IRISH AMERICA

by Lawrence J. McCaffrey

The roughly one million peasants who fled to the United States from Ireland's Great Famine of 1845–49 were not the first Irishmen to leave their homeland behind, nor even the first to seek refuge in America. But the Great Famine induced an exodus of unprecedented proportions.

The Famine was a decisive event in modern Irish history. It claimed an estimated 1.5 million lives and established emigration as Ireland's safety valve, relieving the demographic pressures on a primitive agrarian economy. In the Famine's wake, for three-quarters of a century, many Irish families raised most of their children for export. During those 75 years, three million Irish immigrants crossed the Atlantic to the New World.

The Famine also created the northern United States's first major ethnic problem. Not only did the Irish immigrants represent the most miserable, backward class of peasantry in northern Europe; they were also Roman Catholics in an obdurately Protestant land. Perhaps as many as one-third were not fluent in English. Virtually all of them were destitute.

Unlike many Germans and most Scandinavians, the new immigrants shunned the countryside. While the vast majority of them had been farmers, they had also been ignorant farmers. The oppressive Anglo-Irish landlord system back home, under which the Irish worked essentially as serfs, had robbed them of ability and ambition. Psychologically, too, the American farm was uninviting. "If I had [in Ireland] but a sore head I could have a neighbor within every hundred yards of me that would run to see me," one Irishman reflected in a letter home from rural Missouri. "But here everyone gets so much land, and generally has so much, that they calls them neighbors that live two or three miles off."

While some bishops in Ireland and the United States tried to steer immigrants away from the "wicked" cities, it was nevertheless to Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, New Orleans, and other cities that the Irish tended to gravitate. They became pioneers not of the open frontier but of the urban ghetto, blazing a trail that would later be followed, with varying degrees of success, by Italians, Jews, and Eastern Europeans, by blacks migrating to the North from the cottonfields, by Hispanics from Puerto Rico and Mexico.

The transition from the thatched-roof cottages of the Irish

Shanty Irish: squatters in mid-Manhattan. "The Atlantic works no miracles on them," wrote Thomas D'Arcy McGee. Yet between 1848 and 1861, Irish immigrants sent an estimated $60 million "home" to relatives.

countryside to the tenements and tarpaper shacks of 19th-century urban America was traumatic. The immigrants were typically exploited first by countrymen who had come earlier. In New York, Irish "runners" would meet the 30 to 40 immigrant ships that arrived every day. They seized the luggage and rushed the newcomers to run-down, Irish-owned boarding houses. What little money the new arrivals had was soon spent on lodging, drink, and counterfeit railway tickets to the interior. Penniless, the immigrants were on their own.

In the crime-ridden Irish neighborhoods, where open sewers drained the streets, tuberculosis, cholera, and alcoholism took their toll. In Boston during the 1840s, the life expectancy after arrival of the typical Irish immigrant was 14 years. In New York, in 1857, a state-government report warned of a new blight on the urban landscape—the corrosive inner-city slum.

Many immigrants turned to crime. Prisons and asylums bulged with Irish occupants. Between 1856 and 1863, according to historian Oscar Handlin, at least half of the inmates in the Boston House of Correction were Irish. Many Irish women drank and brawled like the men. Their children roamed the streets engaging in mischief and petty crime. "Scratch a convict or a pau-

per and the chances are that you tickle the skin of an Irish Catholic at the same time," commented an editorial writer for the *Chicago Evening Post* in 1868.

Native Americans had never before experienced a foreign influx so big and of such distressing quality. To be called "Irish" was not much better than to be called "nigger"; racist commentary made little distinction. In some respects, descriptions of the 19th-century Irish ghetto anticipated those of today's black ghetto. But there was no palliative welfare state, no sense among other Americans of collective responsibility for the plight of the underclass.

To many Anglo-Americans, the antisocial, frequently violent behavior of the Irish was less offensive than their religion. Anti-Catholicism was an essential ingredient in American nativism. Deeming the swarming mass of Irish-Catholic immigrants to be an unassimilable menace to Anglo-Protestant culture and institutions, the American (Know-Nothing) Party during the 1850s pressed for curbs on immigration and exclusion of the foreign-born from political office. Periodically during the 1840s and '50s, mobs attacked and burned Catholic churches and convents.

Managing Money

Nativist efforts notwithstanding, continued Irish immigration had by 1860 made Roman Catholicism the largest single religious denomination in the United States. Some three million Catholics, in highly visible urban concentrations, were being served by 2,235 priests and many more nuns and brothers. Many members of the clergy were Irish and imported. In short order, Irish clerics wrested control of the hierarchy from the handful of Anglo-Americans and French missionaries who had guided the Catholic Church during the Republic's first half century.

The church aroused Protestant antipathy, but it also served as a bulwark in slum communities that could boast few others. In the Irish ghetto of the 19th century, as in many black neighborhoods today, the local church became the basic social and political unit. Confronted with ethnic and religious prejudice outside their own neighborhoods, Irish Catholics erected an alternative system of schools, hospitals, asylums, and orphanages. They paid

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for it in America the way that they had paid for it in Ireland—with small sums contributed regularly by millions of the faithful. Because the brightest Catholic lads in America became priests, the money was managed well and put to work quickly. (Construction of Saint Patrick's Cathedral in Manhattan was begun in 1858, within a decade of the Famine's end.) In cities such as New York, Boston, and Chicago, the archdiocese eventually became a wealthy property owner, sometimes scandalously so.

'Ten Thousand Micks'

As Irish America congregated socially around Saint Mary's, Saint Patrick's, and Saint Bridget's, Irish men and women sought to penetrate the fringes of the U.S. economy. It took time. Lacking marketable skills, Irish men during the mid-19th century had no choice but to take work as menial laborers. In one sense, they were lucky: They arrived in the American metropolis at a time when most jobs required a strong back, not a skilled hand or nimble brain. This was no longer the case a century later, as rural black migrants to northern cities learned to their dismay.

The ravages of alcohol—an imported problem with complex origins—did to Irish men what drugs and alcohol have done to many blacks: first made them unemployable, then killed them. But the able-bodied Irish could at least clean stables, drive horses as draymen or cabbies, load and unload riverboats, and work in construction. Irish men mined coal in Pennsylvania, gold in California, copper in Montana. Because slaves represented a costly capital investment, Irish wage workers were hired to drain the deadly malarial swamps of Louisiana. They dug canals and laid miles of railroad track, their graves edging westward as the country reached for the Pacific. In the words of one southern folk song: "Ten thousand Micks, they swung their picks, / To dig the New Canal. / But the choleray was stronger 'n they, / An' twice it killed them awl."

Professionally, the first big breakthrough made by the Irish was in the military. As it already had done in Great Britain, the lure of adventure, glory, smart uniforms, three square meals a day, and some loose change jingling in the pocket attracted many Irish men into the armed forces. They rose quickly in the ranks. Eventually, the same contradictory combination of physical challenge and economic security that had drawn the Irish into the armed services would draw them into big-city police and fire departments as well. As early as 1854, 98 of the 150 police officers in New Orleans's First District were born in Ireland.

During the Civil War, almost 40 exclusively Irish regiments

saw action on the side of the Union. At Antietam, on October 6, 1862, the Irish Brigade, which included New York's "Fighting Sixty-Ninth," lost 196 of its 317 men. The brigade was reconstituted and then, in December of the same year, decimated again—by the Confederate Irish Brigade—as it sought to scale Marye's Heights at Fredericksburg. After the war, Irish officers and enlisted men helped keep order on the western frontier. The performance of Irish soldiers (and Irish nursing nuns) on the Civil War battlefield had an important secondary consequence: It helped to take the steam out of anti-Irish nativism.

So did the growing demand for cheap labor, as America moved into the Industrial Age. The arrival of increasing numbers of non-English-speaking Italians and Eastern Europeans also helped push the Irish up from the bottom rung, socially and economically.

The progress of Irish-Americans was highly uneven. As the century wore on, Irish men did begin to make some gains, moving into the ranks of skilled labor. They were heavily concentrated in the building trades and dominated plumbing and plastering. The Civil Service, especially the Post Office, became an Irish redoubt. Irish men, along with Jews, claimed a leadership role in the trade-union movement, and union jobs were typically passed from father to son. All of this occurred,

The pretensions of "lace-curtain" Irish-Americans were ridiculed in the press and on the stage. "There's an organ in the parlor, to give the house a tone / And you're welcome every evening at Maggie Murphy's home."

however, fully two generations after the initial, famine-induced, wave of immigration.

As historian Hasia Diner makes plain in *Erin's Daughters in America* (1983), Irish women as a group made a better, faster adjustment to American urban life than did their husbands, sons, and brothers. Like the southern black women who migrated to northern cities during the 1950s and '60s, Irish women during the 19th century simply had more to offer the local economy. Like southern black women, too, Irish immigrant women seemed relatively "nonthreatening" to Anglo-Americans.

Women As Civilizers

In the annals of European emigration, the Irish exodus was unique in that women, most of them single, always outnumbered men. (This anomaly was due in part to the fact that daughters could not expect to inherit the family farm.) Coming from a society with sharp gender segregation and a new, church-encouraged tradition of late marriage or no marriage, Irish women aggressively pursued economic independence.

Not all of them, of course, "made it." Many single Irish women drifted perforce to the ill-paying mills and factories of New England and the Midwest. When American textile and shoe manufacturing shifted from hand to factory production, it was often Biddy who operated the machines. (Not surprisingly, Irish women, like Irish men, became ardent unionists.) But many Irish women enjoyed a happier existence. While women from other ethnic groups scorned domestic service as degrading, the Irish flocked to such jobs, which offered food, shelter, clothing, and a taste of genteel living. Above all, they earned money that was theirs to spend as they pleased. Cartoons from the mid-19th century typically depict Irish maids ostentatiously "wearing their paychecks"—adorning themselves in finery.

Irish women moved more quickly than men into white-collar work. For the intelligent, ambitious Irish female, nursing and teaching were for decades the professions of choice. During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, second-generation Irish women constituted the largest single ethnic group in the teaching profession. In 1900, according to the *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups*, their numbers exceeded the "combined total of all female teachers with English and German parents."

A key point should be noted: Working, single Irish women were, for the most part, not working, single Irish *mothers*. This made them a prime economic asset. Married Irish males spent most of their income supporting families, Irish wives tended to

stay at home, and single men squandered substantial sums on drink; single Irish women, on the other hand, typically sent part of their paychecks "home" to Ireland. They paid the way to America for their brothers and sisters and faithfully contributed their tithe to the church. Often they lived with relatives, their wages boosting the household into middle-class, "lace-curtain" comfort.

Irish women looked out for one another. While Irish priests and bishops tended to ignore the problems many Irish women faced—out-of-wedlock births, abusive husbands, the loneliness of spinsterhood—Irish nuns sheltered the poor and afflicted. Three large orders of nuns—the Sisters of Mercy, the Presentation Sisters, and the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary—had originated in Ireland; these and other orders, which recruited heavily among the Irish in the United States, deliberately focused their educational efforts on women. "Many orders were expressly forbidden by their charters to teach boys or at least boys above a certain age," writes Diner. In 1873, there were 209 Catholic schools for girls in America's cities but only 87 for boys.

There was another important role for Irish women—as mothers. To be sure, marriage was no more attractive an option in America than it had been in Ireland. On both sides of the ocean, many couples were miserable. Male pride suffered when women but not men could find work. In both Ireland and the United States, an emotional coldness existed between the sexes; sexual puritanism without a doubt took much of the zip out of wedlock. However, once wed, and if not deserted or widowed, Irish women in America were *less* likely than those of other nationalities to be in the workplace. As the dominant force in Irish homes, Irish mothers complemented the efforts of their single sisters, leading a slow but tenacious drive toward middle-class respectability.

The Boston Ghetto

By the turn of the century, humorist Finley Peter Dunne's Mr. Dooley could ridicule the social-climbing pretensions of a Mrs. Donahue, who bought a piano so that her daughter Molly could learn to play "Bootoven and Choochooski" and not "The Rambler from Clare."

If gender was long one of the fault lines in Irish America, another was geography. Just as Hispanics today have found more opportunity in the Sun Belt than in the Frost Belt, so did Irish men and women on the "urban frontier"—in the booming, free-

wheeling cities of the Midwest, where *everyone* was a newcomer—enjoy better prospects than their cousins in the older cities of the Eastern Seaboard. The Heartland's burgeoning factories, mills, stockyards, and railroads were starved for labor. In Detroit between 1850 and 1880, as historian JoEllen McNergney Vinyard points out in *The Irish on the Urban Frontier* (1976), Irish immigrants lived in far less crowded conditions than they did in eastern cities. Proportionately more of the Irish found work as skilled laborers and entered the middle class.

In New England, by contrast, the situation was never encouraging. There, the Irish encountered a highly structured society dominated by Yankee yeomen and an elite Brahmin aristocracy. Physically and psychologically, the Irish in Boston, Newburyport, and Providence were captives of the ghetto. As historians Stephan Thernstrom and David Noel Doyle have noted, the situation in Boston was by far the most dismal. Doyle estimates that, during the late 19th century, an Irishman right off the boat who headed for the Midwest was more likely to blaze a trail from the peasantry into the lower middle class than was a fourth-generation Irish Bostonian. Not only had the Irish in "Southie," Charlestown, and Brighton settled amid an old and stratified society; they remained for decades the only foreign ethnic group of any size in Boston.

Whites vs. Blacks

It is ironic that America's first Irish-Catholic President, John F. Kennedy, should have been a Boston native. But, tellingly, his father's fortune, which made possible JFK's achievement, came largely from ventures *outside* the city. Despite his Harvard degree, Joseph P. Kennedy was never accepted socially by Boston's Anglo-Protestant elite.

The sense of being left out and left behind has surfaced among Boston Irish in a politics of revenge rather than of purpose. More than other Irish-Americans, those in Boston supported the fascist preachings of Father Charles Coughlin during the 1930s and the Communist-chasing of Senator Joseph McCarthy during the 1950s. During the 1970s, racial violence flared in South Boston over the busing of black children from Roxbury to local white schools. While relations between the two ethnic groups have never been overly warm—the Irish long competed with blacks for housing and jobs, and worked hard to keep blacks out of the American Federation of Labor—the strife in Roxbury reflected more than simple animosity. It represented a clash of two "cultures of poverty," existing side by side, both of

them alienated from America's mainstream.

Except in New England, the acquisition of political power by certain Irish-Americans hastened the social and economic progress of the larger Irish-American community. A knack for politics was the one thing that many Irish, pugnacious yet gregarious by nature, had brought with them from their native land. During the early decades of the 19th century, Daniel O'Connell trained his people in the techniques of mass agitation and the principles of liberal democracy. O'Connell's Catholic and Repeal Associations were sophisticated political machines; no other immigrant group had participated in anything like them. In the United States, the vast majority of Irish immigrants joined the Democratic Party, which was far less nativist than its rivals, controlled the governments of most major cities, welcomed the immigrant vote (especially if the immigrants voted more than once), and rewarded the Irish with patronage jobs. Saloonkeepers and morticians became key Irish political leaders; both had ample opportunity to meet (and

THE POL

How did a 19th-century Irish ward boss make his appointed rounds? George Washington Plunkitt (1842–1924), a New York State Senator and Tammany Hall stalwart, left in his diary this description of a typical day:

2 A.M. Wakened by a boy with message from bartender to bail him out of jail. 3 A.M. Back to bed. 6 A.M. Fire engines, up and off to the scene to see my election district captains tending the burnt-out tenants. Got names for new homes. 8:30 to police court. Six drunken constituents on hand. Got four released by a timely word to the judge. Paid the other's [sic] fines. Nine o'clock to Municipal court. Told an election district captain to act as lawyer for a widow threatened with dispossession. 11 to 3 P.M. Found jobs for four constituents. 3 P.M. an Italian funeral, sat conspicuously up front. 4 P.M. A Jewish funeral—up front again, in the synagogue. 7 P.M. Meeting of district captains and reviewed the list of all voters, who's for us, who's agin. 8 P.M. Church fair. Bought ice cream for the girls; took fathers for a little something around the corner. 9 P.M. Back in the club-house. Heard complaints of a dozen push cart pedlars. 10:30 A Jewish wedding. Had sent handsome present to the bride. Midnight—to bed.

console) their constituents.

Politics gave the Irish opportunities for status and wealth often denied them in business. Building a multi-ethnic coalition of Irish (the largest bloc), Italians, and Eastern Europeans, with Catholic solidarity as the glue, the Irish gradually took command of the urban wing of the Democratic Party. In 1880, William Grace, a shipping magnate, became the first Irish-Catholic mayor of New York. Hugh O'Brien followed suit in Boston in 1885, John Patrick Hopkins in Chicago in 1893. By April 1894, nativist John Paul Bocock was lamenting in the pages of *Forum* magazine that an "Irish Oligarchy controls America's leading cities."

Machine Politics

What did the Irish do with their power? Sociologist (now Senator) Daniel Patrick Moynihan argued in *Beyond the Melting Pot* (1963) that "the very parochialism and bureaucracy that enabled them to succeed in politics prevented [the Irish] from doing much with government. In a sense, the Irish did not know what to do with power once they got it."

Moynihan was off the mark. No, the Irish did not think of politics as an instrument of social change, not in so many words; with a view of the world tempered by the concept of Original Sin, Irish politicians entertained few illusions about the natural goodness or perfectibility of man. At the same time, however, the Irish scorned the fashionable Yankee notion of laissez-faire "social Darwinism." Irish political machines were short on ideology; but they mitigated poverty by dispensing food, clothing, coal, and city jobs, and not only to the Irish but also to Italians, Poles, Jews, and other constituents.

Johnny Powers, alderman boss of Chicago's Nineteenth Ward at the turn of the century, routinely provided bail for his constituents, fixed court cases, paid the back rent, and attended weddings and funerals. One Christmas he personally distributed six tons of turkey and four tons of duck and goose. Inadvertently, by example rather than precept, Irish "machine politics" advanced the notion of welfare-state liberalism.

Of course, men such as Powers in Chicago and George Washington Plunkitt in New York City, not to mention the numerous subalterns in their organizations, were less than fastidious about lining their own pockets. Corruption was rife. Yet to their constituents, such men often appeared as Robin Hoods, taking from the rich and giving to the poor. Joseph F. Dinneen made the same point in his 1936 novel, *Ward Eight*, when Boss Hughie Donnelly explains to a protégé why grafters run a more prosperous, happy

may have cost him the Presidency in 1928, the religion of Irish America came to appear less alien during the 1930s and '40s. On the screen, movie stars such as Spencer Tracy and Bing Crosby portrayed priests less as spiritual leaders than as social workers in Roman collars.

But the GI Bill proved to be the real springboard. Millions of Americans of Irish ancestry had served their country in World War II. By 1950, for the first time in history, more Irish men than women were enrolled in college. Among American ethnic groups, including English Protestants, only Jews as the 1950s began were sending a higher proportion (59 percent) of their children on to college than the Irish (43 percent). By the 1960s, the evidence was clear that Irish America was now a solid, middle-class community, with its fair share of millionaires, civic leaders, academics, and entries in *Who's Who in America*.

Shifting Gears

A 1963 survey by the National Opinion Research Center showed that not only were the Irish the most successful Catholic ethnic group in the country (in terms of education, occupation, and income); they also scored highest on questions of general knowledge, were least prejudiced against blacks and Jews, and were most likely to consider themselves "very happy." That is not to say that all Irish-Americans were confident, content, and open-minded. Irish-American literature during the 1960s and '70s would expose a distasteful underside. Jimmy Breslin's Dermot Davey and other hard-drinking New York cops abuse blacks, are on the take, and have perverse sexual relationships with wives and lovers. Tom McHale's wealthy Philadelphia Farragans hate "niggers," "fags," and "pinko draft dodgers." The best of the family, Arthur, turns holy pictures to the wall when making love with his wife. The paranoids, drunks, wife beaters, bigots, and sexual neurotics who inhabit the novels of Breslin, McHale, Thomas J. Fleming, John Gregory Dunne, Pete Hamill, Joe Flaherty, and James Carroll all have real-life counterparts. Many Irish-Americans, meanwhile, continue to inhabit bleak Irish ghettos in dying industrial towns; these communities are seldom publicized, but they are still there.

Yet the real story of the Irish in modern America is not that some of them nurse private tragedies or, as in South Boston, aggravate public ones. It is what success has done to the Irish as ethnics, and what it has done to the two institutions—the political machine, the Catholic Church—that long sustained them as a group.

COUNTING FOR SOMETHING

From the beginning, Irish-Americans followed events in their home-land with special interest. They also spent considerable amounts of time and money trying to influence those events—to improve the lot of the Irish peasant and, if possible, to bring about Ireland's inde-pendence from Great Britain.

Irish-American nationalism had no single source. For some in the 19th-century American ghetto, it was rooted in an exile mentality that romanticized Ireland as a paradise lost, a land of green fields and soft rain, purple mountains and blue lakes. It was a country of honorable men and chaste women, where ties of family and friend-ship were strong.

Another source was hatred. All that was wrong with the land the immigrants left behind—the poverty, the hunger, the disease, the evictions—all of this was cruel England's fault. And now the op-pressor had forced millions of Irish to "cross the raging main" and, especially in New England, suffer a new and different form of Anglo-Protestant ascendancy. In his poem "Remorse for Intemperate Speech," William Butler Yeats described how the Irish had left their country with maimed personalities, carrying from their "mother's womb a fanatic heart."

Finally, there was the yearning for respect. Many Irish linked their low status in the United States with Ireland's colonial collar and leash; with independence would come dignity. Promised Michael Davitt, founder of the Land League in 1879: "Aid us in Ireland to re-move the stain of degradation from your birth, and the Irish race here in America will get the respect you deserve."

Dedicated Irish-American nationalists—always a minor-ity—could usually count on the moral and financial support of the broader Irish community. Through societies such as the Fenians and Clan na Gael, and by bankrolling the efforts of politicians and re-formers in Ireland, Irish-American nationalists during the 19th cen-tury variously sought to curb evictions and stabilize rents, promote ill will between Britain and the United States, and, above all, pry Ireland loose from the British Empire, by force if necessary.

The Fenians, a 50,000-member (at its peak) conspiratorial brother-hood dedicated to Ireland's independence, received $228,000 in con-tributions from Irish-Americans in 1865; the next year, donations swelled to almost $500,000. The Fenians hoped to use the United States as an arsenal, providing arms and ammunition to freedom fighters across the sea. At the same time, brandishing Irish Amer-ica's new political clout, the Fenians sought to shape American for-eign policy to their own purposes. Ultimately, factional squabbling dimmed Fenian hopes of fomenting armed insurrection; sporadic, Fenian-sponsored acts of terrorism in Ireland ended not with Brit-ain's hasty retreat from the island but with "martyrs to the cause"

dangling from a hangman's rope.

The Irish nationalists had little impact on U.S. foreign policy. After the American Civil War, while the United States was haggling with Great Britain over the settlement of war-related claims, Washington successfully intimidated London with friendly overtures toward the Fenians, 600 of whom in 1866 had launched a quixotic invasion of British Canada. (The Fenians had hoped to trade a "hostage" Canada for a free Ireland.) By the mid-1870s, however, President Ulysses S. Grant let it be known that the United States would not tolerate an Irish nationalist government-in-exile using America as a base to attack British territory.

Noraid's Michael Flannery.

After World War I, amid an Anglo-Irish war (1919–21), President Woodrow Wilson resisted pressure from Irish-Americans to recognize the embattled Irish Republic, notwithstanding the "self-determination" principle enunciated in his Fourteen Points. Wilson's stand cost the Democratic Party many Irish votes in the 1920 presidential election.

Creation in 1922 of an Irish Free State, consisting of all but six of the island's 32 counties, did not entirely quell nationalist fervor in the United States. With Northern Ireland still an integral part of the United Kingdom, and Catholics there an oppressed minority, nationalist efforts focused henceforth on Irish unification. Although no one has produced any credible figures on the amount of money Irish-Americans today contribute to the terrorist Irish Republican Army (IRA) through front organizations, such as the New York–based Irish Northern Aid Committee (Noraid), the sum is certainly substantial. However, only a small number of Irish-Americans are involved in aiding the IRA. When, in 1983, Noraid director Michael Flannery (above) was named grand marshal of New York's Saint Patrick's Day parade, prominent Irish-Americans, including Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan (D.-N.Y.) declined to march. New York's Terence Cardinal Cooke, breaking tradition, refused to receive Flannery on the steps of Saint Patrick's Cathedral. Many American IRA supporters are recent immigrants who left Ireland during the 1950s, bitter at their government's failure to provide jobs, only to discover an upwardly mobile Irish America into which they did not fit.

The current efforts of these people on behalf of a united Ireland recall Sir Isaiah Berlin's definition of nationalism as "the inflamed desire of the insufficiently regarded to count for something among the cultures of the world."
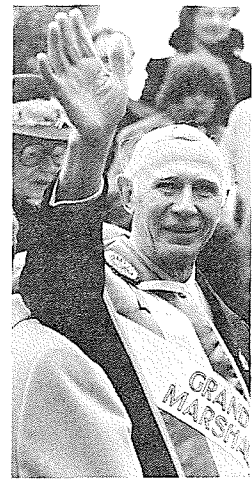
The election of John F. Kennedy to the Presidency in 1960 marked the arrival of Irish-Americans as politicians on the *national* scene. Ironically, at the same time, Irish pols were losing their grip on City Hall. Why? In Edwin O'Connor's *The Last Hurrah* (1956), one politician attributes the defeat of Mayor Frank Skeffington, loosely modeled on Boston's James Michael Curley, to the New Deal. "The old boss," he explains, "was strong simply because he held all the cards. If anybody wanted anything—jobs, favors, cash—he could only go to the boss, the local leader. What Roosevelt did was to take the handouts out of local hands. A few things like Social Security, Unemployment Insurance, and the like—that's what shifted the gears, sport."

A Costly Success

That may have been part of the reason, but the flight by increasingly prosperous Irish families from the central cities to the suburbs was surely a bigger factor. Sociologist Marjorie Fallows has documented how working- and lower-middle-class Irish families tended to forsake the old neighborhoods for ethnically "mixed" communities ringing downtown. Middle- and upper-middle-class Irish families found homes even farther out. In Chicago, for example, Southsiders typically migrated to Oak Lawn, Evergreen Park, and Burbank; Westsiders to Oak Park, River Forest, and Lombard; and Northsiders to Evanston and Wilmette.

The refugees from the ghetto parish left much of their Irishness behind; by the early 1970s, according to one study, only 43 percent of the Irish were marrying "within the tribe." The 1970s also witnessed an accelerating defection of Irish Catholics from the Democratic Party. (Ronald Reagan in 1980 received an estimated 53 percent of the Irish vote.) Increasingly, Irish Americans are voting along *class* rather than ethnic lines.

Weakening, too, in recent years has been Irish America's reflexive allegiance to the Catholic Church. Most well-educated Irish-Americans welcomed the theological renewal promised by the Second Vatican Council (1962–65), and most came away believing that the church had either gone too far or not gone far enough. On the one hand, the council scrapped many of the ritual and theological landmarks—the Latin mass, for example— that Irish Catholics had held dear. Gone, now, was what writer Mary McCarthy once called the "history and mystery" of the Roman Catholic Church. On the other hand, the Vatican remained adamant in its condemnation of birth control, a stricture that many American Irish-Catholics studiously ignore. Since Vatican

II, attendance at mass has fallen, as has use of the confessional. The sharpest Irish-Catholic youths now go not to Saint Joseph's Seminary but to the Harvard Business School.

What does it mean in 1985 to be an Irish-American? Americans of Irish ancestry are beginning to wonder about that themselves, now that the answers their grandparents accepted no longer seem to suffice. Many, of course, do not care. Others identify with the cause of Irish unification and naively send money to support the depredations of Irish Republican Army (IRA) gunmen in Northern Ireland (see box, pages 90–91).

But quite a few Irish-Americans, aware that "ethnicity" offers a psychological bulwark against the nation's chronic cultural turmoil, have reacted more sensibly. The field of Irish studies, for example, has blossomed during the past quarter century. Founded in 1959, the American Committee for Irish Studies now counts some 600 scholars as members; respected journals such as *Eire-Ireland*, the *James Joyce Quarterly*, and the *Irish Literary Supplement* have commenced publication in the United States. All over the country, college students flock to courses on Irish literature, history, music, and dance.

Is such enthusiasm merely for the moment? Perhaps. But it may also be that a new generation is prepared to help Irish America survive in a reduced but still vital context. No longer self-consciously Catholic, unsatisfied by the material affluence of suburban life, many younger Irish-Americans seem to find a certain solace in the historical and cultural aspects of their ethnicity.

Meanwhile, the long drama of the Irish in America may offer others some timely reminders. To blacks and Hispanics, the Irish experience promises hope but also cautions patience. It underlines the crucial roles that family, school, church, and politics variously can (and do) play in promoting social progress in America. But "success" also came to the Irish after heavy casualties—in terms of lives ended prematurely, in terms of lives misspent or spent in incredibly harsh circumstances. And it took 100 years.