poor quality. Irish bishops found America a convenient dumping ground for alcoholic, rebellious, or womanizing priests. After the reforms of Cardinal Cullen, Irish missionary priests brought with them the zeal of the newly reformed Irish Catholic Church (McCaffrey, 1992, p. 61).

Of the 4,000,000 Irish who emigrated to the United States of America between 1845 and

1900, 2,300,000 came after 1860. This group had the advantage of effects of the devotional revolution and the increased ability of the Roman Catholic Church to influence its membership. The effects of the Famine also suppressed the rowdy traditional elements of the pre-Famine Gaelic culture. With the modernization of the economy and increased Church control, the later Irish immigrants to New York City did not present the problems of collective violence that came with the earliest Famine Irish.

Cullen was also able to recommend young clerics to Rome for leadership positions in the Church. Within the 25-year period, the Irish Church reflected Cullen's reformist enthusiasms. Rome made few important decisions on the Church in Ireland or in the countries of the Irish Diaspora without consulting Paul Cardinal Cullen (Gilley, 1985, p. 200).

PARISH LIFE IN NEW YORK

Irish immigrants in their ethnic villages in New York City followed clerical leadership and built a strong system of churches, schools, and social organizations based on the parish. By duplicating the Protestant or state educational system with parish schools, the Irish Catholics maintained their identity. The community also reproduced on a smaller scale social service programs and philanthropic organizations. Irish fraternal organizations, the Knights of Columbus, the AOH, savings programs, mutual insurance companies, religious confraternities, and sodalities were formed to continue the connection between the Church and the Irish immigrant. Often the parish priest was an

important leader of these organizations. With his attendance at meetings and affairs, Irish organizations had little chance to stray from the Church. The Irish community became "... self sufficient with its own newspapers fraternal societies, lawyers, priests, politicians, teachers, academies, booksellers, and political leaders" (Gilley, 1985, p. 196).

The rules of the Catholic Church influenced where a Catholic could worship.



Catholics were to be members of the parish they lived in and were discouraged from joining another parish. Catholics must submit to the authority of the church as Catholic worship requires ordained priests to conduct the services. The Archbishop of New York held the authority to establish parishes, control property, and appoint priests. Unlike Protestant and Jewish New Yorkers, the Church required Catholics to attend Mass in their parish church. While Jews and Protestants were free

to worship wherever they choose, Church law required all Catholics within the geographic boundaries of the parish to attend their local church. Baptisms, first communions, confirmations, marriages, and funerals could usually be held only in the parish church of participants. Catholics from outside the boundaries of a parish usually could not send their children to its school or to join in the parish social organizations. Parish boundaries excluded outsiders and built strong close-knit local communities with powerful attachments to the Church and its priests. The center of the parish was the church, the rectory, the parish school, and convent (Gamm, 1999, p. 120).

Gamm in his examination of the influence of Catholic parish and Jewish synagogue as community anchors found that Catholics were

Photo:

Political scientist Gerald Gamm has concluded that American Catholics ultimately developed a strong commitment to their religion and a strong territorial attachment to their local parish community and church, for which many made significant sacrifice.

more firmly rooted to the parish church. The parish church was a permanent structure built at great expense and sacrifice by the members of the parish. It represented a strong commitment to the religion and offered a strong territorial attachment to the parish as a community (pp. 17–21). Irish American Catholics continued to identify themselves with their parish well into the middle of the twentieth century. When meeting another Catholic, one would frequently ask, “What parish are you from?” The question was in part geographic, but it had at its heart the importance of the parish in the lives of the Irish American community.

The parish was the most important social center in Irish neighborhoods. Parishes functioned as a meeting place and intensified feelings of group solidarity. The importance of the parish as a focal point in the community also stressed the importance of maintaining militant respectability and enforced a behavioral code in even the roughest neighborhoods. The Irish parishioners, creating the new Irish Catholic world in New York City, moderated their drinking and violent behavior under the eyes of the parish clergy and requirements of the industrial world. They also focused their time and energies on the parish school and creating a more sheltered environment for their children. Thus, the parish sustained the impoverished immigrant’s self respect in the face of a long list of problems associated with poverty and violence.

CONCLUSION

The traditional behaviors and culture changed at the end of the 1845–1875 period. Problematic behaviors, such as the faction fighting traditions, were forced to change as life in the modern city required. As the Roman Catholic Church grew in stature and power, it could shape and affect traditional behaviors as it socialized its members to become good citizens. The Church worked to make the Irish immigrant more “Catholic” and less “Irish” in the traditional sense.

Increased social control associated with the more industrialized and commercialized New York society after 1875 also affected

the Irish immigrants. Industrial occupations demanded steady attendance at work. The increased status of the Irish community after the Civil War pressured the newest and more traditional immigrants to adjust to the norms of the modernizing Irish community. Sports grew in importance and offered alternate means of dealing with youthful aggression. The increased efficiency of the expanded New York City Police Department helped prevent or control collective violence and other unacceptable behaviors.

Notes

- 1 While looking for deeper meaning for human activities, more obvious explanations may be the most persuasive. Conley (1999) explained faction fighting as a response to the monotony or rural Irish life. As the legal system tended to turn a blind eye to the activities of the Irish peasantry, faction fighting and recreational brawling flourished (p. 59). Conley would generally be in agreement with Jack Katz who examined the relationship between fun, pleasure, and criminal activity. Katz uses the term “seductions of crime” to describe the situational inducements to led to violence. Fighting is exciting and fulfills personal needs (Siegel, 1995, p. 115). Rural Irish peasants, without exciting recreational outlets such as sports, used collective violence as a socially sanctioned recreational source.
- 2 “The firemen were a powerful and representative body of men. They were feared and respected. They could extinguish the political ambition of the most popular citizen as readily as they could put out the light of a blazing tar barrel. Their influence was far-reaching, and whenever they saw fit to indulge in a family jar, (drink alcohol) it was as a rule considered the safer course to let them severely alone, and settle their difficulties among themselves” (Costello, 1997, pp. 117–118).
- 3 (Compiled from reports of the warden of the New York City Prison contained in the Annual Reports of the Commissioners of public charities and correction, New York 1861–1865, as follows: 1861 p.156; 1862, p. 115; 1863 p. 106; 1864, p. 74; 1865, p. 12.) During the period of the 1850s statistics on inmates of the city prison listed native born and “foreigners” without any further ethnic breakdown.

4 Charles Tilly (1969) classified this form of collective violence as primitive. Primitive violence is most often associated with local people dissociated from a central power. The violence is usually directed against members of rival groups and includes feuds, brawls, and religious rivalries. However, the notion of traditional enemies can be only a pretext for the collective violence. Much of this violence is for “the fun of it” or recreational and is often present at fairs, funerals, feasts, and other events that bring together local antagonists. It also served to reinforce group solidarity. Primitive violence is usually nonpolitical and intensely local in objectives and motives. Recreational battling can be considered as a form of team sports in an era before organized athletics. Membership in the group could achieve the goal of physical activity, danger, and excitement (Feldberg, 1980, pp. 76–78).

In contrast to primitive violence, reactionary collective violence involves small groups in conflict with representatives of the powerful. Anticonscription, antitax, antiland enclosure movements, and Luddite actions are a few of the reactionary and backward looking forms of violence associated with people attempting to hold onto rights that they fear are in jeopardy. Reactionary collective violence is often directed against the central power or the elites in society. It is political in the broad sense as it attempts to influence powerful elements in society to allow the less powerful to continue in their traditional manner without interference.

Modern collective violence is usually the most well organized and with the most obvious political or economic purposes. Modern collective violence involves strikes and political demonstrations, which attempt to achieve new rights or powers. Labor issues, temperance, and suffrage movements are typical causes that have resulted in modern collective violence. Many of these demonstrations are mainly shows of force, but can result in violence, especially when governmental authorities overreact to them (Tilly, 1969, pp.13–29). Most of the violence connected with the Irish community during the 1845–1875 period was primitive.

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