

JOURNAL OF URBAN HISTORY

Volume 25, Number 2 / January 1999

Contents

Rethinking the Politics of White Flight in the Postwar City: <i>Detroit, 1945-1980</i>	163
HEATHER ANN THOMPSON	
The Dynamics of Minority Vote Dilution: <i>The Case of Augusta, Georgia, 1945-1986</i>	199
PEYTON MCCRARY	
Public Space and Public Memory in New York's City Hall Park	226
MICHELE H. BOGART	
Review Essays	
Homeless in America	258
ELAINE S. ABELSON	
How the Irish Became Urban	271
EDWARD T. O'DONNELL	
Urban Politics in the Age of the French Revolution	287
BRYANT T. RAGAN, JR.	
Public Places and Private Lives in Imperial London	294
GRAHAM MOONEY	
Acknowledgments	307
Contributors	308

REVIEW ESSAY

HOW THE IRISH BECAME URBAN

- NOEL IGNATIEV, *How the Irish Became White*. New York: Routledge, 1995, xii, 233 pp., illustrations, notes, index.
- EILEEN M. McMAHON, *What Parish Are You From? A Chicago Irish Community and Race Relations*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1995, xii, 226 pp., maps, tables, notes, bibliography, index, \$32.95 cloth.
- THOMAS H. O'CONNOR, *The Boston Irish: A Political History*. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1995, xix, 363 pp., illustrations, notes, bibliography, index.
- RONALD H. BAYOR and TIMOTHY J. MEAGHER, eds., *The New York Irish*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996, xxii, 743 pp., illustrations, maps, tables, appendices, notes, bibliography, index, \$45.00 cloth.

In the mid-nineteenth century, as hundreds of thousands of Famine Irish migrated to America, many commentators searched for an explanation as to why an ostensibly rural people chose to remain in America's seaboard cities in such great numbers. Why did they not forgo the dreary, overcrowded slums in the East for the more healthful and economically promising regions in the Midwest and West? Some did, according to the editor of the *Irish-American*. "The pith and marrow of Ireland," he commented in 1849, averaging between 100 and 5,000 dollars per family, have arrived within the past two years, in our seaboard cities. These emigrants do not stop in cities to spend their money and fool away their time. They go directly into the interior to seek out the best location as farmers, traders, and so forth.

Other observers suggested that most Irish had no choice but to remain in the city. "Irish emigrants of the peasant and laboring class were generally poor," noted a visitor from Ireland in 1855, "and after defraying their first expenses on landing had but little left to enable them to push their way into the country in search of such employment as was best suited to their knowledge and capacity."¹ While contemporaries and subsequent generations of historians have offered different explanations for the tendency of the Irish to settle in

cities, none questioned the notion that the Irish experience in America was fundamentally an urban one. As William V. Shannon wrote in 1963, "The history of the Irish in America is founded on a paradox. The Irish were a rural people in Ireland and became a city people in the United States."²

That consensus stood unquestioned until a decade ago when historian Donald H. Akenson offered a decidedly novel answer to why nineteenth-century Irish immigrants flocked to cities instead of the countryside: They actually never did, at least not to the extent commonly believed. Needless to say, his thesis sent tremors through the field of Irish-American history. Seeking to overthrow the dominant interpretive model of the Irish as urban and industrial, Akenson argued that for most of the nineteenth century, the American Irish experience was fundamentally rural and agricultural. In subsequent work, he has endeavored, with greater success, to challenge another characteristic attributed to this group, namely, Roman Catholicism.³

Alas, the tremors were short lived as numerous scholars, most notably David N. Doyle, exposed both the limited character of Akenson's database and the underlying fallacies of his interpretation. By demonstrating, for example, that nearly three-quarters of the Irish-born in 1870 lived in urban counties, Doyle's research buttressed and validated, perhaps for the first time in a conscious manner, the long-standing notion of the Irish as urban wage earners.⁴

Even while the debate over Akenson's findings raged, historians of the Irish in America continued to produce a growing number of scholarly studies that, not surprisingly, focused on the Irish as Catholic in faith, industrial in occupation, and urban in habitat. These studies exhibited a degree of sophistication in methodology, evidence, and interpretation generally missing in earlier urban examinations of the Irish that tended to focus narrowly on immigration, nativism, the institutional church, political machines, and biography.⁵ Works by David M. Emmons and Brian C. Mitchell, for example, provide rich and detailed analyses of the formation and evolution of two Irish communities in Butte, Montana and Lowell, Massachusetts, respectively. Their works explore not merely the clashes between the Irish and their nativist detractors but also the conflicts and tensions that developed *within* these Irish communities, particularly in terms of class, religious authority, and ethnic identity.⁶

While these studies have added greatly to our knowledge of the Irish in small industrial cities, there remained until recently almost no historical study of equivalent caliber for the massive Irish populations of large American cities. A series of recently published works, however, signals the end of this glaring omission and the beginning of broader, deeper, and more varied understanding of the Irish urban experience in America. Many of the issues

addressed by the authors in the four books reviewed here constitute the traditional topics found in the works of previous generations: nativism, politics, nationalism, church and parish. Yet, in each work, some more than others, the authors bring new insights to old categories. Better still, they reflect the influence of the past thirty years of social history by exploring a host of new themes—that is, women and gender roles, labor and class formation, culture and ethnic identity, and relations between the Irish and other racial and ethnic groups. In sum, they constitute a dramatic expansion of what historians know about the experiences of one of the largest immigrant groups (and one of the most urbanized) ever to come to the United States.

Two points argue in favor of beginning this review with New York. First, since the early nineteenth century, no American city has possessed a larger Irish-born population than New York. Second, despite this fact (or perhaps, because of it), it has had the greatest paucity of literature on its Irish denizens when compared to other major cities. Their economic, demographic, religious, cultural, and political impact on the city has long been acknowledged, yet no scholarly study existed that focused specifically on the Irish over an appreciable period of time.⁷ Indeed, it was arguable that historians knew more about the Irish of Albany, Troy, Yonkers, and Buffalo than the state's largest city. No more. The long-awaited publication of *The New York Irish* adds significantly to the city's ethnic historiography.

The twenty-five essays that comprise *The New York Irish* (five period overviews and twenty topical) are as diverse in their subject matter as they are in quality. Overall, they range from the basic to the brilliant. Not surprisingly, the most provocative and illuminating essays are those that go beyond the aforementioned traditional categories of Irish-American historiography to explore more novel and intriguing questions of law and political philosophy, linguistics, radicalism, and interracial and interethnic relations. The three essays that fall into the latter category will be considered later in this review with the books that address similar issues.

One of the book's immediate strengths is the lengthy overview essays that introduce each chronological period. When confronted by a book constructed in this manner, one is tempted to see how well the individual overview essays might work when considered together. Do they form a reasonably good single narrative essay? In the case of *The New York Irish*, they do not, but that is largely due to the fact that they are written by five different authors. Still, the differences in quality and form are significant. Some of the essays, particularly those by Hasia Diner and David Reimets, are superb and stand alone as both informative and interpretive. Others lapse into a stiff informative, but less engaging, even encyclopedic style. Additionally, there are

innumerable places where information presented in an overview essay is subsequently restated in a topical essay.

Among the most significant topical works is Walter J. Walsh's brilliant essay "Religion, Ethnicity, and History: Clues to the Cultural Construction of Law." By informing his historical inquiry with techniques of critical legal theory, Walsh focuses on the legacy of the famed exiles of the 1798 uprising who settled in New York City—especially jurists William Sampson and Thomas Addis Emmet—and identifies an Irish republican nationalist ideology "strikingly antisectarian, egalitarian, and inclusive" (p. 48). Such findings greatly broaden our understanding of Irish nationalism, studies of which typically begin with Daniel O'Connell's Catholic Emancipation movement (1829) or the Famine and subsequent Young Ireland uprising (1848), both of which were marked by ever-hardening divisions between Irish Catholics and Irish Protestants. More significant, however, is Walsh's convincing assertion that "the fiercely anti-sectarian ideals of those original Irish republicans" (p. 49) constituted the basis of Sampson and Emmet's winning arguments in two landmark cases involving religious freedom and ethnic tolerance. Although the massive influx of embittered Catholic immigrants during the Famine and their "hard-line" leaders like Archbishop John Hughes overwhelmed this legacy of tolerance in Irish nationalist ideology, Sampson and Emmet succeeded in making "their political philosophy a part of the new [American] republic's evolving constitutional structure" (p. 49).

Likewise noteworthy is Kenneth E. Nilsen's work on "The Irish Language in New York, 1850-1900." Drawing upon a wide array of unique sources, Nilsen successfully demolishes what remained of two long-accepted tenets of Irish-American historiography, namely, that few nineteenth-century Irish immigrants arrived with a knowledge of Irish and that the burgeoning Irish language movement begun in the mid-1870s was primarily an expression of Irish nationalism. Nilsen asserts that the Irish language was prevalent *before* the Famine and after when between 1860 and 1900 upwards of 80,000 Irish New Yorkers spoke it. They did so, he argues, not simply as a gesture of resurgent nationalism but more tellingly because "Irish was the language that was most natural for them to use with family, friends, and neighbors" (p. 274)—just as Creole is spoken among New York's Haitians in the 1990s.

Three essays illustrate what is perhaps the most important development in Irish-American historiography of the past twenty years: the movement away from speaking of a monolithic "American Irish" to a portrayal of Irish-Americans as a complex community of diverse views, interests, and identities. Paul Gilje's essay on the formation of the pre-Famine Irish community aptly describes how conflicts both outside the Irish community (between Irish immigrants and nativists) and within (between poor working-class im-

migrants and the more established accommodationist Irish, among them Sampson and Emmet) affected the formation of a distinct ethnic identity. By the early 1840s, notes Gilje, the mass of poor Irish fashioned a "hybrid identity" quite different from that offered by respectables like Sampson, one composed of Catholicism, antiauthoritarianism, collective violence, and working-class republicanism. David Brundage's work on the "Key Themes in the Social Thought of New York's Irish Nationalists, 1890-1916" discusses the social thought of a crucial class of leaders in the years between the mass nationalist movements of the Land League (early 1880s) and the Friends of Irish Freedom (1916). His analysis of three central issues—"social class and socialism; religion and the Catholic Church; and gender and women's rights"—reveals a community characterized by many divergent and conflicting views. Charles Fanning's superb essay, "The Heart's Speech No Longer Stifled: New York Irish Writing since the 1960s," explores the multiplicity of voices and perspectives of the New York Irish on issues ranging from the Catholic Church, assimilation, economic mobility, the old neighborhood, race relations, family strains, and Ireland as revealed in recent fiction. Despite this diversity of experience and interpretation, Fanning emphasizes an Irish ethnic consciousness as an influence evident in all the works. He argues that the authors' "refusal to decide between the poles of ethnic community and cosmopolitan individuality" have provided them with "a rich, varied life" to reflect on and write about (p. 530).

A third grouping of essays, admittedly less original and provocative than others in the collection, nonetheless offers additional insights into the New York Irish community. Alan M. Kraut's "Illness and Medical Care among Irish Immigrants in Antebellum New York" presents a useful and detailed portrait of the profound medical problems faced by Irish immigrants and the various attempts (by Irish and native New Yorkers) to solve them. His underlying thesis, however, that the ill health of the Irish led to the "medicalization of prejudice" (p. 168) by nativists (later employed against all subsequent immigrant waves), simply echoes the findings of his fine work *Silent Travelers: Germs, Genes, and the "Immigrant Menace"* (1994). Similarly, William Devlin's essay on Irish entrepreneurs and artisans gives clarity to a fact established long ago by Robert Ernst and Carol Groneman that the Irish were not exclusively poverty stricken, unskilled laborers but also upwardly mobile, skilled artisans (tailors, hat makers and stonemasons) and entrepreneurs (shopkeepers and building contractors).⁸ Yet, he is convincing in his conclusion that the emergence of a successful class of Irish business leaders and philanthropists (and presumably a middle class) is more accurately attributed to this early entrepreneurship than the more traditional explanation of Irish upward mobility coming almost entirely via the successful acquisition of politi-

cal power and patronage. Marion R. Casey, in "From the East Side to the Seaside": Irish Americans on the Move in New York City," offers an engaging look at the strategies employed by Irish families, particularly women, for achieving higher quality housing without necessarily moving upward economically. Yet, one is left wondering just how Irish a phenomenon this was, especially when she concludes that Irish migrants did not select their new neighborhoods on the basis of ethnicity. New York Germans, Jews, Italians, and other groups also benefited from the vast expansion of transportation lines and affordable new housing and doubtless employed similar strategies to their advantage.

Two essays take Irish women as their central subjects but with mixed results. Colleen McDannell's essay, "Going to the Ladies' Fair: Irish Catholics in New York City, 1870-1900," brings to light the key role women-run church fairs played in raising precious funds for the Church's institutional expansion. Her strongest point, mirroring the conclusions of other studies of the relations between Irish men and women, is the assertion that the church fair and the St. Patrick's Day parade served to confirm and solidify separate gender roles. While the former took place in a religious setting under the control of women and emphasized the Victorian code of order and respectability, the latter (while nominally religious) was overtly ethnic, nationalist, and frequently raucous. Beyond that, however, far too much is read into the minute aspects of the fair. We are told, for example, that the practice of raffling off prizes, "emphasized that wealth could be accumulated through luck or the grace of God . . . and challenged the rational market" (p. 239). Yet, as anyone who has run a fund-raising event will explain, the more likely answer lay with the simple fact that raffles produce many times the revenue of a straightforward sale.

Joe Doyle's work, "Striking for Ireland on the New York Docks," raises an excellent question of why Irish women went beyond their traditionally low-profile or invisible role in earlier independence movements (except for the Land League of the 1880s) to become some of the foremost nationalist activists in New York between 1916 and 1921. He ends his engaging account with a convincing conclusion that this surge in women's nationalist activism stemmed from the influence of the women's suffrage movement and a "power vacuum" within Irish-American nationalism—that is, most Irish-American men and their organizations (Ancient Order of Hibernians and the Knights of Columbus) faced government repression if they criticized England, America's wartime ally. Nonetheless, this leaves unanswered the questions of what drew these women to the suffrage movement and why they enjoyed such immunity, particularly since the government did not hesitate to persecute militant suffragists picketing the White House.

In addition to these informative, though limited, contributions, the remaining essays address the more traditional categories of Irish-American historiography. They present considerable information and shed light on new areas of the Irish experience, but little is offered by way of new interpretation. Indeed, many key themes remain largely unexamined. For example, the emergence and evolution of the Irish theater, especially the "stage Irishman" character, receives only scant and fleeting references. The absence of an essay on figures such as the Bryant Brothers minstrels, playwrights Dion Boucicault and Ned Harrigan, or songwriter and producer George M. Cohan, all of whom exerted a profound influence on the shaping of Irish-American identity, constitutes a missed opportunity. The fine review of Irish music in the twentieth century by Rebecca S. Miller is precisely the sort of work needed for the nineteenth-century theater.

The same can be said about the amount of attention devoted to Irish women. Notwithstanding the fact that many essays make references to Irish women whenever possible and two essays, by Doyle and McDannell, make women their primary focus, we learn very little about the lives of working-class Irish women; of the relationship, beyond annual fairs, between Irish women and the Catholic Church (especially in the tumultuous changes of the post-1945 years); or of the response of Irish women to the tenets of modern feminist thought. Missing, too, is any substantive discussion of the image and reality of both Irish crime and gang activity and the Irish policemen and law enforcement. There developed in New York City, if you will, a "criminalization of prejudice" surely as important as the "medicalization of prejudice" discussed by Alan M. Kraut.

Overall, *The New York Irish* presents many unique and fresh insights. One comes away from the book with an appreciation for how profoundly the Irish affected the development of New York City yet also how much they were shaped by the city and its dynamic economy, unique politics, and ever-changing ethnic mix. Clearly, one book cannot possibly cover every facet of the story. As its editors note at the outset, this collection of essays represents "a first attempt to tell that vast, complex and fascinating tale" (p. xx). In this endeavor, they have been successful. The limitations of the work serve as a guide to future avenues of fruitful research.

Much of the scholarship under review here addresses one of the central elements of the Irish *urban* experience, yet one traditionally only glanced at by earlier generations of historians: that the Irish immigrant struggle took place in the context of numerous struggles by other groups. Because the Irish and other racial and ethnic minorities lived together in the poorest districts of American cities and competed for the same low-skill, low-wage jobs, their struggles often pitted them against one another. Yet, as several essays in *The*

New York Irish and other recent related scholarship demonstrate, their common plight also allowed for accommodation and creative interaction.

Graham Hodges's essay, "Desirable Companions and Lovers": Irish and African Americans in the Sixth Ward, 1830-1870," challenges two interpretations, one old and one recent, of the relations between Irish immigrants and African Americans. First, he rejects the traditional conclusion that Irish-black relations were characterized by "irreconcilable racial conflict" (p. 106). In addition, he takes exception to the provocative thesis set forth in recent years by Theodore Allen and David R. Roediger that the Irish achieved admission into the mainstream white American working class by becoming some of the most vigorous practitioners of American racism, thereby achieving "whiteness."⁹ Focusing on New York's Sixth Ward, Hodges reveals a world of positive Irish-black relations: a high number of Irish women married to black men, a preponderance of Irish-black social interaction in dance halls and taverns (resulting in, among other things, a remarkable intermixing and borrowing of dance and musical styles), and shared class interests that developed as a result of their many shared occupations (carting, groceries, taverns, peddling, and domestic service). Conflict, violence, and murder undeniably marked aspects of Irish-African American interaction in the Sixth Ward (though, significantly, not during the 1863 Draft Riots when elsewhere in the city eleven blacks were lynched). But through the development of these "many points of cooperation and exchange," they "found common ground and affection" (p. 124).

Adherents of Allen and Roediger will deny that Hodges's findings overturn the essential claims of the "wages of whiteness" thesis, arguing that the evidence from a study of limited duration (1830-1870) in a single, perhaps anomalous city ward is insufficient. Even so, they will be forced to acknowledge that the process by which the Irish earned their whiteness was complex and varied.

Such an understanding would have benefited Noel Ignatiev in his work *How the Irish Became White*. Despite its brilliant title and many perceptive insights, the work as a whole is disappointing. Much of his thesis is supported by anecdotal, limited, and selective evidence. As its title suggests, Ignatiev's book builds on the earlier work of Allen and Roediger, seeking to show that race is a socially and culturally constructed (as opposed to biologically determined) category shaped and influenced by factors such as class, power, and the capitalist market. Focusing primarily on Philadelphia, with occasional (and selective) references to Boston and New York, he endeavors to explain the process by which "an oppressed race in Ireland, became part of an oppressing race in America" (p. 1).

Ignatiev's work is weakened by his gloss on the existence of positive Irish and African American relations as revealed in Hodges's essay. It also fails to account for the persistence of racial depictions of the Irish in theater and political cartoons up to World War I—long after he asserts the Irish had achieved whiteness. In addition, the book largely ignores a crucial aspect of Irish-black social and labor relations: women in domestic service. Throughout the period he studies, newspapers in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia carried classified ads for domestic help that explicitly shunned Irish applicants and not infrequently expressed a preference for African American women over Irish. In the end, Ignatiev clearly furthers the study of whiteness but not nearly as much as his title suggests. We are more certain that the Irish "became white", though how, why, and to what extent is a story that remains to be told.

That story of the interplay between race (variously defined), class, work, and political economy will, if told in the manner suggested by John Kuo Wei Tchen, be far more complex than that described by Ignatiev and Hodges. His essay, "Quimbo Appo's Fear of Fenians: Chinese-Irish-Anglo Relations in New York City," begins by arguing against the traditional bilateral ethnic history—how an immigrant group overcomes barriers erected by a hostile host society—in favor of a more realistic tri-lateral model that examines Irish, Chinese, and Anglo relations.

Like Hodges, he finds that antebellum relations between the Irish and Chinese in New York were often positive—one of every four Chinese men, for example, was married to an Irish woman. Yet, the career of Quimbo Appo, an early Chinese immigrant who married an Irish woman, demonstrates how positive relations failed to endure. Popularly depicted in newspapers as a model sober and hardworking immigrant in the 1850s (in contrast to the "low Irish"), Appo was known by New Yorkers in the late 1870s as the heathen "Chinese Devil Man" (now in contrast to a more accepted Irish). This dramatic reversal occurred, argues Tchen, because the Irish possessed a cultural voice (mainly the ethnic stage), while the Chinese had none. This allowed the Irish "to build up their own image in mainstream society while creating new 'heathens' to displace their longstanding negative image" in Anglo society. The Chinese, in a word, "were made into Irish 'others'" (pp. 144-5).

Tchen's work constitutes a unique contribution to the emerging study of whiteness, one that broadens the field considerably with its focus on Asian racial typing. Indeed, the cumulative effect of Ignatiev, Hodges, and Tchen is to suggest the need for at least a quadrilateral analysis of Irish, Chinese, African American, and Anglo interaction.

These studies of the mid-nineteenth century address only one aspect of a prolonged urban experience in which the Irish interacted, cooperated, and

fought with many "others." Studies of the post-World War II era immediately encounter one of the great ironies of the Irish urban experience in America: the quintessential urban ethnic group of the nineteenth century becomes by the late 1960s the quintessential symbol of white flight to the suburbs. The latter impression, however, has until recently been just that—an impression. Scholarly work testing its validity and seeking to offer an explanation beyond sweeping generalizations about the racism of so-called white ethnics has been sparse. In the case of the Irish, it has been nearly nonexistent.¹⁰

Robert W. Snyder's "The Neighborhood Changed: The Irish of Washington Heights and Inwood since 1945" and Eileen McMahon's *What Parish are You From? A Chicago Irish Community and Race Relations* examine the disintegration of two lower middle-class Irish neighborhoods in the face of the arrival of African Americans and Latinos beginning in the 1940s. In both cases, the mass exodus of Irish families did occur but not in the manner or solely for the reasons suggested by the term *white flight*, as conventionally defined. The exodus occurred neither instantly nor without a period in which some members in the different communities sought common ground and accommodation.

Snyder's essay provides a useful, though almost journalistic, account of the Irish exodus from the Washington Heights-Inwood area of northern Manhattan as African Americans and Latinos began moving in. Unfortunately, its purpose seems to be to bemoan the tragic failure of the groups involved to reach an accord rather than to explain the cause of such failure beyond a simplistic push-pull scenario: "The pull was the pull of suburbia. . . . The push was the push of crime and disorder" (p. 440). We glean scant understanding of why the Irish reacted with hostility to the newcomers, except that they did. We are told that the Irish preferred a cohesive and homogeneous neighborhood, but not why. We learn very little of the efforts by some parties to establish good relations and work toward common goals, except that their work failed.

A far more satisfying analysis of the issues raised by Snyder is found in McMahon's study of the Irish parish of St. Sabina's in southwest Chicago. Combining a wide variety of data on mobility (geographic and economic), employment, and church attendance with dozens of interviews, McMahon deftly details the story of how the Irish of St. Sabina's struggled first to comprehend and accommodate and eventually to resist and flee their envelopment into South Chicago's burgeoning "black belt" after 1945.

In a manner very similar to Jay Dolan's path-breaking study of antebellum Irish and German parishes in New York, the early chapters of McMahon's work focus on detailing the fabric and pulse of parish life from the 1920s to the early 1950s. Through the development of a vast web of spiritual, social,

and educational programs, from the Holy Name Society to a parish credit union, St. Sabina's came to dominate the identity of its congregation, according to McMahon, surpassing even Irish culture and nationalism in importance and influence. As they grew in prosperity, they sought a middle-class lifestyle but one within their insular, comfortable, familiar, homogeneous parish world. It is precisely this social and cultural outlook fostered by parish life, explains McMahon, that led the Irish of St. Sabina's to interpret the approaching black belt as a threat to the world they had painstakingly constructed. Thus, the dual meaning of the book's title. On one hand, the frequently asked question demonstrated the positive and congenial character of parish identity among Chicago's Catholics. On the other, it bespoke insularity, defensiveness, and intolerance.

The chief contribution of McMahon's book is the compelling portrait it paints of a community buffeted by a multiplicity of forces, loyalties, and interests. Racism, from virulent to unconscious, was one of those factors, to be sure. But so, too, were the countervailing influences of a largely liberal Catholic clergy dedicated to fostering tolerance and brotherhood in their changing parishes. McMahon skillfully articulates not simply the fears of St. Sabina's residents over "loss" of their homogeneous parish but the equally significant fears of personal loss. As "panic peddling" realtors unscrupulously spread rumors of impending black incursion to drive down the prices of houses, working-class and lower middle-class families faced a monumental quandary. Should they heed the preaching of the priests to stay and thereby risk the possible erosion of their one tangible asset (their home), or should they sell early and reinvest in the suburbs? Clearly, the fear among many in the parish over the loss of the value of their home was equal to or greater than the fear engendered by the race of their new neighbors. To stay might be the morally upright thing to do. It also might be financially suicidal. Doubtless, this helps to explain why so many families slunk away in the middle of the night, ashamed even to say goodbye to their long-time friends and neighbors.

Community leaders recognized this personal facet of the coming changes and preached a message of both tolerance and neighborhood preservation. The latter took the form of campaigns encouraging homeowners to repair and paint their houses, remove neighborhood graffiti and trash, and withstand the temptation to illegally subdivide their homes. This proved to be a difficult, if not impossible balancing act, encouraging parishioners to welcome any African American newcomers but also to do everything in their power to keep up their property values to prevent the neighborhood's decline (i.e., accessibility to poorer newcomers, all of whom were black). One of the book's few weaknesses is its failure to fully explore the not-so-subtle segregationist implications, however unintentional, of this policy.

On a larger level, the work also leaves the reader wondering just how representative St. Sabina's was in its transformation from a nearly all Irish to a nearly all African American parish. A comparison to the experiences of another parish would likely shed more light on the multiple influences and available choices faced by working-class Irish as their neighborhoods and parishes underwent rapid demographic, racial, and cultural changes in the 1950s and 1960s. Less significantly, some of the middle chapters are impeded by an overly detailed account of the various community groups seeking to address the coming changes in the neighborhood, leaving the reader overwhelmed by three-letter monikers. Nonetheless, McMahon has written an important and useful book that provides keen insight into the world of the twentieth-century Irish Catholic urban parishes and, in so doing, renders inoperative the simplistic phrase "white flight" as a suitable means of explaining their disintegration.

Each of the works reviewed thus far, for all of their strengths, has been limited in a significant respect. McMahon's work is confined to a single parish in mid-twentieth-century Chicago, while Ignatiev restricted his study of the Irish in Philadelphia to the antebellum period. Bayor and Meagher's work, although comprehensive in chronology, is necessarily limited in coverage by its essay format. In contrast, Thomas O'Connor's *The Boston Irish: A Political History* attempts to provide a cohesive and coherent interpretation of the Irish experience in Boston from the colonial period to the present day. The potential pitfall of producing this type of highly readable narrative is the tendency on one hand to omit crucial elements of the story and on the other to make large generalizations about the rest. Unfortunately, while offering a highly useful interpretation of the city's ethnic politics, *The Boston Irish* reveals far less about the Boston Irish themselves than the title would suggest.

With the exception of one brief monograph published in 1983 and a recent biography of James Michael Curley,¹¹ the history of the Irish in Boston was limited to one scholarly work, Oscar Handlin's classic *Boston's Immigrants* published in 1941. O'Connor's attempt to end this dearth begins with an underlying thesis: Compared to their fellow Hibernians in Chicago, Philadelphia, New York, and even nearby Lowell and Worcester, "the Boston Irish are different." What made the Boston Irish different was their extraordinary homogeneity. The city of Adamses, Cabots, and Lowells, writes O'Connor, had by the onset of the Irish hegira in the 1840s developed an acute sense of its Anglo-Saxon Protestant heritage. They detested everything the alien Irish represented—Catholicism, poverty, ignorance, and vice. The Irish, according to O'Connor, reciprocated both in rhetoric and, before long, political opportunism. And therein lies the principal weakness of the work: its nearly ex-

clusive focus not simply on politics but politics defined as narrowly as possible—mayors and the occasional ward boss.

The book is at its best when explaining how this ethno-cultural Cold War produced two alternating political styles that came to characterize Boston Irish politics. The first was exemplified by the city's first Irish-Catholic mayor, Hugh O'Brien (1885-1889) and later Patrick Collins (1903-1905). Well-educated and "face-curtain," they sought peaceful accommodation with Boston's Anglo-Protestant ascendancy by downplaying ethno-cultural issues and projecting an image (and reality) of fiscal restraint and propriety. The second style was embodied in the person of James M. Curley (mayor in 1915-1919, 1922-1926, 1930-1934, and 1946-1950). Born into classic Irish ghetto poverty, Curley took his cues not from the downtown centers of financial, cultural, and political power but rather in the Irish-dominated wards. His election in 1915 ended decades of the accommodationist Irish style. He was provocative, confrontational, flagrant, and beloved (at least by the Irish poor). His years as mayor brought many benefits to working-class neighborhoods (paid for, noted Curley with unrestrained glee, by the wealthy who despised them). The price, notes O'Connor, was political warfare that hampered Boston's ability to focus on necessary municipal projects. The shenanigans associated with Curley also cost the city its share of New Deal money, even though Curley was an early and ardent supporter of FDR.

Boston politics returned to its more "respectable" form after Curley's famed "Last Hurrah" defeat in 1949. The mayors who followed (Hynes, Collins, and White) reflected the more upwardly mobile and assimilated character of their Irish-American constituents and, in so doing, regained the confidence and cooperation of the still Brahmin-dominated financial and business interests. Then, just as Boston appeared ready to embark on an ambitious liberal program of revitalization—urban renewal, public housing, office tower complexes, modern highways—Boston's neighborhoods revolted. Neighborhood representatives on the City Council and School Committee revived Curley's populist and confrontational style, only now their target was not the Anglo-Protestant establishment but rather the Irish-American liberal establishment. "[T]he result," concludes O'Connor, "was a growing antagonism between the Irish-Catholic residents of the ethnic neighborhoods and the Irish-Catholic politicians who ran city government" (p. 237). By the late 1960s, the former no longer viewed municipal government as the provider of relief to the poor, the immigrant, the laborer, and the distressed. "Instead, they saw it as an over-grown establishment that was continuously oppressing them, taxing them, conspiring to take away their land and knock down their houses" (p. 246).

Thus did Boston become the setting for the battle over public school desegregation, or simply bussing, a struggle so ably described by Anthony Lukas in *Common Ground*. It is only with the 1984 election of Ray Flynn—a native of reactionary South Boston but also a liberal—that Boston's politics shifted away from the balkanized neighborhoods and back to a focus on the city as a whole (i.e., the Hugh O'Brien and John Hynes model).

O'Connor's lucid explanation of Boston's alternating styles of Irish-dominated politics constitutes the primary contribution of his work. Unfortunately, it is based on a fundamentally impressionistic analysis of Boston's Irish residents. From the outset, Boston's Irish are depicted in monolithic terms, in a narrative style strikingly similar to that of William V. Shannon's 1963 classic *The American Irish*. Unlike the portrait of the Irish as revealed in *The New York Irish*, there is little sense of the Boston Irish, beyond vague terms such as *respectable* or *working class*, as an ethnic group composed of different interests, affinities, and classes. The labor movement is virtually absent from the story, with the exception of a limited examination of the dramatic 1919 police strike. Even in a work subtitled as "political history," surely the dominant role played by working-class Irish in the city's labor movement, a role often at odds with the interests of the city's rising Irish political and business leaders, deserves attention.

One of the biggest disappointments with the book is its failure to deliver on the issue alluded to so promisingly in its introduction—the divisiveness of the late 1960s and early 1970s. O'Connor's argument is weakened by the fact that by 1965, his story is decidedly less Irish. Indeed, while he avoids the term, he is really writing about Boston's white ethnics—at least Irish and Italian. (Jews, surprisingly, are not mentioned in this period at all.) Furthermore, in explaining the revolt of the Boston neighborhoods primarily in terms of taxes and urban renewal, it greatly diminishes the salient issue of race so directly addressed by Snyder and McMahon. It also begs the question of how such programs came to be characterized, in O'Connor's words, as "alien liberalism" that threatened faith, family, and neighborhood.

O'Connor also omits any meaningful mention of the resurgence of Irishness among the Boston Irish since the mid-1970s (a trend visible in other U.S. cities). It also fails to assess the impact on Boston of the rapid increase in the population of new Irish immigrants since the early 1980s, an omission one recognizes as significant after reading the immensely informative essay "A Social Profile of Recent Irish Immigration in New York City" by Mary P. Corcoran in *The New York Irish*. Finally, O'Connor ignores the highly illuminating controversy surrounding the demand of a gay and lesbian Irish organization to march in the annual St. Patrick's Day parade. Thus, while *The Boston Irish* reveals the broad outlines of Boston's ethnic politics and certain par-

ticulars about the Boston Irish, many questions remain unanswered. Just as Ignatiev leaves his readers convinced that the Irish became white but unsure as to how, O'Connor's work plausibly asserts that the Boston Irish were different without fully explaining why.

The field of Irish-American history, as evidenced by these works, continues to grow and mature. Significantly, the combined effect of these works greatly adds to our understanding of the Irish experience in America while making clear the need for future research. For example, we still know precious little about the apparent diminution of Irish-American ethnic identity in the postwar years and its subsequent resurgence, in multiple forms, since the mid-1970s. Still less is known about Irish-American Protestants, either urban or rural. Moreover, even though much has been written about the undercurrent of labor and political radicalism among working-class Irish-Americans, we still lack a clear understanding of just how pervasive and enduring such thought was. Much more must be written about innumerable aspects of Irish-American women, be it their role in the labor movement, their changing attitudes toward feminism, or the manner in which many have struggled since the 1960s to reconcile their sense of Irish identity with their disillusionment with the modern Catholic Church. Finally, in spite of Professor Akenson's continued efforts, there is a story of the nonurban Irish, however many there were, yet to be told. The need for research into these and many other areas is not cause for regret. Rather, it suggests nothing less than an exciting historiographic agenda for the future.

—Edward T. O'Donnell
Hunter College
City University of New York

NOTES

1. *Irish American*, August 26, 1849, quoted in Robert Ernst, *Immigrant Life in New York City, 1825-1863* (New York, 1947), 62; John Francis Maguire, *The Irish in America* (New York, 1868), 214-5.
2. William V. Shannon, *The American Irish* (New York, 1963).
3. Donald H. Akenson, *The Irish in Ontario: A Study in Rural History* (Montreal, 1984); Akenson, *Being Had: Historians, Evidence, and the Irish in North America* (Port Credit, Ontario, 1985); Akenson, *Small Differences: Irish Catholics and Irish Protestants: An International Perspective, 1815-1922* (Kingston, 1987); Akenson, *The Irish Diaspora: A Primer* (Streetsville, Ontario, 1993); Akenson, *An Agnostic View of the Historiography of the Irish Americans*, "Labour/Le Travailleur 14 (1984); Akenson, "Data: What is Known about the Irish

in North America?" in Oliver MacDonagh and W. F. Mandel, eds., *Ireland and Irish-Australia* (London, 1986); Akenson, "The Historiography of the Irish in the United States of America," in Patrick O'Sullivan, ed., *The Irish in New Communities* (New York, 1993).

4. David N. Doyle, "The Irish as Urban Pioneers in the United States, 1850-1870," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 10 (1990), 36-59.

5. See, for example, R. A. Burchell, *The San Francisco Irish, 1848-1880* (Manchester, UK, 1979); Dennis Clark, *The Irish in Philadelphia: Ten Generations of Urban Experience* (Philadelphia, 1973); Earl F. Niehaus, *The Irish in New Orleans, 1800-1860* (New York, 1965); Dennis Ryan, *Beyond the Ballot Box: A Social History of the Boston Irish, 1845-1917* (Madison, NJ, 1983); Jo Ellen Vinyard, *The Irish on the Urban Frontier: Detroit, 1850-1880* (New York, 1976).

6. David M. Emmons, *The Butte Irish: Class and Ethnicity in an American Mining Town, 1875-1925* (Urbana, 1989); Brian C. Mitchell, *The Paddy Camps: The Irish of Lowell, 1821-1861* (Urbana, 1988).

7. For example, see Ronald Bayor, *Neighbors in Conflict: The Irish, Germans, Jews, and Italians of New York City, 1929-1941*, 2nd ed. (Urbana, 1988); Jay Dolan, *The Immigrant Church: New York's Irish and German Catholics, 1815-1865* (Baltimore, 1975); Florence E. Gibson, *The Attitudes of the New York Irish toward State and National Affairs, 1848-1892* (New York, 1951); Michael Gordon, *The Orange Riots: Irish Political Violence in New York City, 1870 and 1871* (Ithaca, 1993).

8. Ernst, *Immigrant Life*; Carol Groneman (Pemicone), "The 'Bloody Ould Sixth': A Social Analysis of a New York City Working-Class Community in the Nineteenth Century" (Ph.D. dissertation, Rochester, 1973).

9. Theodore W. Allen, *The Invention of the White Race* (New York, 1993); David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York, 1991).

10. A notable exception is J. Anthony Lukas, *Common Ground: A Turbulent Decade in the Lives of Three American Families* (New York, 1985). See also James T. Farrell, *Studs Lonigan: A Trilogy* (New York, 1935), for a compelling treatment of this issue in Irish-American fiction.

11. Jack Beatty, *The Rascal King: The Life and Times of James Michael Curley (1874-1958)* (Reading, MA, 1992); Dennis Ryan, *Beyond the Ballot Box: A Social History of the Boston Irish, 1845-1917* (Madison, NJ, 1983).