EMIGRANTS FROM ERIN

Ethnicity and Class within White America

The Age of Jackson witnessed not only Indian removal and the expansion of slavery, but also the massive influx of a new group of immigrants. 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 flunkies 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 also 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" upon hearing the "wailing notes" of Irish ballads that reminded him of the "wild notes" of slave songs.1

The Irish Exodus

The Irish described their migration to America in Gaelic terms: deorai or "exiles," dithreachbhaich or "homeless," and dibeartach or "banished people." "Doib eigean dom imeacht go Meirice," they explained, "I had to go to America," or "going to America was a necessity for me." As historian Kerby Miller pointed out, many did not want to leave Ireland.
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"There's such a clinging to the country," a contemporary noted, "that they would rather live on anything rather than go." Their songs told mournful tales of exile in a foreign land:

\[
\text{Such troubles we know that have often} \\
\text{Caused stout Irish hearts to roam...} \\
\text{And... sons from their homes were drove...} \\
\text{The hills and the valleys so dear to my heart;} \\
\text{It grieves me to think that from them I must part.} \\
\text{Compelled to emigrate far, far o'er the sea...} \\
\]

Between 1815 and 1920, five and a half million Irish emigrated to America.²

Feeling like the "children of Israel," the Irish viewed themselves as a people driven from their beloved homeland by "English tyranny," the British "yoke" "enslaving" Ireland. The British were seen as "savage tyrants" and "cursed intruders." The movement to America was "artificial," explained one Irish migrant, because the poverty of Ireland had been created by English colonial policies. "Foul British laws," they declared, were the "whole cause" of their emigration. British oppression was defrauding them of the fruits of their hard labor. Time and again, migrants complained that they were being pushed out of their country by strangers from England:

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

British oppression was rooted deeply in Irish history. Centuries earlier, in 1166, Norman armies had arrived to assist the king of Leinster in a struggle against Rory O'Connor, the high king of Ireland. During the next ten years, King Henry II of England also sent troops and was declared the ruler of Ireland by the Norman invaders. The English conquest led to the abolition of traditional Irish laws and obligations and the confiscation of Irish lands, which then became estates for resettled

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English landlords. By 1700, the Irish owned only 14 percent of Ireland. Meanwhile, the English colonizers had forced the Irish to become Christian; but when the Church of England became Protestant in the sixteenth century, the Irish suddenly found themselves defending Catholicism.

\[
\text{Three centuries the foreign race} \\
\text{has ground us 'neath the harrow;} \\
\text{The sweat aye running down our face} \\
\text{in travail and in sorrow;} \\
\text{Our priests, proscribed, were forced to say} \\
\text{their Mass in secret hollow...} \\
\]

As subsistence farmers, Irish peasants formed clachans, or "small communities of families," and worked the land collectively. Beginning in the late eighteenth century, however, Protestant landlords decided to make their estates more productive and profitable. Therefore, they initiated a campaign to commercialize the Irish economy and transform the island into a "cattle civilization." By enclosing their estates and evicting peasant families, landlords shifted agricultural production from tillage to pasture. 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. Between 1750 and 1830, Irish exports increased from two million to six million 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 cloathed only in Rags." The Irish had been forced to survive on "Potatoes and Buttermilk, without Shirts," so that the "Merchants" could export "Beef, Butter, and Linnen" to England.

\[
\text{... the Landlord calls for rent,} \\
\text{The flood which over-spread the Land, has caused} \\
\text{them to lament,} \\
\text{And yet John Bull must have the Beef, let it be} \\
\text{cooked or raw,} \\
\]
Whence did we go, and where are we going? Where was Africa when the first waves of European exploration came to our shores? What were the motives behind these voyages of discovery, and what were their consequences for the indigenous peoples of the Americas, Africa, and Asia? These are the questions that too often are left unanswered, or answered in a way that glosses over the brutal realities of conquest and colonization.

The transatlantic slave trade was a massive andinhuman enterprise that resulted in the deaths of millions of people. It is estimated that between 1450 and 1870, approximately 12.5 million people were transported from Africa to the Americas as part of this trade. The majority of these individuals were captured and sold into slavery by African rulers and traders, who then sold them to European slave traders. The trade was driven by the demand for labor in the newly established colonies, particularly in the Caribbean and the Southern United States.

The transatlantic slave trade had a profound impact on both the African and the American continents. It resulted in the loss of countless lives and the tearing apart of families, as well as the disruption of communities and cultures. It also had long-lasting economic consequences, as the profits from the slave trade funded the industrial revolution in Europe and fueled the expansion of the American economy.

The legacy of the transatlantic slave trade is still felt today, both in the United States and in Africa. It is a reminder of the importance of recognizing and learning from our history, and of the need to work towards justice and reconciliation.

From this point of view, the concept of borders is not an abstract or sterile one, but rather a lived experience of displacement, separation, and longing. The borders that divide us are not just physical barriers, but also psychological and emotional ones, that can be just as difficult to cross.
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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 one could see "famished and ghastly skeletons," "cowing 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 poor-house was surrounded by "a mob of starved, almost naked, women," "clamoring 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 suffer destitution and death.

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

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." The potato blight reversed Irish attitudes toward emigration. What had earlier been viewed as banishment was now regarded as release. 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
To earn our pay in Baltimore.

Generally poor and unskilled, these immigrants were mostly laborers. They were young: in 1850, the median ages for both Irish immigrant men and women in Philadelphia were under thirty. More than the pre-famine immigrants, they included women, the elderly, and children, and many Irish emigrated as family groups. Overwhelmingly Catholic, they were also strongly Gaelic in culture and language.

With bundles on their shoulders, the migrants were "laving dear old

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Ireland without warnin' " to "shtart for Philadelphia in the mornin' " and cross the "briny ocean." But before they left, they attended an "American wake" — a party hosted by the 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.

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 pine wood, 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. That year, 20 percent of the emigrants died during the passage or immediately after arrival.

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
The Persuasive Presence of the Irish in Railroad Work

Exhausted, they tried to rest. They hid in the shadows and tried to steal the boundaries turning in their heads. At night, they continued to feel the vibrations of the spade handles in their hands and aches in their backs. A song and a prayer. As they lay in the dark, they made their voices sing.

Work on the rail, 'tis a fight
Drill my horses, drill!
Drill my men, drill!

When I lay down to sleep, bad luck to the work on the railroad!

The idea of a work song:
The Irish and their songs in the American railway.

Immortal Irish Brigade of Workers

Ireland, between 1845 and 1846, three million more Irish came to America...
In their response to Sampson's, "we feel the pinch of the American economy..." Chinese workers and their advocates are calling for higher wages and better working conditions. The Chinese workers, who constitute a significant portion of the labor force in the United States, are demanding an end to exploitation and discrimination. They are seeking fair treatment and respect, which they feel they are not receiving in their current work environment.

Furthermore, they argue that the exploitation of Chinese workers by employers is not only a violation of labor laws but also a contradiction of American values. They believe that every worker, regardless of their nationality, should be treated with dignity and respect, and that the American economy should be built on principles of fairness and justice.

The Chinese workers are not alone in their struggle. They are supported by a growing number of activists and organizations who are working to promote workers' rights and to address the issues facing Chinese workers in the United States. These groups are calling for increased awareness and action to ensure that Chinese workers are treated fairly and with dignity.

In conclusion, the Chinese workers are fighting for their rights and demanding a fairer and more just society. Their struggle is not only for themselves but for all workers, who deserve respect and dignity in the workplace.
‘Irishman’ is almost as great an insult as to be stigmatized as a ‘nigger feller’... Sometimes the immigrants were described as ‘Irish niggers.’

Like blacks, Irish workers were condemned for lacking the habits of punctuality and industry. 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 laboring class. In Jersey City, Irish workers were denounced by a newspaper editor as ‘a mongrel mass of ignorance and crime and 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.’

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 antislave. 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.’

What the Irish had learned in America was actually a painful and complex lesson. Stereotyped as ignorant and inferior, they were forced to occupy the bottom rungs of employment. In the South, they were even made to do the dirty and hazardous jobs that masters did not want 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 immigrants were displacing blacks as hackney coachmen, draymen, and stevedores. Irish Stefano and Trinculos were taking menial jobs away from black Calibans.

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?’ The Irish were insisting on what historian David Roediger perceptively termed ‘their own whiteness and on white supremacy.’ Targets of nativist hatred toward them as outsiders, or foreigners, they 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 the assimilation of Irish foreigners.

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.’ An Irish song warned:

When the negroes shall be free
To cut the throats of all they see,
Then this dear land will come to be
The den of foul rascality.

The Irish opposed suffrage for blacks, fearful this would set ‘the Niggers high.’ Complaining that blacks did not know their place, they shouted:
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"Down with the Nagurs!" "Let them go back to Africa, where they belong."

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. An Irish song declared:

"Twas not to subjugate the South, those Irish braves went forth,
Nor emancipate their negroes to satisfy the North —
But bring them back unto the laws, their noble sires had made,
And place again, beneath our Flag, each Southern renegade."

Condemning abolitionism as "Niggerology," many Irish immigrants were willing to support the war only to preserve the Union. They did not want to fight to free the slaves and thereby increase labor competition. "Let the niggers stay in the South!" Irish workers shouted. They had been warned by Democrats during the 1860 election: "Vote against Abraham Lincoln, or you will have negro labor dragging you from your free labor." "Let the four million 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."

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."

In July 1863, a mass meeting in New York City protested a new draft law 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 $300. In protest, angry gangs composed mostly of Irish stirred and burned the draft office. Then the Irish turned on blacks. Hundreds of rioters destroyed an orphanage for black children and many homes of

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blacks. "Vengeance on every nigger in New York," the rioters 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."

Led by Irish longshoremen, the rioters warned employers "not to put any niggers to work" and blacks to stay away from the docks. They insisted that all stevedore jobs belonged to white men. 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."

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. On one plantation, slaves mocked their Irish overseer by saying that an Irishman was "only a Negro turned inside out." Blacks told anti-Irish stories about the alleged gullibility and stupidity of the newcomers:

Two Irishmen were walking along one day, and they came across a wagonload of watermelons. Neither one had ever seen a watermelon before, and they inquired of some negroes, who were working nearby, what they were, and what they were good for. The negroes answered their questions very politely, and then, as it was their dinner hour, sat down in the shade to eat. The Irishmen concluded to buy a melon and see how they liked it. They went a little distance and cut the melon, but, taking pity on the poor negroes, decided to share it with them. "Faith!" they said, "guts is good enough for niggurs." So they cut the heart out of the melon and gave it away, and ate the rind themselves.

Blacks complained that the Irish were taking jobs from them. "These impoverished and destitute beings, transported from the trans-Atlantic
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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 did 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...”

As Americans, many blacks aimed nativist barbs against the Irish foreigners. “Pat O’Flanagan 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 woolly hair and dark complexion is made the Victim... of Social Ostracism.”

The Irish Maid in America

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. More than half of the Irish immigrants were women, compared to only 21 percent for southern Italians and 4 percent for 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:

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

In Ireland, the struggle for economic survival had a particular impact on women. Increasingly after 1815, farmers practiced imparitable 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.”

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 incontinent packed across the ocean.”

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 there. “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,
The scenario sets the stage. The woman's workday is busy and demanding. She spends long hours at the office, and when she finally gets home, she is worn out. She has little energy to devote to her family or her own well-being. Her husband, on the other hand, is busy with his own work, and they have little time to spend together.

This is a common scenario in many households. The demands of work often leave little time for family or personal interests. This can create a sense of isolation and stress for both the woman and her family.

In this context, the challenge is to find ways to balance the demands of work and family. It may mean finding creative ways to spend time together, or it may mean finding ways to reduce the demands of work. Whatever the solution, it is important to recognize the importance of both work and family, and to find ways to support each other in that balance.
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.'"

The nature of domestic service involved what sociologist Stephen Steinberg termed "the exploitation of the whole person." Where the factory operative had her labor appropriated at the workplace, the servant found that her employer demanded more of her than the execution of assigned tasks. "Though the textile worker might be reduced to a commodity, paradoxically, her inner self was left intact." On the other hand, the servant could not have such space and 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 paper box 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 waitresses, 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."

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 work force. "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,'

The "factory girls" also worked in dangerous conditions. On January 15, 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."

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."  

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. . . . [A]ny 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 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."  

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 independent. . . . 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.  

The Irish “Ethnic” Strategy  

These immigrant women, however, were mainly confined to domestic service and factory work. Significantly, their daughters 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.  

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 post office clerk to superintendent of city streets, and another son 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?"  

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, to share our prosperity and our sentiments." In his opinion, 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."  

The Irish were also able to make such great social and economic strides because they settled in the cities rather than in the country. A rural people in Ireland, they had become 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 children outnumbered Protestant white children. This city
was no longer the "Boston of the Endicotts and the Winthrops" but had become "the Boston of the Collines and the O'Briens."  

This Irish concentration in certain cities provided the basis for the development of their political power. As "white" immigrants, they were 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 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."  

Unlike the Chinese immigrants, who were barred from naturalized citizenship, and the blacks, who were largely disenfranchised, the Irish possessed suffrage. As voters, they consciously cultivated and promoted "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 the 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. The 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. Meanwhile, ethnic associations like the Ancient Order of Hibernians and the Clan na Gael functioned as networks for employment, while unionized skilled Irish workers monopolized many trades and shared job opportunities only with their sons and compatriots. 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 Amer- ica... 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." Thus what especially boosted the Irish as a class was their opportunity to participate in the higher waged skilled and unionized trades.  

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 work force, 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. This Irish dominance in the skilled and high-wage jobs represented what historian Roediger called "the wages of whiteness." Irish workers had successfully campaigned to make American labor equal "white" labor. Once they became members of the privileged stratum of the work force, they monopolized the better jobs. Their social and economic rise resulted, to a significant extent, from keeping down workers of other groups. Irish "ethnic solidarity" and influence in the unions enabled them to exclude the "others" such as the Chinese and blacks — the Calibans of color.  

Ironically, Irish entry into the economic mainstream threatened 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...?"  

There were different views about whether the Irish should preserve their cultural identity or assimilate. 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." But the Irish experienced intense pressure to assimilate in America's "melting pot." Earlier, they had been warned by John Quincy Adams: "[The Irish] come to... a life of labor — and, if they cannot accommodate themselves to the
My thoughts were on old Erin's isle.

Their tear filled eyes said, "God save the King!" I began talking about the Irish people's struggle for independence. I mentioned the importance of the Irish community in America and how their contributions have shaped the country. I spoke about the Irish role in American history and the impact of their culture on the United States. I also discussed the challenges they faced and the resilience they displayed.

Add to that the fact that my father's directs are over the railway, he never said England without a tear. He knew the pain of being separated from home. His stories inspired me to learn more about my heritage.

I believe that the Irish community is strong and proud of their culture. They have contributed greatly to American society and have left a lasting impact on the country. Their history is a testament to their strength and determination.

Emigrants from Erin

Borders