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FLEEING “THE TYRANT’S HEEL”

“Exiles” from Ireland

CALIBAN COULD ALSO have been Irish. As we noted in chapter two, like Caliban, the Irish were dispossessed of their island by the English Prosperos. The Irish, too, were depicted and degraded as the “Other”—as “savages,” outside of “civilization,” and “wild.”

Fleeing English oppression in the nineteenth century, millions of Irish crossed the Atlantic to America. Thus, the age of Jackson witnessed not only Indian removal and the expansion of slavery, but also the great influx of immigrants from Ireland. Suddenly, blacks in the North were competing with Irish workers. “Every hour sees us elbowed out of some employment to make room perhaps for some newly arrived immigrants, whose hunger and color are thought to give them a title to special favor,” Frederick Douglass complained. “White men are becoming house servants, cooks, stewards, common laborers and flunkeys to our gentry.” Then he warned that Irish immigrants would soon find that in taking “our vocation,” they had also assumed “our degradation.” But Douglass found himself empathizing with the Irish. During a visit to Ireland in the 1840s, he witnessed the terrible suffering inflicted by the Potato Famine and was “much affected” on hearing the “wailing notes” of Irish ballads that reminded him of the “wild notes” of slave songs.¹

Behind the Emigration: "John Bull Must Have the Beef"

The Irish described their migration to America in Gaelic terms: *deorai* or "exiles," *dithreabhach* or "homeless," and *dibeartach* or "banished people." "*Dob eigean dom imeacht go Meirice,*" they explained, "I had to go to America," or "Going to America was a necessity for me." A contemporary noted: "There's such a clinging to the country that they would rather live on anything rather than go." But they were forced to leave their island. Their songs told mournful tales of exile in a foreign land:

*Such troubles we know that have often
Caused stout Irish hearts to roam . . .
And . . . sons from their homes were drove . . .*

*The hills and the valleys so dear to my heart;
It grieves me to think that from them I must
part.
Compelled to emigrate far, far o'er the sea.²*

Feeling like the "children of Israel," the Irish were driven from their beloved homeland by "English tyranny," the British "yoke" "enslaving" Ireland. The conquerors were seen as "savage tyrants" and "cursed intruders." The movement to America was "artificial," explained one Irish immigrant, because the poverty of Ireland had been created by English colonial policies. "Foul British laws," they declared, were the "whole cause" of their emigration. Time and again, the Irish complained that they were being pushed out of their country by their oppressors:

*I would not live in Ireland now, for she's a
fallen land,
And the tyrant's heel is on her neck, with her
reeking blood-stained hand.
There's not a foot of Irish ground, but's trodden
down by slaves,
Who die unwept, and then are flung, like
dogs, into their graves.³*

The emigration was rooted deeply in the history of English oppression. Beginning in the twelfth century, English conquest

of Ireland led to the confiscation and transfer of lands to English colonizers. By 1700, the Irish owned only 14 percent of Ireland. As subsistence farmers, the Irish were forced to rent or lease land from English landlords. Then, in the late eighteenth century, the landlords decided to make their estates more profitable. Therefore, they initiated a campaign to transform the island's economy into a "cattle civilization." By enclosing their estates and evicting peasant families, landlords shifted from tillage agriculture to ranching. Between 1820 and 1840, livestock increased at a faster rate than the population, and cattle exports more than quadrupled. The conversion of land from tillage to grazing meant that 90 percent of the laborers previously needed for planting and harvesting had become superfluous.⁴

The landlords sought to bring Ireland into the British market. Due to increased beef production between 1750 and 1810, Irish exports rose from two million to six million British pounds. During a visit to Ireland in 1771, Benjamin Franklin reported that British colonialism and its emphasis on exports had reduced the Irish people to "extremely poor" tenants, "living in the most sordid wretchedness, in dirty Hovels of Mud and Straw, and clothed only in Rags." The Irish had been forced to survive on "Potatoes and Buttermilk, without Shirts," so that the "Merchants" could export "Beef" to England.

*. . . the Landlord calls for rent,
The flood which over-spread the Land, has
caused them to lament,
And yet John Bull must have the Beef, let it
be cooked or raw,
We're told by each big English thief: we
darsen't break the law.*

By the 1830s, according to an observer, Ireland had developed a profitable export economy. But, he added, this commercialization of agriculture was accompanied by a "visible deterioration" in the condition of the "labouring classes and of the small farmers." "Progress" for the landlords meant pauperization for the peasants.

*Ireland's oppressors soon must know, they
can't for ever last,
Landlords [have] been cruel for generations
past,*

*What right have they to claim the soil which
never was their own,
When thousands now are starving and
evicted from their home?⁵*

"Misery, naked and famishing," reported visitor Gustave de Beaumont in the 1830s, was "everywhere, and at every hour of the day." The typical single-room cabin of an Irish family consisted of four walls of dried mud with a straw roof and a hole cut in the roof for the chimney. Inside lived the father, mother, children, and sometimes a grandfather or grandmother. There was no furniture in this "wretched hovel"; a single bed of straw served the entire family. "Five or six half-naked children [could] be seen crouched near a miserable fire, the ashes of which [covered] a few potatoes, the sole nourishment of the family." The squalor was oppressive, stifling. "What a Country this [was] to live in," a farmer complained, where Catholics were "only breathing, afraid & scarce able to raise their heads."⁶

But there was an alternative. Rather than "toil and starve like slaves," they could emigrate to "the Land of Promise." A song explained:

*My father holds 5 acres of land, it was not
enough to support us all,
Which banished me from my native land, to
old Ireland dear I bid farewell.
My holdings here I can't endure since here
no longer I can stay.
I take my lot and leave this spot and try the
land of liberty.*

By the thousands, Irish were leaving for America, where there was "room for all—employment for all and success for many." Letters from friends and family in the United States glowingly described riches "growing like grass" and the boundlessness of a country where there was no tyranny or oppression from landlords. Between 1815 and 1845, one million Irish came to America.⁷

During this period, however, most Irish endured their hardships at home. Rather than emigrate, many became *spalpeens*, or migratory workers, leaving their cottages each spring for agricultural or construction labor within Ireland, then returning to

their families in the fall with "the rent money sewn inside their clothes." Their earnings, while meager, enabled many families to farm small plots and grow potatoes. By the early 1840s, the rural poor were existing mainly on potatoes; between late spring and the time of harvest, many were eating only one meal a day. Sometimes they cooked their potatoes only partially, keeping the cores or "bones" of the potatoes raw in order to digest their food more slowly. These hardy peasants believed they could survive in their homeland forever, for a family could produce a year's supply of potatoes on one acre of land. "What did we eat?" said an Irish immigrant. "Well, just potatoes."⁸

Then suddenly, a little-known fungus appeared and changed the course of Irish history. Although potato crops had been attacked by plant diseases in past years, a new blight destroyed about 40 percent of the crop in 1845. "Coming on the harvest time... the crops looked splendid," a farmer said as he recalled the beginning of the famine, "but one fine morning in July there was a cry around that some blight had struck the potato stalks." As the leaves blackened and crumbled, the air became "laden with a sickly odor of decay, as if the hand of death had stricken the potato field, and... everything growing in it was rotten." Returning annually, the deadly disease continued its relentless devastation. By 1855, some one million people had died from hunger and sickness.⁹

The Great Famine intensified the already terrible suffering. Unable to pay their rent, thousands of families were evicted. For many landlords, the famine offered an opportunity to convert more land into fields for grazing. The evicted peasants angrily denounced their oppressors:

*'Twas famine's wasting breath,
That winged the shaft of death,
And the landlord, lost to feeling,
Who drove us from our sheeling....¹⁰*

During the famine years, Ireland continued to export grain and cattle to British markets. Half the people of Ireland could have been fed with the livestock exported in 1846: 186,483 cattle, 6,363 calves, 259,257 sheep, and 180,827 swine. Throughout the country, however, one could see "famished and ghastly skeletons," "cowering wretches almost naked in the savage weather," children with "their faces bloated yet wrinkled and of a pale greenish hue,"

and families eating seaweed and suffering from fevers and dysentery. According to an English visitor, the streets of one town were "crowded with gaunt wanderers, sauntering to and fro with hopeless air and hunger-struck look," while the poorhouse was surrounded by "a mob of starved, almost naked, women," "clamouring for soup tickets." So many people died that corpses were placed in reusable "trap-coffins" with hinged bottoms. For the living, the choice became clear: emigrate or face destitution and death.

*Desert a land of curse and slave,
Of pauper woe...
Poor Eire now is all a grave....*¹¹

In panic, one and a half million Irish fled to the United States during the Great Famine. More so than the earlier emigrants, these people were the "uprooted." The *Cork Examiner* reported that they were "running away from fever and disease and hunger, with money scarcely sufficient to pay passage for... the voyage." Their reason for coming to America was survival. It was not ambition, a ballad declared, but

*the blackening of the potatoes
That drove us over the sea.*¹²

With bundles on their shoulders, the departing men and women were "laving dear old Ireland without warnin'" to cross the "briny ocean." But before they left, they attended an "American wake"—a party hosted by their families. Sharing food and music, they said their good-byes and mourned what everyone knew would be a permanent separation.

*Sad was the day we said farewell,
Dear native land, to thee;
And wander'd forth to find a home,
Beyond the stormy sea.
Hard then our fate; fast flow'd the tears,
We tried to hide in vain,
At thought of those we left behind,
And might ne'er see again.*¹³

After the "wake," they traveled to Dublin and then to Liverpool, where they boarded crowded ships bound for America. The

crossing was traumatic. "The emigrant is shown a berth," the *Times* reported, "a shelf of coarse pinewood, situated in a noisome dungeon, airless and lightless, in which several hundred persons of both sexes and all ages are stowed away on shelves two feet one inch above the other, three feet wide and six feet long, still reeking from the ineradicable stench left by the emigrants of the last voyage." On one ship, according to a witness, hundreds of passengers lay together like sacks, motionless. Some were dead, while others were sick, feverish and delirious, scarcely able to turn in their narrow berths. Tens of thousands of travelers died during the passage or immediately after arrival.¹⁴

The terrible blights finally ended in 1854, but the commercialization of agriculture, the eviction of families from their lands, and the decline of Irish crafts due to the importation of British manufactured goods continued to pauperize the Irish peasantry and depopulate Ireland. A contemporary described his country's melancholy condition: "This grass grown road, over which seemingly little, if any, traffic passes, is a type of solitude everywhere found. Tillage there is none; but in its stead one vast expanse of pasture land extends. Human habitations are rarer than the bare walls of roofless cottages. Where once a population dwelt... see how lonely and untrodden are these roads." In the 1860s, an American consul reported that there were "many thousands of strong young men" who sighed for "food & employment in the US," "and would gladly embrace any opportunity of removal from the misery & starvation" in Ireland. Between 1855 and 1900, two million more Irish came to America.¹⁵

An "Immortal Irish Brigade" of Workers

Pushed from Ireland by economic hardships and famine, the immigrants were pulled to America by prospects of jobs. They provided labor for the construction of canals and railroads, connecting the different economic regions of the country. Watching them work on the National Road in Pennsylvania, a farmer described them as an "immortal Irish brigade, a thousand strong, with their carts, wheelbarrows, shovels and blasting tools, grading the commons, and climbing the mountainside... leaving behind them a roadway good enough for an emperor to travel over." Irish laborers helped to build waterways, including Connecticut's Enfield Canal, Rhode Island's Blackstone Canal, and most important, New York's Erie Canal, described by Reverend Michael Buckley, a visitor from

Ireland, as "one of the grandest pieces of engineering ever seen in the world" and "proof" of "Irish talent." Standing knee-deep in water while cursing swarms of mosquitoes, the workers dug and shoveled earth as they sang:

*When I came to this wonderful rampire, it
filled me with the greatest surprise,
To see such a great undertaking, on the like I
never opened my eye.
To see a full thousand brave fellows at work
among mountains so tall,
To dig through the vallies so level, through
rocks for to cut a canal.¹⁶*

Irish workers built thousands of miles of rail lines such as the Western and Atlantic Railroad from Atlanta to Chattanooga and the Union Pacific segment of the transcontinental railroad. All day they were ordered: "Now Mick do this, and Mick do that." And they shouted back: "The divil take the railroad!" As they laid tracks, they tuned their bodies to the rhythms of a work song:

*Then drill, my Paddies, drill—
Drill, my heroes, drill,
Drill all day, no sugar in your tay
Workin' on the U. P. railway.*

At night, they continued to feel the vibrations of the sledgehammers in their hands and arms and to hear the pounding ringing in their heads. Exhausted, they tried to rest:

*When I lay me down to sleep,
The ugly bugs around me creep;
Bad luck to the wink that I can sleep,
While workin' on the railroad.¹⁷*

The Irish became disposable workers. The pervasive presence of the Irish in railroad work produced the popular saying that there was "an Irishman buried under every tie." Indeed, the Irish had high accident rates, for they were frequently assigned to the hazardous jobs. A Connecticut ax manufacturer explained that he employed the Irish as grinders because the death rate due to

accidents was so high he had difficulty finding "Yankees" to do this dangerous work. "My father carried the mark of the quarry to his grave," wrote Elizabeth Gurley Flynn. "When he was a boy, working in a quarry in Maine, carrying tools, the sight of one eye was destroyed by a flying chip of granite." Time and again, newspapers reported accidents—"an Irishman drowned—an Irishman crushed by a beam—an Irishman suffocated in a pit—an Irishman blown to atoms by a steam engine—ten, twenty Irishmen buried alive in the sinking of a bank..." Yankees regarded the Irishman "as one made to work," reported Reverend Buckley. "Where they want labour they will engage Paddy as they would a drayhorse." An Irish worker recalled how he labored "so severely" digging cellars, "up before the Stars and working till darkness," "driven like horses" to be "a slave for the Americans." Working in the mines of Pennsylvania, Irish miners "sucked up" the black dust into their lungs as they dug the "bloody coal."¹⁸

Irish laborers, an immigrant complained, were "thought nothing of more than *dogs*... despised & kicked about." They lived in "clumsy, rough and wretched hovels," made with "roofs of sod and grass" and "walls of mud," observed Charles Dickens during a visit to the United States. "Hideously ugly old women and very buxom young ones, pigs, dogs, men, children, babies, pots, kettles, dung hills, vile refuse, rank straw and standing water, all wallowing together in an inseparable heap, composed the furniture of every dark and dirty hut." America turned out to be a nightmare for many Irish immigrants. A song expressed their disappointment:

*I got a letter from a relation
Telling me to hasten across the sea,
That gold was to be found in plenty there
And that I'd never have a hard day or a poor
one again.*

*Alas, when I landed
I made for the city without delay;
But I never saw gold on the street corners—
Alas, I was a poor aimless person cast
adrift.¹⁹*

The Irish found themselves not only exploited as laborers but also pitted against workers of other races, including the Chinese.

In New England, Irish workers in the shoemaking industry were struggling against low wages and the introduction of labor-eliminating machines; consequently, they organized the Secret Order of the Knights of St. Crispin. The Crispins quickly became the largest labor organization in the United States; in 1870, it had a membership of fifty thousand. Demanding higher wages and an eight-hour day, the Crispins went on strike at a shoe factory in North Adams, Massachusetts. The owner, Calvin T. Sampson, fired the disgruntled workers and pursued a strategy of divide-and-control by driving a "wedge" between himself and the strikers.²⁰

This "wedge" turned out to be a contingent of seventy-five Chinese workers from San Francisco. Brought to North Adams as scabs to break the Irish strike, they were housed in dormitories inside the locked and guarded gates of the factory yard. Within three months after their arrival, the Chinese workers were producing more shoes than the same number of white workers had been making before the strike. The success of Sampson's strategy was celebrated in the press. "The Chinese, and this especially annoys the Crispins," the editor of *The Nation* wrote, "show the usual quickness of their race in learning the process of their new business, and already do creditable hand and machine work."²¹

The Chinese were held up as a model for Irish laborers. Writing for *Scribner's Monthly*, William Shanks compared the Chinese to the Irish workers. The Chinese "labored regularly and constantly, losing no blue Mondays on account of Sunday's dissipations nor wasting hours on idle holidays," he reported. "The quality of the work was found to be fully equal to that of the Crispins." Through the use of Chinese labor, Sampson had widened his profit margin: the weekly saving in labor costs was \$840, or \$44,000 a year. These figures inspired Shanks to calculate: "There are 115 establishments in the State, employing 5,415 men . . . capable of producing 7,942 cases of shoes per week. Under the Chinese system of Mr. Sampson, a saving of \$69,594 per week, or say \$3,500,000 a year, would be effected, thus revolutionizing the trade."²²

In their response to Sampson's "wedge," the striking Crispins tried to promote working-class solidarity by organizing a Chinese lodge of St. Crispin. Watching this initiative to build Irish-Chinese unity, the editor of *The Nation* commented: "Chinese lodges and strikes will come in time when enough Chinamen are collected together in any given place; but the prospect appears not immediately flattering at North Adams." Based on self-interest

rather than an ideological commitment to class solidarity, this attempt to unionize the Chinese workers quickly collapsed. At a meeting in Boston, white workers turned against the Chinese laborers, condemning them for reducing "American labor" to "the Chinese standard of rice and rats."²³

Sampson's daring action had a sobering effect on striking workers at nearby shoe factories. Ten days after the arrival of Sampson's "Mongolian battery," Parker Brothers, Cady Brothers, Millard and Whitman, and E. R. and N. L. Millard were able to force their laborers to return to work with a 10 percent wage cut. Commenting on the significance of Sampson's experiment of substituting Chinese for Irish laborers, a writer for *Scribner's Monthly* observed: "If for no other purpose than the breaking up of the incipient steps toward labor combinations and 'Trade Unions' . . . the advent of Chinese labor should be hailed with warm welcome." The "heathen Chinese," he concluded, could be the "final solution" to the labor problem in America.²⁴

While they were contrasted with the Chinese, Irish immigrants found themselves compared to blacks. The Irish were stereotyped as "a race of savages," at the same level of intelligence as blacks. Pursuing the "lower" rather than the "higher" pleasures, seeking "vicious excitement" and "gratification merely animal," the Irish were said to be "slaves" of their "passions." Since sexual restraint was the most widely used method of birth control, the large families of these immigrants seemed to prove a lack of self-control: "Did wealth consist in children, it is well known, that the Irish would be rich people . . ." In a sermon called "The Dangerous Classes," Reverend Theodore Parker of Boston claimed that some people were "inferior in nature, some perhaps only behind us in development" on "a lower form in the great school of Providence—negroes, Indians, Mexicans, Irish, and the like." A southern planter stated that slaves were like the Irish in "their subserviency, their flattering, their lying, and their pilfering as traits common to the characters of both peoples." An English traveler reported that both the Irish and blacks were viewed as outcasts: "To be called an 'Irishman' is almost as great an insult as to be stigmatized as a 'nigger feller' . . ." Sometimes the immigrants were described as "Irish niggers."²⁵

Like blacks, Irish workers were condemned for their alleged negative traits. They were dismissed from their jobs for laziness, gambling, drinking, and "other debaucheries," as well as for "levity" and "impudence." A saying claimed: "It's as natural for a

Hibernian to tipple as it is for a pig to grunt." Their "idleness" and "brutal leprosy of blue Monday habits," it was argued, rendered them unreliable as workers and kept them impoverished. Like the "giddy multitude" of seventeenth-century Virginia, the Irish were chastised as an unruly and disorderly class. In Jersey City, Irish workers were denounced by a newspaper editor as "a mongrel mass of ignorance and crime and superstition, as utterly unfit for its duties, as they [were] for the common courtesies and decencies of civilized life." Irish children, moreover, were seen as "undisciplined" and "uninstructed," "inheriting" the "stupidity of centuries of ignorant ancestors." At school, they allegedly emitted a "pungent odor"—the "fumes of New-England rum." The Massachusetts Board of State Charities calculated that it would take two or three generations to "correct the constitutional tendencies to disease and early decay." Worried about the alarming presence of a largely Irish working class, Horace Mann was determined to educate the children in order to save the masses from "falling back into the conditions of half-barbarous or of savage life."²⁶

Many Irish saw parallels between themselves as a degraded people and blacks in bondage. In Ireland, they had identified themselves as the "slaves" of the British, and many supported the abolition of slavery in the United States. In 1842, thousands of them signed a petition that declared: "Irishmen and Irishwomen! treat the colored people as your equals, as brethren." But Irish sympathy for black slaves seemed to disappear with the Atlantic crossing. In America, many of them became antiblack. Frederick Douglass criticized the Irish immigrants for abandoning the idea of "liberty" they nurtured in their homeland by becoming "the oppressors of another race" in America. Irish freedom fighter Daniel O'Connell shared Douglass's disappointment. Chastising the immigrants for their racism, O'Connell declared: "It was not in Ireland you learned this cruelty."²⁷

In America, the Irish found themselves stereotyped as ignorant and inferior, and forced to occupy the bottom rungs of employment. In the South, they were even made to do the dirty and hazardous jobs that masters were reluctant to assign to their slaves. A planter told a northern visitor that he had hired an Irish gang rather than use his own slaves to drain a flooded area. "It's dangerous work," he explained, "and a negro's life is too valuable to be risked at it. If a negro dies, it's a considerable loss, you know." In the North, Irish repeatedly fought blacks for jobs as waiters and longshoremen. During the 1830s, a Philadelphia newspaper

reported that the Irish were displacing blacks as hackney coachmen, draymen, and stevedores.²⁸

As they competed against blacks for employment, many Irish immigrants promoted their whiteness. "In a country of the whites where [white workers] find it difficult to earn a subsistence," they asked, "what right has the negro either to preference or to equality, or to admission?" Targets of Protestant nativist hatred identifying them as Catholic, outsiders, and foreigners, the Irish newcomers sought to become insiders, or Americans, by claiming their membership as whites. A powerful way to transform their own identity from "Irish" to "American" was to attack blacks. Thus, blacks as the "Other" served to facilitate their assimilation.²⁹

Reacting to Irish hostility, blacks called their tormentors "white niggers." They resented being told by immigrants to leave the country of their birth and "go back" to Africa, a place they had never been.³⁰ Blacks complained that the Irish were taking jobs from them. "These impoverished and destitute beings, transported from the trans-Atlantic shores," a black observed, "are crowding themselves into every place of business and labor, and driving the poor colored American citizen out. Along the wharves, where the colored man once done the whole business of shipping and unshipping—in stores where his services were once rendered, and in families where the chief places were filled by him, in all these situations there are substituted foreigners."³¹

As Americans, many blacks aimed nativist barbs against the Irish foreigners. "Pat O'Flannagan does not have the least thing in the world against Jim from Dixie," a black observed, "but it didn't take Pat long after passing the Statue of Liberty to learn that it is popular to give Jim a whack." Blacks scornfully described the Irish as "hyphenates" and mocked their accent as such "a heavy brogue that it sounded as if they had marbles in their mouths." "It is to be regretted," black journalist John E. Bruce observed, "that in [America] where the outcasts—the scum of European society—can come and enjoy the fullest social and political privileges, the Native Born American with wooly hair and dark complexion is made the Victim . . . of Social Ostracism."³²

Victims of English prejudice and repression in Ireland, the Irish in America often redirected their rage in a pecking order. "They [the Irish] have been oppressed enough themselves to be oppressive whenever they have a chance," commented an observer, "and the despised and degraded condition of the blacks, presenting to them a very ugly resemblance of their own home circumstances,

naturally excites in them the exercise of the disgust and contempt of which they themselves are very habitually the objects . . ." Viewing blacks as "a soulless race," some Irish said they "would shoot a black man with as little regard to moral consequences as they would a wild hog." The Irish opposed suffrage for blacks, fearful this would set "the Niggers high." Complaining that blacks did not know their place, they shouted: "Down with the Nagurs!"³³

Irish antagonism toward blacks exploded during the Civil War. Many Irish were angry at President Abraham Lincoln for expanding the aims of the war to include emancipation. Condemning abolitionism as "Niggerology," many Irish immigrants were willing to support the war only to preserve the Union. "Let the niggers stay in the South!" Irish workers shouted. They had been warned by the Democrats during the 1860 election: "Vote against Abraham Lincoln, or you will have negro labor dragging you from your free labor." "Let the four millions of slaves in the South be set at liberty . . . and we should very soon have . . . a terrible conflict between white labor and black labor . . . The unemployed slaves will be found among you in sufficient numbers to compete with you at your wharves and your docks, and in every branch of labor in which white people alone are now employed."³⁴

During the Civil War, New York Democratic politicians warned that the Republicans were willing to "spend" Irish blood to win the abolitionist war and that freed blacks would be transported north to "steal the work and the bread of the honest Irish." Similarly, an Irish newspaper, the *Boston Pilot*, aroused the fears of its readers: "We have already upon us bloody contention between white and black labor . . . The North is becoming black with refugee Negroes from the South. These *wretches* crowd our cities, and by overstocking the market of labor, do incalculable injury to white hands."³⁵

The Irish became angry when a new draft law was enacted to bolster sagging enlistments in the Union Army. In July 1863, a mass meeting in New York City protested the law's provision that allowed a draftee to avoid military service by paying \$300 or providing a substitute. This law clearly discriminated against the working class. Many of the first draftees were Irish, poor men unable to pay the fee. Irish rioters stormed and burned the draft office. Then they turned on blacks. "Vengeance on every nigger in New York," the rampagers screamed as they assaulted blacks in the streets. One of the victims, William Green, said later: "They stripped me naked . . . they had a rope to hang me, and a man saved me." General rampage exploded as mobs vandalized and pillaged

stores. "I saw the rioters in the street — 100 or 150 of them," a passerby stated, describing the looting of a liquor store. "Some three or four stout boys with clubs attacked the windows and broke them in; they then smashed in the doors; then the crowd rushed in; they pitched out boxes of cigars and bottles, and in about 10 minutes the house was on fire." The riot continued for four days. Finally, an army regiment rushed to the city from Gettysburg and restored order. By then scores of people had been injured and 105 killed. Condemning the "revolting, fiendish, cowardly, cruel" treatment of "the poor unfortunate negroes," an Irish newspaper, the *Metropolitan Record*, declared that "a superior race should disdain to vent their passions on an inferior one."³⁶

Irish "Maids" and "Factory Girls"

Labor competition between the Irish and blacks was fierce in the domestic services. According to an English visitor, employers were willing to "let negroes be servants, and if not negroes, let Irish fill their place." In 1830, the majority of the servants in New York City were black; twenty years later, they were Irish women. Daughters of farmers in Ireland, they had become maids in America. In the textile towns of Lowell and Providence, they became factory workers.

More than half of the Irish immigrants were women, compared to only 21 percent of southern Italians and 4 percent of Greeks. In New York City in 1860, Irish women outnumbered Irish men — 117,000 to 87,000. This massive migration of women was saluted in a song:

*O brave, brave Irish girls,
We well might call you brave
Should the least of all your perils
The Stormy ocean waves.*³⁷

In Ireland, the struggle for economic survival had a particular impact on women. Increasingly after 1815, farmers practiced impartible inheritance: their land was not divided among their sons but left to only one. Consequently, many sons had little choice but to emigrate. "If you divide a farm and give it to two sons, neither is going to have a heck of a lot," an Irish immigrant explained. "So I began to realize that [I] would have to go somewhere." Women, too, came to a similar realization. They found

that many noninheriting sons lacked the resources to marry and that their own possibilities for marriage were extremely limited unless they had dowries. Marriage rates declined: by 1841, 44 percent of the men and 36 percent of the women aged twenty-six to thirty-five were single. Many young women felt gloomy about their futures in terms of marriage and family. "There is no fun in Ireland at all," lamented a young woman; "the times are very lonesome... there are no one getting married."³⁸

The times were also hard on women economically. The commercialization of agriculture and the decline of Irish cottage manufacturing, such as weaving, left thousands of women excluded from the economy. "Laws made by men shut them out of all hope of inheritance in their native land," an observer noted. "Their male relatives exploited their labour and returned them never a penny as a reward, and finally, when at last their labour could not wring sufficient from the meagre soil to satisfy the exertions of all, these girls were incontinently packed across the ocean."³⁹

To these daughters of Erin, possibilities for marriage and money were waiting for them across the ocean. "Every servant-maid thinks of [America as] the land of promise," the *Cork Examiner* announced, "where... husbands are thought more procurable than in Ireland." A dowry was not necessary here. "Over in Ireland people marry for riches," a woman wrote from Philadelphia, "but here in America we marry for love and work for riches." On this side of the Atlantic, women could find jobs, especially as maids. Guidebooks for prospective Irish immigrants announced that servant girls in America were paid from eight to sixteen dollars a month and offered enticing prospects: if a domestic worker saved half her wages and its accumulated interest, she would be rich within ten years. Indeed, many maids had "in the course of twenty or thirty years, by faithful industry and moderate economy become owners of from three to five thousand dollars."

*She being inclined to Emigrate her wages
did demand,*

*To seek a situation in America's FREE
LAND.*

*This undaunted Female hearing that a ship
at Dublin Quay,*

*Had advertised for Servants to go to
America,*

She bid farewell to all her friends....⁴⁰

Irish immigrant women became ubiquitous as maids. In the 1850s, they represented 80 percent of all female household laborers in New York City. Irish women went west to San Francisco where they, like many Chinese men, became servants. In California, Dennis Kearney led an anti-Chinese labor movement, charging that the Chinese threatened the employment of Irish women. "The Chinese Must Go!" shouted Kearney. "Our Women Are Degraded by Coolie Labor."⁴¹

Irish women entered domestic service in greater numbers and proportions than women of other immigrant groups. In 1900, 54 percent were classified as "servants and waitresses," compared to only 9 percent for Italian female workers. A Boston study reported that more than two-fifths of the immigrant women who entered the city in 1905 and 1906 became servants and that they were almost all Irish. Jewish and Italian women seldom became domestic workers. "Italian women were more likely to take in boarders because the men rarely permitted their wives to work as maids, cleaning women, or factory hands," explained historian Virginia Yans-McLaughlin. "The Italian ideal was to keep women at home."⁴²

Unlike Italian women who came to America with their husbands or fathers, Irish immigrant women tended to be unmarried and unattached to families. Hence, they were attracted to work that offered housing and meals. "Single women can get along here better than men as they can get employment more readily than men," an Irish laborer in Philadelphia wrote home to his sisters. "For instance liveing out girls or as the[y] are called at home servant girls gets from eight to twelve shillings per week and keep, that is from two to three dollars of American money.... Labouring mens wages averages from six to nine dollars per week.... But their work is not near so steady as womens."⁴³

For these women, service work offered more than shelter, sustenance, and money: it also provided an introduction to American culture. Irish women had come to settle permanently, and had to adapt to American society. "Certainly, they had to begin immediately the process of acculturation on their own terms," historian Hasia Diner noted, "and domestic service provided perhaps the most intimate glimpse of what middle-class America was really like."⁴⁴

Some servants became attached to their employers and their families. "I got a place for general housework with Mrs. Carr," said an Irish woman. "I got \$2 till I learned to cook good, and then \$3 and then \$4. I was in that house as cook and nurse for twenty-two years.... Mrs. Carr's interests was my interests. I

took better care of her things than she did herself, and I loved the children as if they was my own." But, while they lived inside middle-class American homes, Irish maids were still outsiders. Their relationship to the family was a hierarchical one of upstairs and downstairs, masters and servants. They were present but invisible in a very intimate setting. Far from their own parents in Ireland, many of them hungered to belong to the families of their employers. "Ladies wonder how their girls can complain of loneliness in a house full of people, but oh! it is the worst kind of loneliness—their share is but the work of the house," a domestic servant said. "They do not share in the pleasures and delights of a home. One must remember that there is a difference between a *house*, a place of shelter, and a *home*, a place where all your affections are centered." Another servant echoed: "What I minded . . . was the awful lonesomeness. I went for general housework, because I knew all about it, and there were only three in the family." But the family members, "except to give orders," had "nothing to do with me. It got to feel sort of crushing at last."⁴⁵

Moreover, the work itself was demanding and often demeaning. As they cooked, cleaned, laundered, and took care of the children, servants were required to wear caps and aprons, badges of social inferiority. Most worked as live-in servants, available on a beck-and-call schedule around the clock, usually for seven days a week. Their employers "bossed" them "everlastingly" and wanted them to be "on tap from six in the morning to 10 or 11 at night." One servant complained about her employer: "She had no more thought for me than if I had been a machine. She'd sit in her sitting-room on the second floor and ring for me twenty times a day to do little things, and she wanted me up till eleven to answer the bell, for she had a great deal of company." The servants felt like "prisoners," always "looked down upon." The daughter of a maid protested: "I hate the word service. We came to this country to better ourselves, and it's not bettering to have anybody ordering you around! If there was such a thing as fixed hours and some certain time to yourself, it might be different, but now I tell every girl I know, 'Whatever you do, don't go into service.'⁴⁶

The nature of domestic service involved what sociologist Stephen Steinberg termed "the exploitation of the whole person." The servant lacked privacy, for she lived and worked in her employer's home. Her character and manners were scrutinized for approval. In this sense, it was not just her labor that was purchased but the laborer herself. This lack of personal freedom was the reason why

one Irish woman chose to work in a factory rather than in "the service":

It's freedom that we want when the day's work is done. I know some nice girls . . . that make more money and dress better and everything for being in service. They're [house servants] and have Thursday afternoon out and part of every other Sunday. But they're never sure of one minute that's their own when they're in the house. Our day is ten hours long, but when it's done it's done, and we can do what we like with the evenings. That's what I've heard from every nice girl that ever tried service. You're never sure that your soul's your own except when you are out of the house, and I couldn't stand that a day.⁴⁷

On the other hand, the factory worker had her labor appropriated only at the workplace. "Though the textile worker might be reduced to a commodity, paradoxically, her inner self was left intact." Factory work, however, was also difficult to "stand." Denouncing such labor as "especially fatal to women," Archbishop John Lancaster Spalding declared that there were "few sadder sights than the poor women of the cotton mills of New England," so many of them "Irish girls, whose cheeks once bloomed with health as fresh and fair as the purity of their hearts." Irish women were preponderant in the New England textile mills of Lawrence, Holyoke, Fall River, and other towns. In Lowell, the City of Spindles, they represented 58 percent of the total textile workforce. "The gray mills in Manchester [New Hampshire]," remembered Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, "stretched like prisons along the banks of the Merrimac River. Fifty percent of the workers were women . . . Many lived in the antiquated 'corporation boarding houses,' relics of when the mills were built. Our neighbors, men and women, rushed to the mills before the sun rose on cold winter days and returned after dark. They were poorly dressed and poverty stricken."⁴⁸

In the dusty and noisy mills, the women felt their heads had become "empty of sense and their ears . . . deaf." Constantly standing and tying knots, they suffered backaches "until they lost their minds and ran amuck." Far from the rural countryside of Ireland, they had become tenderers of machines, their activities routinized and measured by the clock.

*When I set out for Lowell,
Some factory for to find,*

*I left my native country
And all my friends behind.*

*But now I am in Lowell,
And summon'd by the bell,
I think less of the factory
Than of my native dell.*

*The factory bell begins to ring
And we must all obey,
And to our old employment go,
Or else be turned away.*

*Come all ye weary factory girls,
I'll have you understand,
I'm going to leave the factory
And return to my native land.*

The "factory girls" also worked in dangerous conditions. On January 10, 1860, a terrible tragedy occurred at Lowell's Pemberton Mill. A building suddenly collapsed, trapping nine hundred workers, mostly Irish women; then a fire broke out, adding to the terror and destruction. One hundred and sixteen women were seriously hurt while eighty-eight were killed. The list of victims included many daughters of Erin.⁴⁹

Irish women were heavily employed in the sewing trades. "No female that can handle a needle need be idle," a young woman in Philadelphia wrote home. By 1900, a third of all seamstresses and dressmakers in the United States were Irish women. Work in the garment industry was repetitious and dirty, and the wages were pitifully low. "I am a good seamstress and work hard," one woman explained. "I try but I can not make over \$1 per day. I pay rent for my machine, \$2.50 per month. Am not able to afford to ride on street cars, therefore I have to walk, and if I happen to be one minute late, I have to walk up long flights of stairs and am not allowed to go on the elevator."⁵⁰

Still, for many Irish women, America was a land of opportunity. "My dear Father," a daughter wrote from New York in 1850, "I must only say this is a good place and a good country.... Any man or woman without a family are fools that would not venture and come to this plentiful Country where no man or woman ever hungered or ever will and where you will not be seen naked...." Similarly, in the

same year, Margaret McCarthy wrote home to her family: "Come you all Together Courageously and bid adieu to that lovely land of our Birth" where there was so much misery, oppression, and degradation. She enclosed twenty dollars, urging her father to clear away from "that place all together and the Sooner the Better."⁵¹

For these women, America represented not only jobs and wages but also economic self-sufficiency—freedom from dependency on fathers or husbands. "I am getting along splendid and likes my work...it seems like a new life," one of them wrote to her younger sister in Ireland. "I will soon have a trade and be more independint.... You know it was always what I wanted so I have reached my highest ambition." Thomas McCann wrote home about his sister: "Maggie is well and likes this Country. She would not go back to old Ireland for any money." What Maggie especially valued was the "independence" she had found in America.⁵²

"Green Power": The Irish "Ethnic" Strategy

Immigrant women were mainly confined to domestic service and factory work. Their daughters, on the other hand, did not follow in their occupational footsteps. In 1900, only 19 percent of the Irish women born in America worked as servants or laundresses, compared to 61 percent of the immigrant generation. An employment agent reported that most immigrant Irish women were illiterate: "In fact they are the only class I know of that cannot read or write." But their daughters, he added, were educated and shunned domestic service. Increasingly, young women were entering white-collar employment as secretaries, nurses, and teachers. By 1910, Irish-American women constituted one-fifth of all public school teachers in northern cities and one-third in Chicago alone.⁵³

These advances for Irish women reflected a broader pattern of Irish success—a rise out of the ranks of "the giddy multitude." By 1900, two-thirds of the Irish were citizens by birth, and they were better educated and had greater occupational mobility than their parents. In Boston, for example, 40 percent of those born in America had white-collar jobs in 1890, compared to only 10 percent for the immigrants. The family of John Kearney of Poughkeepsie, New York, represented this pattern. After arriving in America, Kearney worked as an unskilled laborer and then became a junk dealer; one of his sons rose from postal clerk to superintendent of city streets, and another son went from grocery clerk to inspector of the city's waterworks. "My children [are] doing first rate," an

Irish immigrant proudly declared, but "if they were back there [in Ireland] what would they be?"⁵⁴

By the early 1900s, Irish Americans were attending college in greater proportion than their Protestant counterparts. They had even begun to enter Harvard University in substantial numbers. Initially, the students at this elite school resented the Irish presence, but gradually they came to accept the newcomers. President Abbott Lawrence Lowell viewed the Irish favorably and highlighted Harvard's role in assimilating them into American society. "What we need," he had explained earlier, "is not to dominate the Irish but to absorb them." We want them to become "rich," he added, "send their sons to our colleges, and share our prosperity and our sentiments." In his opinion, however, such inclusionism should be reserved for certain groups. The "theory of universal political equality," he argued, should not be applied to "tribal Indians," "Chinese," or "negroes under all conditions, [but] only to our own race, and to those people whom we can assimilate rapidly." Lowell added that the Irish were unlike Jewish immigrants: they were Christian as well as culturally similar to Americans of English origin. The Irish could, therefore, become "so merged in the American people" that they would not be "distinguished as a class."⁵⁵

What greatly enabled the Irish to "merge" into the mainstream was the fact that they were "white" and hence eligible for naturalized citizenship. Their rates for becoming citizens and voters were the highest of all immigrant groups. They wanted to become Americans, for they had come here as settlers rather than as sojourners: only 10 percent of them went back to Ireland, while Italians had a return rate ranging from 40 to 60 percent. "The outstanding fact" about the Irish "return tide was its minuteness," observed historian Arnold Schrier. "Compared with the vast numbers who left Ireland it was a mere trickle." The Irish entry into citizenship and politics was facilitated by their language skills. "The Irish had one advantage which other immigrants did not share—they did not have to learn to speak English," recalled Elizabeth Gurley Flynn. Thus "they more easily became citizens."⁵⁶

Unlike the Chinese immigrants who were barred from naturalized citizenship and the blacks who were largely disenfranchised, the Irish possessed the suffrage. The rise of Irish political power was rooted in their pattern of settlement. A rural people in Ireland, they became urban in America. In 1850, one in three Irish immigrants lived in fifteen cities, including 134,000 in New York City, 72,000 in Philadelphia, and 35,000 in Boston. Thirty years later, one-third of

New York City's population was Irish. By 1885, Boston's Irish Catholic children outnumbered white Protestant children. This city was no longer the "Boston of the Endicotts and the Winthrop" but had become "the Boston of the Collinses and the O'Briens."⁵⁷

As voters, they consciously cultivated and promoted their "Green Power." Led by politicians like John Kelly, New York's Tammany Hall helped elect the city's first Irish Catholic mayor, William R. Grace. By 1890, the Irish had captured most of the Democratic party organizations in northern cities. In New York, Boston, Chicago, and San Francisco, Irish political machines functioned like "Robin Hoods," taking taxes from the Yankee middle class and giving revenues to the Irish through the public payrolls. By 1900, the Irish represented 30 percent of the municipal employees in these cities. Through political machines, the Irish were able to get jobs in the fire and police departments as well as municipally owned utilities, subways, street railways, waterworks, port facilities, and in city hall itself. The "Irish cop" and "Irish fireman" became ubiquitous at this time. Irish political bosses also awarded public works projects to Irish building contractors. As early as 1870, Irish building contractors constituted a fifth of all contractors in the country. An "Irish ethic" led these contractors to give preferential treatment to compatriot subcontractors and workers.⁵⁸

Meanwhile, ethnic associations like the Ancient Order of Hibernians and the Clan na Gael functioned as networks for employment, while skilled Irish workers monopolized many trades and shared job opportunities only with their countrymen. Emigration was no longer "like going into a City where you don't know anybody," a worker wrote to a relative in Ireland. "Should your Brother Paddy Come to America, he can rely on his Cousins to promote his interests in Procuring work." Heavily concentrated in the building trades, Irish workers became highly unionized. Many of the prominent leaders in the labor movement were Irish—Terence Powderly of the Knights of Labor, Mary Kenny O'Sullivan of the American Federation of Labor, and Cork-born Mary Harris, the legendary labor activist known as "Mother Jones." Through this leadership and the unions, many Irish were able to experience what historian David Montgomery described as "the much celebrated rise from rags to riches."⁵⁹

By 1900, the Irish occupied a significant niche in the skilled labor market: 1.2 million were employed in the blue-collar trades, representing 65 percent of all Irish workers. Most of these blue-collar laborers—78 percent—were skilled. While the Irish composed only 7.5 percent of the entire male workforce, they were disproportionately

represented in the elite construction and industrial occupations — one-third of the plumbers and steamfitters, one-fifth of the stonecutters and brass workers, and one-sixth of the teamsters and steelworkers. Once they became members of the privileged stratum of the workforce, they monopolized the better jobs. Irish workers campaigned to make American labor equal “white” labor. Irish “ethnic solidarity” and influence in the unions enabled them to exclude the “others” such as the Chinese and blacks. This Irish exclusion of racial minorities from the skilled and high-waged jobs represented what historian David Roediger called “the wages of whiteness.”⁶⁰

Ironically, Irish social and economic success challenged their ethnicity and sense of group unity. “How shall we preserve our identity?” asked an Irish immigrant in 1872. “How shall we preserve our faith and nationality, through our posterity, and leave our impress on the civilization of this country?” The *Irish American* urged its readers to learn Gaelic so they could “feel more proud and manly as Irish, and be more respected as American citizens.” Even as the Irish immigrants took possession of America, many of them reaffirmed their Irish identity by telling and retelling stories about British oppression in the homeland. Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, for example, remembered how in the 1890s “the awareness of being Irish came to us as small children, through plaintive song and heroic story. The Irish people fought to wrest their native soil from foreign landlords, to speak their native Gaelic tongue, to worship in the church of their choice, to have their own schools, to be independent and self-governing. We drew in a burning hatred of British rule with our mother’s milk. Until my father died at over eighty, he never said *England* without adding, ‘God damn her!’”⁶¹

The immigrants had hoped to return to their beloved Emerald Isle, but most of them stayed and struggled to make America their new homeland. Working as “factory girls” and railroad builders, entering politics and businesses, and speaking English with an “American accent,” they transformed themselves into Americans. “The second generation here are not interested in their ancestors,” an immigrant stated, because “we have never told them of the realities of life [in Ireland], and would not encourage any of them to visit. When we left there, we left the old world behind, we are all American citizens and proud of it.” For them, the ocean was a psychological border, protecting them from bitter memories. “We have too many loved ones in the Cemetary here to leave them,” an immigrant wrote to her brother in Ireland. “We have been here a long time — and it is home to us now.”⁶²