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MACHINE MADE: IRISH AMERICA, TAMMANY HALL AND THE CREATION OF  
MODERN NEW YORK POLITICS

by

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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Although Tammany Hall was founded as a social club just after the American Revolution, it exists in memory as the quintessential American political machine, run by and for Irish-American political operatives more concerned with power than ideas. This dissertation seeks to re-interpret Tammany in the context of a transatlantic Irish experience of hunger, dislocation, and alienation. Irish immigrants brought with them distinct political narratives which were incorporated into Tammany Hall's pragmatic but progressive ideology during the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. These political narratives, centered on the experience of powerlessness and oppression in Ireland and inextricably linked to Catholicism, led Irish immigrants to regard reformers in New York as American versions of their traditional enemies, the well-born Anglo-Protestant.

The Irish arrived in New York with an understanding of the power of mass politics thanks to Daniel O'Connell's campaign for Catholic Emancipation in the 1820s. Few studies of Tammany Hall attempt to link O'Connell's mobilization of the Irish peasantry to Tammany's ability to turn out the vote, especially after the Famine exodus of 1845-52.

Likewise, the critical role of John Hughes, the first Catholic archbishop of New York and a native of Ireland, remains outside the story of Irish-American politics, despite the key role he played in organizing the Irish vote behind transatlantic grievances.

This dissertation seeks to show how a particularly Irish experience in both Ireland and New York helped to mobilize a new kind of politics which emphasized cultural pluralism, populist rhetoric, and practical solutions to social injustice. A child of a Famine immigrant, Charles Francis Murphy, transformed Tammany into a force for social change during the Progressive Era. Murphy's forgotten role in nurturing politicians such as Alfred E. Smith and Robert Wagner has been forgotten, but this dissertation will show that his embrace of change helped set the stage for the rise of Franklin Roosevelt and the implementation of the New Deal.

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## INTRODUCTION

Thousands of New Yorkers hurry by an ornate, three-story brick building on the corner of East 17<sup>th</sup> Street and Park Avenue South in Manhattan every day, with few if any pausing to look up at fading letters carved into concrete above the building's main entrance. There is nothing, except those ignored words on the building's facade, to indicate that this building was once the epicenter of New York politics and government. The men – and a few women – who streamed into the building's arched doorways for political meetings are remembered only as abstractions, as anonymous political hacks whose depredations inspired civic-minded progressives to reform state and municipal government in New York.

The words on the building's 17<sup>th</sup> Street façade read, “Society of St. Tammany or Columbian Order,” along with a date, 1928, indicating when the building opened. That very year, a member of the Society, a grade-school dropout who flouted the national prohibition against alcohol consumption and who challenged the nation's self-image as an Anglo-Saxon Protestant country, became the Democratic Party's nominee for President of the United States. His name, of course, was Alfred E. Smith, a four-term Governor of New York, the first non-Protestant to win a major party's presidential nomination, and the product of a political institution known not by its formal name but by the building in which it met, Tammany Hall.

It has been a half-century since Tammany Hall ceased to exist as a power in New York politics. The building on Union Square hasn't been used for a political meeting since the late 1940s, when the failing Tammany society sold the property to pay expenses. Today, the old main meeting room serves as a theater for a professional acting company, a nice if unintended piece of

irony, for many of the politicians who inhabited the Hall were nothing if not theatric.<sup>1</sup> But the passage of years and loss of influence have not dimmed Tammany Hall's power to conjure images of a certain style of politics – corrupt, autocratic, parochial, and cynical, a politics devoid of ideas and ideals. There is no shortage of pejorative images attached to Tammany: Daniel Rodgers, in his history of the Progressive movement, contrasted “the stink of Tammany Hall” to the perfumed scent of urban civic reformers. Similarly, journalist M.R. Werner's history of Tammany, a book regularly cited in academic and popular studies of New York politics, is unrelenting in its descriptions of the Hall's leaders and crimes, asserting that “Tammany Hall has been the most pathological case [of corruption] in American government almost since its foundation three weeks after the adoption of the Constitution of the United States.” Even Dr. Seuss offered a negative opinion of Tammany. In a drawing in November, 1941, the artist drew his famed cat in the hat dressed as a disheveled Tammany tiger, with a brown derby on his head, a cigar dangling from his left hand, and his right arm draped around an overflowing garbage can. “Today's the big day, folks,” the caption reads. “Vote early and often.”<sup>2</sup>

The people who gave Tammany its power – whether or not they voted early or late, often or just once -- generally are treated no more sympathetically. Warren Sloat's chronicle of the Rev. Charles Parkhurst's famous anti-vice crusade in the 1890s referred to Tammany's core constituents as “greasy men with bumpy noses and bull-necked men in baggy trousers.”<sup>3</sup> Sloat's description of the immigrant-stock working people who supported Tammany is harsher than

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<sup>1</sup> As of 2010, the Union Square Theater occupied Tammany's main meeting room. Al Smith, Tammany's most-famous member, was an aspiring actor before he entered politics. See Robert Slayton, *Empire Statesman: The Rise and Redemption of Al Smith* (New York: Free Press, 2001). Another notable Tammany product, New York City Mayor James Walker, also considered a career in show business, and, in fact, wrote a popular song, “Will You Love Me in September as You Did in May?”

<sup>2</sup> Daniel Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2000), p. 135; W. R. Werner, *Tammany Hall* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1968), p. viii. The Seuss cartoon is reproduced in several venues, including Joseph M. Bessette and John J. Pitney, Jr., *American Government and Politics: Deliberation, Democracy and Citizenship* (Stamford, Ct.: Cengage Learning, 2010), pg. 305.

<sup>3</sup> Warren Sloat, *A Battle for the Soul of New York*, (New York: Cooper Square Press, 2002), p. 82.

most, but not outlandishly so. The *New York Times* asserted in 1917 that Tammany “thrived on the unthinking obedience given by dependents who looked to patronage for a living.”<sup>4</sup>

Historians have tended to echo the reformers’ characterization of Tammany voters as mere pawns of the Hall’s nefarious designs. Political scientist Elmer E. Cornwell, Jr. asserted that political machines like Tammany depended on a “docile mass base” of “manipulable” immigrant-stock voters who were “insecure” and “confused.”<sup>5</sup>

Tammany’s unenviable place in popular memory extends far beyond the borders its home base of Manhattan. For example, in 2009 a correspondent for the British newspaper *The Independent* described the Speaker of the House of Commons, Michael Martin, as an “angry, vindictive, manipulative, secretive, power-abusing Tammany Hall tribalist.”<sup>6</sup> A 2009 article in *The New York Times* on Rahm Emanuel, former chief of staff for President Barack Obama, described a cleavage in the White House between policy-driven intellectuals, dubbed the “Aspen Institute” wing, and hard-boiled political operatives, referred to as “Tammany Hall.” Emanuel, it was noted, was the “undisputed boss” of the Tammany Hall wing.<sup>7</sup> The title was not necessarily given as a compliment, for the piece described Emanuel as a profane, two-fisted politico better known for smashing heads (figuratively speaking) than creating enlightened public policy. Journalist and former presidential speechwriter Peggy Noonan described Hillary Clinton’s Senate campaign in New York in 2000 as “too cynical for the place that gave birth to Tammany Hall.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *The New York Times*, October 28, 1917.

<sup>5</sup> Elmer E. Cornwell, Jr. “Bosses, Machines, and Ethnic Groups,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 353 (May, 1964), pp 27-30.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in *The Guardian*, May 12, 2009.

<sup>7</sup> *The New York Times*, August 16, 2009.

<sup>8</sup> Peggy Noonan, *The Case Against Hillary Clinton* (New York: Regan Books, 2000), pg. 180.



What is notable about these passages is the authors' assumption that readers will understand the references to Tammany, even though Tammany disappeared from New York's civic life in the early 1960s. In a sense, then, Tammany Hall would seem to require no introduction – even the 21<sup>st</sup> Century readers of an online movie magazine, *Bright Lights Film Journal*, apparently know all about Tammany Hall. A recent issue of the journal paid tribute to the late actor Lee Tracy by describing his screen persona as “simultaneously despicable and likeable, even lovable. With his impish grin, twinkling eyes and boyish blonde hair, he [looked] like Tom Sawyer crossed with a Tammany Hall fixer.”<sup>9</sup> The writer's language speaks to the enduring place of Tammany Hall in American culture and memory: A hypothetical “Tammany fixer” is considered as familiar and as easy to picture as one of the best-known characters in American letters.

In the popular imagination, a Tammany fixer might come in any shape or size (he might even be a cat wearing a hat and brandishing a cigar), but he – and Tammany surely was a bastion of masculinity – certainly looked Irish, whatever that might mean. Tammany Hall became a predominately Irish-American institution after the fall of its most-infamous (and non-Irish) leader, William M. Tweed, in 1871. The narratives of Tammany and the New York Irish thereafter are intertwined, for history rightly acknowledges that Tammany provided the Irish with the means to achieve their rapid rise to political power in New York. In fact, Tammany and the Irish were considered so interchangeable that almost any Irish-American politician from New York was assumed to be, by definition, a Tammany product and therefore a person of dubious ethics. When Franklin Roosevelt sought to appoint Edward Flynn, the political leader of the Bronx, as an envoy to Australia during World War II, the White House and Roosevelt's fellow

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<sup>9</sup> “Lee Tracy: ‘A Manic, Scalding Passion for Success,’” by Imogen Sara Smith, *Bright Lights Film Journal*, Issue 64, May, 2009 [www.brightlightsfilm.com](http://www.brightlightsfilm.com).

Democrats were deluged with protests. One constituent told Senator Claude Pepper of Florida that “we do not have to take this Tammany grafter to represent our country now or any time in the future.”<sup>10</sup> A more-prominent critic, New York Governor and failed presidential candidate Thomas E. Dewey, attacked the “Flynn-Tammany crowd” during his re-election campaign in 1950.<sup>11</sup> Flynn, though a protégé of legendary Tammany leader Charles Francis Murphy, was never a member of Tammany. He lived in the Bronx and so was ineligible for membership in the Manhattan-based organization. What’s more, he worked against Tammany’s candidate in the 1933 mayoral election in New York, leading to the election of a Republican anti-Tammany candidate, Fiorello LaGuardia. But these were distinctions without a difference for those who automatically associated the New York Irish with Tammany, and Tammany with graft.

Negative images and stereotypes of Tammany Hall persist despite the efforts of several scholars since the 1960s to complicate and soften our understanding of the nation’s most-famous urban political organization. J. Joseph Huthmacher, John Buenker, and Nancy Joan Weiss, among others, have sought to re-cast Tammany Hall as a force for generally accepted progressive goals, such as social welfare legislation and even, in some cases, political reform.<sup>12</sup> While none of these scholars sought to apologize for or excuse the admitted excesses and outright corruption of Tammany Hall, each argued, in essence, that Tammany Hall was neither static nor monolithic, that the Tammany Hall led by Richard Croker from 1886 to 1901 was very

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<sup>10</sup> Dwight E. Weist to Senator Pepper, Jan 20, 1943, President’s Official File 5224, Box 1, Presidential Papers of Franklin Roosevelt, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, N.Y. The box is filled with letters protesting Flynn’s appointment, which Flynn eventually turned down.

<sup>11</sup> The charge is referenced in a letter from Edward J. Flynn to Manhattan District Attorney Frank Hogan, December 15, 1950. Papers of Edward J. Flynn, Box 11, Folder 7, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library.

<sup>12</sup> See, among others, J. Joseph Huthmacher, “Urban Liberalism an the Age of Reform,” *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 49, 1962; John Buenker, *Urban Liberalism and Progressive Reform* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1973), Nancy Joan Weiss, *Charles Francis Murphy: Respectability and Responsibility in Tammany Politics* (Northhampton, Mass: Smith College Press, 1968).

different from the Tammany Hall which produced Al Smith and Robert Wagner, and which won the respect of civic reformers such as Frances Perkins and Belle Moskowitz.

These studies have helped shape more-recent scholarship about Tammany and other urban political organizations.<sup>13</sup> But in many ways, Tammany has remained as inscrutable as its most-accomplished leader, the taciturn Charles Murphy, known as “Silent Charlie.” None of its leaders saved personal correspondence (no doubt for good reason), and even the papers of notable members like Smith and Wagner contain little insight into their thinking, their personal narratives, and their interactions with other Tammany members. As a result, Tammany rarely is viewed as anything more than an organization designed to win elections, control major offices, and distribute favors to friends and allies. In other words, it is viewed as a classic political machine, that is, a top-down, neighborhood-based organization concerned not with ideology and ideas, but with the simple maintenance of power and patronage.

Widespread use of the phrase “machine” to describe highly disciplined political institutions like Tammany began with the rise of muckraking journalism in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, when writers such as Lincoln Steffens examined the corrupt practices of virtual single-party rule in several American cities, including New York.<sup>14</sup> While the organization could be either Democratic, as it was in New York, or Republican, as it was in Philadelphia, it was portrayed as the political equivalent of trusts in the private sector. A political machine, as its critics described it, achieved a monopoly over political power through an undemocratic, mechanical process in which voters gave their assent to the party’s candidates in exchange for

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<sup>13</sup> For examples of more recent studies of Tammany which acknowledge the arguments of Huthmacher, Bunker, and Weiss, see, among others, Charles LaCerra, *Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Tammany Hall of New York* (New York: University Press of America, 1997); Steven Erie, *Rainbow’s End: Irish-Americans and the Dilemmas of Urban Politics* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1988), Elisabeth Perry, *Belle Moskowitz* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); Richard F. Welch, *King of the Bowery: Big Tim Sullivan, Tammany Hall, and New York City from the Gilded Age to the Progressive Era* (Madison, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2008).

<sup>14</sup> See Lincoln Steffens, *The Shame of the Cities* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1957).

jobs and other rewards. The “external principle” of a political machine, wrote an anonymous correspondent in *Time* magazine in 1947, “is the exchange of political favors in return for popular support; its internal principle is group devotion to the idea of more power for the group.”<sup>15</sup>

Was it really so simple? Did Tammany maintain its power simply through the distribution of jobs, a whispered word to a beat cop, or the timely delivery of coal? Or did it serve a larger cultural and political purpose, especially for its signature constituency, the Irish of New York City? Why did the Irish turn to politics with such enthusiasm and with such great effect? Were Irish-American voters mere cogs in the political machine, cynically manipulated to give their unthinking consent to policies that hurt them?

A serious examination of Tammany Hall should inspire a series of observations which those intent only on scandal have either ignored or simply taken for granted. The simplest observation is the most obvious: Werner, in his history of Tammany, noted that once the Irish began arriving in large numbers in the 1840s, “it was not long before Tammany Hall was dominated by them.”<sup>16</sup> But Werner and most other historians have not interrogated the cultural implications of that undoubted domination. How did the Irishness of Tammany Hall frame its understanding of power and politics? What cultural baggage did the Irish carry with them on the journey from the stony fields of Connaught to New York’s City Hall and beyond?

These questions help place Tammany in a larger, trans-Atlantic context, a context which has been neglected in most scholarship. The attitudes, cultural narratives, and values which informed New York’s Irish-American politicians and voters can be traced not just to tenements of the Lower East Side, but to the more than sixty two thousand townlands of rural Ireland that

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<sup>15</sup> The quote is from a review of Edward J. Flynn’s book, *You’re The Boss*, (New York: The Viking Press, 1947) in *Time*, Sept. 8, 1947. Further references to Flynn’s book will be to the paperback issued by Collier Books in 1962.

<sup>16</sup> Werner, *Tammany Hall*, p. 29.

were home to the bulk of the island's Catholic population and which sent hundreds of thousands of emigrants across the water to New York City.<sup>17</sup>

While most of Tammany's non-immigrant district leaders, petty officeholders, and elected officials probably never set foot in Ireland, it would seem historically negligent to view Tammany in a purely New York or even American context. Scholars of enslavement and the African diaspora in the United States have shown how African cultural forms, from the ring shout to the social importance of mothers to ethnic and linguistic differences, made the journey across the Atlantic to the plantations of the South, influencing the speech, religious rituals, kinship circles, and cultural memories of the enslaved.<sup>18</sup> In similar fashion, then, the Irish who dominated Tammany Hall as its leading actors as well as its most-important voting bloc should not be seen simply as generic European immigrants. There were important particulars to the Irish emigrant experience, particularly after the potato famine, which informed their analysis of power and privilege, and, ultimately, Tammany's, and which influenced national politics in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

The famine and post-famine waves of Irish immigrants were overwhelmingly Catholic at a time when Catholicism was considered suspect. They were a poor, starving, rural people with few skills, and they were subjects of an oppressive colonial system which some of them routinely challenged through extra-legal means. From the Catholic Association, a mass movement organized in the 1820s to protest legal proscriptions against Catholics, to rural secret societies that meted out a rough and often violent form of justice against landed gentry, the Irish in Ireland

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<sup>17</sup> The figure comes from Robert James Scally, *The End of Hidden Ireland: Rebellion Famine & Emigration* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 13.

<sup>18</sup> See Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: Norton, 1999). and John Thornton, *African and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World 1400-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

were accustomed to seeking remedies that challenged – and threatened – ruling elites. “Their means of resistance – conspiracy, pretense, foot-dragging, and obfuscation – were the only ones ordinarily available to them, ‘weapons of the weak,’ like those employed by defeated and colonized peoples everywhere,” wrote historian Robert James Scally in his masterful re-creation of Irish townland life.<sup>19</sup> Any examination of the Irish presence in Tammany Hall would seem to require an understanding of the Irish trans-Atlantic narrative of resistance, famine, oppression, and exile.

Expanding the story and meaning of Tammany Hall should include, then, a deeper understanding of Irish-American political culture and identity formation, a process which included Tammany’s campaign spectacles but which also included sermons delivered in St. Patrick’s Cathedral, and commentaries on trans-Atlantic events in the city’s plethora of Irish-American weekly newspapers. Irish-American politics in New York from the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century to the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> entailed much more than the series of scandals which dominates the academic and popular historiography, and more than the legislative achievements emphasized by scholars like Huthmacher, Beunker, and Weiss. All of these approaches examine Tammany Hall and Irish-American attitudes in the isolated context of the urban electoral politics. But, for the most part, they fail to give adequate consideration to trans-Atlantic forces, memories, cultural forms, political debates, and institutions which were part of Irish-American culture and identity, and which had a profound effect on how the Irish in New York reconfigured themselves and Tammany Hall.

While scholars such as Daniel Patrick Moynihan and William Shannon concede that Irish politics in Ireland surely influenced Irish politics in America – Moynihan brilliantly explained how village life in rural Ireland prepared young Irish males for service as Tammany ward leaders

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<sup>19</sup> Scally, *The End of Hidden Ireland*, p. 14.

– most historians simply note that the Irish owed their political success to their ability to speak English and their familiarity with British parliamentary politics.<sup>20</sup> That assertion seems self-evident, but it deserves closer examination. Scholars of the Irish immigrant experience, especially Kerby A. Miller, have found that large numbers of immigrants were Irish speakers from the island’s western and southwestern regions where neither the English language nor English customs had yet replaced the peasantry’s traditional tongue and ways of life.<sup>21</sup> But if some Irish did, in fact, arrive in the U.S. with a working knowledge of electoral politics thanks to the British parliamentary system, they could hardly be blamed for concluding that democracy was a rich man’s game. Historian George W. Potter noted that the “great and wealthy ran Ireland politically like Tammany Hall in its worst days. .. A gentleman was thought no less a gentleman because he dealt, like merchandise, with the votes of his tenants or purchased his parliamentary seat as he would a horse or a new wing for his big house.”<sup>22</sup>

It is fair to wonder if those immigrants saw in Tammany a reflection of the informal centers of power of Ireland, from rural secret societies to Daniel O’Connell’s Catholic Association, which represented their interests, demands, and frustrations. Tammany was not, of course, a formal governmental structure; its leaders were chosen not in general elections but by fellow members of the Tammany Society. Many of Tammany’s services to its constituents, from picnics to the proverbial Thanksgiving turkeys, were provided through this informal structure.

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<sup>20</sup> For Moynihan’s essay on the Irish, see *Beyond the Melting Pot* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1963); see also, William V. Shannon, *The American Irish: A Political and Social Portrait* (New York: Macmillan, 1963).

<sup>21</sup> Kerby A. Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles*. A chart and on page 579 notes that nearly half of Irish immigrants from 1856 to 1910 came from counties where at least 10 percent of the population spoke Irish in 1891. Slightly more than 19 percent came from Counties Galway, Mayo, Waterford and Kerry, where more than 40 percent of the population still spoke Irish in 1891. It is important to note that the benchmark year of 1891 was nearly a half-century after the Great Famine of 1845-51, which devastated the poor Irish-speaking regions of the west and southwest.

<sup>22</sup> George W. Potter *To the Golden Door: The Story of the Irish in Ireland and America*, (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1960), p. 229.

These sorts of issues were hardly the concern of the Society of St. Tammany or Columbian Order when it was founded in the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century as a social club, evolving as a vehicle for Jeffersonian and Jacksonian politics in New York. But once the Irish began to arrive in great numbers when the potato crop failed, year after year, from 1845 to 1851, Tammany was transformed from a local political faction into an expression of the Irish diaspora's understanding of political and cultural power. That transformation led Tammany to incorporate Irish narratives, cultural forms, anxieties, and grievances into its rhetoric, and formed the basis of a progressive, pragmatic ideology that emphasized attainable goals over utopian ideals – an ideology which has been described as “urban liberalism.”<sup>23</sup>

Tammany Hall, informed not only by the metrics of election returns but larger currents in Irish culture, became the vehicle through which New York politics became more pluralistic and, ultimately, more representative of the city's majority population. How it did so remains an untold story, in part because the narrative has been confined to just one side of the Atlantic.

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<sup>23</sup> The phrase is most associated with J. Joseph Huthmacher and Joseph Bunker (see citations above), but James J. Connolly, in his study of the Boston Irish, believes a better description should be “ethnic progressivism.” See *The Triumph of Ethnic Progressivism: Urban Political Culture in Boston, 1900-1925* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998).



## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **FROM A LAND BEYOND THE WAVES**

Tammany Hall may have been founded in Manhattan by native New Yorkers, and its most-famous (or notorious) boss, William Tweed, may have been a descendant of Scots Presbyterian immigrants, but it was New York's Irish community which provided it with its core mission and historic identity. That community's heritage, culture and values must be understood before embarking on an analysis of Tammany Hall, because for nearly four decades, from 1886 to 1924, Tammany was led by an Irish immigrant (Richard Croker) or the son of Irish immigrants (Charles Francis Murphy). Indeed, Irish-Americans formed Tammany's base of support from the 1840s through World War II.

This irrefutable Irishness meant a great deal. Unless one believes that the Irish arrived without context on the streets of the Sixth Ward and other Manhattan enclaves, any attempt to explain Tammany and Irish-American politics would seem to demand not just general themes and theories of immigration, but a more-specific study of the political, culture, and social relations of 19<sup>th</sup> Century Ireland. Whether they were uprooted or transplanted, whether they considered themselves emigrants or exiles, the Irish who arrived in New York in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and who became so clearly identified with Tammany Hall were, in a word, Irish, members of a burgeoning trans-Atlantic community with distinct cultural forms, traditions, and memories which were considered as alien to New Yorkers as they were to the landed gentry of their native land. George Templeton Strong, a well-known New York lawyer and diarist in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century, believed that the Irish were "almost as remote from us in temperament and constitution

as the Chinese.”<sup>24</sup> By “us,” Strong referred to his fellow Anglo-Protestants who feared that the Irish presence in New York threatened the city’s cultural order and self-image.

The Irish were prepared to believe that powerful people like Strong were capable of acting on those fears by barring them from full participation in civic, cultural and political life, just as the British and Anglo-Irish had in Ireland. Even the achievement of prosperity and power in New York could not flick away the chip on many an Irish-American shoulder. In 1898, a prominent New York Irish businessman named John Byrne saw in a friend’s failure to win a top judicial appointment the same sinister forces which, in his view, prevented Irish Catholics from attaining office and success in Ireland. Byrne complained to Tammany Congressman William Bourke Cochran, an affluent Irish-Catholic himself, that his friend was brought down by the same “iron heel of tyranny ... from which our ancestors suffered enough.”<sup>25</sup>

In Ireland, the man who gave voice to these ancient (and historically justified) grievances, who mobilized the Irish peasantry as a political force in British imperial politics, and who alerted the Irish to what Daniel Patrick Moynihan called “the possibilities of politics,” was a middle-class, Gaelic-speaking, French-educated barrister named Daniel O’Connell.<sup>26</sup> O’Connell, the first Catholic to serve in the British House of Commons since the Reformation, was a prototype for the Tammany Hall political boss: He built and presided over a complex, mass-based organization in Ireland, he was a master of the rhetoric of grievance, he was a shrewd tactician, and he understood the potential and power of loyalty in local politics. “His swaggering, loud-mouthed, abusive and boastful behavior in public controversy gave him a mass

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<sup>24</sup> Allen Nevins and Milton Halsey Thomas, eds., *The Diaries of George Templeton Strong*, (New York: Macmillan, 1952), Vol. I, p. 348.

<sup>25</sup> John Byrne to William Bourke Cochran, October 20, 1898, William Bourke Cochran Papers, Box 1, New York Public Library. Ironically, it was Richard Croker, the Irish immigrant head of Tammany – albeit a Protestant – who blocked the appointment of Byrne’s friend, a judge named Daly. See undated memo in the Papers of Edwin Kilroe, Box 20, Columbia University Special Collections. Cochran broke with Croker over the Daly non-appointment.

<sup>26</sup> Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting Pot*, p. 224.

audience and the potential to bridge the gulf between the play of high politics and the popular political feelings of the people,” wrote Irish historian Fergus O’Ferrall.<sup>27</sup> R.F. Foster, in his landmark book *Modern Ireland*, noted that O’Connell was a showman as well as a masterful political organizer. “He loved organizations, bands, public show, emotion, uniforms,” Foster wrote.<sup>28</sup> But while these description of O’Connell could easily be attached to the proverbial “Tammany fixer,” most historians of urban politics in the U.S. have ignored the undoubted influence of O’Connell in forming Irish attitudes towards politics, organization, and power, attitudes which helped form a distinctly Irish political culture in Tammany and its lesser equivalents elsewhere..<sup>29</sup>

That is not to say that O’Connell has been overlooked completely in studies of Irish America and Tammany Hall-style politics. Several observers, including Moynihan, William Shannon, Mary C. Kelly and others, have argued that Irish-American political consciousness could be traced to O’Connell’s agitations on the eve of the great migration to the United States.<sup>30</sup> There can be little question that O’Connell’s mass movement on behalf of full political rights for Catholics in the 1820s, culminating in his own election to the House of Commons in 1828, provided the Irish with invaluable instruction in the power of politics and participatory democracy, instruction which later non-Irish immigrants lacked in their native countries.<sup>31</sup> This trans-Atlantic political narrative is critical in understanding how and why the Irish acted as they did once they settled in the U.S. during and after the Famine exodus. Their political touchstone

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<sup>27</sup> Fergus O’Ferrall, *Catholic Emancipation: Daniel O’Connell and the Birth of Irish Democracy, 1820-30* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1985), p. 5

<sup>28</sup> R.M. Foster, *Modern Ireland*, (New York: Penguin, 1989), p. 301

<sup>29</sup> For example, Huthmacher’s “urban liberalism” thesis does not take into account the Irish experience in Ireland. Commonly cited works by Werner and Gustavus Myers, *A History of Tammany Hall* (New York: Boni & Liveright, 1917) also make no mention of O’Connell.

<sup>30</sup> In addition to Moynihan, see William Shannon, *The American Irish: A Political and Social Portrait* (New York: Macmillan, 1963) and Mary C. Kelly, *The Shamrock and the Lily: The New York Irish and the Creation of a Transatlantic Identity 1845-1921* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007).

<sup>31</sup> William Shannon echoes this point in *The American Irish*, p. 15.

was not George Washington or Thomas Jefferson or any of the other founders. Their reference points were Irish, not American.

Joseph Tumulty, a product of the Jersey City Democratic organization who went on to become private secretary to President Woodrow Wilson, wrote that he was inspired to pursue politics because of stories he heard in his father's grocery store, a center of local politics like many other small businesses – usually saloons – in 19<sup>th</sup> Century American cities. Tumulty wrote that his old uncle, Jimmie Kelter, regularly recounted “his experience when he was present at a session of the House of Parliament in London and heard the famous Irish statesman, Daniel O’Connell, denounce England’s attitude of injustice ...”<sup>32</sup>

Daniel O’Connell may have taught the Irish peasantry how to challenge the island’s governing elite, but he was not exactly one of the island’s landless masses, even though he shared their Catholic faith and their roots in Gaelic culture. He was a product of the rural west, County Kerry, where the forces of Anglicization had paused after their long, contested march west from Dublin. His family managed to hold onto its land through careful evasion of Britain’s punitive laws against Catholics, allowing O’Connell the luxury of attending college in France. The bloody aftermath of the French Revolution left an indelible impression on the young Irishman. The causes he would later embrace, while they clearly were threats to the established order, were carefully calibrated to avoid violence and manage expectations. O’Connell even opposed the Irish rebellion in 1798 because its leaders recruited the assistance of republican France, although in the 1820s he defended numerous rural agitators accused of murdering or terrorizing landlords and other symbols of British domination in the Irish countryside. O’Connell’s enthusiastic defense of these violent agitators led many of his followers, and no

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<sup>32</sup> Joseph P. Tumulty, *Woodrow Wilson As I Know Him* (New York: Doubleday, 1921), p. 2.

small number of his detractors, to conclude that his campaign for Catholic emancipation was the first step towards a planned rebellion.<sup>33</sup>

Despite O’Connell’s controversial work in the courtroom, his place in European history rests on his ability to achieve dramatic social and political change through peaceful, constitutional methods. O’Connell anticipated the sheer power of numbers in a democratic society – a power which Tammany Hall understood, and which the New York Irish eventually used to reward, and punish, Tammany.<sup>34</sup>

O’Connell’s demands for truly dramatic change in Ireland were, however, conservative in tenor even if they were tactically radical. The masses he mobilized never threatened to become a mob despite the fears of critics and perhaps the hopes of those who followed him. The causes he embraced – full political rights for Catholics and repeal of union between Britain and Ireland – were carefully framed to appeal to the island’s middle classes as well as its rural masses.

This search for a middle ground and fear of direct confrontation – which, in Ireland, never ended well for the majority population – was embedded in the Tammany’s aversion to systematic change even when it supported broad social reforms during the Progressive Era. In O’Connell’s insistence that he was loyal to the British crown despite his support for Irish self-government (a carefully constructed, nebulous phrase), one can hear the echo of the equally eloquent Tammany Congressman William Bourke Cochran denouncing the practices of Wall Street speculators while assuring people like Winston Churchill that he was actively trying to banish socialists from New York’s Democratic Party in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> See “Pastorini and Captain Rock: Millenarianism and Sectarianism in the Rockite Movement of 1821-4,” by James S. Donnelly in Samuel Clark and James S. Donnelly, Jr., eds., *Irish Peasants: Violence and Political Unrest 1780-1914* (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, , 1983)

<sup>34</sup> See George W. Potter, *To The Golden Door*, p. 105.

<sup>35</sup> For O’Connell’s loyalism, see Robert Kee, *The Most Distressful Country* (London: Penguin, 1972), p. 181; for Cochran, see his letter to Winston Churchill, May 16, 1906, William Bourke Cochran Papers, New York Public Library, Box 4, and undated Wall Street speech, Box 30.

O'Connell and Tammany shared a skepticism for the promise of paradise that was ingrained in the rhetoric and campaigns of Protestant reformers, socialists, and Irish republicans. Pragmatists to their core, O'Connell and Tammany figures such as "Big Tim" Sullivan often settled for solutions that were attainable although not ideal, whether the ideal was an independent Irish republic or a perfect piece of social legislation.<sup>36</sup> Perfection, in Catholic teaching, was unattainable anyway, and confrontation with state often led to violence and defeat. Pragmatism, then, was the watchword for O'Connell and for the Irish politicians of New York.

O'Connell formed his first mass-based organization, the Catholic Association, in 1823 to agitate for what was called "Catholic emancipation," that is, the right of Catholics to occupy elected and high appointed offices in Ireland and throughout the United Kingdom. The organization capitalized on long-standing grievances among the island's majority Catholic population, which had been defeated, humiliated, oppressed, and, in essence, criminalized through an instrument known as the Penal Laws. These measures, put in place in the early 18<sup>th</sup> Century, demanded that officeholders take oaths that denied essential tenets of the Catholic faith. Not only did the Penal Laws effectively bar Catholics from top positions in government, but they also broke up the holdings of Catholic landowners, required Catholic tithes to support the established Church of Ireland, ordered the evacuation of all priests (this, of course, never took place), and prohibited Catholic education. While some Catholic families like the O'Connells were established enough to evade the consequences of these laws, the mass of the island's population was left powerless and impoverished, segregated from civic and commercial life in their rural townlands and left to live on the island's staple crop, the potato. Edmund Burke, the

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<sup>36</sup> O'Connell never supported formation of a republic in Ireland, the dream of Irish rebels from 1798 to the late 20<sup>th</sup> century; in 1910, "Big Tim" Sullivan, a Tammany state Senator, pushed through a bill limiting the work week for women industrial workers to 54 hours although the bill exempted the politically powerful canning industry. Frances Perkins hailed Sullivan as a hero for his work, even though the bill was not perfect. See *The Reminiscences of Frances Perkins*, Columbia Center for Oral History, pgs. 99-114..

Irish-born statesman and writer, said the Penal Laws were “as well-fitted for the oppression, impoverishment and degradation of a people, and the debasement in them of human nature itself, as ever proceeded from the perverted ingenuity of Man.”<sup>37</sup>

By the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when Ireland’s home rule legislature dissolved itself and approved the island’s incorporation into Great Britain, many of these measures were either no longer enforced or were repealed. But the ban on full Catholic participation in political and civic life remained, to the immense satisfaction of King George III, who contended that he would give up his throne and “beg my bread from door to door throughout Europe” before he would allow Catholics to hold high public office in his kingdom.<sup>38</sup>

He never was forced to make that choice. His son, George IV, initially adopted a more conciliatory attitude towards his Irish subjects, visiting the island in 1821 and accepting a garland from none other than O’Connell himself. But the ambitious Irish barrister would not be content with a mere brush with power. Within two years of George IV’s visit, O’Connell and several allies founded the Catholic Association as a vehicle to win full civil rights in the United Kingdom.

O’Connell’s organization was not the first to make such a demand, but previous efforts had failed to expand beyond a core of middle-class Catholics looking to advance in Ireland’s legal and professional establishments. Their demands, including the right to hold a seat in the House of Commons or an administrative post in Dublin, were little more than abstractions to the average Irish Catholic, but O’Connell brilliantly framed the issue as a symbol of mass Catholic exclusion and Protestant oppression. The Association, he said, would deal with “practical and not

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<sup>37</sup> Jonathan Bardon, *A History of Ulster* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1992), p. 64.

<sup>38</sup> Sean McMahon, *A Short History of Ireland* (Cork: Mercier Press, 1996), p. 110

abstract questions,” a mandate that could easily have been delivered (and perhaps was) by any number of Tammany sachems in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries.

O’Connell noted that Ireland’s Catholics had “many grievances” – not just a bar on the House of Commons door -- which the Association would seek to ameliorate.<sup>39</sup> With that sweeping mission statement, O’Connell placed the Catholic Association and its middle-class leadership on the side of aggrieved peasants. Support us, O’Connell said, and we will be your advocates. The island’s population was more than eighty percent Roman Catholic, and in the rural west, the figure was more like ninety-six percent.<sup>40</sup> Properly organized, Irish Catholics could have the power to force a change in British policy and law, or so O’Connell believed.

The Catholic Association was transformed from pressure group to a mass mobilization through the ingenious use of subscriptions which offered even the poorest tenant farmer an opportunity to become invested in the movement. For a mere penny a month, Irish Catholics could join the Catholic Association as associate members of a political organization run for and by fellow Catholics. Dubbed the “Catholic rent,” dues poured into the Catholic Association within a matter of months, leading O’Connell and his supporters to open a central headquarters in the Corn Exchange in Dublin. By 1828, the Association had three million associate memberships, while some fifteen thousand more-affluent Catholics paid an annual fee of one pound sterling.<sup>41</sup> The Association’s campaign reached across the ocean to the Irish emigrant community in New York, which followed the Emancipation campaign in newspapers and periodicals such as the *Truth Teller*, the *United States Catholic Miscellany*, the *Shamrock*, and the *Irish Shield*, each of which offered extensive coverage of O’Connell’s organization. In early

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<sup>39</sup> O’Farrell, *Catholic Emancipation*, p. 37.

<sup>40</sup> The figures are from O Tuathaigh, *Ireland before the Famine*, p. 59.

<sup>41</sup> Angus Macintyre, *The Liberator: Daniel O’Connell and the Irish Party 1830-1847* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1965), p. 7



1829, the Catholic Association received a donation of more than two hundred pounds sterling from a man identified as James McNevin of New York City.<sup>42</sup> Members of another emigrant society, the O’Connellite Association of New York, opened meetings with toasts that spoke to their insistence that they could be both Irish and American – they drank to the President of the United States, to Daniel O’Connell, and to the “fair daughters of Erin and Columbia.”<sup>43</sup>

Many of the adult males who joined the Catholic Association brought to the movement more than their pennies – they brought their votes, because Irish Catholic freeholders who owned or leased property worth forty shillings or more had been given the franchise in 1793 as part of a more-general reform of the Penal Laws.<sup>44</sup> Traditionally, freeholders who leased property voted for their landlords or their agents, since their votes were declared publicly and it was hardly prudent to cast a public vote against the landlord’s interest. “Landlords,” noted historian Fergus O’Ferrall, “expected their tenants, who were registered as voters, to vote for them and they formed coalitions where necessary with other landlords to secure sufficient backing to be elected.”<sup>45</sup> Democratic politics in Ireland, then, was little more than a fiction for Irish Catholic freeholders, who numbered about two hundred thousand in the late 1820s.<sup>46</sup> It was an empty ritual. Contested elections were rare, and when they took place, they often became violent or corrupt.

O’Connell’s mobilization in the 1820s did more than change the dynamics of electoral politics in Ireland. It sought to create a space for Catholics in public life in the United Kingdom, undermining the state’s self-image as a Protestant nation. “In Ireland, where a little while ago a

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<sup>42</sup> Catholic Association to James McNevin, January 30, 1829, The Papers of Daniel O’Connell, MS 5242, National Library of Ireland. The sender most likely was Dr. William James MacNeven, president of the Association of the Friends of Ireland and a prominent leader of the immigrant community.

<sup>43</sup> The *United States Catholic Miscellany*, April 11, 1829

<sup>44</sup> Catholics in mainland Britain did not have the vote at this time.

<sup>45</sup> O’Ferrall, *Catholic Emancipation*, p. 118

<sup>46</sup> The figure is from Foster, *Modern Ireland*, p. 302..

Protestant shoeblack would have grinned with contempt at the titled head of the most ancient Catholic family, the tables are completely turned,” lamented *The Times* of London.<sup>47</sup>

The populist themes and rhetoric of grievance which mobilized the Irish masses in the 1820s became part of the trans-Atlantic Irish narrative, influencing generations of Tammany voters and leaders. Daniel O’Connell and the Catholic Association provided a foundational experience for hundreds of thousands of Irish people who were destined to flee their staving homeland in the 1840s and cross the Atlantic to find a political climate that not unlike the one they left behind. While O’Connell revisited the power of mass mobilization in the early 1840s when he launched a doomed campaign to repeal the Act of Union of 1801, it was the campaign for Catholic Emancipation in the 1820s which should be seen as a milestone in the formation of an Irish-Catholic political consciousness, for it marked the first time that Ireland’s majority population was organized effectively, and because, unlike the Repeal campaign, the campaign designed to win Emancipation actually succeeded. It is equally important, however, to note that the Emancipation movement unfolded in the face of, indeed, in defiance of, an aggressive Protestant evangelization effort which spanned the Atlantic Ocean and which strengthened the political and cultural bonds between Irish Catholics and their priests.

Even as the Catholic Association began its campaign for equal rights in the 1820s, evangelical Irish Protestants mobilized the rhetoric of reform and education in an effort to convert the island’s Catholic population and make the issue of emancipation moot. The so-called “Second Reformation” in Ireland was part of a broader Protestant awakening in the United Kingdom and the trans-Atlantic world, an awakening which inspired the abolitionist movement in the northern United States and which, in Ireland, disrupted a tacit non-aggression pact between Protestantism and Catholicism. Moral reformers and civic elites organized themselves in groups

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<sup>47</sup> Denis Gwynn, *Daniel O’Connell* (Cork, Ireland: Cork University Press, 1947), p. 170

such as the Hibernian Bible Association and the Kildare Place Society for the express purpose of evangelizing Catholics through the promotion of independent Bible study and Protestant-dominant schools. This aggressive challenge to the island's majority population destabilized what historian S.J. Connolly called a "considerable degree of mutual tolerance and accommodation that had existed up to the 1820s" in Ireland. "Now, for the first time in over a century, Protestants were making serious efforts to win converts among the Catholic population," Connolly wrote.<sup>48</sup> The conversion process was, of course, politically as well as spiritually loaded, for those who sought the conversion of Ireland's majority population had an agenda beyond issues of transubstantiation and Papal authority. They wished to change flaws in the Irish character – perceived to be laziness, ignorance, superstition, dependence, and fondness for alcohol -- through moral reformation. An anonymous writer in *Blackwoods Magazine* described Ireland's problem in a few phrases: "If its people were Protestants, they would be free from spiritual tyranny; they would be accessible to instruction and civilization; the subject would not be arrayed against the ruler, and the tenant against the landlord ..."<sup>49</sup>

The writer's description of social relations in Ireland in the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century – subjects arrayed against rulers, and tenants against landlords – is instructive, because it offers an insight into the political and cultural attitudes which the Irish brought with them to New York and elsewhere. Those attitudes informed Irish America's analysis of power in the United States, and were evident in the populist rhetoric of Tammany's politicians. Recalling the lessons he learned at an early age from his politically active father, historian Thomas Fleming wrote of the Jersey City machine, "I had the basic philosophy down cold. Us against them. Us against the two-faced, penny-pinching, Irish Catholic-hating Protestant Republicans ... They were trying to drive us

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<sup>48</sup> W.E. Vaughn, ed., *New History of Ireland*, Vol. V (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), p. 79.

<sup>49</sup> *Blackwood's Magazine*, May, 1827, p. 575.

back to the days when being Irish meant you dug ditches and lived on handouts when the jobs ran out. There was nothing the Republicans wouldn't do to us ... which meant it was perfectly okay to play the same nasty game against them, and do it ten times better, tougher, smarter.”<sup>50</sup>

Robert Merton recognized the machine's “basic philosophy” in his work on social theory and structure. American politics dating to the Anti-Masonic Party, Merton noted, embraced what he called negative reference groups, that is, a “pattern of hostile relations between groups and collectivities in which the actions, attitudes and values of one are dependent upon the actions, attitudes and values of the other to which it stands in opposition.”<sup>51</sup> Tammany did not lack for negative social groups – in 1921, the organization published a leaflet which claimed that Tammany had been waging “a bitter fight against the Tories” on behalf of “immigrant Europeans oppressed by the aristocratic elements in America.”<sup>52</sup> Use of the word “Tories” to describe American elites in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century suggests that Tammany understood the trans-Atlantic, Anglo-American nature of civic reform. It was a Tory government, after all, which adamantly opposed Catholic Emancipation in the 1820s.

The *Blackwoods* writer was not wrong to identify Catholicism as the marker which set apart Ireland's subjects from its rulers, its tenants from its landlords, even though some landlords were Catholic (as the O'Connells were). The writer did not note, however, that the divisions in Ireland were a creation of the island's dominant minority population, which viewed Catholics not simply as feckless, disloyal, and ignorant, but as unworthy of Anglo-Protestant conceptions of liberty. A Protestant clergyman named Richard Warner issued a popular pamphlet during the

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<sup>50</sup> Thomas Fleming, “Us Against Them: The Irish in New Jersey,” delivered at a symposium on Irish and Irish-American research perspectives sponsored by the Caspersen School of Graduate Studies at Drew University and the New Jersey Catholic Historical Commission, November 6, 2009. Original copy of Fleming's remarks are in the author's possession..

<sup>51</sup> Robert K. Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure* (New York: Free Press, 1968), p. 300-301.

<sup>52</sup> *Plain Facts About Tammany for all Americans*, published in New York in 1921 and found in the Edwin Kilroe Collection of Material Related to Tammany Hall, Box 1, New-York Historical Society.

Emancipation crisis arguing that Catholics throughout the United Kingdom deserved only “that limited political indulgence which every state has a right to determine upon as just ... to such of its members, as differ in their principles, civil and religious, from those of the State, and who are, consequently, not to be trusted (consistently with the safety and prosperity of the State) with the same equal participation of political power which its other members enjoy.” For English and Irish Catholics “to expect or demand more while they continue to be Papists is ... unreasonable and insolent.”<sup>53</sup>

That attitude did not disappear once O’Connell achieved Catholic Emancipation. Alexis de Tocqueville, touring Ireland in the summer of 1835, met with an unnamed Protestant cleric in a fine house with a piano. The cleric, de Tocqueville noted in his journal, complained about the incapacity “of the people in general and above all the Irish people to govern themselves. Savages.” Before moving on, de Tocqueville took note of the demographic geography in a village which he identified only as X, but which historian Robert James Scally has identified as a townland in County Galway. Mounting a hill that overlooked the settlement – Scally noted that an Irish townland had none of the commercial features of a typical English or French village – de Tocqueville saw “on one side the hovels of the village and the little home of the [Catholic] priest,” while on the other, “the mansion ... the grounds ... the house of the minister.” On one side, de Tocqueville noted, was “wealth, knowledge, power,” and on the other, perhaps incongruously, he found “strength.”<sup>54</sup> The Catholic priest who lived in the little house had been the Frenchman’s host during his visit, and de Tocqueville recorded with admiration the priest’s assertion that he was obliged to serve the poor. When the Frenchman suggested that the priest

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<sup>53</sup> Richard Warner, *Catholic Emancipation, Incompatible With The Safety Of the Established Religion, Liberty, Laws and Protestant Succession of the British Empire* (London: C.J.G. & F Rivington, 1829).

<sup>54</sup> Emmet Larkin, ed. *Alexis de Tocqueville’s Journey in Ireland* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of New York Press, 1990), pgs. 128-129.

would have more success with “the upper classes,” the priest explained why he would not abandon his poor flock.

“Any religion that will wander away from the people, Sir, will move away from its source and will lose its principal strength,” the priest told de Tocqueville. “It is necessary to go with the people, Sir. There lies strength ...”<sup>55</sup>

In a real sense, the power of the “us against them” ideology which Fleming described as a quintessentially Irish-American world view was based on the strength which de Tocqueville found in the windowless mud cabins of “Village X.” Knowledge and power were on the other side, but solidarity and community built the strength needed to resist “them,” whether they were landlords in the west of Ireland or civic elites on Manhattan’s East Side.

For the trans-Atlantic Anglo-Protestant community, the Irish presented a challenge to cultural, political, and economic norms such as laissez faire, property rights, civic virtue, Anglo-Saxon supremacy, and, of course, Protestantism itself. The anxieties which prompted Joseph H. Choate, the Massachusetts-born lawyer and diplomat, to denounce a “mongrel ticket” of judicial candidates put forward by Tammany Hall in 1908 were not unlike the concerns which led Warner to complain that Catholic Emancipation “would only let slip the dogs of rapine, spoliation, and destruction.”<sup>56</sup> Both men saw Irish Catholics or Irish-Catholic institutions as threats to the political and cultural order over which they presided, an order whose parameters and priorities were established by a trans-Atlantic Anglo-Protestant ascendancy. Not coincidentally, Choate served as U.S. Ambassador to the Great Britain from 1899 to 1905, and was among the elite Anglo-Protestant New Yorkers who sought to create stronger ties between

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<sup>55</sup> Emmet Larkin, ed., *Alexis de Tocqueville’s Journey in Ireland*, pg. 127.

<sup>56</sup> For Choate, see *The New York Times*, October 24, 1906; for Warner, see *Catholic Emancipation, Incompatible*, p. 19.

Britain and the U.S. during the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century – an agenda which Tammany’s core constituency adamantly opposed.<sup>57</sup>

The Protestant campaign in Ireland in the 1820s sought to deliver the island’s majority population from the source of its miseries – the Roman Catholic Church. As historian Irene Whelan noted, the movement was rooted in larger moral reform campaigns that were sweeping mainland Britain and the United States during the first quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. In the United States, the movement gave impetus to an emerging moral critique of slavery, especially in New England. In Ireland, evangelicals concluded that the Catholics in their midst were, in the words of a Protestant pamphleteer, “the vassals of papal tyranny” and were “languishing in the lowest intellectual debasement” not because they had been dispossessed and virtually segregated from civic life in their native land, but because they continued to follow the tenets of a faith that was, as the Rev. Warner put it, incompatible with British-Protestant ideas of liberty.<sup>58</sup> Not all Anglo-Protestant evangelicals agreed with Warner’s assessment. The great campaigner against the slave trade, William Wilberforce, supported Catholic demands for emancipation, but even he found Catholicism distasteful and hoped to keep it contained. He took note of the number of priests attending the Catholic seminary of Maynooth in the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century – some four hundred a year, he claimed -- and he worried that if Maynooth continued to churn out priests in such astonishing numbers, this one seminary alone would “increase beyond measure the Roman Catholic body,” destabilizing Ireland and its relationship with Protestant Britain. Wilberforce’s biographer, John Stoughton, noted that even this paragon of Christian humanitarianism allowed

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<sup>57</sup> In its obituary of Choate, *The New York Times* noted that the former ambassador “did much to cement the kindly feeling between this country and Great Britain.” *The New York Times*, May 15, 1917.

<sup>58</sup> Irene Whelan, *The Bible War in Ireland: The ‘Second Reformation’ and the Polarization of Protestant-Catholic Relations, 1800-1840* (Madison, Wis., University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), p. 85.

“his Protestant morality” to “obscure his judgment” on the question of justice for Catholics in general and Irish Catholics in particular.<sup>59</sup>

The campaign to separate the Irish peasantry from the source of its misery took the form of several organizations that grew out of several early 19<sup>th</sup> Century movements such as the Dublin Bible Society, which was the Irish branch of the British and Foreign Bible Society, established in 1804 to distribute Bibles to any Christian who wanted one, Catholics included.<sup>60</sup> This was more than an innocuous gesture; it was, and was meant to be, a direct challenge to the Catholic hierarchy, a challenge rooted in the Reformation-era theological dispute over the mediating influence of priests.

Irish evangelicals bemoaned the influence of priests on the island’s majority population, a complaint that would make its way across the Atlantic when Catholics began arriving in large numbers in the 1840s. A Baptist minister in Ireland sought to remind his fellow evangelicals that the work of conversion would be difficult. In an anonymous leaflet, he wrote of the same anxieties which concerned William Wilberforce – a plentiful supply of priests to defend Catholic dogma from the Protestant insurgency. To those who thought that Catholicism was on the wane in Ireland, the minister wrote, “if you knew the dreadful and despotic influence the priests have over the bodies and souls of the poor people, you would be more convinced of the reality of my idea.”<sup>61</sup>

This obsession with clerical power over masses of ignorant Catholics was part of trans-Atlantic discourse about Irish Catholicism. Horace Greeley’s *New York Tribune*, an antebellum voice of abolitionism and moral reform, complained in 1854 that the city’s Catholic clergy

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<sup>59</sup> John Stoughton, *William Wilberforce* (New York: A.C. Armstrong & Son, 1880), p. 57

<sup>60</sup> I am indebted here to the ground-breaking research of Irene Whelan and her study, cited above, of the “Second Reformation” in Ireland.

<sup>61</sup> Irene Whelan, *The Bible War in Ireland*, p. 170.



“possess so great and peculiar a power – a power over a class who are almost impervious to other reformatory influence other than theirs.”<sup>62</sup> The nomination of Irish-Catholic William R. Grace as the Democratic Party’s mayoral nominee in 1880 inspired mass revulsion among New York’s Anglo-Protestant elites for similar reasons. At an anti-Grace rally in Cooper Union, civic leaders including future Secretary of State Elihu Root heard a speaker named Lawson N. Fuller declare that Grace was unqualified to be mayor because he was a “good Catholic (who) must obey orders.” The rally’s speeches against clerical interference in secular civic life may have been lost on at least three Protestant clerics who joined Root on the platform: the Rev. John P. Newman, the Rev. Stephen H. Tyng Jr., and another clergyman identified in press reports only as the Rev. Dr. Wilson. Newman was presented with a bouquet after a stem-winding speech which associated Catholicism with ignorance and illiteracy in Spain and Italy, implying that the same result would follow in New York if Grace were elected.<sup>63</sup>

For the Irish community in New York, the Cooper Union speeches were a variation on an old and hoary theme – the Anglo-Protestant assertion that Catholicism willfully kept its flock unenlightened. Grace’s critics charged that Catholics were unfit to manage the city’s public schools, which had been founded and controlled for years by a private organization, the Public School Society, made up of Anglo-Protestant civic elites who resented the Catholic challenge to their cultural hegemony. Not coincidentally, the evangelical crusade in Ireland in the 1820s also focused its attention on the character and curriculum of public education as Protestant reformers sought to transform Catholic children, inspiring a similar backlash – cultural as well as political – from the island’s majority population.

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<sup>62</sup> Cited in the *New York Freeman’s Journal and Catholic Register*, September 2, 1854

<sup>63</sup> *The New York Times*, October 30, 1880

Lacking strength of numbers, the evangelical movement in Ireland in the 1820s sought power through organization. Groups such as the London Hibernian Society, the Hibernian Bible Society, the Religious Tract and Book Society and the ambitious if unwieldy Irish Society for the Education of the Native Irish through the Medium of Their Own Language were formed in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century for the purposes of conversion and moral uplift. In the context of British culture and society, these efforts could scarcely be conducted without a political agenda. Evangelizers might well have viewed Ireland's Catholics as the victims of clerical despotism, and might well have sought with great sincerity to rescue them from ignorance and possible damnation. But, as the London Hibernian Society made clear, conversion of Ireland's Catholics also would bring about salutary political consequences to an island not far removed from a republican rebellion that killed thirty thousand people in a few months of fighting in 1798. The "numerical predominance of the Roman Catholics is itself a prolific seed of disunion," an LHS pamphlet asserted. "The hope, therefore, that the Irish will ever be a tranquil and loyal people must be built on the anticipated reduction of popery."<sup>64</sup> As subjects of a Protestant sovereign in a self-fashioned Protestant kingdom, Ireland's Catholics were not simply sectarian outsiders. They were, as the LHS document makes clear, of suspect loyalty to the nation-state. This critique would find its way to New York where, in a more-secular setting, Irish-Catholics would find their suitability for citizenship questioned because of their presumed loyalties to the Pope of Rome and his underlings. This Anglo-American consensus on the suspect loyalty of Catholics informed civic discourse on both sides of the Atlantic until the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

The London Hibernian Society started out as a clearing-house of sorts for Protestant evangelizers and Bible-distribution organizations. When that system failed to produce a rush to conversion, the Society focused more directly on the conversion of Catholic children through the

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<sup>64</sup> Irene Whelan, *The Bible War in Ireland*, p. 95

construction and maintenance of schools and other educational facilities, including housing for teachers. The Society relied on the financial support of the island's well-off landowners, who may or may not have shared the evangelicals' religious fervor, but who surely saw the conversion process as part of a more-general program of pacification and even Anglicization, although the Society persisted in offering religious instruction in the Irish language. (This respect for the island's native culture, it seems important to note, was not shared by the clergy and leaders of the established Church of Ireland – the LHS and other societies were founded and maintained by Dissenters, including Methodists and Baptists.) By 1822, there were more than six hundred LHS schools scattered throughout Ireland, educating more than thirty thousand students. Meanwhile, another aggressive evangelical organization, the Baptist Society for Promoting the Gospel in Ireland, opened about seventy schools with about six thousand students, the vast majority in the most-Gaelic portion of the country, the western province of Connaught.<sup>65</sup>

The LHS, unlike the smaller Baptist Society, received not only private donations from Ireland's gentry, but public funds that were funneled to the schools through an organization called the Kildare Place Society, named for its street location in the heart of Dublin. The Society was founded in 1811 as a publicly funded but private enterprise charged with building and running a non-denominational school system in Ireland. Unlike the efforts of the LHS and Baptist Society, the KPS schools were designed, in essence, to remove the religious question from the classroom and to centralize efforts to create a broad system of public education throughout the island. The KPS had the support of O'Connell and other prominent Catholics who believed that the organization would be able to negotiate a middle ground between education and evangelization.

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<sup>65</sup> Whelan, *The Bible War*, pgs. 104-106

Inevitably, the schools became a source of cultural conflict as the Irish evangelical movement and O'Connell's fledgling efforts to achieve Catholic emancipation developed side by side in the early 1820s. Thomas Wyse, one of O'Connell's shrewdest lieutenants, noted that the KPS schools "were imperceptibly converted into sectarian decoys. The priests took the alarm, and a new crusade instantly commenced."<sup>66</sup> Some evangelicals, including William Wilberforce, sought to soften a possible all-out sectarian clash in Ireland, noting in a speech in 1822 that the Irish were Christians before the British were, and that while the Irish certainly were different from the English, they had known, in the distant past, the very liberties which the English now enjoyed. But even the gentle Wilberforce believed that Catholic Ireland had to change. In his view, Catholic priests held onto power by keeping their flock uneducated.<sup>67</sup>

The assault on Catholic clergy came even as Catholic parishes throughout the island were building schools in reaction to the success of the LHS and Baptist society educational efforts, and led priests to turn to O'Connell and his new Catholic Association for both financial and political support. Thomas Wyse noted that the "cause of education became identified with the cause of emancipation," and that priests who might have remained aloof from the Catholic Association came to view it as a cultural redoubt in an increasingly aggressive Protestant offensive. Priests, Wyse noted, became in time "the principal channel" through which the Catholic Association's messages "were communicated to the remotest parts of the land."<sup>68</sup>

This critical development, it should be noted, came about not through priestly demands for a role in Catholic politics, but in reaction to growing Protestant assertions of political power and cultural privilege. The Catholic Association itself saw its mission as defensive. During a

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<sup>66</sup> Thomas Wyse, *Historical Sketch of the late Catholic Association of Ireland*, Vol I, (London, A.J. Valpy, 1829), p. 234.

<sup>67</sup> A story about Wilberforce's speech appears in the *Dublin Evening Post*, March 30, 1822

<sup>68</sup> Wyse, *Historical Sketch*, Vol. I, p. 237

meeting of the Association on May 15 1826, an O'Connell ally named F.W. Conway said that any "attacks" on the Bible societies and other Protestant groups were "provoked." Catholics were subjected to "calumnies against their religion ... The Association only acted in self-defense, and if the war was sometimes carried into the camp of the enemy," it was "perfectly justifiable and praise-worthy." <sup>69</sup>

As the cultural battle lines were drawn, Catholics charged that Protestant landlords were forcing their tenants to send their children to KPS schools, which O'Connell and other Catholics now condemned because they believed that KPS allowed its teachers to become Protestant proselytizers. <sup>70</sup> O'Connell, in a speech to his Catholic Association colleagues, complained that Protestant evangelizers were "buying up a few Papists who were in a state of utter poverty and destitution." <sup>71</sup> To counter this perceived economic threat, the Catholic Association dispatched funds from the Catholic rent to priests whose parishioners were "persecuted for not allowing their children to go to the Kildare Schools." <sup>72</sup>

The linkage between education and Catholic identity had profound consequences not only for the Catholic Association, but for New York politics and culture beginning in the 1840s. Catholic skepticism of Protestant-controlled schools provided a cultural rallying point for both O'Connell in the 1820s and Archbishop John Hughes in New York in the 1840s, and in both cases led to the growth of a separate Catholic school system and a more-general sense of Catholic separatism which informed Tammany Hall's rhetoric and the "us against them" mindset of the Catholic political machine. Thomas Wyse observed that Ireland's Catholics came to view

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<sup>69</sup> *Dublin Evening Post*, May 16, 1826

<sup>70</sup> R.M. Foster, in *Modern Ireland*, said the KPS became "tainted with proselytism" (p. 304), while Gearoid O Tuathaigh notes in *Ireland Before the Famine*, that a government inquiry found "that the allegations" of proselytizing were "well-founded," p. 101). See also Irene Whelan, *The Bible War in Ireland*, pgs. 85-123.

<sup>71</sup> Speech of Daniel O'Connell, July 5, 1827, Papers of Daniel O'Connell, Records of the Catholic Association, MS 3289, National Library of Ireland.

<sup>72</sup> Papers of Daniel O'Connell, Records of the Catholic Association, MS 5242, Minutes of the Relief Committee, February 6, 1826.

the island's moral reformers and evangelizers as agents of Protestant cultural and political domination, rather than as devout fellow Christians seeking only to bring salvation to Ireland's majority population. The typical Irish Catholic, Wyse wrote, "could not conceive it possible that the same men who were so anxious to exclude him from all enjoyment of the rights of a citizen could really feel much anxiety about his education or his soul. They came with bad credentials before him; they spoke ... of 'persuasion' and 'their poor countrymen' and 'the true way' ... as the only remedies for the evils of Ireland."<sup>73</sup> The condescending attitudes of moral reformers, their conclusion that the people themselves were to blame for their miseries, became part of the Anglo-American consensus on matters Irish, helping to frame moralizers' distinction between worthy and unworthy poor on both sides of the Atlantic.

In Ireland, Thomas Wyse saw an opportunity to capitalize on growing Catholic resentment of the Second Reformation and the aggressive Protestant critique of Irish Catholic culture. In County Waterford, leading Catholic clergy and laymen began holding meetings in late 1824 to plan a counter-offensive as Bible-toting evangelicals made inroads into the county's dominant Catholic population. A parliamentary election in Waterford in 1826 offered, Wyse thought, a splendid opportunity to mobilize Catholic freeholders on behalf of a candidate pledged to support Catholic Emancipation in the House of Commons. Such a candidate, of course, would have to be Protestant, as Catholics remained barred from holding a seat in the Common as long as members were required to take a test oath. Wyse regarded the incumbent MP, Lord George Beresford, as "an exceedingly friendly and kind man," but he nevertheless recruited another landlord, Henry Villiers Stuart, to run an insurgent campaign as the candidate of the Catholic emancipation movement.<sup>74</sup> Wyse, an affluent Catholic educated at Trinity College, began to put

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<sup>73</sup> Wyse, *Historical Sketch*, Vol. 1, p. 235.

<sup>74</sup> Thomas Wyse, *Historical Sketch*, Vol. I, p. 267.

together the nuts and bolts of the first authentic Irish political machine, a machine whose frame was built on defiance of cultural and political norms. He mobilized parish priests as well as fellow middle-class Catholics, and he recruited agents to monitor developments in individual baronies, the 19<sup>th</sup> Century rural Irish equivalent of a ward.

This activity in Waterford, unprecedented in Irish history, took place as the Catholic Association in Dublin continued to agitate on a broader basis for Catholic emancipation and against the Protestant conversion campaign. The “Catholic rent,” that is, the funds sent to the Association from penny-a-month subscribers, reached 19,000 pounds sterling by early 1825, allowing O’Connell to open a new central headquarters in Dublin’s Corn Exchange and to build what amounted to a shadow political organization aligned against the government – a foreboding prospect on an island only a quarter-century removed from a failed rebellion. Britain’s Under-Secretary for Ireland, William Gregory, referred to the proceedings in the Corn Exchange as “the popish Parliament,” adding that the Catholic Association now had a means to achieve “direct communication” with “the whole mass of the Catholic population.”<sup>75</sup> Westminster sought to both crush and conciliate the Catholic movement: The Catholic Association was banned in early 1825 (the wily O’Connell renamed it as the New Catholic Association, and it returned to business), while a Catholic Relief Bill, designed to conciliate O’Connell and the mass organization he led, was introduced in Parliament. The bill, however, failed in the House of Lords despite O’Connell’s approval of language that would have stripped his core base of support, the island’s forty-shilling freeholders, in exchange for British concessions on Catholic eligibility for high civil office. O’Connell’s image as a defender of the Catholic peasantry suffered because of his willingness to disenfranchise the island’s eighty-five thousand Catholic forty-shilling freeholders, but O’Connell argued that the freeholders were merely agents of their landlords

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<sup>75</sup> W.E. Vaughn, ed. *New History of Ireland*, vol. V, p. 85.

anyway and so their franchise already was compromised.<sup>76</sup> But miles to the south, in Waterford, Thomas Wyse and his committee were determined to prove him wrong. Wyse believed in the possibilities of democratic politics and the educated judgment of Catholic freeholders. It was critical, he told his colleagues in the Catholic Association, for the “the common people” to “meet together as much as possible.”<sup>77</sup>

Scholars in Ireland call the Waterford election of 1826 a “great socio-economic and political confrontation,” a “break with the tradition of [landlords’] electoral influence,” and part of a “new kind of political struggle” in Ireland.<sup>78</sup> The mobilization of the county’s Catholic freeholders, the methods used to persuade the freeholders to cast public votes against their landlord’s interests, and the use of campaign funds to recruit voters and win their loyalty despite fears of economic ruin – all of which led to the defeat of Lord Beresford -- constitute a milestone in Ireland’s development as a democracy. The Catholic Association’s successes, in Waterford and elsewhere, pioneered “new techniques of mass agitation,” according to Irish historian S.J. Connelly.<sup>79</sup>

The Waterford election, however, has not been examined through the prism of Irish-American politics, as a template for the methods, rhetoric, and organization which Irish-Americans would bring to Tammany Hall after the great dispersal of the Irish Famine in the 1840s. In addition, the Waterford election saw the mobilization of a mass political organization, the Stuart campaign committee, as a protector of freeholders who feared retribution from their landlords. Committee agents assisted dozens of freeholders – with cash and other benefits -- in return for their support, a method of operation which became familiar to reformers and voters

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<sup>76</sup> The number of forty-shilling freeholders is from Gearoid O Tuathaigh, *Ireland Before the Famine*, p. 75.

<sup>77</sup> Fergus O’Ferrall, *Catholic Emancipation*, p. 114

<sup>78</sup> See, respectively, Fergus O’Ferrall, *Catholic Emancipation*, p. 125; Gearoid O Tuathaigh, *Ireland Before the Famine*, p. 71; R.M. Foster, *Modern Ireland*, pgs. 299-300

<sup>79</sup> W.E. Vaughn, ed., *New History of Ireland*, vol. V, p. 90.



alike in the streets of New York. While Waterford was but one election in a single Irish county, the tactics and strategies deployed there were replicated in a string of Parliamentary elections throughout Ireland over the ensuing two years, transforming the Catholic Association into a national political organization and leading to the historic election of O’Connell himself in 1828. These elections, more so than O’Connell’s later agitation for repeal of the Union, taught the Catholic Irish the power of popular politics and the mechanics of mass organization – and, unlike the repeal agitation, the political effort ended with stunning victories that energized a population that had had little reason to believe in the power of politics before.

Thomas Wyse may not have been the “boss” of the Catholic emancipation effort – O’Connell, of course, played that role – but in the Waterford election, he displayed the organizational skills, political instincts, and use of resources which the Irish would display with such conspicuous success in the United States. His agents were, in the words of one of them, “in constant intercourse with the freeholders,” buying them beer, addressing meetings and distributing thousands of copies of speeches by O’Connell, although the leader himself remained aloof from the campaign until the final moment.<sup>80</sup> Wyse broke down the county-wide election into a series of smaller elections at the barony level, recruiting two agents to work each barony and report back to the central committee about local conditions and concerns. Many agents were selected because they spoke Irish and so could converse with the freeholders in the native language. Remarkably, members of Wyse’s election committee had never worked in a political campaign before. Then again, rarely if ever had there been a campaign like this one. Several of tenants in Tramore sent the landlord a petition which progressed rapidly from the rituals of deference to a cannonade of defiance, all but announcing the group’s intention to vote as it pleased. “Tenants of a kind and considerate landlord, we are fully impressed with the duties

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<sup>80</sup> John Burke to Thomas Wyse, May 30, 1826, Wyse Papers, 15,023, National Library of Ireland.

which we owe him, and are ready at all times to fulfill these obligations with all the diligence ... in our power,” the petition read. “But ... if we are your Tenants, we are also the Electors of a free state, and entrusted with the Elective Franchise not for the exclusive benefit of the landlord but for our own benefit and that of our fellow Country.” As Catholics, they said, they supported Emancipation. “Any candidate therefore who will not give a pledge to vote for that measure must in our minds be considered an unfit person to sit in Parliament.”<sup>81</sup>

This extraordinary declaration was more than a statement of political purpose. It was a virtual declaration of war on Ireland’s social order, which is precisely how Sir Robert Peel, the government’s Home Secretary, interpreted the Catholic Emancipation movement and its electoral machinery. The “friendly connection between landlord and tenant” in Ireland, he wrote, was “one of the remaining bonds of society.” He worried that this bond – which was not quite as friendly as he suspected – was on the verge of being “dissolved,” bringing a “darker cloud than ever” over Ireland.<sup>82</sup>

A flavor of how this mini-machine operated is preserved in Wyse’s papers in the National Library of Ireland. For example, the Stuart campaign committee asked its agents to identify and record the names of freeholders, their landlords, their place of residence, and a list of freeholders who had not yet registered to become eligible for the vote so they could identify supporters and target them individually. Local agents were encouraged to report back any “general observations” about each potential voter.<sup>83</sup>

The campaign records and letters suggest that O’Connell’s skepticism of the independence of forty-shilling freeholders was not entirely unwarranted. “Patriotism may fill a man’s heart but [it] can not fill the belly,” wrote a petitioner to Stuart supporter Henry Winston

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<sup>81</sup> Petition found in Papers of Thomas Wyse, MS 15,024, National Library of Ireland

<sup>82</sup> Fergus O Ferrall, *Catholic Emancipation*, p. 114.

<sup>83</sup> This handwritten spreadsheet is in the Papers of Thomas Wyse, MS 15,028, National Library of Ireland

Barron.<sup>84</sup> Many freeholders feared the consequences of voting against the interests of their landlords, and some asked for money or favors in return for voting for Stuart. One such freeholder, a man named Anthony Heale, told the committee that after he announced that he would vote for Stuart, he no longer received work “from the merchants who always employed him.” Heale asked one of Wyse’s agents, Pat Powers, for unspecified financial support for his vote. Another freeholder, William Flaherty, presented himself to Wyse as a person “in the greatest distress” because he had been “denied charity because of his politics.”<sup>85</sup> A publican named John Power told Wyse that agents from the Stuart committee promised him “the profit of two barrels of Beer every week” if he allowed the agents to meet in the pub. The profit, however, was not forthcoming, and now, “my Landlord threatens to turn me out of my house” and he was “reduced to Extreme Poverty.” He asked Wyse, as “an Honourable Gentleman” to “do something on my behalf.” Illiterate, Power signed the letter with his mark, presumably after dictating it to a friend or associate.<sup>86</sup> The appeals continued even after the election as freeholders reported economic retaliation from employers and landlords. The campaign committee’s treasurer, John Mathew Galwey, was inundated with requests for financial assistance. He told Wyse of a priest who “is daily coming to me on the Subject of some of his Parishioners who are persecuted by their Landlords,” and of a tenant on Lord Beresford’s land who was “entitled to something more” than the five pounds, ten shillings he received “because he has a large family.”<sup>87</sup>

Wyse’s army of agents submitted expense forms for copious amounts of drink in the weeks leading up to the election. Political campaigns, whether in Ireland or in the United States, certainly did not lack for spirits in the 1820s. In their study of drinking in America, Mark

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<sup>84</sup> R. Ott to Winston Barron, Papers of Thomas Wyse, MS 15,023, National Library of Ireland.

<sup>85</sup> Powers to Wyse, May 17, 1826; Edm. Lavthan to Wyse, June, 1826, the Papers of Thomas Wyse, MS 15,023, National Library of Ireland

<sup>86</sup> John Power to Wyse, April 18, 1826, Wyse Papers, MS 15,023 National Library of Ireland

<sup>87</sup> Galwey to Wyse, August 24, 1826, Wyse Papers, MS 15,023 National Library of Ireland.

Edward Lender and James Kirby Martin noted that Jacksonian-era office-seekers revived the old colonial custom of “treating,” which the authors defined as providing would-be voters “with generous libations.” Treating not only won the affection of the voting masses, but also demonstrated the office-seeker’s close connection with his constituents.<sup>88</sup> In the Waterford election, there is no indication that either one of the affluent candidates sought to ingratiate themselves with the freeholders by personally buying a round or two. But Wyse and his agents used drink as part of a mass mobilization strategy, not simply as populist ritual. An agent named Patrick Heffernan purchased six hundred and seventy seven gallons of beer from February 24 to March 21 as he met with freeholders and sympathizers in Waterford. Another agent, Philip Barron, put in an expense claim for two pounds, eleven shillings and four pence “for beer drank on the night of Mr. Stuart’s entry (in the election) and on the following morning.” A correspondent named Patrick Linehan described himself as a freeholder who abandoned “the cause of the intolerant party.” He requested payment for 2 pounds, 2 shillings, and 2 pence for election expenses, including 18 shillings for beer provided to “friends of the cause” and 6 shillings, 6 pence to replace a pair of shoes which a Waterford butcher lost while marching to a committee rally on March 17, St. Patrick’s Day, 1826.<sup>89</sup>

Although O’Connell was wary about Wyse’s strategy and Stuart’s chances, some money flowed into Waterford from the Corn Exchange in Dublin. At a meeting on February 6, 1826, the Catholic Association voted to send one hundred and fifty pounds sterling to two priests in Waterford to assist freeholders “who are persecuted” because they declared for Stuart.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Mark Edward Lender and James Martin Kirby, *Drinking in America: A History* (New York: The Free Press, 1987), pgs. 10, 54.

<sup>89</sup> Accounts of Heffernan, Barron and Linehan, Papers of Thomas Wyse, MS 15,028, National Library of Ireland

<sup>90</sup> The Papers of Daniel O’Connell, Records of the Catholic Association, MS 5242, minutes of the Relief Committee of the Catholic Association, February 6, 1826

Concerns about eviction were widespread, Galwey found, but some freeholders were ready to put the cause ahead of economic self-interest if the committee could protect them from retribution. Writing of his conversations with some Waterford freeholders, Galwey wrote that the “poor Devils only want to be apprised [that] if they are turned out of their Houses by the Duke or Lord Waterford they won’t be left with their Children on the High Road (as they say themselves).”<sup>91</sup> Galwey used committee funds to construct homes for freeholders worried about being left “on the High Road.”

Catholic priests were incorporated into the campaign as the election drew near in late spring, 1826, and they were highly effective agents. As Alexis de Tocqueville observed several years later, Ireland’s Catholic priests shared “the same instincts, the same interests, the same passions as the people.” They had, in a word, credibility.<sup>92</sup> Wyse and an ally named Henry Winston Barron were not entirely comfortable with this mixture of religion and politics – in a letter to Wyse, Barron said the reliance on clerics was not “legitimate or constitutional” – but they believed success required the mobilization of every resource at their disposal.<sup>93</sup> Committee members were dispatched to Catholic parishes to deliver addresses in support of Stuart, and priests were encouraged to make it clear that they supported the committee’s efforts. This intermingling of secular and sacred was condemned by the *Dublin Evening Mail*, founded in 1823 as an explicitly anti-Catholic newspaper, just as similar charges would be lodged against Tammany Hall through the Gilded Age and Progressive Era. While there clearly is no denying the accusation of clerical involvement in politics – the Catholic Church certainly did play a role in the Catholic Association’s political victories in the 1820s and in Tammany’s victories decades later – there has been little effort to examine the ways in which prominent Protestant clerics,

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<sup>91</sup> Galwey to Wyse, June 7, 1826, Wyse Papers, MS 15,023, National Library of Ireland

<sup>92</sup> Emmet Larkin, ed., *Alexis de Tocqueville’s Journey in Ireland*, p. 48.

<sup>93</sup> Barron to Wyse, May 22, 1826, Wyse Papers, 15,023, National Library of Ireland

especially in New York, often scaled the wall of separation themselves, either through leadership of moral crusades with their implicit political agenda or by issuing sermons deploring Catholic influence in politics<sup>94</sup>

O'Connell, sensing that Waterford electors might well deliver an historic return, made the journey from Dublin in mid-June, just days before polling was to begin. He made a point of visiting areas where landlords were known to favor Beresford (some landlords, Protestant and Catholic alike, supported Stuart). There, he hoped to strengthen or inspire the resolve of their Catholic tenants with stirring speeches that often were made in the presence of approving clergymen. O'Connell, an unmatched orator in Ireland and perhaps within the wider world of British politics, stirred crowds with sectarian appeals, saying that Catholics who voted for Beresford were, in his words, "miscreants" and traitors to their faith.<sup>95</sup> When unleashed, O'Connell could be a formidable demagogue, rarely more so than in the run-up to the 1826 election. But Wyse did not rely on oratory alone. Agents such as John Magin traveled the county ceaselessly, delivering correspondence to and from the central committee, traveling with prominent supporters to attend meetings with freeholders, and keeping tabs on public opinion.<sup>96</sup> Writers churned out propaganda in the form of broadsides and poetry, much of which presented the Irish (and by this, the writers clearly meant Catholics) not simply as oppressed, but as slaves. The language of enslavement was a constant theme in Irish and Irish-American discourse. O'Connell, a devout abolitionist who criticized Irish-Americans for their lack of anti-slavery fervor, framed the Catholic challenge to Protestant hegemony as a struggle between slaves and masters. Addressing Catholics in County Clare, he said, "I want to know whether the forty-

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<sup>94</sup> The *Dublin Evening Mail*, June 4, 1826, criticized a "crusade" by priests in Waterford; similar complaints against Catholic clerical involvement in New York politics were common, as later chapters will illustrate.

<sup>95</sup> O'Ferrall, *Catholic Emancipation*, p. 132

<sup>96</sup> See Magin's schedule in the Wyse Papers, MS 15,028, National Library of Ireland.

shilling freeholders of Clare are the slaves of their landlords. Are they, like negroes, to be lashed by their drivers to the slave market, and sold by the highest bidder?"<sup>97</sup> A poem composed for the Waterford election was entitled "The Intolerant." Like so many patriotic Irish ballads and poems designed for a mass audience, the anonymous poet recalled an imagined heroic past, when the Irish king Brian Boru was in residence on the hills of Tara.

*The harp that long in Tara's Hall  
Resounded Erin's praises  
Again renews its plaintive call  
And Irish spirit rises.  
Oh! Who is he who'd madly think  
In Slavery's chains to bind us.  
'Tis George the Lord who would sink  
And in oppression grind us.*

The poem went on to promise that Lord Beresford would be bound and placed in the "Tyrant's Tomb."<sup>98</sup> This hyperbolic attack on a landlord who was hardly the worst of the species shows how the Irish framed mass politics in terms of "negative reference groups," in Merton's phrase. While hardly unusual in Western democracies – Merton, as noted earlier, traced the lineage in the U.S. to the anti-Mason parties of the early Republic – the rhetoric of "us against them" politics had never been deployed successfully in Ireland precisely because Catholics were unable to mount a serious challenge against "them." Mobilized, educated, and motivated, convinced that they would be protected from economic ruin if they voted against Beresford, the freeholders of County Waterford went to the polls beginning on June 22. It was a colorful and raucous event, but remarkably free of violence. Freeholders from at least three estates presented themselves at the courthouse in Waterford City wearing pink and green cockades, a visible sign of support for Stuart. The excited crowds never threatened to act on the poet's vow to deliver Beresford to a "tyrant's tomb." Stuart was declared the winner on June 28, polling 1,357 votes to Beresford's

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<sup>97</sup> *Dublin Evening Post*, July 3, 1828

<sup>98</sup> See Wyse Papers, MS 15,028, National Library of Ireland.

527, a figure that does little justice to the depth of Stuart's support. Polling stopped when it became clear that Stuart was the winner, so areas where Stuart enjoyed his greatest support, including his own estates, weren't counted in the official tally.<sup>99</sup>

The liberal *Dublin Evening Post* cheered, "The enemy whom the people had to contest against was great and powerful, and great and glorious indeed has been the victory. The county has risen as one man, and intolerance has been beaten to the ground and trodden into extinction." The paper reprinted a notice in the *Waterford Chronicle* which warned that it would publish the names of "the Catholic slaves who have voted for the Beresfords."<sup>100</sup> Beresford himself was bewildered, the victim of forces beyond his control and his comprehension. "When I was a boy," he wrote, "the Irish people meant the Protestants; now it means the Roman Catholics."<sup>101</sup>

Success in Waterford led to a string of similar victories for pro-Emancipation candidates as emboldened tenants voted against their landlords and their agents, having been assured that the Catholic Association would protect them against retribution. And so it did. In the aftermath of the campaigns, requests for financial assistance poured into the Corn Exchange. Those requests went beyond simply supplying cash to freeholders who asked for it in return for their votes. The Association's relief committee functioned as an unofficial, extra-governmental social welfare agency. For example, it authorized payment of six pounds, ten shillings to the widow of a man killed by a police officer, five pounds to purchase a cow for a poor (and presumably sympathetic) family, fifteen pounds for a Westmeath man named James Connell who claimed to be "without house or home" after voting for a pro-Emancipation candidate. Five pounds went to

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<sup>99</sup> See Fergus O'Ferrall, *Catholic Emancipation*, pgs. 130-133.

<sup>100</sup> *Dublin Evening Post*, July 1, 1826

<sup>101</sup> Thomas Bartlett, *The Fall and Rise of the Irish Nation* (Dublin: Rowman and Littlefield, 1992), pg. 343



a child who had been “wounded in the leg by an Orangeman.”<sup>102</sup> An agent in Waterford named Pat Hayden proposed that freeholders “could be placed at permanent employment” instead of receiving cash payments, since “these suffering people cannot be neglected and it would require too much money to support them.”<sup>103</sup>

If, as Daniel Patrick Moynihan asserted, the O’Connell movement taught the Irish the possibilities of politics, the movement also taught the Irish to look to extra-governmental institutions for relief and protection. In Ireland before the late 1820s, the Irish Catholic peasantry turned not to politicians for such relief and protection, but to rural secret societies known as the Ribbonmen, the Whiteboys, and the Defenders. They assaulted and even murdered landlords, crippled livestock and carried out other violent activities in the Irish countryside. These illicit activities did not end with the triumph of O’Connell (the man who defended many of these agitators) – a secret society murdered the Chief Secretary of Ireland and his assistant in Phoenix Park in 1882. However, the success of the Emancipation movement did rally the Irish to constitutional politics at a time when violent secret societies sought to capitalize on peasant beliefs that the fall of Protestantism was near, beliefs inspired by the written works of a Catholic bishop named Charles Walmsley, known by his pen-name, Pastorini. Historian James S. Donnelly argued that O’Connell benefitted from those beliefs because peasants believed he would “fulfill the prediction of the destruction of Protestantism.”<sup>104</sup>

The British government was concerned, too, about what O’Connell had brought about in Ireland. After the victories of 1826, O’Connell offered himself as a candidate in 1828 despite the

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<sup>102</sup> See in the O’Connell Papers, Records of the Catholic Association, National Library of Ireland: Minutes of the Relief Committee, January 31, 1827, MS 5242; C.M. Murphy to O’Connell, December 20, 1828, MS 5242, Richard Walsh to Edward Dwyer, January 29, 1828, MS 5243; Minutes of the Relief Committee, November 8, 1828, MS 5243.

<sup>103</sup> Hayden to Thomas Wyse, August 4, 1826, the Papers of Thomas Wyse, MS 15,023, National Library of Ireland.

<sup>104</sup> Samuel Clark and James S. Donnelly, Jr., *Irish Peasants: Violence and Political Unrest, 1780-1914*, p. 137

continued bar on Catholics holding high public office in Britain and Ireland. His victory over William Vesey Fitzgerald in County Clare prompted the Prime Minister (the Duke of Wellington, an Irish-born Protestant) and Peel to consider the possibility of civil war in Ireland, for their Tory colleagues remained opposed to granting Catholic Emancipation even as the Irish rallied to the cause. Lord Anglesey, the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, told the government that he was “quite certain” that the “agitators” – a reference to O’Connell and his colleagues – “could lead on the people to open rebellion at a moment’s notice.”<sup>105</sup> He did not seem as concerned about Protestant agitators who, in the words of London diarist Charles Greville, were “moving heaven and earth to create disturbances” to protest O’Connell’s election and the assumption that he would be allowed to take his seat in the House of Commons.<sup>106</sup>

Thomas Wyse, the architect of this constitutional coup, had no intention of leading open rebellion. Like so many Irish political operatives on either side of the Atlantic, Wyse sought to achieve practical change rather than pursue abstract ideals, foreshadowing the tactics of Tammany politicians nearly a century later. “My principles are already before you,” he told a crowd in County Tipperary when he stood for election in 1830, “I am an enemy to revolution, and therefore a friend to reform; opposed to anarchy and confusion, therefore hostile to abuses of all kinds.”<sup>107</sup> Wyse emphasized his constitutional bona-fides as British authorities feared, and perhaps some Irish Catholics anticipated, a violent climax to the Catholic emancipation agitation. “Political ameliorations ... are not to be obtained by physical force,” he wrote after O’Connell’s election, arguing that “moral power arising from the concert and universality of constitutional exertion” would rally “every county [to] become a Clare or Waterford.”<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Fergus O Ferrall, *Catholic Emancipation*, p. 200

<sup>106</sup> Fergus O Ferrall, *Catholic Emancipation*, p. 205.

<sup>107</sup> *Dublin Evening Post*, September 6, 1830

<sup>108</sup> Thomas Wyse, *Historical Sketch*, Vol. II, appendix, pgs. cxlv-clvi

To that end, he immersed himself in the expansion of a network of local political organizations, called Liberal Clubs, which he envisioned as an arm of the Catholic Association. Through a “well-digested system of political tactics,” the Catholic Association would link together a hierarchy of clubs at the county, town, and parish level, creating “precision, constancy, unanimity, and uniformity.”<sup>109</sup> This highly disciplined, centralized control of local politics, with its emphasis on unity and uniformity, would become a hallmark of Tammany Hall under Irish-American leadership. Tammany, in fact, adopted the club system of organization in the late nineteenth century, moving away from ad-hoc organization in the city’s wards, in an effort to exert tighter discipline.

Membership in the Liberal Clubs was not mass-based – Wyse insisted that members must be able to read – but the clubs became part of the Catholic Association machinery, collecting Catholic Rent (which increased to as much as three thousand pounds sterling per week after O’Connell’s election) and registering sympathetic freeholders for future elections.<sup>110</sup> The clubs promised to represent “all classes of their fellow citizens,” although they were top-heavy with middle-class and upper-middle class professionals – including some liberal Protestants.<sup>111</sup>

Wyse’s genius for organization and his emphasis on pragmatic results rather than utopian ideals established the template for the organization which the Irish would take with them across the Atlantic beginning with the mass emigration of the Famine. While O’Connell’s oratory spoke to Irish-Catholic grievances, and his love of political spectacle helped prepare the Irish for the raucous mass politics of New York, the victories which his movement won required more than spectacle and oratory. They required discipline and organization, and the hard work of

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<sup>109</sup> Fergus O Ferrall, *Catholic Emancipation*, p. 215

<sup>110</sup> Fergus O Ferrall, *Catholic Emancipation*, p. 227

<sup>111</sup> Preamble to the constitution of the City of Waterford Liberal Club, Thomas Wyse Papers, 15,026, National Liberty of Ireland.

organization often is far removed from the color and sound of rallies and meetings. Tammany Hall, like the Catholic Association, understood the importance of spectacle, and its orators were among the city's most-gifted. But its greatest strength was organization, its ability to impose a "well-digested system of political tactics" on its members and clubhouses. Tammany leaders were notable not for their affability and congeniality (that sort of work was relegated to elected officials such as Al Smith, Jimmy Walker, and William Bourke Cochran) but for their ability to administer a highly efficient and responsive organization and to instill a sense of discipline within and loyalty without. Their success at this work in New York is a tribute to the legacy of Thomas Wyse, who is all but forgotten.

The electoral victories of 1826-28 were a defeat not only for Ireland's landlords but for the evangelical Protestants who hoped and no doubt prayed that Irish Catholics would see the light and join them on the side of progress, prosperity, and morality. The Kildare Place Society and other Protestant-dominated school societies collapsed, replaced by a system of government-funded national schools that were non-denominational in theory, but under the effective control of local clergy – meaning, in most cases outside of the island's Protestant-majority northeast, under the control of Catholics. The evangelizing spirit, however, did not entirely disappear in Ireland, and when hunger devastated the Irish countryside in the late 1840s, Protestant proselytizers constructed the catastrophe as a morality tale.

O'Connell entered the House of Commons in 1829, an occasion marked on both sides of the Atlantic with celebrations. The New York *Irish Shield* celebrated O'Connell for having "snatched the rusty key of the temple of Liberty from the tenacious grasp of gloomy Intolerance, without slaying her guards."<sup>112</sup> But the O'Connell victory was by no means complete – the grasp of the powerful was strong indeed. O'Connell did not so much as snatch the key to the temple of

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<sup>112</sup> *Irish Shield*, May 5, 1829

Liberty as he did borrow it. In return for passing a Catholic Relief Act which granted emancipation to Catholics, the Tory administration of Wellington and Peel changed the rules of engagement. The Irish voters who forced Catholic Emancipation on a recalcitrant ministry and monarch, the forty-shilling freeholders, were stripped of their franchise as part of the price of “liberty.” The property qualification for voting was raised to 10 pounds sterling, reducing the number of Irish freeholders from two hundred and sixteen thousand to thirty-seven thousand, although the latter figure rose to just over sixty thousand after the franchise was expanded in 1832.<sup>113</sup> O’Connell, who had been willing to dispense with the forty-shilling freeholders as part of a deal in 1825, once again agreed to the disenfranchisement of his core supporters, even though he had said that he would not accept Emancipation if it were “coupled with any conditions that would tend to deprive the forty-shilling freeholders of the elective franchise.”<sup>114</sup>

Faced with a choice between principled idealism and a practical path to power, O’Connell agreed to a political deal rather than remain on the outside. The Irish leaders of Tammany surely were practical men themselves, but when the franchise came under attack in New York, they drew a different lesson from Irish history. Rather than cut a deal to avoid confrontation, as O’Connell did, Tammany resisted repeated attempts to disenfranchise its core constituents through property qualifications and prolonged paths to citizenship from the 1870s to the 1920s. While these decisions could be seen as practical – Tammany’s power would have eroded if these “reforms” had been adopted – they could also be viewed as evidence of steadfast conviction. There were some deals to which Tammany would not be a party -- restrictions on the franchise was one of them.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> R.M. Foster, *Modern Ireland*, p. 302

<sup>114</sup> *Dublin Evening Post*, July 6, 1826

<sup>115</sup> Tammany’s resistance to the Tilden Commission and various anti-immigrant initiatives will be explored in Chapter Five.

O'Connell went on to become a dominant figure in British politics as he formed shrewd alliances with sympathetic Whigs and cast himself as the implacable enemy of Protestant supremacists like Peel. More than three-dozen Irish candidates, including O'Connell, were returned to the House of Commons in 1832-33, giving O'Connell the leverage to bargain for municipal reforms and relief programs for the Irish poor in exchange for his support of the Whigs. Although several Liberal Clubs, like the Catholic Association, folded after O'Connell's election, the bulk did not, and they continued to organize freeholders with notable success. The growth of mass politics in Ireland inspired visits from Alexis de Tocqueville and Gustave de Beaumont, both of whom believed that the Irish were dismantling an oppressive aristocracy, although both were concerned about the island's poverty and unjust distribution of land. In Ireland, de Tocqueville noted, "when a man has no land he really faces death."<sup>116</sup>

In the early 1840s, with a Tory administration back in power in Westminster, an aging O'Connell embarked on a new mass campaign, this one for repeal of the Union created in 1801. It was not a demand for independence, rather, O'Connell sought the return of a home rule parliament in Dublin. O'Connell contested repeal not in elections but through the power of mass protest, attracting hundreds of thousands to meetings around the country. The repeal campaign emphasized mass participation mobilized at the local level, but ultimately repeal was a protest, not a political contest, and so its importance can be over-emphasized. Repeal ended in failure, partly because O'Connell backed down in the face of a British threat to break up a huge meeting, but also because the cause became abstract in the face of a great calamity: The Irish famine.

When hundreds of thousands of starving Irish arrived in New York beginning in 1845, they found a political and cultural debate not unlike the one they left behind. The average Irish-speaking laborers or farmers from the west of Ireland, carrying no more possessions than the

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<sup>116</sup> Emmet Larkin, *Alexis de Tocqueville's Journey in Ireland*, pg. 55.

clothes on their backs, knew nothing of the particulars which divided Whig from Democrat in New York. But they did recognize the rhetoric of inclusion and exclusion, and recognized the voice of the hostile moralizers and sympathetic populists. There should be little surprise that they responded as they did, and that they drew on the methods that served them so well in Ireland in the 1820s.

## CHAPTER TWO

### NEW YORK'S FIRST IRISH BOSS

As political bosses go, John Hughes was unlike any other the Irish in New York knew or would know. He was not a member of Tammany Hall, although critics would charge that the Hall's leaders were all too eager to kiss his ring. Such an exercise in deference would have been understandable – after all, John Hughes was the Roman Catholic bishop of New York, a polarizing and intensely political figure in the city's civic life from the early 1840s to his death in 1864. He also was a symbol of the linkage between politics and the Catholic Church which the Irish brought with them when they crossed the Atlantic.

He was known as “Dagger John,” a reference to the little cross which he and other Catholic clergy scrawled next to their signatures in official correspondence. David Hales, editor of the anti-Catholic *Journal of Commerce* newspaper, charged that the cross actually was a dagger aimed at the identity and culture of Protestant New York. The menacing nickname only added to the bishop's larger-than-life image.<sup>117</sup> But it also symbolized fears that Hughes might command his impoverished flock to violent political action – fears which the native of County Tyrone was happy to stoke. In 1844, when Roman Catholic churches came under attack in Philadelphia and Boston, the city's outgoing Mayor, a Tammany man named Robert Morris, summoned Hughes to City Hall. Morris was about to yield power to a new Mayor, James Harper, who was elected on the explicitly nativist platform of the American Republican Party. Knowing that Harper's supporters were planning a potentially explosive rally near City Hall, Morris asked

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<sup>117</sup> The cafeteria at Fordham University in the Bronx is known as “Dagger John's” in tribute to the man who founded the school at St. John's College in the 1840s.



Hughes if he feared that Catholic churches in the city might be put to the torch. No, Hughes replied. “I am afraid some of yours will be burned.”<sup>118</sup> The rally never took place.

In his confrontational style, his chip-on-the-shoulder defensiveness, and his demand for a more-inclusive political culture, Dagger John Hughes could well be viewed not only as Irish New York’s first political boss, but as the man who provided Tammany Hall with a core belief system, one that could be summed up in a letter which Hughes wrote to Mayor Harper. “I even now can remember my reflections on first beholding the American flag,” he wrote. “It never crossed my mind that a time might come when that flag, the emblem of ... freedom ... should be divided by apportioning its stars to the citizens of native birth and its stripes only as the portion of the naturalized foreigner.”<sup>119</sup> Tammany became, after Hughes’ death, the city’s most-powerful advocate for the foreign-born, with its Irish leaders continuing to insist, as Hughes did, that the Stars and Stripes stood for all citizens, regardless of their place of birth.

In demanding equal treatment for immigrants two decades before the 14<sup>th</sup> amendment guaranteed equal protection under the law to naturalized citizens, John Hughes acted more like a political activist than an elite cleric. He was, in fact, much more than a local spiritual leader -- he was the voice of politically engaged American Catholicism. President James Polk consulted with Hughes in the White House in 1848 about Catholicism in Mexico, prompting a vocal protest from Protestant ministers. An aging Henry Clay came to hear Hughes preach while the two men were in Saratoga in the summer of 1849 (Clay found Hughes’ homily to be “a massive chain of the closest and most metaphysical reasoning.”<sup>120</sup>) As a tide of antebellum nativism began to

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<sup>118</sup> Richard Shaw, *Dagger John: The Unquiet Life and Times of Archbishop John Hughes of New York* (New York: Paulist Press, 1977), p. 197.

<sup>119</sup> Hughes to Harper, May 17, 1844, printed in Lawrence Kehoe, ed., *Complete Works of the Most Rev. John Hughes DD, Vol. I* (New York: Lawrence Kehoe, 1866), p. 344.

<sup>120</sup> Shaw, *Dagger John*, p. 252.

recede, Hughes was invited to preach in the U.S. House of Representatives on a wet, windy December morning in 1857, when the combative cleric disarmed critics with an ecumenical address on the moral and social merits of Christianity. The bishop's high profile, his insistence that Catholicism was compatible with American ideals, and his eagerness to confront hostile politicians and journalists made him a favorite target of those who saw him as little more than an agent of foreign popery. Walt Whitman called him a "mitred hypocrite," while former New York City Mayor Philip Hone called him a "generalissimo" who "deserves a cardinal's hat for what he has done in placing Irish Catholics upon the necks of native New Yorkers."<sup>121</sup> Much as Daniel O'Connell did in Ireland in the 1820s, John Hughes organized Catholics around a series of grievances and mobilized them as a voting bloc, to the point of sponsoring his own political ticket in a municipal election in 1841.

He also set a pattern for Tammany in his skepticism of reformers whose ideals and theories seemed to promise heaven on earth. Hughes' religious training taught him that perfection was impossible on earth – that would come only after the final judgment. The Catholic Church, he said in 1852, had "little confidence in theoretical systems which assume that great or enduring benefit is to result from the sudden or unexpected excitements, even of a religious kind ... by which the pace of society is to be preternaturally quickened in the path of universal progress," he said. Social experiments, he added, too often were prescribed by "new doctors who turned out to have been only quacks."<sup>122</sup> Tammany's skepticism of radical politics, especially

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<sup>121</sup> The Whitman reference can be found in Tyler Anbinder, *Five Points: The Nineteenth Century New York Neighborhood That Invented Tap Dance, Stole Elections, and Became the World's Most Notorious Slum* (New York: The Free Press, 2001), pg. 185; for the Hone reference, see Philip Hone, *The Diary of Philip Hone* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1889) Vol. I, pg. 659.

<sup>122</sup> John Hughes, *The Catholic Chapter in the History of the United States: A Lecture*, quoted in "John Hughes and a Catholic Response to Slavery in Antebellum America," by Walter G. Sharrow, *The Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 57, No. 3 (July, 1972), pg. 261.

socialism, could be traced to Hughes' suspicion of antebellum reform movements, including abolition.<sup>123</sup>

Before Hughes arrived in the city, the Irish lacked a commanding, unifying political voice around which to rally in the face of an increasingly hostile culture. That was true in matters sacred as well as secular -- the Roman Catholic diocese of New York was fragmented and loosely administered before Hughes took charge. Lay trustees saw themselves, rather than clerics, as the stewards of individual churches and parishes. A weak and unpopular bishop, Jean Dubois, had little response to growing anti-Catholic agitation in U.S. cities during the 1830s.

Hughes changed all that, replacing the appearance of anarchy with a tightly organized hierarchy that foreshadowed the style and discipline of the first Irish leader of Tammany Hall, John Kelly, who succeeded Boss Tweed in 1871 and, it has been often said, turned Tammany from a mob into an army.<sup>124</sup> After Hughes became bishop in his own right in 1842 (he had served as the ailing Dubois' coadjutor bishop for four years), power was centralized in Hughes' office, trustees were ousted and made irrelevant, dependable clerics were recruited from Ireland to serve as foot soldiers in Hughes' expansion plans, and a new newspaper, the *Freeman's Journal*, was founded to serve as a print pulpit for the bishop.

While he repeatedly insisted that he was uninterested in partisan politics, John Hughes played an important but often-overlooked role in New York's political culture and civic life for

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<sup>123</sup> Although Tammany vigorously opposed Socialist candidates, its most-famous member, Governor Al Smith, vetoed legislation in New York -- the Lusk laws -- that sought to impose loyalty oaths on teachers and otherwise crack down on radical politics. The laws were passed after his defeat in 1920, but when he returned to office in 1923, he led the effort to repeal them. He also opposed the expulsion of five Socialists from the state Legislature in 1920.

<sup>124</sup> See, for example, William Shannon, *The American Irish*, pg. 72, who referred to Tweed's "disorganized horde" and Kelly's "disciplined army." Similar critiques of Kelly's rule are found in Michael Gordon, *The Orange Riots: Irish Political Violence in New York City 1870 and 1871* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2009), pg. 19, and M.R. Werner, *Tammany Hall* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1980), pgs. 276-280.

twenty years, a period that includes one of the most-important events in the city's history, the mass immigration of starving Irish Catholics during the Great Famine of 1845-51. During his tenure as bishop and, later, as archbishop of New York, he served not just as a source of spiritual solace for his flock, but as the defender of his people during a time of extreme anti-Catholic nativism and as the architect of an extra-governmental social welfare and educational system that challenged both the values and self-image of New York's civic elites.<sup>125</sup>

Hughes rose to prominence not only because he demanded equal justice for Catholics, but also because he challenged the popular linkage of Americanism with Protestantism. When one of his antagonists, a lawyer named Hiram Ketchum, insisted that the United States was a Protestant country, Hughes issued a rejoined that no doubt shocked non-Catholic New Yorkers. "That a great majority of the inhabitants of this country are not Catholic, I admit," he said. "But that it is a Protestant country, or a Catholic country, or a Jewish country, or a Christian country in a sense that would give any sect or combination of sects the right to oppress any other sect, I utterly deny."<sup>126</sup> The bishop's demand for equality and protection of minority faiths was more than a simple assertion of an obvious right. It was an act of defiance at a time when New York's native-born civic elites joined with the city's Protestant immigrants in opposition to the influx of Catholic immigrants. Anti-Catholic sentiment united the native-born with the Protestant

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<sup>125</sup> Recent scholarship has tended to ignore Hughes and his challenge to Anglo-Protestant New York. Mary P. Ryan and Ronald G. Walters examined, respectively, civic wars in urban America during the nineteenth century, and the rise of moral and civic reformers in U.S. cities, but both failed to consider the impact of Hughes and his aggressive critique of Anglo-Protestant reform ideology, including its embrace of individualism, laissez faire economics, and claims to cultural authority. Amy Bridges, however, in her study of the origins of machine politics in New York, did acknowledge the important role Hughes played in demanding a place for non-Protestants in the city's cultural and political life, noting that Hughes "introduced the Catholic church into electoral politics." See Mary P. Ryan, *Civic Wars: Democracy and Public Life in the American City During the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1998); Ronald G. Walters, *American Reformers 1815-1860* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1997); Amy Bridges, *A City in the Republic: Antebellum New York and the Origins of Machine Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pg. 90.

<sup>126</sup> *Freeman's Journal*, August 7, 1841.

immigrant, especially Irish-born Protestants accustomed to thinking of Catholics as their political and cultural enemies and inferiors.<sup>127</sup>

Hughes insisted that American values and liberties were not the exclusive province of Protestants and Anglo-Saxons. He saw all minority religions, not just Catholics, as vulnerable to an oppressive dominant culture, and he advised his flock to stand with other minority groups rather than assimilate the dominant culture's values. "If the Jew is oppressed," he told his fellow Catholics, "then stand by the Jew."<sup>128</sup> Jews and other minorities certainly did not always find New York's Irish Catholics standing beside them in troubled times, but Hughes' exhortation spoke to vision of American society that included those who were not part of the Anglo-Saxon, Protestant society culture. "There is no such thing as a predominant religion," he said, "and the small minority is entitled to the same protection as the greatest majority."<sup>129</sup>

During the antebellum era's conflicts over politics, culture, and identity, John Hughes could not have been anything less than a political leader, even though he insisted that he was nothing of the kind. "I have been accused of being a politician," he told an audience in 1841. "The charge is false in the letter and the spirit ... I conceive it to be the duty of a minister of religion to avoid being a partisan of either (party), but rather to study the things which will soothe the irritated feelings and mitigate the asperities of political life."<sup>130</sup> Nevertheless, Hughes forged an important alliance with New York Governor William Seward, met with presidents who sought his advice, and engaged in public debates with the city's political leaders, all in an effort to create a place for Catholics – most of them Irish – in New York civic culture.

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<sup>127</sup> See Lee Benson, *The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy: New York as a Test Case* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1961), pg. 326

<sup>128</sup> Hughes address in Washington Hall, June 1, 1841, published in Kehoe, *Complete Works*, Vol. I, pg. 269.

<sup>129</sup> Hughes address at Carroll Hall, October 29, 1841, published in Kehoe, *Complete Works*, Vol I, pg. 276.

<sup>130</sup> Kehoe, *Complete Works* Vol. I., pg. 292.

John Hughes saw Catholics in general and Irish Catholics in particular as embattled and aggrieved, surrounded by hostile Anglo Protestants who were no more hospitable to Catholic culture than the Anglo Protestants of Ireland. Hughes and his flock might have sailed three thousand miles from their homeland, but the enemy hadn't changed – the enemy was the moralizing reformer, the civic elitist, the high-church Protestant who believed Irish Catholics needed to shed their superstitions and their cultural identity before they could be politically and socially redeemed. “We are, in truth, placed in the same situation as the Catholics were by the Kildare [Place] Society in Ireland,” Hughes told his fellow New York Irish in 1841.<sup>131</sup>

As he organized his constituents and centralized power in his own office, Hughes was not particularly concerned about the feelings and opinions of those who preferred the old, decentralized style of administering the growing diocese. The Sisters of Charity, an order of nuns based in Emmitsburg, Maryland, and therefore under the control of the diocese of Baltimore, incurred Hughes' wrath when they decided they could no longer administer an orphanage for young boys in the New York diocese. Hughes told the order's leader, Sister Rosalia Green, that such decisions were his, not theirs, to make. “I wish and request and require that you leave the diocese of New York with as little delay as possible,” he told the nun. “I shall tolerate no officer of a religious community, male or female, exercising without my previous advisement and consent, powers of disturbance and embarrassment, such as have been exercised ... in my diocese of late.”<sup>132</sup> Some of the Sisters of Charity left forthwith, but most, including the bishop's sister Angela, chose to remain under Hughes' authority.

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<sup>131</sup> Hughes address at Carroll Hall, October 29, 1841, Kehoe, *Complete Works*, Vol. I, pg. 272.

<sup>132</sup> Hughes to Sister Rosalia Green, August 24, 1846, Hughes Papers, Box 5, Archives of the Archdiocese of New York

The nuns were not alone in testing Hughes' limited idea of patience. A Dominican priest informed Hughes that he intended to resign his parish post and either return to Ireland or move to Rome. "I anticipate that this resignation will be agreeable to your sentiments & inclination," he wrote, "as you were pleased to tell me, not long since, that my ministry in New York ceased to be useful."<sup>133</sup>

Historian Jay Dolan chose his words carefully when he described Hughes' reign as the "emergence of boss rule in the church."<sup>134</sup> But as Daniel Patrick Moynihan pointed out, the principle of boss rule under the Irish, whether in politics or in the Catholic church, "was not tyranny, but order."<sup>135</sup> In a hierarchy like Tammany or the diocese of New York, power most certainly flowed from the top, but those at the bottom – whether they were aldermen or parish priests -- were not without influence in their wards and parishes, although, to be sure, they defied the boss at their peril. Hughes' constituency was a polyglot of nationalities that regarded each other with curiosity at best, suspicion at worst. Germans resented the power of Irish clerics; the French threatened a schism over control of parish churches, and the Irish carefully guarded their new-found power in Catholic New York. Tensions were such that some Germans refused to bury their dead in a diocesan cemetery with their fellow Catholics, the Irish. Daggar John told them to cease and desist, or else he would close their church. They gave in, grudgingly, to the bishop-boss.<sup>136</sup>

Hughes was candid about the goals of his top-down administration. He told Mayor Harper that he wanted Catholics "to become educated, and as a consequence, orderly."<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> John D. Urquart, O.P., to Hughes, September 5, 1841, Archives of the Archdiocese of New York, Reel 3.

<sup>134</sup> Jay P. Dolan, *The Immigrant Church* (Notre Dame, Ind.: The University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), pg. 165.

<sup>135</sup> Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting Pot*, pg. 227

<sup>136</sup> The cemetery controversy is explained in Jay P. Dolan, *The Immigrant Church*, pgs. 89-90.

<sup>137</sup> Hughes to Harper, May 17, 1844, published in Kehoe, *Complete Works*, Vol. I, pg. 462.

Anarchy in the face of hostility, Hughes believed, would play into the hands of powerful anti-Catholics – like Mayor Harper himself. Even after Hughes’ confrontation with Harper’s predecessor, Mayor Morris, Catholics continued to face hostility verging on violent opposition in New York and elsewhere. The inflammatory nativist tract, *Awful Disclosures of Maria Monk*, which chronicled tales of alleged sexual depravity in a French-Canadian convent, was published in New York in 1836, prompting a fresh round of nativist outrage against the city’s growing Catholic population. (Harper helped arrange for publication of *Maria Monk*, although the text did not bear the imprint of the family’s publishing company, Harper Brothers.) The tale was quickly proven to be a fraudulent hoax, but that did not prevent sales of *Maria Monk* reaching three-hundred thousand, a spectacular publishing success. When an Irish-Catholic church was burned just across the North River in Newark in 1854, George Templeton Strong thought it just a matter of time before similar violence broke out in Manhattan. “We may well have a memorable row here ... and perhaps a religious war within the next decade if this awful vague, mysterious, new element of Know Nothingism is as potent as its friends and political wooers seem to think it is,” Strong wrote. ‘I’m sick of Celtism; it’s nothing but imbecility, brag, and bad rhetoric. If the Know Nothings were only political, not politico-religious, I’d join them.’<sup>138</sup>

In the face of such sentiments, Hughes demanded and created an orderly Catholic organization under his command, just as Tammany sought to impose order on a fractious political party opposed by reform movements that often spoke the language of Know-Nothingism. Similarly, Irish gangs like the original Bowery Boys, led by future Congressman Mike Walsh, were quick to discipline those who acted “contrary to orders,” in Walsh’s words.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> Allen Nevins and Milton Halsey Thomas, eds., *The Diary of George Templeton Strong*, Vol. II, pgs. 182-183.

<sup>139</sup> Peter Adams, *The Bowery Boys: Street Corner Radicals and the Politics of Rebellion* (Westport, Ct.: Praeger, 2005), pg. xvi.



This emphasis on order, discipline and respect for hierarchy would have been familiar to Irish immigrants, especially those from areas where agrarian secret societies organized resistance to the dictates of landlords and British officials. Because of the risks involved, the secret societies demanded absolute loyalty from those whose interests they claimed to represent. Resistance without discipline and order invariably meant defeat and death. Turncoats and informers, therefore, could expect no mercy, and none was given. Hughes and Tammany both mobilized this framework of order and discipline as they confronted hostile forces in New York City.<sup>140</sup>

Richard Croker, a onetime gang member and boss of Tammany Hall from 1886 to 1901, put it another way during an interview with muckraker Lincoln Steffens, who asked why a political boss was necessary when the city already had a mayor and a City Council to govern its affairs. “That’s why,” Croker said in a moment of unexpected but welcome candor. The city required a boss, he said, “*because* there’s a mayor and a council and judges, and a hundred other men to deal with.”<sup>141</sup> Order in such a city required, in Croker’s view, a theoretically impartial boss who could arbitrate the conflicting interests and ambitions of the city’s political and commercial classes. Of course, Croker was able to retire from Tammany with enough wealth to raise thoroughbreds in Ireland – one of them won the Derby in England in 1907, much to the King’s embarrassment – so his decision-making clearly was not entirely impartial and civic-minded. But in his own way, he did provide a philosophical justification for boss rule, one that Dagger John Hughes surely would have understood and appreciated. Croker inherited from Kelly a political organization which emphasized hierarchy and discipline, owing much to the Church model as implemented by Dagger John Hughes. Not coincidentally, perhaps, Kelly married the

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<sup>140</sup> See George Potter, *To the Golden Door*, pg. 236-37, for a comparison between Tammany and the Ribbon Society in Ireland.

<sup>141</sup> Lincoln Steffens, *Autobiography* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Co., 1930), pg. 236 (emphasis added).

niece of Hughes' successor, Cardinal John McCloskey, an arrangement that did nothing to quell fears that Tammany Hall and the Catholic Church were indivisible.

If Hughes can be seen, then, as New York's first Irish-American political boss, it is ironic to note that he was by no means a partisan Democrat. In fact, his most-dependable ally was Governor Seward, a Whig who believed that his party could win over Irish Catholics if it could summon sympathy for their plight and concerns. When his Whig colleagues complained that Hughes influenced Catholics to vote Democratic in the gubernatorial election of 1840, Seward wrote, "From one end of the state to the other, the complaint rings that Bishop Hughes and his clergy have excited the Catholics against us. I know this to be untrue, totally untrue." Hughes, he wrote, was "my friend. I honor, respect, and confide in him."<sup>142</sup>

Although he was no abolitionist and could not even be described as anti-slavery, Hughes enjoyed the confidence of both Seward and Abraham Lincoln. Hughes carried out a diplomatic mission to Catholic Europe on Lincoln's behalf, and was close enough to Seward to offer him unsolicited advice about military strategy after South Carolina's attack on Fort Sumter. (On June 1, 1861, he told Seward that the Union ought to seize Fort Pickens in Florida "and take possession of the town of Pensacola," which should then be "fortified on the land side."<sup>143</sup>).

In his public actions, his speeches, his letters to leading journalists in New York, Hughes established a political and cultural framework for Tammany Hall's pluralistic politics (however incomplete and imperfect) under Irish-American rule. He mobilized the language of liberty on behalf of the rights of Catholics and other non-Protestants in New York, calling into question accepted meanings of citizenship, of identity, indeed, of Americanism itself. During a bitter and

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<sup>142</sup> Lee Benson, *The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy*, pg. 188

<sup>143</sup> Hughes to Seward, June 1, 1861, Archives of the Archdiocese of New York, Reel 2.

deeply divisive campaign against the city's Public School Society, which was a publicly funded, privately run self-appointed organization in charge of the city's schools, Hughes argued that the elite society's members were imposing their own religious views on others, in violation of the nation's founding laws. The "grievances of this case do not afflict us alone," he told his fellow Catholics. "They fall equally upon other religious denominations. And while it is the Catholics today, it may be the Universalists, or the Jews, or the Baptists, or the Unitarians tomorrow who may suffer."<sup>144</sup> This demand for religious tolerance was neither created nor monopolized by Irish-Catholic public figures. But in New York City in the 1840s, John Hughes was the loudest and most-controversial critic of Anglo-Protestant cultural hegemony, and the most-passionate advocate for the claims of immigrants – most of whom were fellow Catholics – on the American promise of equality and justice. Daniel O'Connell once described priests in Ireland as "the natural protectors of the people ... the only persons who can make the people thoroughly sensible of their political degradation."<sup>145</sup> Hughes saw himself playing a similar role for a Catholics, particularly Irish Catholics, who found themselves in the hostile environment of antebellum New York.

Hughes' campaign against the Public School Society in the early 1840s is not considered part of the Tammany narrative – no general history of Tammany focuses on this bitter cultural-political battle which unfolded just three years before the election of a nativist Mayor in 1844. But the school war is important in understanding the cultural battles which Tammany fought in the decades to come. Hughes framed the issue as part of a trans-Atlantic continuum of contempt for Irish-Catholic culture and claims to civic leadership. Irish immigrants who recalled the bitter

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<sup>144</sup> Hughes speech in Washington Hall, New York, February 11, 1841, published in Kehoe, *Complete Works*, pg. 244.

<sup>145</sup> William Shannon, *The American Irish*, pg. 21

controversies in Ireland over the Kildare Place Society in the 1820s came to see in New York's Public School Society the same proselytizing anti-Catholic agency which was part of a larger effort to refashion Irish-Catholics into British Protestants during the Emancipation crisis in Ireland. The school war served as a template for later cultural battles pitting Tammany against reformers, allowing Tammany, with varying degrees of justice, to portray its critics as recognizable figures from a remembered past of oppression, poverty, and hunger. It certainly didn't hurt Tammany that its antagonists, ranging from nativist mayors to anti-immigrant abolitionists to Progressive-era social Darwinists, tended to be affluent or middle-class Protestants of British heritage who spoke a language of moral reform interpreted as hostile to Irish-Catholic culture, whether that culture was found in the hills of Donegal or the tenements of the Sixth Ward. So when the high-minded Fusion Committee described Tammany leader Charles Francis Murphy as a "graduate of the Gas House Gang, ex-bartender, street-car driver and saloonkeeper," the Irish in New York no doubt heard echoes of the Rev. Richard Warner, the English clergyman who argued against Catholic Emancipation in 1826 because Catholics lacked what he called "a plain, practical Protestant education" and were "chained" to ignorance "by the Popish priests."<sup>146</sup>

The bitter political and cultural confrontation over public schools was the first self-consciously Irish-Catholic political mobilization in the city's history. Not coincidentally, the conflict erupted over the role of religion in the city's schools, just as the Bible war in Ireland centered on education and helped muster support for O'Connell's mass mobilization on behalf of Catholic emancipation.

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<sup>146</sup> The quote about Murphy is from *The New York Times*, October 2, 1913; the quote from Warner is from his broadside, *Catholic Emancipation, Incompatible With the Established Religion, Liberty, Laws and Protestant Succession of the British Empire* (London: C.J.G. & F. Rivington, 1826)

The Public School Society of New York, an outgrowth of an organization called the Free School Society, was founded in 1826 as a private institution charged with maintaining and building nonsectarian common schools for the city's growing population of school-aged children. Some religious schools received city funding until 1824, when a Baptist church was found to be using school funds to erect churches. The Common Council quickly stopped funding religious schools and instead empowered the PSS to expand its privately run system. The society's trustees may have been sincere and concerned civic elites, but their notion of non-sectarian education was, perhaps inevitably, imbued with Protestant assumptions and attitudes, evident in their selection of the King James Bible for students' lessons. For Irish Catholics with memories of religious oppression in Ireland, the presence of Protestantism even in generic form conveyed cultural disrespect.<sup>147</sup> Catholics demanded in vain that their children read from the Douay Bible, which included notes and commentary to help interpret the readings. This Bible war in New York had a secular front as well, as Catholics complained about textbooks that contained disparaging phrases, including a description of the Spanish conquistador Fernando Cortez as a "papist" and the Protestant theologian John Huss as a "zealous reformer from Popery" who had been burned as a heretic by "deceitful Catholics."<sup>148</sup> Another textbook asserted that the Catholic Church was a center of "superstition," and that those who practiced the faith were "apparently destitute of true devotion."<sup>149</sup>

Bishop Hughes was abroad on a fundraising mission to Europe in January, 1840, when the city's Catholics found a new and surprising political champion, the Whig Governor of New York, William Seward. Tammany Hall and the city's Democratic Party had not taken up the

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<sup>147</sup> For more on Irish attitudes towards Protestantism in New York, see Diane Ravitch, *The Great School Wars: A History of the New York City Public Schools* (Baltimore, Md.: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), Chapter 1.

<sup>148</sup> Diane Ravitch, *The Great School Wars*, pg. 52

<sup>149</sup> Richard Shaw, *Dagger John*, pg. 141

cause of Catholic immigrants, or immigrants in general, as they would in later years. Seward, a political rarity in that he was an abolitionist who also sympathized with the plight of the Irish in Ireland as well as in the U.S., saw a political opportunity for himself and his party by placing the Whigs on the side of this growing segment of New York's population. Addressing the state Legislature, Seward proposed the establishment of publicly funded schools in which the "children of foreigners ... may be instructed by teachers speaking the same language with themselves and professing the same faith."<sup>150</sup> Catholic leaders wasted little time in presenting a petition to the Common Council to apply for public funding for their schools. The Public School Society moved with equal alacrity, joining with some of the city's leading Protestant clergymen in pleading with members of the Common Council, each of whom served as an ex-officio member of the PPS, to put aside the Catholic petition.

It is a measure of Catholic political power in 1840 that the Common Council's Board of Assistant Alderman rejected the Catholic petition almost unanimously (the vote was 16-1 against funding Catholic schools). The assistant aldermen might well have noticed divisions within the Catholic community itself. The lay editors of the *Truth Teller* opposed Seward's plan, perhaps because it came from a Whig looking to build a broader base for his party. But the *Catholic Register*, the voice of the Catholic hierarchy in New York, favored Seward's approach, arguing that public schools already were sectarian, so Catholic schools were as deserving of public money as Protestant schools disguised as non-sectarian. The Public School Society offered an olive branch to the city's Catholic leaders, appointing a committee "to examine the books in use in the Public Schools ... with a view to ascertain and report whether they contain any thing derogatory to the Roman Catholic Church or any of its religious tenets with power to

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<sup>150</sup> Ravitch, *The Great School Wars*, pg. 37.

communicate with such persons of that Church as may be authorized to meet them in reference to such alterations.”<sup>151</sup> The committee had sporadic contact with two high-ranking priests in an effort to identify Catholic objections, but the Catholic community provided a confused, often rancorous, response. The editors of the *Truth Teller* accused Whigs of injecting politics into the debate when they canvassed church-goers outside St. Peter’s Church, while Father John Power, a high-ranking prelate, launched an intemperate, personal attack on members of the Public School Society.<sup>152</sup> The Catholic community appeared to be divided and powerless.

In late July, however, John Hughes returned to New York from Europe. Order was soon restored. “My people are divided,” he told Seward, “and my Sacred Office requires that I should be a father to all.”<sup>153</sup> His strategy for achieving unity soon became clear – he would not cooperate with the Public School Society. When members politely asked when they might hear from him regarding their proposed revisions of school textbooks, Hughes curtly replied that he was at “a loss to account for the supposition on the part of your committee that I was engaged in the special examination of the objectionable passages, with a view to assist the Committee in their laudable undertaking.” He was, he wrote, too busy – his “many and incessant duties” left him with no “sufficient leisure for this purpose.”<sup>154</sup> He was indeed a busy man, for he was about to embark on a political campaign designed to force civic institutions such as the Public School Society and the Common Council to recognize the right of religious minorities to reject the values and norms of the city’s dominant culture.

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<sup>151</sup> Minutes of the Board of Trustees, Public School Society, meeting of May 1, 1840, New-York Historical Society.

<sup>152</sup> *Freeman’s Journal*, July 4, 1840.

<sup>153</sup> Hughes to Seward, August 29, 1840, Hughes Papers, Box 4 (Reel 2), Archives of the Archdiocese of New York.

<sup>154</sup> Hughes to Patrick Collins of the Public School Society, September 15, 1840, Minutes of the Board of Trustees of the Public School Society, New-York Historical Society.

Over the next several months, Hughes embarked on an extraordinary public campaign to defeat the Public School Society and those civic elites who supported it. In doing so, he identified a grievance rooted in a trans-Atlantic Irish memory of religious and cultural domination in Ireland. The forces of oppression in New York City, he argued, were no different from those which his flock confronted in Ireland. The Public School Society was the Kildare Place Society; its mission was the same – to separate the Irish from their faith and culture, and so make them more reputable, trustworthy citizens of the Protestant republic.

The new, recalcitrant position of the church did not pass unnoticed. The Public School Society concluded that “the cooperation of the Catholic clergy in effecting an expurgation of the books cannot be relied on,” so the Society resolved to “accomplish the work without them.”<sup>155</sup> Hughes indeed had no intention of cooperating with the Society. He confided his strategy to an unnamed fellow priest, saying that he planned “to detach the children of the Holy Faith from the dangerous connexion and influence of the public schools.”<sup>156</sup> Such a campaign at such a moment in the city’s history may well have been needlessly provocative, but it is worth noting that Hughes began his historic confrontation with the Public School Society immediately after returning from a trip that included visits to London, where he met with Daniel O’Connell, and to his native Ireland, where he saw “the stripes of ... martyrdom” inflicted by “an apostate nation.”<sup>157</sup> O’Connell, of course, played an important role in destroying the Kildare Place Society school system and persuading the British government to fund sectarian schools in Ireland.

Unfortunately, there is no record of any conversation between the two men regarding the similarities of their causes. But Hughes did visit the government-supported Catholic schools in

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<sup>155</sup> Minutes of the Board of Trustees of the Public School Society, September 25, 1840, New-York Historical Society.

<sup>156</sup> Hughes to unknown recipient (addressed as “Right Rev. and Dear Brother in Christ), August 27, 1840, Hughes Papers, Box 4, Archives of the Archdiocese of New York.

<sup>157</sup> Richard Shaw, *Dagger John*, pg. 137.



Ireland, concluding, perhaps not surprisingly, that they were well-run and worthy of emulation. The students, he said, were “masters of the subjects on which they were examined.” He added: “And such order ... I have not seen in any establishment at any time or place.” These schools, he told a New York audience, were supplying the sort of education of which “the tyrannical government of Britain tried to deprive the Irish people.”<sup>158</sup>

Hughes clearly saw the Irish model of state-supported denominational schools as the answer to Protestant hegemony in the city’s public schools. The battle to obtain those funds in New York, however, would require a highly focused, disciplined political mobilization along the lines of the O’Connell movement in Ireland in the 1820s. Hughes viewed the public school issue as an opportunity to rally Catholics around a single message through and, in the process, strengthen their bond with the Church’s institutions. The effort was not without political implications as well, for Hughes’ campaign led to the creation of a separate (and short-lived) Catholic political party whose power and numbers caught the attention of Tammany Hall.

Through the summer of 1840 and into fall, Hughes rallied the city’s Catholics against the public schools by continuing to portray New York’s civic elites in terms that his listeners would easily understand and resent. “In England,” he said at a meeting on September 21, “there is an officer who is designated the ‘Keeper of the King’s Conscience,’ and the Trustees of the Public School Society are becoming the guardians of the consciences of both the Catholics and Protestants.” He argued that if the city refused to fund Catholic schools, “let it be branded on the flag of America that Catholics were denied and deprived of equal rights.” And he portrayed the Public School Society as elitist and undemocratic. The Society, he said, “was not at any time

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<sup>158</sup> Hughes speech at Carroll Hall, March 30, 1841, published in Kehoe, *Complete Works*, pg. 256.

from its origin the representative of the state, but merely a private corporation” made up of some of the city’s wealthiest citizens.<sup>159</sup>

Behind the scenes, Governor Seward encouraged Hughes to pursue his aggressive campaign against the PSS. “I need not assure you of my sympathy in regard to the ultimate object of your efforts, the education of the poor,” Seward told Hughes. “I content myself therefore with saying that it will afford me great pleasure to consult with you freely on the subject whenever it fits your convenience.” Seward added that Hughes would “have what support is in my power.”<sup>160</sup> Under Hughes’ leadership, Catholic leaders appealed to the Board of Aldermen for relief, leading to a dramatic confrontation between Hughes and his critics in the Council chambers in late October, when the aldermen held hearings on the new Catholic appeal for school funding. Hughes’ two-day performance before the Council, on October 29 and 30, 1840, was a milestone in New York politics and, arguably, an important moment in United States history. Never before had a high-ranking Roman Catholic prelate challenged critics so directly and with such great effect in such an overtly political setting. New York newspapers covered the event as a cultural and political spectacular, and hundreds of ordinary citizens crowded into the Common Council’s chambers in City Hall to witness the great debate. An array of speakers argued the case against funding Catholic schools, including a handful of Protestant clerics and two attorneys for the Public School Society. But only one person spoke on behalf of the Catholic claim: Dagger John Hughes.

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<sup>159</sup> Kehoe, *Complete Works*, pgs. 100, 54, and 73. Historian Martin L. Meenagh noted that of the 34 members of the PSS’s executive, 23 were wealthy financiers. See “Archbishop John Hughes and the New York Schools Controversy of 1840-43,” *American Nineteenth Century History*, vol. 5, No. 1, Spring, 2004, pg. 49.

<sup>160</sup> Seward to Hughes, September 11, 1840, Hughes papers, Box 4 (Reel 2), Archives of the Archdiocese of New York.

During the two long days of speeches, John Hughes held the floor for a combined six and a half hours. His Ulster accent, with its ascending cadence taking the edge off even his sternest declarative sentences, marked him as an outsider, a foreigner, as did his very aura as a supposed agent of international popery. A lawyer for the Society, Hiram Ketchum, asked why “foreign Potentate” should decide “whether the Bible should be read in our common schools.” Ketchum wondered if the Pope would allow the Declaration of Independence or the Constitution to be read in the city’s public schools.<sup>161</sup>

In his long reply to Ketchum and other cultural and political foes, Hughes ingeniously positioned the lawyer’s arguments on behalf of the Public School Society as “better suited” to defend “Church establishments in Spain, Italy or England than ... the republican doctrines of this hemisphere.”<sup>162</sup> Hughes, the immigrant from County Tyrone, framed his argument as particularly American and republican, presenting himself as a better-informed guardian of the nation’s values than his native-born antagonists. At the same time, he returned again to the lessons the Irish learned under British rule. He quoted at length a sardonic speech by Daniel O’Connell in defense of the “Catholic rabble” which lacked the “education” and “influence of polished society,” a chip-on-the-shoulder trope which would become a standard part of Tammany rhetoric when it sought to discredit criticism from well-born reformers. But in the end, Hughes’ message was pluralistic and inclusive. “We are a portion of this community,” he said. “We desire to be nothing greater than any other portion; we are not content to be made less.”<sup>163</sup>

Hughes’ performance won him the grudging respect of foes and the undisputed leadership of his flock, marking him as far more than a spiritual leader in the nation’s most-

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<sup>161</sup> Richard Shaw, *Dagger John*, pgs. 151-152.

<sup>162</sup> Kehoe, *Complete Works*, pg. 239

<sup>163</sup> Kehoe, *Complete Works*, pgs. 143-183.

important city. The *Catholic Miscellany*, based in South Carolina, understood precisely what had taken place in New York's Council chambers during the two long days of hearings. Bishop Hughes, the paper reported, emerged "not as a priest or a theologian" but as an "earnest advocate of a great civil and religious right." The secular New York dailies, invariably hostile to the Catholic claim, conceded that Hughes was a formidable antagonist. "No one could hear him without painful regret that such powers of mind ... and such apparent sincerity of purpose were trammelled with a fake system of religion," wrote the *New York Observer*, unable to hide its contempt for Catholicism even as it conceded Hughes' dominant performance.<sup>164</sup>

Hughes' testimony in the Common Council was more than a personal triumph. It marked the beginning of a new era for the Irish Catholics who would soon become the driving force of Tammany Hall politics in New York. In front of the city's civic and religious elites, some of whom no doubt had never laid eyes on a Roman Catholic bishop before, Hughes gave voice to the values, grievances, and narratives which Tammany would use to such powerful effect under Irish control. He used the American language of rights to advocate for the city's Catholic minority, but his speech bore the unmistakably Irish cadence of grievance. And he unified and mobilized the city's (predominately Irish) Catholic population as nobody had ever done before.

Unity, however, promised little in a city in which Catholics had little political influence. That stark message was delivered when the Board of Alderman voted 15-1 against the Catholic appeal for a share of common-school funds, despite the newly re-elected Seward's continued support for Hughes' cause. The bishop returned to the political arena, denouncing the "petty array of bigotry" in the Common Council and announcing that the campaign to win public funds

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<sup>164</sup> *U.S. Catholic Miscellany*, November 14, 1840; *New York Observer*, November 7, 1840

for Catholic schools would move to Albany, home of his ally, Seward.<sup>165</sup> Hughes had argued that he spoke not as a civil leader but as the guardian of Catholic consciences, but after the aldermen turned down the Catholic claim, he became an overt political boss, plotting strategy, making alliances, mobilizing voters, and delivering stump speeches designed to rouse resentment against Protestant proprieties. When he was introduced to cheers at a meeting in Washington Hall, one of the city's largest venues, Hughes slyly told listeners that they ought to be more discreet. "My friends," he said, "take care of your cheering, for if the advocate of the school society be passing by, he will say this is a meeting of Whigs or Democrats. He, you know, is not obliged to reason like other men, and if he should pass by and reason so, the fault will be yours for cheering, and not his for foolish reasoning."<sup>166</sup>

The Washington Hall meeting led to creation of a special Catholic committee, which organized a petition drive and parish-level meetings designed to pressure the state Legislature into acting on Governor Seward's words. Seven thousand Catholics signed the committee's petition asking legislators to revise New York City's common school law to break the monopoly of the Public School Society. A duly impressed state Senate asked Governor Seward's secretary of state, John Spencer, to investigate the claim. As Spencer was doing so, New York voters went to the polls for a round of municipal elections. Democrats easily captured the Mayor's office and control of the Common Council, but the lone alderman who supported the Catholic petition for funding, Daniel Pentz, was defeated even though he was a Democrat. Bishop Hughes' new newspaper, the *Freeman's Journal*, contended that Pentz was the victim of anti-Catholic bigotry.

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<sup>165</sup> Richard Shaw, *Dagger John*, pg. 159.

<sup>166</sup> Kehoe, *Complete Works*, Vol. I, pg. 242.

<sup>167</sup> *Freeman's Journal*, April 17, 1841.

In late April, after the municipal elections in New York, Spencer released his report on the city's school controversy. It was a stunning blow for the Public School Society. Spencer agreed with Catholic claims that the society's notion of non-sectarianism was, in fact, a form of Protestantism. He assailed the Society for appalling enrollment figures, charging that a majority of the city's school-aged children were not in the classroom, evidence, he argued, of the Society's refusal to accommodate the values of parents. Many citizens, Spencer argued, concluded that the Society was intent on coercion rather than education. Spencer wrote that the society "calls for no action or cooperation on the part of those parents, other than the entire submission of their children to the government and guidance of others, probably strangers, and who are in no way accountable to these parents."<sup>168</sup> The Spencer report recommended a new, decentralized system of ward-based schools under the control of elected trustees who would, in turn, send a representative to a city Board of Commissioners, which would supervise the Public School Society's schools. Meanwhile, Catholic schools which educated poor children (nearly all of them did) would be funded with public money, but would be kept under the control of Catholic authorities.

The Spencer report was a landmark challenge to Anglo-Protestant cultural hegemony in New York City. The issues Spencer raised were the very issues Hughes raised, issues which called into question the right of a majority population to dictate the terms of citizenship, cultural authority, and civic engagement in a diverse, pluralistic society. Dagger John Hughes forced the issue; William Seward facilitated it. They were an odd combination – Seward, the abolitionist Whig whose party opposed Catholic claims, Hughes, an anti-abolitionist (for lack of a better term) who challenged Whig authority in the city. But together they envisioned a city where a

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<sup>168</sup> Diane Ravitch, *The Great School Wars*, pg. 63

majority population and its values would create civic space for those who objected to New York's dominant culture and polity.

John Hughes believed that the Public School Society was doomed, but the Society was not prepared to surrender. The indefatigable Hiram Ketchum launched a bitter lobbying campaign in Albany to head off any attempt to write legislation based on Spencer's recommendations. Ketchum's campaign inspired another round of attacks on Hughes and the Catholic position in the city's public prints, with the Herald's James Gordon Bennett, a baptized Catholic, joining the usual chorus led by the *New York Observer* and the *Journal of Commerce*. The Public School Society's lobbyist in Albany distributed an anti-Catholic diatribe published in the *Journal of Commerce* under the pseudonym "Americus" to members of the state Senate – the piece referred to Catholic "sticklers for equality" who, in fact, were "bigoted" and "arrogant."<sup>169</sup> The article reprinted an alleged order of excommunication of a priest, which purported to condemn not just his soul but individual body parts (including, of course, his genitals). The alleged church document actually was an adapted passage from the novel *Tristram Shandy*. This revelation allowed Hughes to command the high ground, and he was happy to fire away. The Public School Society, he told a crowd of Catholic supporters, had conducted itself in a fashion "worthy of those men who ushered Maria Monk into the world," a reference to the notorious, and false, memoirs of a former nun. The Society was forced on the defensive, publicly condemning "the conduct of a member of the Board who improperly ... placed on the desks of the Senate chamber ... a gross libel on the religious sentiments of our Roman Catholic fellow citizens."<sup>170</sup> Another truculent voice of anti-Catholicism, William Craig Brownlee, a Presbyterian minister, was shouted down inside his own church by Irish mobs shouting "Maria Monk." Bishop Hughes'

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<sup>169</sup> *Journal of Commerce*, May 20, 1841

<sup>170</sup> Minutes of the Board of Trustees of the Public School Society, August 6, 1841, New-York Historical Society.

foray against the public schools surely had become a cultural offensive, precisely as he intended it to be.

It did not, however, provide the result he might have anticipated. Although the Spencer report had the support of Governor Seward and his partisan antagonists, the Democrats, who were become concerned about Catholic sensibilities in an election year, the state Legislature decided in May, 1841, to postpone consideration of a school reform bill until the new year, well after the fall's state legislative elections. Hughes chose this moment to intervene in politics as no Catholic clergyman had done before, and none since. After another series of meetings through the spring and summer designed to rally political support for Catholic school funding, Hughes announced on October 29 the formation of a separate Catholic political party, dubbed the Carroll Hall ticket for the venue in which Hughes made his announcement, in the coming election. The bishop dined with Whig boss Thurlow Weed, a frequent correspondent of his, hours before the Carroll Hall meeting, suggesting that Hughes may have briefed Weed about his endorsements. Whether he did or not, the meeting with Weed was further evidence of Hughes' involvement in local politics.<sup>171</sup>

Dagger John did not try to hide his prominent role as the de-facto chairman and organizer of the Carroll Hall ticket. Instead, after insisting that it was “not my province to mingle in politics,” he publicly announced the names of candidates who had his personal approval, candidates, he said, who were “friendly to an alteration in the present system of public education.”

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<sup>171</sup> For more on this meeting, see Richard Shaw, *Dagger John*, pg. 166



“We have now resolved to give our suffrage in favor of no man who is an enemy to us ... and to support every friend we can find among men of all political parties,” he told a crowd of supporters. “You have often voted for others, and they did not vote for you, but now you are determined to uphold with your own votes, your own rights.” In previous meetings, Hughes’ speeches often sounded like homilies even when they addressed political issues, but on this evening, the bishop let loose with a stem-winding appeal for unity, order, action, and victory. On the election day, he told the audience, “go, like free men, with dignity and calmness, entertaining due respect for your fellow citizens and their opinions, and deposit your votes.” Contemporary accounts of the speech noted that listeners waved their hats, stomped their feet, and shouted themselves hoarse as Hughes finished this remarkably overt intervention in a tightly contested election.<sup>172</sup>

The Carroll Hall ticket was a curious amalgam: Of the 13 Assembly candidates Hughes endorsed, 10 already were on the ballot as candidates of the Democratic Party, and of those 10, seven responded to an appeal by the New York *Evening Post* by asserting that they supported the Public School Society even though Hughes insisted that they supported the Spencer report’s recommendations. Three Assembly candidates and two state Senate candidates ran exclusively on the Carroll Hall ticket.

Hughes, as usual, provoked a furious reaction from the city’s leading newspapers. Pro-Whig newspapers insisted that Hughes was a tool of Tammany Hall; Democratic papers argued that the bishop was plotting with Seward and the Whigs against Tammany Democrats. It’s hardly a wonder the newspapers were confused – when Samuel Morse, one of the city’s leading nativists, and the anti-Catholic *Journal of Commerce* responded to the Carroll Hall ticket by

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<sup>172</sup> Kehoe, *Complete Works*, Vol. I, pgs. 280-281

endorsing a ticket of their own, three of the presumably nativist candidates on the Morse-*Journal* ticket also had Hughes' endorsement. It is hard not to conclude that in the potentially explosive dispute over school funding, some candidates found much to admire in both the Hughes and Morse positions.

The legislative elections of 1841 were a Democratic triumph as they captured both houses of the Legislature from Seward's Whigs. All 10 Democratic Assembly candidates with Carroll Hall's endorsement won, but a more meaningful result came in the three Assembly districts in which Hughes' candidates ran separate campaigns. While they polled only about two thousand votes, Hughes' candidates proved to be spoilers, splitting the Democrats and allowing Whigs to prevail. The message was clear: an identifiable Catholic, mostly Irish, voting bloc could hold the balance of power between the Whigs and the Democrats. Tammany Hall had tried to evade the public school issue until now, but the election of 1841 put an end to the Hall's straddling. The city's Whigs, on the other hand, moved in the other direction, appalled by the spectacle of a Catholic bishop functioning as a de-facto political boss, even if that boss happened to consult with the Whig governor (Seward) and, indeed, the Whig boss himself (Weed).

In the opening weeks of the new legislative session, Assemblyman William B. Maclay visited Hughes as he prepared to introduce a new school reform bill. Maclay was one of the candidates who managed to win the endorsement of both Samuel Morse and Hughes, but while he may have demonstrated flexibility during the campaign, he was now on a collision course with the Public School Society. He was a Democrat, but he met with Hughes at the behest of Seward, who asked Hughes to consult with Maclay about the "best and most effectual manner"

of winning support for the new school-reform effort.<sup>173</sup> Maclay's legislation framed the Public School Society as an unacceptable, unaccountable monopoly that had lost the public's confidence. He proposed that the city's school system be run on a ward level, accountable to locally elected trustees and to a citywide board. There was, however, no mention of funds for Catholic schools, and no mention of religious instruction in publicly funded district schools.

The Maclay bill overcame furious objections from Seward's fellow Whigs in New York City, passing with the overwhelming support of Democrats in the Assembly. Hughes was delighted with the result even though the bill did not achieve his goal of public funding for Catholic schools. He told Seward that he was willing to give the new system "a fair trial," and he warned the state's top Whig that his party ought to support the measure, lest the city's Catholics flock "into the faithless arms" of Democrats, who, Hughes, insisted, supported the bill only "from necessity."<sup>174</sup> When the bill seemed stalled in the state Senate in April, 1842, Hughes and his flock made preparations to field another independent ticket, this one in the city's looming elections for Mayor and Common Council in April. Democrats got the message: The Maclay bill was passed into law, and the Public School Society's monopoly passed into history. Although the Society continued to function for several years afterwards, the Maclay legislation allowed for the creation of a new school system under the supervision of elected trustees. The city's Catholic leaders celebrated the defeat of an "oligarchy" based on "anti-republican principles," language which emphasized that the city's mostly immigrant Catholics were on the side of bedrock American values, while its antagonists were the stewards of an outdated aristocracy.<sup>175</sup>

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<sup>173</sup> Seward to Hughes, February 7, 1842, Box 4 (Reel 3) Hughes Papers, Archives of the Archdiocese of New York

<sup>174</sup> Hughes to Seward, March 22, 1842, Box 4 (Reel 3), Archives of the Archdiocese of New York.

<sup>175</sup> See *Freeman's Journal*, April 9 and May 7, 1842.

A portion of the city's electorate did not share the Catholics' joy or its analysis of the Public School Society. Walt Whitman, writing in the journal *Aurora*, complained that passage of the Maclay bill would allow the "teaching of Catholic superstition." He was disappointed that his fellow Democrats caved into Hughes and the "filthy Irish rabble" he led, wondering if the "dregs of foreign filth" would be "permitted to dictate what Tammany must do."<sup>176</sup> Two days after passage of the Maclay bill, when voters went to the polls to choose a mayor and aldermen, gangs rampaged through the heavily Irish Sixth Ward and then moved on to assail Hughes' residence adjacent to St. Patrick's Cathedral. The message surely was unmistakable: New York City was no more hospitable to Catholics than was Ireland, a place where violent secret societies roamed the countryside and constitutional politics existed side by side with more shadowy organizations.

John Hughes did not achieve his immediate object, but, in a sense, the campaign for public funding was a means to a larger political and cultural end. Hughes identified a grievance rooted in a trans-Atlantic Irish memory of religious and cultural domination in Ireland. The forces of oppression in New York City, he argued, were no different in New York City than those which his Irish flock confronted in Ireland. The Public School Society was the Kildare Place Society; its mission was the same – to separate the Irish from their faith and culture, and so make them more reputable, trustworthy citizens.

John Hughes contended that the founding ideals of the United States created a place for minority groups who had the right to reject the values of a dominant culture if they found them offensive. He used the language of liberty to argue with his antagonists; he used the power of memory to unify the Irish portion of his flock. This mobilization, like that of O'Connell's in the

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<sup>176</sup> Tyler Anbinder, *Five Points*, pg. 155.

1820s, demonstrated the power of politics even in the face of more-powerful cultural and political forces.

Two years after school reform became law in New York City, voters elected James Harper as Mayor as the forces of nativism took hold in cities throughout the American northeast. There was continued violence in New York City, too, but nothing like the church burnings in Philadelphia in 1844 took place in New York City. John Hughes had made it clear that New York's Catholics were prepared to defend their rights as Americans, preferably in the ballot box but in the streets if necessary.

## CHAPTER THREE

### A GREAT HUNGER

The fall of 1845 brought frightening news to New York's Irish community: Ireland's potato crop failed, seemingly overnight. The *New York Tribune* reported the failure in an anxious tone. "We regret to have to state that we have had communications from more than one well-informed correspondent, announcing ... the appearance of what is called 'cholera' in the potatoes in Ireland," the paper's editors noted. The *Tribune* account quoted a farmer who reported that his potato crop had turned black and slimy overnight.<sup>177</sup> Other reports noted that a sickly odor lingered over the blasted fields, not quite the smell of death, but frightening all the same.

The potato was but one crop among many harvested on Irish soil, but it was the one crop on which nearly half the island's eight million people depended for their daily existence. Adult male cottiers and landless farm laborers consumed as many as fourteen pounds of potatoes a day; the other crops they tended were used to pay the rent.<sup>178</sup> Irish Americans in New York knew better than their fellow citizens that a prolonged failure would be catastrophic. And so it was.

The potato failed again in 1846, and again, and again, year after year, until 1852. By then, a million people were dead and another two million were across the sea or on their way to England, to Canada, to Australia, and, of course, to the United States. Huge swaths of the island, particularly in the Gaelic redoubts of the west and southwest, were virtually depopulated. Farmlands that once provided sustenance for millions were converted to grazing pastures for livestock. Cabins that once were home to peasant families were pulled down, the tenants either

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<sup>177</sup> *The New York Tribune*, October 4, 1845

<sup>178</sup> Cormac O Grada, *The Great Irish Famine* (London: The Macmillan Press, 1989), pg. 25. For a study of how the potato became a staple for the European poor, see Redcliffe N. Salaman, *The History and Social Influence of the Potato* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1985). Salaman also investigates the causes of the potato failure in Ireland and its devastating consequences.

dead, evicted, or simply vanished. A census of Ireland in 1840 counted more than eight million people. By 1850, the number was 6.5 million, and by 1910, it was fewer than five million.<sup>179</sup>

The Irish nation scattered across the Atlantic world and beyond, carrying among its possessions the searing, bitter memories of hunger and deprivation in the midst of plenty, memories that would permanently and unalterably color its narrative of grievance and exile, memories that were destined to inform Irish identity and their view of the world.

Or not. The question of whether the Great Famine produced what the sociologist Maurice Halbwachs called a “collective memory” among the Irish – emigrants as well as those who remained in their native land -- remains contested among historians.<sup>180</sup> In the 1940s, to mark the Famine’s centenary, an Irish government commission compiled oral recollections passed down to the children or grandchildren of Famine survivors.<sup>181</sup> Their stories centered on memories of appalling deprivation and injustice, although some respondents also spoke of humane landlords and effective private charity. Irish historians disagree on what, if anything, these memories preserve. Economic historian Cormac O Grada argued in 2001 against the notion, popularized by Irish politicians, celebrities, and academics alike, that these stories constitute an agreed-upon national narrative. While sympathetic to the plight of the Famine’s victims, O Grada noted that the catastrophe did not affect all classes and all regions in the same way, and so could hardly produce a single collective memory. Even if it did, however, O Grada insisted that the

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<sup>179</sup> These figures are quoted in nearly all works about the Famine, including Christine Kinealy, *This Great Calamity: The Irish Famine 1845-52* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 2006), pgs. 295-96

<sup>180</sup> See Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992). For a critique of Halbwachs, see Jeffrey K. Olick, *The Politics of Regret: On Collective Memory and Historical Responsibility* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

<sup>181</sup> The phrase “Famine survivor” will be used here to describe any person who lived through the catastrophe, including children born from 1845 to 1852, the years when the potato crop failed. The Irish government’s collection of Famine memories is housed in the National Folklore Collection at University College, Dublin.

preservation of memory in folklore is “informed by a simplistic understanding of the past” and “always tells us more about the present than it does the past.”<sup>182</sup>

On the other hand, another Famine scholar, Christine Kinealy, has argued that “folk history of the Famine can sharpen and give depth” to the variety of interpretations which the catastrophe has inspired.<sup>183</sup> Preserved in poetry, ballads, oral tradition, and popular histories, folk memories of the Famine include stories of armed agents of the state summoned to carry out evictions – often supervised by Irish middlemen acting on behalf of English or Anglo-Irish landlords -- and to prevent the starving Irish from seizing shipments of food designated for profitable export. In a published version of Famine folk memories, children of survivors recalled being told of “redcoat soldiers” presiding over evictions and guarding “meal carts” carrying food to ports.<sup>184</sup> While historians still debate issues such as the export – and import – of food at the time, it is important to recognize that folk memories of evictions and deprivation produced a trans-Atlantic narrative of injustice. From the blackened potato fields of Ireland grew a bumper crop of bitterness and rage, as expressed in a contemporary poem by Aubrey Thomas De Vere in *Dublin University Magazine* in 1849:

*England, thy sinful past hath found thee out  
Washed was the blood-stain from the perfumed hand:  
O'er lips self-righteous smiles demure and bland  
Flickered, though still thine eye betrayed a doubt,  
When round thy palace rose a People's shout –  
'Famine makes lean the Helots' helpless land.'*

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<sup>182</sup> Cormac O Grada, “Famine, Trauma, and Memory,” *Bealoideas: The Journal of the Folklore Society of Ireland*, No. 69, 2001, pgs. 121-143.

<sup>183</sup> Christine Kinealy, *A Death-Dealing Famine: The Great Hunger in Ireland* (London: Pluto Press, 1992), pg. 14.

<sup>184</sup> Cathal Poirteir, *Famine Echoes* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1995). Pg. 71, 235.



*What makes them Helots? Gibbet, scourge, and brand.*

*Plaguing with futile rage a faith devout.* <sup>185</sup>

Famine survivors, already inclined to regard the British as a hostile force in their native land, absorbed a new and fundamental lesson about power: Those who possess it will never be helpless, and those who are denied it are doomed to starvation and exile when resources become scarce. In his last speech in the House of Commons, a dying Daniel O’Connell, his once-powerful voice reduced to a whisper, told his colleagues in early 1847 that “Ireland is in your power. If you do not save her, she cannot save herself.” <sup>186</sup> Seated with his fellow Tories on the opposition benches, future Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli was unmoved, describing O’Connell as a “feeble old man muttering from a table.” <sup>187</sup> O’Connell was correct – Ireland could not save itself. Whatever gains O’Connell made in achieving Catholic representation in the House of Commons, whatever influence Irish MPs wielded as allies of Britain’s Whig party, Ireland’s relationship with London remained asymmetrical. Britain held the power. Ireland, in its hour of need, was powerless.

The Irish understood that their fate was in the hands of others. “The Potatoe crop is much worse than the last,” wrote James Prendergast, a farmer in O’Connell’s home county of Kerry, in 1846. “We expect good measures from the British parliament this year but we [must] wait to know the issue.” Prendergast’s expectations were dashed, and he would not survive the Famine. But before he died, he sent letters regularly to his emigrant children in Boston, asking them to send money home, if only to pay for burial costs. “If I die, as I am sure I will before many days,

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<sup>185</sup> *Irish Colonization: 1848*, by Aubrey Thomas De Vere, published in Seamus Deane, ed., *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, Vol. II, (Derry, N.I.: Field Day Publications, 1991), pg. 56.

<sup>186</sup> *Hansard*, Vol. 89, February 1847, pgs. 994-95.

<sup>187</sup> Cecil Woodham-Smith, *The Great Hunger*, pg. 300

there is not a shilling in the House to defray my funeral expenses, and your Mother must have recourse to credit from some neighbours until ye relieve her,” he wrote in late 1848, just days before his death. His daughter-in-law, Ellen Prendergast, wrote to her husband, Michael, in Boston, pleading for assistance. Their children, she wrote were “Bare and Naked,” and “the times are so bad” that she could no longer ask her own parents for help.<sup>188</sup>

This sense of powerlessness in the face of disaster traumatized the Irish, whether they remained home or escaped the hunger through emigration, and it helps to explain Irish-American attitudes towards politics and government in the United States. When faced with the ultimate sense of powerlessness – they could not feed themselves – they found government to be aloof, unsympathetic, and judgmental. They had expected more. A group of local relief administrators criticized the government’s response in a letter to Prime Minister John Russell in 1847, insisting that starvation “could have been easily prevented by a liberal policy on the part of Her Majesty’s government.”<sup>189</sup> Whether or not the British could have done more to prevent mass starvation is beside the point; the Irish were convinced that the authorities could have done more and did not.

The lesson was clear. Power, in the hands of enemies, rendered the Irish helpless. Power, in the hands of friends, could have saved them. More than a century later, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, in a surprising misreading of the Irish experience in American politics, argued that Irish-Americans “did not know what to do with power once they got it.”<sup>190</sup> That formulation not only discounts the achievements of Irish-led Tammany Hall during the Progressive Era, but it ignores the unspoken messages delivered to the Famine Irish as they watched bailiffs eject starving families from their cabins, or gazed at meal carts trundling towards port under the

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<sup>188</sup> Shelley Barber, ed., *The Prendergast Letters: Correspondence from Famine-Era Ireland, 1840-1850* (Amherst, Mass.: The University of Massachusetts Press, 2006), pgs. 98, 140 and 119.

<sup>189</sup> *The Times*, October 10, 1847.

<sup>190</sup> Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting Pot*, pg. 229.

protection of armed soldiers. They were powerless to feed themselves; powerless to remain in their own homes. When they achieved power in the United States, they would hold onto it and keep it from their enemies, even if that meant defying what Moynihan called “Yankee proprieties.”<sup>191</sup> Reformers and civic elites who sought to displace urban machines and their immigrant constituents, whether through criminal prosecutions, outright disenfranchisement, or moralistic reform campaigns, unwittingly invoked in Irish-American politicians and their constituents Famine memories of powerlessness, of state power mobilized on behalf of the propertied and the privileged.

Tammany Hall’s Irish-American leaders knew very well what to do with power once they achieved it. They sought to keep it away from those who would not help them. Al Smith, whose mother fled Ireland just before the hunger, explained how he interpreted the use of power in New York in 1920. “One group believes that the Constitution and statute law is intended only for the protection of property and money,” he said. “The other group believes that law in a democracy is not a divine principle but exists for the greatest good to the greatest number and for meeting the needs of present day society ... That is the theory I hold ....”<sup>192</sup>

Just as the validity of memory and folk history is contested, so, too, is the political and economic context of the Famine. Debate centers on the British cabinet’s adherence to laissez-faire economics in the face of a catastrophe, and the government’s decision to close down its relief efforts midway through the Famine, demanding that Irish ratepayers alone, rather than the British exchequer, assume the costs of relief. Irish nationalist historians (many of them journalists and popular writers) contend that Britain’s failure to intervene aggressively to

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<sup>191</sup> Glazer and Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting Pot*, pg. 224.

<sup>192</sup> *The New York Times*, March 27, 1920.

minimize the disaster was a crime verging on, if not actually, genocide, while a revisionist school, seeking a less-passionate, more-scientific interpretation of the catastrophe, asserts that the island's tragedy was years in the making, the product of forces such as overpopulation and inefficient agricultural practices that were beyond the control of government and charity. In recent years, another group of historians, dubbed post-revisionists, has assailed the revisionist consensus, conceding errors and exaggerations committed by nationalists and popularizers but insisting all the same that at its core, the nationalist case against British actions and inactions during the Famine essentially is correct.<sup>193</sup>

From the perspective of New York politics and Tammany Hall, one assertion seems inarguable: The Famine immigration and its immediate aftermath marked the beginning of the end of old New York, a city governed by Anglo-Protestant patricians and mercantile elites. True, nativists and old-stock Anglo and Dutch families did not simply surrender their cultural and political hegemony once Famine ships began docking along Manhattan's East Side waterfront. Indeed, nativism as a political force against the Irish in New York actually grew stronger in the early 1850s, prompting a congressman from the city to despair of efforts to contain it. "Our only hope this fall is in having the [Know Nothings] fight among themselves," wrote Representative William M. Tweed in 1855. "Otherwise we are a used up party for the present."<sup>194</sup> But nativist reaction could not counter the power of sheer numbers, for the Famine marked a demographic tipping point in the struggle over power and identity between new Irish-Catholic immigrants and native-stock New Yorkers. By the time the Famine wave receded in the mid-1850s, more than one in four New Yorkers was a native of Ireland, and the city's overall percentage of foreign-

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<sup>193</sup> The classic nationalist tract on the Famine is Cecil Woodham Smith, *The Great Hunger* (London: H. Hamilton, 1962); the revisionist argument is embodied in R. F. Foster, *Modern Ireland* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1988), while the post-revisionist argument is put forward in Christine Kinealy, *A Death-Dealing Famine: The Great Hunger in Ireland* (London: Pluto Press, 1997)

<sup>194</sup> William M. Tweed to James J. Murphy, February 5, 1855, Tweed Papers, New-York Historical Society

born was 52 percent.<sup>195</sup> A new, diverse, chaotic, and – for some -- alien city was taking shape in the streets and wards of downtown Manhattan, where the famished Irish rebuilt their lives, families, and culture. Tammany's Boss Tweed embraced the new New York, and could not help but notice that others did not. The city's "rich old men," he said, "cannot realize that New York is no longer a series of straggling villages."<sup>196</sup>

The tens of thousands of Irish who settled in New York during and just after the Famine were different, even when compared with their fellow immigrants of an earlier generation.<sup>197</sup> Between 80 and 90 percent of the newcomers were farm laborers or servants with few skills and no assets, while only about 10 percent were skilled artisans.<sup>198</sup> Only twenty years earlier, in 1826, 48 percent of Irish immigrants had been skilled workers.<sup>199</sup> More than half of Famine immigrants were from regions where Irish speakers were a majority of the population.<sup>200</sup> And nearly all the new immigrants brought with them the embittering experience of mass starvation and, in many cases, mass eviction.

The lives their families had led for decades, if not centuries, collapsed with the failure of the potato. Until the Famine, they had been able to resist the modernizers of Victorian Britain who found their Roman Catholic faith to be primitive, their farming practices inefficient, and

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<sup>195</sup> The *Census for the State of New York for 1855* (Albany: 1857) showed that the city's total population was 622,924, the number of Irish-born, 175,735, and the total number of foreign born, 325,646.

<sup>196</sup> Kenneth Ackerman, *Boss Tweed: The Rise and Fall of the Corrupt Pol Who Conceived the Soul of Modern New York* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2005), pg. 63

<sup>197</sup> The New York census of 1845 included immigrants from Ireland in the category of "Great Britain and Possessions." That number was 96,518. As noted above, the number of Irish-born in the 1855 Census was 175,735. The number of English born was 22,713, Scotland, 8,487, and Wales, 935. Figures for 1845 and 1855 from the New York State Census, reprinted in Robert Ernst, *Immigrant Life in New York City, 1825-1863* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1994), pgs. 192 and 194.

<sup>198</sup> James Donnelly, *The Great Irish Potato Famine*, (Phoenix Mill, U.K.: Sutton Publishing Ltd., 2001), pgs. 181-182.

<sup>199</sup> Kerby Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985) pg. 195-96

<sup>200</sup> Kerby Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles*, pg. 297

their communal traditions outdated. A visitor to the west of Ireland, where Gaelic culture remained strong until the Famine, wrote of the local population: “If they have turf and potatoes enough, they reckon themselves provided for; if a few herring, a little oatmeal and above all the milk of a cow to be added, they are rich, they can enjoy themselves and dance with a light heart after the day’s work is over.”<sup>201</sup> At a time when Victorian Britain emphasized virtues associated with a thrifty, sober, hard-working middle class, the Irish peasantry celebrated physical strength, prowess in Gaelic games, faction fighting, and, inevitably, drinking. British observers regarded this way of life as not simply pre-modern, but morally inferior, requiring not a more-equitable distribution of resources but reform of the peasantry’s character. A newspaper in Ulster argued that the Famine did not affect the heavily Protestant areas of the island’s northeast because “we are a painstaking, industrious, laborious people who desire to work and pay our just debts, and the blessing of the Almighty is upon our labour. If the people of the South had been equally industrious with those of the North, they would not have so much misery upon them.”<sup>202</sup>

Traditionally, the Catholic Irish in the remote western counties generally lived in small communities, called a *clachan*, in which land was held communally. Families might tend to individual gardens within the *clachan*, but the center of the community was a broad, unenclosed infield, where oats and potatoes grew. Strips of land within the infield were regularly redistributed among families so that no one family or group of families would hold a monopoly on the best soil.<sup>203</sup> Life was difficult; survival depended on practical solutions to the daily dilemmas and frustrations of ordinary life, even if those solutions offended the sensibilities of their social betters. Most poor farmers had no barns, so they housed their livestock, primarily

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<sup>201</sup> See Kevin Whelan’s essay “Pre and Post-Famine Landscape Change” in *The Great Irish Famine*, Cathal Poirteir, ed., (Cork: Mercier Press, 1995), pg. 24.

<sup>202</sup> Christine Kinealy, *A Death-Dealing Famine*, pg. 141-42.

<sup>203</sup> Kevin Whelan, “Pre and Post-Famine Landscape Change,” in *The Great Irish Famine*, pg. 23.

pigs, in their own homes, which often were no more than one-room cabins. Most farmers had neither plows nor the horses required to operate them. They depended on each other and on family members to prepare the soil for planting.<sup>204</sup> Communal supervision of resources took precedence over individual ambitions and needs.<sup>205</sup> While *clachans* began to break up at the turn of the nineteenth century, the values, kinship groups, and interpersonal relationships which formed the core of these communities persisted among the peasantry.

The Famine, however, destroyed the old ways. The culture, farming practices, and customs which so offended British administrators were swept away, leaving behind depopulated villages, ruined cabins and vacant fields. On the roads leading to port cities, on ships bound for America, and in the cellars, churches, firehouses, and shebeens of lower Manhattan, Famine immigrants carried with them the traditions of the peasant society they left. They arrived in New York not as wide-eyed newcomers with dreams of riches but as starving exiles hoping for something better than death and hunger. As they settled into the crowded, industrializing cities of the American northeast, they recreated the scorned ethos of the *clachan* in their new urban environments, defined by the religious geography of the Catholic parish. The communal nature of the *clachan* found expression in mutual aid organizations, many of them based in parish churches, and in settlement patterns which often were a blending of individual estates, villages, or more broadly, counties. For example, immigrants from County Kerry were found in great numbers in Manhattan's Fourth Ward, while thousands of immigrants in the Five Points section of the city's Sixth Ward hailed from just three estates in the west of Ireland.<sup>206</sup> The Five Points and other Irish enclaves often were re-creations of Irish space and geography with its attendant

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<sup>204</sup> Kerby Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles*, pg. 50.

<sup>205</sup> Kerby Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles*, pg. 54. Like many scholars of Irish America, I am indebted to Professor Miller's groundbreaking study of Irish immigration.

<sup>206</sup> Tyler Anbinder, *Five Points: The 19<sup>th</sup> Century New York City Neighborhood That Invented Tap Dance, Stole Elections, and Became the World's Most Notorious Slum* (New York: Free Press, 2001), pgs. 47-50.

loyalties, represented socially in the foundation of fraternal societies organized by counties of origin.

The Famine immigration led to profound change in New York's civic and political life. After trying to please nativists and immigrants alike in the early 1840s, Tammany Hall's leaders recognized the power of numbers and the inevitability of a shift in power in the city, abandoning for good the machine's occasional flirtations with nativism. From the Famine era to the 1920s and beyond, Tammany rarely failed to stand with the city's immigrant community – regardless of origin -- when it came under assault. The city's old mercantile and cultural elites responded to Tammany's embrace of pluralism and ward-level politics with reform movements that sought to portray professional politicians as inherently corrupt and the voters who supported them as unworthy of the franchise. Inevitably, these Protestant-dominated reform movements associated corruption with Catholicism. Even a sensitive poet like Walt Whitman echoed their complaints. “Shall these dregs of foreign filth – refuse of convents – scullions from Austrian monasteries – be permitted to dictate what Tammany must do?” Whitman asked in 1842. Increasingly, the answer to Whitman's question was “yes.”<sup>207</sup>

Famine immigrants transformed New York into the capital of a trans-Atlantic Irish diaspora. New York City accounted for an astonishing 12 percent of all Irish immigrants in the United States during the Famine years of 1845 to 1851.<sup>208</sup> New York became the base of operations for Irish revolutionary organizations and emigrant aid associations, the seat of the profoundly Irish Catholic Church in the U.S., and a center of political and cultural debate about Irish identity in America. Bishop John Hughes and a cadre of immigrant journalists and political

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<sup>207</sup> Joseph J. Rubin and Charles H. Brown, eds., *Walt Whitman of the New York Aurora* (State College, Pa: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1950), pgs. 58-59.

<sup>208</sup> See Hasia Diner's essay, “The Era of the Great Migration,” in Ronald H. Bayor and Timothy J. Meagher, eds., *The New York Irish* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), pg. 91.



polemicists helped to develop a political interpretation of the Famine which influenced nationalist interpretations of the catastrophe in Ireland and which established an ideological framework for the urban liberals who would rise to power in Tammany during the Progressive Era. Indeed, if Progressivism can be defined as (among other things) a rejection of laissez-faire economics, Irish America's interpretation of the Famine might well serve as a starting point in the development of that critique, long before the excesses of the Gilded Age.<sup>209</sup>

The Famine and its aftermath produced other long-term changes to New York's civic life. By the opening decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, as men born in the shadow of Famine exile assumed positions of power in City Hall and in Albany, New York's political culture was vastly different from the elite-led structure of the antebellum years.<sup>210</sup> Famine exiles helped to create a political culture that was more populist and more representative of the city, a culture personified by immigrant and immigrant-stock political figures like Richard Croker, George Washington Plunkitt, Timothy Sullivan, Charles Francis Murphy, and Al Smith. While they could not be described as social revolutionaries, they spoke and often acted on a populist language of class difference and economic grievance, and they embraced reforms which transferred public resources from the wealthy to the poor.

A political culture which drew its leaders from street gangs (Croker), saloons (Murphy), slums (Sullivan, Smith), and shanty towns (Plunkitt) clearly was very different from the antebellum culture which produced mayors like Philip Hone, a wealthy merchant, and James Harper, a publisher. It was a culture which allowed the common man to seize control of the

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<sup>209</sup> Joseph Huthmacher, in "Urban Liberalism and the Age of Reform," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 49, 1962, and John Buenker, in *Urban Liberalism and Progressive Reform* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1973), date the beginnings of urban liberalism in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

<sup>210</sup> Lee Benson identified New York politics in 1884 as a clash between two groups of elite officeholders who called on the rhetoric of ethnicity and religious difference to mobilize voters. See *The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy: New York as a Test Case* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984).

machinery of government, sometimes with the acquiescence of elite leaders, sometimes in defiance of them. The question is how, or whether, a constructed Famine narrative of victimhood and exploitation influenced these Irish-American political leaders, some of whom emerged – improbably, in the view of critics -- as the most-effective advocates for social reform in the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. <sup>211</sup>

The issue of memory – collective, folkloric, expressed, or repressed – is subject to historical debate in several fields.<sup>212</sup> Irish scholars such as Christine Kinealy, Kevin Whelan, and Peter Gray are among those who argue that there is a Famine folk memory in Irish culture, evident in the ballads, poetry, literature, journalism, and political attitudes of later generations of Irish. The Famine, Kinealy writes, “has become an integral part of folk legend ... associated with nationwide suffering, initially triggered by the potato blight, compounded by years of misrule and consolidated by the inadequate response of the British government and Irish landlords alike.” <sup>213</sup>

Memories of hunger and want were regularly invoked in New York’s Irish-American newspapers. Editors published poems and stories which reminded readers of the catastrophe, and which portrayed Ireland as the emerald isle, a land of shimmering lakes and pleasant fields from which they were forced to flee to escape death and oppression. “The Irish in America live in 1846,” noted an Irish member of the House of Commons, T.P. O’Connor, in 1918. Mothers and grandmothers, O’Connor asserted, kept alive memories of the Famine and its injustice, so that

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<sup>211</sup> See Robert Ernst, *Immigrant Life in New York City, 1825-1863*, pg. 171. Ernst argues that “unprincipled officeholders” like Boss Tweed and “Slippery Dick” Connolly “set a pattern of politics” for later generations of Tammany leaders, implying that they, too, were without principle and therefore unlikely advocates for social reform.

<sup>212</sup> See Hasia Diner, *We Remember With Reverence and Love: American Jews and the Myth of Silence After the Holocaust, 1945-1962*, (New York: New York University Press, 2009). Through an examination of Jewish songs, rituals and political activity, Diner challenged the prevailing notion that American Jews sought to repress memories of the death camps by remaining silent about their ordeal for more than a quarter-century after World War II.

<sup>213</sup> Christine Kinealy, *This Great Calamity: The Irish Famine, 1845-42* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1994), pg. 342.

“there is only one permanent factor in the minds of men of Irish blood [in America] and that is the famine and emigration of 1846.”<sup>214</sup>

The connection between Ireland and the Irish community in the United States was strong even before the Famine, but the mass movement of hundreds of thousands of Irish only strengthened those bonds and blurred the distinction between an Irish person in Ireland and an Irish person in America. New weekly newspapers, including the *Irish World*, the *Irish Nation*, the *Irish Citizen*, and the *United Irishman*, emphasized news from Ireland on the front page.<sup>215</sup> The *Irish World* featured a columnist, “Trans Atlantic,” who argued that issues like industrial relations, land reform, social justice, and revolutionary republicanism should be the concerns of the Irish diaspora throughout the Atlantic world.

While the Famine’s shadow is present in Irish-American popular culture, radical politics, journalism, and communal discourse, it is much harder to find in the rhetoric of mainstream political leaders like Murphy (whose father fled the Famine in 1848) and Smith (whose maternal grandparents left Ireland in 1841), or even politicians who were Famine immigrants themselves, including a Tammany lawyer and judge named Richard O’Connor. Unlike the immigrant journalists Jeremiah O’Donovan Rossa, who wrote about his father’s death by starvation in Skibbereen, and John Mitchel, who wrote a fiery polemic accusing the British of deliberately starving the Irish, none of Tammany’s most-conspicuous Irish leaders overtly drew on memories of starvation or oppression to explain a vote, a point of view, or a policy position. But public silence does not necessarily indicate the absence of a personal narrative or memory. After all,

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<sup>214</sup> See Mick Mulcrone’s essay, “The Famine and Collective Memory,” in Arthur Gribben, ed., *The Great Famine and the Irish Diaspora in America* (Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), pg. 225

<sup>215</sup> The new journals had well-known editors who played key roles in creating a political consciousness among the New York Irish. Patrick Ford edited the *Irish World*, John Devoy, the *Irish Nation*, John Mitchel, the *Irish Citizen*, and Jeremiah O’Donovan Rossa, the *United Irishman*. All were rabid Irish nationalists, but they disagreed on U.S. politics.

Murphy, Smith and other Tammany politicians in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century also were silent about their impoverished childhoods in New York, although, as Robert Wagner's law partner Jeremiah Mahoney noted, their backgrounds surely influenced their support for progressive reforms such as unemployment insurance, minimum wage, and pensions.<sup>216</sup> These conspicuous silences may suggest that the memory of deprivation – whether through a lack of food in Ireland or a lack of resources on the Lower East Side – was simply too painful and best left unspoken.

Cormac O Grada detected a similarly conspicuous silence embedded in the oral recollections of the children of Famine survivors in Ireland. While the collection includes vivid stories of death and loss, none of the speakers mentioned family members who sought relief in local workhouses, which became a symbol of abject destitution.<sup>217</sup> Considering that hundreds of thousands of Irish people took up residence in the workhouses, and thousands died in them, the absence of a workhouse narrative in the Famine oral histories is noteworthy. O Grada attributed this gap in the narrative to “the shame of people forced to rely on workhouse relief or the soup line.”<sup>218</sup> The Irish writer and Famine survivor Alice Stopford Green also detected shame in the unarticulated memories of hunger. Once the Irish were in New York, she wrote in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century, “none need be ashamed of his name and people.”<sup>219</sup>

These silences, whether they were the result of shame or pain (or both), made sense to one of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century's most-famous Irish-Americans, a fictional character named Mr. Dooley, the creation of Chicago journalist Peter Finley Dunne. In a column published in 1897, Mr.

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<sup>216</sup> See *The Reminiscences of Jeremiah T. Mahoney*, Columbia Center for Oral History, pg. 195. Although Mahoney referred to his personal support for specific social reforms, his comments came during a general discussion of the working-class background of Wagner and other Tammany figures.

<sup>217</sup> See Cathal Portier, *Famine Echoes* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1995).

<sup>218</sup> Cormac O Grada, *Black '47 and Beyond: The Great Irish Famine in History, Economy, and Memory* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996), pg. 196.

<sup>219</sup> “Essay on the Irish in the United States,” Alice Green Papers, MS. 10, 445, National Library of Ireland, Dublin.

Dooley summoned a Famine memory to express astonishment over Chicago's plans to commemorate the anniversary of the Great Chicago Fire of 1871, which killed hundreds of people, most of them poor, and nearly destroyed the city. "An' why shud I cillybrate the' fire?" Mr. Dooley asked. "D'ye hear iv people cillybratin' th' famine ...". For Mr. Dooley, and for the sons and daughters of workhouse inmates, and for generations of Irish and Irish-Americans, silence was the preferred strategy for coping with the Famine.<sup>220</sup> Journalist John Waters, writing on 1994 on the eve of the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Famine, noted that public opinion polls in Ireland showed that "the Irish people do not want to hear about the Famine." But it was time, he said, to concede that there "is a pain in Irish society that is not being admitted" but was "present in much of our literature and music ... It casts a dark shadow over the way we live our lives in both private and public."<sup>221</sup>

The unspoken trauma of the Famine is evident in the actions of Irish New Yorkers who influenced nationalist politics, land reform campaigns, and outright revolution in Ireland, beginning with the founding in New York of the Fenian Brotherhood, an organization pledged to bring revolution to Ireland, in 1858. Many Fenians joined the Union Army during the American Civil War not because they wished to be seen as American patriots, but because they sought military training in preparation for a fight with the British in Ireland.<sup>222</sup> Famine survivors Michael Corcoran and Thomas Francis Meagher commanded the 69<sup>th</sup> New York Volunteers, a unit noted for its conspicuous bravery and for its Fenian influence.

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<sup>220</sup> Charles Fanning, ed., *Mr. Dooley and the Chicago Irish: The Autobiography of a Nineteenth-Century Ethnic Group* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University Press, 1976), pg. 32.

<sup>221</sup> See Waters' essay in Tom Hayden, ed., *Irish Hunger: Personal Reflections on the Legacy of the Famine* (Boulder, Col.: Roberts Rinehart, 1997), pg. 27.

<sup>222</sup> In November, 1863, the Fenian Brotherhood held a convention in Chicago which many Union officers attended while on leave from the army. A Fenian recruiter from Ireland, James Stephens, was allowed to tour Union encampments to recruit Irish-American soldiers to the cause of revolution in Ireland. See Desmond Ryan, *The Fenian Chief* (Coral Gables, Fla.: The University of Miami Press, 1967). See also the Fenian Brotherhood Papers, American Catholic History Research Center, Catholic University of America, Washington, D.C.

As the Famine generation aged, first-generation Irish Americans in New York continued to support, finance, and participate in Ireland's politics, including campaigns for radical land redistribution in the 1880s as well as the murkier world of Irish revolutionary organizations, which mobilized Famine memories to justify an Irish-American bombing campaign in London in the mid-1880s, which was planned and staged in New York. Contemporary observers of the Famine immigrants understood that the experiences of loss and the humiliation of exile were bound to affect the immigrants' world view. As the *New York Times* noted in 1852: "When men are driven away by unjust laws – by starvation and the fear of death – when they are forced to snatch their wives and children and take them three thousand miles across the sea to save them from the jaws of famine, while they see plenty and luxury all around them – their memories of home become motives of hatred, and will feed the fires which time cannot quench."<sup>223</sup>

There can be little question that the Famine inspired an ideology of vengeance among New York's Irish, which was then transported back across the Atlantic and grafted onto both constitutional political movements and underground revolutionary organizations. Irish politicians and revolutionaries alike, from Charles Stewart Parnell, MP, to land reformer Michael Davitt to republican dynamiter Tom Clarke, solicited either financial or emotional support from the Irish community in New York in the 1880s, when the city was filled with Irish immigrants with living memories of the Famine. Parnell, who raised hundreds of thousands of dollars in New York during his campaign for land reform in 1881 and 1882, mobilized an explicit Famine memory of eviction when he urged tenant farmers in Ireland to "keep a firm grip on your homesteads," a

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<sup>223</sup> *The New York Times*, April 2, 1852.

slogan that would have resonated with immigrants in New York with bitter memories of bailiffs forcing them from their homes.<sup>224</sup>

Finding a similar connection between a Famine narrative and a coherent Irish-American domestic political consciousness in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, however, can be more elusive, although it would seem hard to dispute Joseph J. Lee's contention in 2006 that the Famine was "central to the type of country America became, for the Irish who poured in left their distinctive mark on politics, on religion, and on the labor movement."<sup>225</sup> Political figures with roots in the Famine experience may have chosen to ignore or repress a family narrative of hunger, deprivation and exile, but there is little doubt that references to and memories of starvation, eviction, and injustice were part of Irish-American culture and consciousness for decades.

Examples abound. Colonel Michael Corcoran, a Famine immigrant from County Donegal and commanding officer of the 69<sup>th</sup> Regiment, refused to allow his men to march in a parade honoring the visit of the Prince of Wales in 1860. The prince was the son of Queen Victoria, often referred to as the "Famine queen" in post-Famine folklore. (Corcoran was court-martialed for his defiance, but was allowed to return to duty after the Civil War began.) Thomas Francis Meagher, who took command of the 69th after Corcoran died in 1863, referred to the Irish as a "famine-exterminated race" during a lecture in New York in 1868, prompting a prolonged ovation.<sup>226</sup> Bishop John Hughes employed similar imagery when he noted that the New York Irish lived in substandard apartments and basements that were no better than "the

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<sup>224</sup> Parnell's speech in Westport in 1879 is quoted extensively, in this case, from Claude Gernade Bowers, *The Irish Orators: A History of Ireland's Fight for Freedom* (Indianapolis, Ind.: Bobbs-Merrill, 1916), pg. 448.

<sup>225</sup> See Lee's introduction in JJ Lee and Marion Casey, eds., *Making the Irish American* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), pg. 22.

<sup>226</sup> *The Irish American*, June 4, 1868.

Irish hovels from which many have been ‘exterminated.’”<sup>227</sup> (Hughes put the word exterminated in quotation marks in the original, perhaps to indicate that he was not speaking literally.) Irish-American journalist Patrick Ford, a Famine immigrant who founded the influential *Irish World* newspaper in New York in 1870 and edited it for forty-three years, frequently called on Famine memories to mobilize the Irish community’s support for trade unions, radical politics, and anti-colonialism.<sup>228</sup> Ford’s coverage of a famine in India in the 1877, for example, explicitly linked the Irish and Indians together as victims of British imperialism. “Ireland and India – what a similarity in their destinies,” he wrote. “And both their destinies brought about by the robber oligarchy of Great Britain!”<sup>229</sup>

Ford’s mobilization of anti-British sentiment was not unusual in post-Famine Irish-American culture, but his reference to a “robber oligarchy” reflected a new and broader critique of power among the New York Irish. References to victimization, exploitation, and social injustice rooted in the Famine became commonplace in the *Irish World* and in Irish-dominated trade unions during the Gilded Age and into the Progressive Era. Leonora O’Reilly, a founder of the Women’s Trade Union League and the daughter of Irish immigrants, noted in 1910 that a critic of hers had never been “face to face with hunger or eviction.”<sup>230</sup> By the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, this Irish populist critique of social and economic inequality, rooted in first-hand experience rather than abstract theory, was a vital part of Irish-American political consciousness. Even the well-off and utterly respectable Tammany Congressman William Bourke Cochran emerged as a critic of monopoly power and the abuses of big business in the late Gilded Age and early Progressive Era. “It is high time that the people awoke to this fact that the speculator is abroad

<sup>227</sup> Lawrence Kehoe, ed. *Complete Works of the Most Rev. John Hughes*, Vol. 2 (New York: Lawrence Kehoe, 1866), pg. 692.

<sup>228</sup> See, for example, the *Irish World*’s coverage of a food shortages in Ireland, August 30, 1870.

<sup>229</sup> *Irish World*, August 25, 1877.

<sup>230</sup> *New York American*, January 5, 1910.



in the land, that ingenious men ... are seizing control of all the institutions of trade and commerce,” he said.<sup>231</sup>

The place of hunger in Irish and Irish-American memory has been invoked or teased out of some rather unlikely cultural artifacts. Kevin Whelan argued that the Famine was the silent backdrop to James Joyce’s short story, “The Dead,” while novelist Thomas Flanagan suggested that film director John Ford consciously invoked Famine imagery in his adaptation of John Steinbeck’s novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*.<sup>232</sup> In the 1930’s novel and movie *Gone With the Wind*, Katie Scarlett O’Hara, daughter of Irish-Catholic immigrants who lived, somewhat improbably, on a plantation in Civil War-era Georgia, vowed that she would never be hungry again -- even if she had to steal, cheat, or kill. Halfway through the film, a starving Scarlett O’Hara rushes to the ruined soil of her family’s plantation, Tara – named for one of Ireland’s most-historic sites – digs out a root vegetable, and begins to eat it. The vegetable, however, is diseased, and she wretches, prompting her to vow that “as God is my witness, I’ll never be hungry again.”<sup>233</sup>

Scarlett O’Hara’s words do justice to Tammany Hall’s pragmatic attitude towards the problems its constituents faced in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries. Fears of deprivation and helplessness, not anxiety over political corruption, disturbed the sleep of many an immigrant family, not only in New York, but elsewhere, too. Novelist William Kennedy, in a published interview, observed that for the Irish who controlled politics in his home city of Albany, N.Y., “starvation ... was immorality,” not graft, or vice, or intemperance, or any of the other issues

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<sup>231</sup> Undated speech, the Papers of William Bourke Cochran, New York Public Library, Box 30.

<sup>232</sup> See Kevin Whelan, “The Memories of ‘The Dead’” in *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, Vol. 15, No. 1, Spring 2002, and Thomas Flanagan’s essay, “The Irish in John Ford’s Films,” in Michael Coffey, ed., *The Irish in America* (New York: Hyperion, 1997), pg. 190-195. Ford, according to Flanagan, said that the film’s narrative was “similar to the famine in Ireland, when they threw the people off the land and left them wandering on the roads to starve – part of the Irish tradition.”

<sup>233</sup> Margaret Mitchell, *Gone With the Wind* (New York: Macmillan, 1936).

which preoccupied reformers.<sup>234</sup> Anxieties about the very basics of life – food on the table, a roof over the house -- were clear in the Famine generation’s embrace of secure public employment, particularly in law enforcement and fire service for men and teaching for women, rather than riskier ventures in the boom-and-bust private economy. To be sure, most Irish Americans in New York were privately employed, more typically as unskilled laborers on construction sites and domestics who tended to the needs of upper-middle-class families. But in popular culture and memory, the stereotype of an Irish police officer or firefighter resonates even today for good reason – the Irish dominated these jobs in New York and other urban centers in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

“The first thing I learned was that to be a cop or a fireman meant that you would never get laid off, and that to be a construction worker, even in the high-paying skilled trades, was not quite as good because there were always layoffs when the construction boomed ebbed, and, most important, because they did not have the twenty-year pension,” wrote Irish-American novelist Dennis Smith, who spent nearly 20 years as a firefighter in the Bronx in the 1950s and ‘60s.<sup>235</sup> Within a quarter-century of New York’s conversion from a volunteer fire department to a paid service in 1865, nearly three hundred of the city’s one thousand professional firefighters were Irish-born, and if native-born members with Irish last names were included, the department’s roster for 1888 was more than seventy-five percent Irish.<sup>236</sup>

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<sup>234</sup> William Kennedy, *Riding the Yellow Trolley Car: Selected Nonfiction* (New York: Viking, 1993), pgs. 51-52.

<sup>235</sup> Dennis Smith, “A Soul for the Civil Service,” in Michael Coffey, ed., *The Irish in America* (New York: Hyperion, 1997), pg. 165.

<sup>236</sup> Fire Department of New York roster, January 1, 1888, found in the New York City Fire Museum; author’s tally.

In 1860, three hundred and nine Irish immigrants served on the New York Police Department, compared with eighty four German immigrants.<sup>237</sup> Twenty percent of the city's public school teachers were Irish women in 1870.<sup>238</sup> *The New York Times* reported in 1869 that Tammany Hall arranged for government jobs for 754 Irish immigrants, but only 46 such jobs went to German immigrants.<sup>239</sup> Those figures could be read as evidence that the Irish were more active in city politics and so were in a better position to take advantage of Tammany patronage. But it would also seem true that the Irish were more eager for the security of those jobs, while Germans, who generally were more skilled and more entrepreneurial than the Irish, were less inclined to seek government employment. "Fear of eviction," wrote the English historian Cecil Woodham-Smith, "was in the very blood of the Irish peasant."<sup>240</sup> For the Irish peasant transplanted in New York, fear of joblessness replaced fear of eviction. The solution was the institution which had facilitated eviction in Ireland, but which offered protection in New York: the government.

The Irish-American obsession with economic security was not limited to blue-collar civil servants. James O'Neill, a Famine survivor and the father of playwright Eugene O'Neill, was considered one of Victorian America's foremost Shakespearean actors, but he was best-known for playing the lead role in traveling productions of *The Count of Monte Cristo*. He performed it more than four thousand times, although critics believed he was capable of more-challenging

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<sup>237</sup> Adrian Cook, *The Armies of the Street: The New York City Draft Riots of 1863* (Lexington, Ky.: The University Press of Kentucky, 1982), pg. 43.

<sup>238</sup> Ronald H. Bayor and Timothy J. Meagher, eds., *The New York Irish*, pg. 95.

<sup>239</sup> *The New York Times*, September 17, 1869.

<sup>240</sup> Cecil Woodham-Smith, *The Great Hunger*, pg. 123.

roles.<sup>241</sup> Playing the count night after night, however, was preferable to running the risk of joblessness and hunger.

For Famine immigrants from rural Ireland, the simple act of settling in urban America spoke to enduring memories of the catastrophe they had witnessed in the fields of Ireland. The land had failed them in their native country; they would never again put themselves at the mercy of nature, God, or, in the case of those who went into government service, the vicissitudes of the market. The transformation of the Irish from rural peasants to urban proletariat brought about changes in the Irish world view of politics, leading to a conspicuous Irish presence in the labor movement, particularly the Knights of Labor in the United States. It also was evident in Irish-American support for radical land reform movements in Ireland, including a proposal in the 1880s to confiscate the holdings of large landowners and redistribute land to the remaining peasantry. Irish-American support for social reform was not limited to demands for change in Ireland. In the winter of 1850, at the height of the Famine, Irish-American leaders including Bishop Hughes and Congressman Michael Walsh, a leader of the Working Men movement and a member of the Bowery Boys gang, joined Whig Governor William Seward and abolitionist editor Horace Greeley in calling for broad land reform during anti-rent agitation in New York. During a land reform rally in Tammany Hall, resolutions were passed demanding a ban on the purchase of public land by non-U.S. residents, an end to the “land monopoly,” and a “republic in which every citizen is a free holder.”<sup>242</sup>

While the anti-rent and land reform movements in New York dissipated, the very articulation of these radical demands – uniting an Irish-born bishop with an Irish-born Bowery

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<sup>241</sup> See Fintan O’Toole’s essay on James and Eugene O’Neill, “What Haunted Eugene O’Neill,” in *The New York Review of Books*, Nov. 8, 2007. O’Toole notes that James O’Neill lied about the year and circumstances of his birth in an attempt to evade childhood memories of starvation.

<sup>242</sup> *The New York Tribune*, March 2, 1850.

Boy – spoke to the growth of Irish political consciousness in New York. The O’Connell movements in Ireland in the 1820s and 1840s, important though they were, concerned themselves with political rights and issues of political control within the framework of the United Kingdom, issues which were primarily the concern of ambitious middle-class professionals like O’Connell himself. The Famine, however, inspired a broader understanding in New York’s Irish community of other forces at work in a commercializing society, forces which seemed to place economic dogma over the well-being, indeed, the very lives of the poor.

John Hughes, still the foremost political advocate for New York’s Irish community, was among the first on either side of the Atlantic to suggest that starvation in Ireland was the result not of an absence of food but of flawed economic dogma imposed by the British. (Generations of nationalist historians would argue the same in subsequent decades.) In a remarkable speech in lower Manhattan’s Broadway Tabernacle on March 20, 1847, Hughes declared that the potato crop’s failure should not have led to “so frightful a consequence” because it was “but one species of the endless varieties of food which the Almighty has provided for the sustenance of his creatures.” The problem, Hughes said, was not to be found in Ireland’s potato fields, but in the ideology of a political and economic system which placed profits and the privileges of commerce ahead of human needs. “The soil has produced its usual tribute for the support of those by whom it has been cultivated, but political economy found the Irish people too poor to pay for the harvest of their own labor and has exported it to a better market, leaving them to die of famine or to live on alms,” he said. “And this same political economy authorizes the provision merchant, even amidst the desolation, to keep his doors locked and his sacks of corn tied up within, waiting

for a better price, whilst he himself is, perhaps, at his desk, describing the wretchedness of the people.”<sup>243</sup>

Hughes asserted his church’s traditional belief in the “sacredness of the rights of property,” but argued that “the rights of life are dearer and higher than those of property, and in a general famine like the present, there is no law of Heaven, nor of nature, that forbids a starving man to seize on bread wherever he can find it ... I would say to those who maintain the sacred and inviolable rights of property, if they would have the claim respected, to be careful also and scrupulous in recognizing the rights of humanity.” The “great civil corporation which we call the state is bound so long as it has to power to do so to guard the lives of its members against being sacrificed by famine.” He acknowledged that some saw God’s hand in the catastrophe – he asked them “not to blaspheme Providence by calling this God’s famine.” The catastrophe, he insisted, was man-made.<sup>244</sup>

By explicitly linking starvation in Ireland to the British government’s dogmatic belief in laissez-faire economics, John Hughes launched a new and broader Irish and Irish-American assault on the political and economic priorities of the political and mercantile elites who presided over trans-Atlantic politics and commerce. While some Irish-Americans, like Walsh, were part of the Working Men’s movement in the 1820s and ‘30s, their radical critique of the young republic’s market revolution never became mainstream.<sup>245</sup> But Hughes’ speech in the Broadway Tabernacle was a milestone because it showed that no less a figure than the Catholic bishop of

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<sup>243</sup> “A Lecture on the Antecedent Causes of the Irish Famine in 1847,” published in Kehoe, ed., *Complete Works of the Most Rev. John Hughes*, Vol. I, pgs. 544-558.

<sup>244</sup> “A Lecture on the Antecedent Causes of the Irish Famine in 1847,” published in Kehoe, *Complete Work of the Most Rev. John Hughes*, Vol. I, pgs. 544-558.

<sup>245</sup> Sean Wilentz argued that Walsh was the only New York public figure who spoke of the labor theory of value in Jacksonian New York. See *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class 1788-1850* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), pg. 344.

New York saw the world in terms which Walsh and his allies in the city's trade union movement certainly understood and embraced. Their mutual support, three years later, for a radical land reform program in the U.S. becomes more understandable in light of the Famine experience.

Hughes' interpretation of the Famine, made from a distance of three thousand miles across the Atlantic, also is striking because the Irish peasantry generally blamed individual landlords, moralistic administrators or an angry God for their suffering, not such abstractions as laissez faire economics or Ireland's dependent relationship with Britain. But that narrow view changed as Famine immigrants settled in New York and other cities, where they came to view the Famine as a symbol of British misgovernment in Ireland and as an expression of economic dogma steeped in a hostile, evangelical Protestant world view. Hughes' analysis of the Famine quickly made its way across the Atlantic to Ireland, where it won the approval of a group of dissidents in Dublin called Young Ireland. The bishop's lecture was reprinted in Young Ireland's journal, *The Nation*, in early May, touching off an intense political debate in Ireland about the systemic causes of the ongoing death and displacement. A brilliant young polemicist named James Fintan Lalor, soon to become a fierce critic of Irish landlordism, replied to Hughes in *The Nation*, arguing that the famine was an inevitable result of the inequitable distribution of land in Ireland. "The lord of the soil had got his rent," Lalor wrote. "The cultivator of the soil had lost his provision of food ..."<sup>246</sup> In seeking a political explanation for the Famine, John Hughes helped frame a broader debate over land ownership, political economy, and distribution of resources in Ireland itself. The trans-Atlantic exchange between Hughes and Lalor in early 1847 was an early manifestation of the nationalist interpretation of the Famine which dominated folk memory in both Ireland and the United States for decades afterwards.

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<sup>246</sup> *The Nation*, May 8, 1847.

It is difficult to comprehend Hughes' argument or the wider narrative of Irish-American political consciousness without first understanding the political, cultural and economic context of the Famine, and its place in memory and in historical narratives. The immediate cause of island's misery was a fungus called *phytophthora infestans*, a deadly disease exported to Ireland from the New World, just as the potato itself was. But even as the starving and dying were underway throughout Ireland, British administrators and politicians sought to identify the calamity's true cause. It became fashionable in England to blame the Irish themselves. Sir Charles Trevelyan, a British civil servant placed in charge of administering public works projects and other relief efforts during the first two years of hunger, insisted that the catastrophe was a reflection of Ireland's collective moral failings. "The great evil with which we have to contend," Trevelyan wrote, is "not the physical evil of the famine, but the moral evil of the selfish, perverse and turbulent character of the people."<sup>247</sup> Trevelyan, whose official title was Assistant Secretary to the Treasury, saw the hand of God in the potato's failure, describing the catastrophe as "a direct stroke of an all-wise and all-merciful Providence."<sup>248</sup> Even many Irish people saw the disaster as divine punishment for offenses they could hardly begin to enumerate or understand. These were the arguments which Hughes explicitly rejected. By doing so, he helped to begin a larger debate about political ideology and the Famine which remains contested today, especially in Ireland.

The most-contentious issue in both popular and academic interpretations of the Famine is the British government's refusal to interfere with the continued export of food from starving Ireland. During the height of the hunger, from 1847 to 1849, two hundred ninety five thousand

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<sup>247</sup> Cecil Woodham-Smith, *The Great Hunger*, pg. 156.

<sup>248</sup> Charles Edward Trevelyan, *The Irish Crisis* (London: Longman, Brown, Green & Longmans, 1848), pg. 201. Historian Peter Gray described Trevelyan and other British policymakers as "moralists" who saw the famine as a Providential judgment on the character of the Irish-Catholic poor. See *Famine, Land and Politics: British Government and Irish Society, 1843-1850* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2001).



tons of oats were exported from Ireland to Great Britain, along with one hundred seventy eight thousand tons of oatmeal, seventy-seven thousand tons of wheat, and thirty-one thousand tons of barley.<sup>249</sup> Those figures show that Ireland did not lack for food. A closer examination, however, shows that they also illustrate another part of the Famine narrative – exports of oats, oatmeal, wheat, and barley from Ireland fell significantly after the potato failed. For example, Ireland exported two hundred and thirty five thousand tons of oats to Britain in 1845; as the above figures indicate, exports of oats fell to just sixty nine thousand in 1847. Similarly, Ireland exported seventy-eight thousand tons of wheat in 1845; by 1849, the figure fell to twenty-one thousand tons. Exports no doubt fell because these crops were diverted for internal consumption in Ireland, although the foodstuffs often went not to starving people but to livestock that were as dependent on potatoes as the Irish peasantry.<sup>250</sup>

Scholars continue to debate the extent to which Britain could have, or should have, intervened to prevent large-scale suffering. The British government was not inactive in Ireland, indeed, in 1847, government soup kitchens fed three million people a day, an extraordinary administrative and logistical effort which showed that London was not entirely confined by the strictures of laissez-faire. By the end of the year, however, London shifted the burden of paying for relief to Irish landlords, in essence leaving the Irish to devise their own solution to the catastrophe because, in Trevelyan's words, local ratepayers knew best "know how to discriminate between the different claims for relief."<sup>251</sup> Victorian policymakers were intent on

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<sup>249</sup> Figures are from ledgers of imports to England in the Public Record Office, Kew, quoted in James Donnelly, *The Great Irish Potato Famine*, pg. 61

<sup>250</sup> See James S. Donnelly, Jr., *The Great Irish Potato Famine*, pgs. 61-62. Donnelly estimates that livestock consumed a third of Ireland's annual potato crop. When the potato failed, livestock producers required "a substitute for the fodder that plentiful potatoes has once furnished."

<sup>251</sup> Charles Edward Trevelyan, *The Irish Crisis*, pg. 184.

distinguishing between the worthy and unworthy poor, demanding that relief take into account not just need, but behavior and morality as well.

Landlords, unable to afford the cost of relief schemes after London left them to devise a solution, resorted to mass evictions and assisted emigration, adding to the flight from Ireland, a development celebrated in *The Times* of London. “In a few years more,” the paper wrote cheerfully in 1847, as thousands of Irish were dying or emigrating, “a Celtic Irishman will be as rare in Connemara as is the Red Indian on the shores of Manhattan.”<sup>252</sup>

Beyond the historical and economic debate over the meaning of import-export figures and the effectiveness of relief schemes, there is a question with a seemingly inevitable denominational component. To what extent did the moralistic views of British administrators and policymakers lead them to conclude that the Famine was the result of flaws in the Irish-Catholic character? When Trevelyan rejected requests that the government set aside funds for impoverished farmers to help increase cultivation, he complained about the “social evils which beset us on every side.”<sup>253</sup> Victorian economic policy bore the influence of a handful of economists who also were Protestant clerics, most prominently Thomas Malthus and Nassau Senior. They viewed laissez faire economics as more than a system to promote commerce. The market, uninhibited by artificial regulations, encouraged virtue among the lower classes, and served as a framework for determining the difference between the worthy and unworthy poor.

Those precepts determined Trevelyan’s course of action during the Famine. But he was not alone in his moralistic approach to the catastrophe. Charles Wood, who was Chancellor of the Exchequer in Lord John Russell’s Whig government, asserted that the true cause of

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<sup>252</sup> See Kirby Miller’s essay, “Revenge for Skibbereen,” in Arthur Gribben, ed., *The Great Famine and the Irish Diaspora in America* (Amherst, Mass.: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), pg. 186.

<sup>253</sup> Cecil Woodham-Smith, *The Great Hunger*, pg. 148.

“helplessness” among the Irish was their “habit of depending on government... If we are to select the destitute, pay them, feed them and find money from hence, we shall have the whole population of Ireland upon us soon enough.” Wood advised the Prime Minister to “force” the Irish “upon their own resources,” and he was not the only member of the British establishment who grew tired of providing for the Irish poor.<sup>254</sup> The voice of the Britain’s ruling elite, *The Times*, argued that the Irish must help themselves and stop relying on government assistance. “There are times,” the paper’s editors wrote, “when something like harshness is the greatest humanity.”<sup>255</sup> A new journal called *Economist* insisted that government interference in the distribution of food would only transfer resources “from the more meritorious to the less.”<sup>256</sup>

A host of other British thinkers, policymakers, and journalists saw the Irish crisis as the inevitable result of character flaws incompatible with the competitive, individualistic society taking shape in the industrial cities of mainland Britain and in the Protestant northeast of Ireland. To the chagrin of British economists, policymakers, and politicians, the majority population of Ireland remained stubbornly traditional in its continued embrace of communal agrarian values, a worldview that did not emphasize Victorian proto-capitalist virtues such as thrift, relentless self-improvement, and individualism. These practices were hardly in keeping with the spirit of industrializing Great Britain, leading to periodic efforts to improve and modernize Irish agriculture. Those efforts often were met with violent resistance from secret societies whose members were determined to preserve traditional farming practices as well as the culture in which those practices were embedded. Trevelyan complained that Ireland suffered from “lavish consumption” and “diminished production,” which meant that the “bees of the hive, however

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<sup>254</sup> G.P. Gooch, ed., *The Later Correspondence of Lord John Russell, 1840-1878* (London: Longmans, Green, 1925) Vol. I, pgs. 161-62

<sup>255</sup> Christine Kinealy, “The Role of the Poor Law During the Famine,” in Cathal Poirteir, *The Great Irish Famine*, pg. 113.

<sup>256</sup> *Economist*, January 30, 1847.

they may redouble their exertions, must soon sink under the accumulated burden.”<sup>257</sup> This fairly typical analysis of Ireland’s problems emphasized the fecklessness and laziness of the Irish drudges, rich and poor alike, and stood in contrast with those energetic individuals – they could hardly fail to be Protestant -- whose exertions were admirable but doomed. In formulating the government’s response to the early years of the Famine, Trevelyan sought to make relief “so unattractive as to furnish no motive to ask for it,” he wrote, “except in the absence of every other means of subsistence.”<sup>258</sup>

Unattractive it surely was. Those who were granted outdoor relief, that is, work on some form of public works, generally were given the task of making little stones out of big ones for up to 10 hours a day, without a meal break. Those who obtained a place in a workhouse often sacrificed their cabins to obtain relief – their homes were pulled down as the price of receiving alms. This practice was not simply punitive for its own sake. It furthered the government’s explicit goal of clearing the land of small farmers and transforming Irish landowning and agriculture to a more efficient system of large holdings. But there was a moral component to relief as well: British policymakers believed government policy in Ireland should be designed to “encourage industry [and] to do battle with sloth and despair” because they believed the Famine was, at its heart, an expression of flaws in Irish-Catholic culture and character.<sup>259</sup>

The workhouse, however, was a place certain to nurture, not banish, despair. In a single week in 1848, fourteen hundred people died in the workhouses, out of a total workhouse population in Ireland of about one hundred and twenty thousand.<sup>260</sup> Administrators of Ireland’s Poor Law system believed that conditions in the workhouse should be kept primitive so that

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<sup>257</sup> Charles Edward Trevelyan, *The Irish Crisis*, pg. 184.

<sup>258</sup> Charles Edward Trevelyan, *The Irish Crisis*, 187.

<sup>259</sup> James Donnelly, *The Great Irish Potato Famine*, pg. 31.

<sup>260</sup> Christine Kinealy, *This Great Calamity*, pg. 196.

indoor relief would be an absolute last resort. Families were split up upon entering, with children between the ages of 2 and 15 sent to live with other children, and men and women sent to separate quarters. Eventually, Trevelyan hoped, Ireland would “begin to understand that the proper business of a Government is to enable private individuals of every rank and profession in life to carry on their several occupations with freedom and safety, and not itself to undertake the business of the land-owner, merchant, money-lender, or any other function of social life.”<sup>261</sup>

This constricted view of state power had important implications for starving Ireland, but Trevelyan was hardly alone in his insistence that government should not interfere with the market’s ruthless wisdom. New York City’s leading newspapers and fledgling reform organizations shared with Trevelyan a loathing for any suggestion that government ought to play a role in shaping, or softening, market forces. Their opposition to government relief became especially acute in the aftermath of the Famine, and even more so during the Panic of 1857, when thousands of jobless demanded a response from City Hall. The Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor, a charitable organization, charged that “foreigners” in New York were agitating for government relief rather than submit to uplifting private charity.<sup>262</sup> The *New York Evening Post* insisted that relief for the poor was a “Christian duty but not a political duty.”<sup>263</sup> City government, the paper argued, was under no obligation “to find people employment or food.” Despots followed such a course, but “our republican system of government professes to leave every channel of industry open.”<sup>264</sup> These attitudes towards government and its proper place in society put the city’s top editors at odds with the first American politician to be

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<sup>261</sup> Charles Edward Trevelyan, *The Irish Crisis*, pg. 90.

<sup>262</sup> Amy Bridges, *A City in the Republic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pg. 118.

<sup>263</sup> *New York Evening Post*, November 10, 1857.

<sup>264</sup> *New York Evening Post*, October 23, 1857. The *New York Times* espoused a similar view. See the issue of October 10, 1857, which argued that the poor had no right to demand relief.

embraced by New York's Irish immigrant community, Fernando Wood, a Jacksonian Democrat who was elected mayor three times in the 1850s.<sup>265</sup>

Wood came of age politically in Tammany Hall but broke with it to form his own organization just before the Civil War. He was an ambitious rogue, and his sympathy for Southern slaveholders was reprehensible.<sup>266</sup> But he also advocated an activist municipal government at a time when the city's commercial and intellectual elites viewed assistance to the poor as "bounties for highwaymen," as a headline in the *New York Evening Post* put it in 1857.<sup>267</sup> Wood also called for the creation of a free public university so that "the poor man, as well as the rich, should have the privilege of educating his son ..." He proposed a similar but separate institution for young women.<sup>268</sup>

Wood's emergence as a conspicuous champion of the city's Irish community, and the Irish community's support for him, should be seen in the context of Famine emigration, as thousands of New York Irish constructed a memory of victimization, government neglect, and demeaning forms of relief which they applied to their ongoing experience in New York. They saw in Wood an antidote to the moralistic judgments of British relief administrators in Ireland, a public official who sought to ease, not judge, their poverty. The *Irish News*, another Irish-American periodical on the community's expanding newsstand, stated its case for government action in terms recent immigrants were sure to understand. "When famine stares fifty thousand workmen in the face, when their wives and little ones cry to them for bread, it is not time to be

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<sup>265</sup> Wood is best known today for his Southern sympathies and anti-Lincoln speeches on the eve of the city's draft riot in 1863. He was elected mayor in 1854, re-elected in 1856, defeated in a special election in 1857, but elected again in 1859. He lost re-election in 1861, but was elected to Congress in 1862.

<sup>266</sup> Wood's biographer, Jerome Mushkat, noted that Wood voted with pro-slavery forces on fifty-six roll call votes in the House of Representatives in 1841, by far the most of any northern member of Congress. See Mushkat's *Fernando Wood: A Political Biography* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1990), pg. 15.

<sup>267</sup> *New York Evening Post*, October 23, 1857

<sup>268</sup> *Documents of the Board of Aldermen of the City of New York*, Vol. XXIII, Mayor's Message, July 7, 1856 (New York: Chas. W. Baker, 1856).

laying down state maxims of economy, quoting Adam Smith or any other politico-economical old fogy.”<sup>269</sup>

Not coincidentally, Wood was the *bête noir* of municipal politics in the 1850s, especially for powerful editors like William Cullen Bryant of the *New York Evening Post*, Horace Greeley of the *New York Tribune*, and, on occasion, the irascible editor of the *New York Herald*, James Gordon Bennett. His business affairs invited questions about his ethics; his slippery political postures (he covertly joined the Know Nothings even as he championed immigrants in 1854) inspired doubts about his principles – or lack thereof. These issues alone, of course, did not make him especially unique in American politics or civic life in the 1850s. But as mayor from 1855 to 1857 and again from 1860 to 1861, Wood championed a more-active government role in providing relief for the unemployed, and he demanded greater home rule powers for the city in the face of opposition from the new, reform-minded, anti-immigrant, anti-urban Republican Party which dominated state government in Albany. Wood’s positions horrified the city’s business leaders and leading journalists, who wasted little time in denouncing him as a corrupt demagogue even before Wood’s dismal leadership during the first year of the Civil War.

“Mr. Wood is greatly indebted as a politician to what are called by social philosophers the ‘dangerous classes,’” wrote the *New York Evening Post* after the mayor proposed that the city borrow money to purchase fifty thousand pounds each of flour, cornmeal and potatoes to give to unemployed workers in exchange for their labor on public works projects.<sup>270</sup> The mayor justified the request by noting that it was October, and winter was approaching. The city’s unemployed had been holding rallies during the winter in Tompkins Square Park and other

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<sup>269</sup> *Irish News*, November 14, 1857.

<sup>270</sup> *New York Evening Post*, October 23, 1857.

locations beginning in 1854, and with economic prospects even more dire in 1857 (when a new city charter required Wood to run for re-election less than a year after winning a second term), disorder might follow, Wood warned. If the city did nothing, “want, destitution, and starvation will pervade the homes of the working men,” he said.<sup>271</sup> The poor did not have the means to “avoid or endure reverses,” Wood said, and so required the assistance of government. Then, turning to language that would sound familiar to members of the Working Men movement, Wood added, “Truly it may be said that in New York those who produce everything get nothing, and those who produce nothing get everything.”<sup>272</sup>

These were not the sentiments of George Trevelyan and other Famine administrators who saw in the plight of the poor God’s judgment or moral failings, neither of which could or should be ameliorated by government. Wood surely was a scoundrel and arguably a traitor, given his overt pro-Southern sympathies. (It is notable, however, that under Wood’s administration, African Americans obtained licenses as carters after trying and failing to win city approval under previous mayors.)<sup>273</sup> But his advocacy for the poor and his insistence on an active government role to help the unemployed foreshadowed the actions and rhetoric of Tammany’s Irish-American leaders in the decades to come. As the first Mayor elected after the surge of Famine immigrants transformed the city’s demographics, Wood should be seen in the context of an evolving Irish-American political consciousness rooted in the Famine experience. Irish immigrants were so prominent at a rally of unemployed people in Tompkins Square Park in the fall of 1857 that platform speeches were translated into Irish. In its coverage of the rally, the *New York Evening Post*, anticipating the style of Finley Peter Dunne without the humor, sought to

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<sup>271</sup> The *New York Times*, October 23, 1857.

<sup>272</sup> The *New York Sun*, October 23, 1857.

<sup>273</sup> See Graham Hodges’ essay, “ ‘ Desirable Companions and Lovers,’ Irish and African Americans in the Sixth Ward, 1830-1870,” in Bayor and Meagher, eds., *The Irish in New York*, pg. 188.



diminish a short address by a pro-Wood speaker named Maguire by replicating his Irish accent in print: “We niver will sase while there’s a man in the land that nades employment. An’ now let us ... give three chares for the Mayor ...”<sup>274</sup>

The Irish remained among Wood’s most-loyal supporters in all three of his successful mayoral campaigns (1854, 1856, and 1859). His popularity no doubt was enhanced when Tammany split with Wood and aligned with Know Nothings and Republicans to oust him in 1857 in a special election called under a new charter. Wood carried on a feud with Tammany after his defeat in 1857, when a group of civic elites including Samuel Tilden and August Belmont seized control of the Tammany organization partly in response to the former Mayor’s radical solutions to joblessness and poverty.<sup>275</sup> The Irish vote followed Wood (except in Tammany’s home base in Sixth Ward) in his renegade but vain campaign against Tammany’s candidate, Daniel Tiemann, in 1857. The Irish again supported Wood when he regained his old office in 1859.

Wood, whose Quaker ancestors left Wales for the New World in the late 17<sup>th</sup> Century, did not have a great deal in common with his loyal Irish constituents. Although born into humble circumstances, he was a wealthy man – he estimated his worth to be \$250,000 in 1858 – and he lived in comfort uptown. What’s more, he was a covert member of the Know Nothings even as he sought immigrant support for his 1854 mayoral campaign.<sup>276</sup> Later, after he regained City Hall on the eve the Civil War, he was the South’s most-fervent supporter in the North while tens of thousands of Irish New Yorkers marched off to fight the Confederacy.

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<sup>274</sup> The *New York Evening Post*, November 10, 1857.

<sup>275</sup> Amy Bridges argued that some of Wood’s critics turned on him only after he proposed government aid for the jobless. See Amy Bridges, *A City in the Republic*, pg. 119.

<sup>276</sup> For Wood’s estimate of his fortune, see Wood to James Buchanan, September 8, 1858, Buchanan Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

Nevertheless, during his mayoral campaigns in the 1850s, Wood could count on enthusiastic Irish support. Historian Leonard Chalmers attributed Wood's popularity among the Irish to his populist-style campaigns for Congress in the early 1840s, when he accused British interests of financing Tammany's Whig opponents.<sup>277</sup> While Wood might well have engaged in casual Anglophobia to ingratiate himself with Irish-American voters, his actions in 1840 would have meant nothing to the 16,496 immigrants who were naturalized in 1856 alone, never mind the tens of thousands who were naturalized from 1840 to 1856.<sup>278</sup> Wood's undoubted popularity among the Irish in New York was a product of the singular circumstances of the 1850s, a time when tens of thousands of Irish immigrants were recovering from a catastrophe they came to see as a symbol of political powerlessness, official neglect, and callous moralism. It should hardly be a surprise that they rallied behind a mayor who, while tremendously flawed and cynical, appeared to sympathize with their plight and, perhaps not coincidentally, seemed to delight in enraging the city's moralizing elites.

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<sup>277</sup> Leonard Chalmers, "Fernando Wood and Tammany Hall: The First Phase," *New-York Historical Society Quarterly* 52 (October, 1968).

<sup>278</sup> *Report to the Select Committee on Alleged New York Election Frauds, Made to the House of Representatives, Fortieth Congress, Third Session* (Washington, 1869).

## CHAPTER FOUR

### “OUR POLITICAL INFLUENCE, SURE IT IS GREAT”

As dusk approached on a mid-winter's afternoon in January, 1871, two small boats filled with politicians shoved off from the piers of Lower Manhattan and churned through the chilly waters of New York Harbor towards a larger ship, the Cunard steamship *Cuba*, docked off a federal quarantine station on Staten Island. One of the boats, a U.S. government cutter, carried the Collector of the Port of New York, Thomas Murphy, a Republican who was the chief dispenser of federal patronage in the city. Aboard the other boat was a judge named Richard O’Gorman, an Irish immigrant and Famine survivor who carried with him a message of welcome for the *Cuba*’s passengers from his mentor, the chairman of the general committee of the Society of St. Tammany and the boss of New York’s Democratic Party, William M. Tweed.

The two boats raced to see which party would claim the honor of being first to greet five Irishmen who were aboard the *Cuba* and escort them to Manhattan, where a reception awaited them. The Irishmen, unaware of the drama unfolding in the harbor, were playing cards on the *Cuba*’s deck as the ship sailed past the New Jersey shoreline and into New York’s lower bay. One of the passengers, Jeremiah O’Donovan Rossa, told his traveling companions that he had never played a card game in his life. After several hands of poker, Rossa was richer by seven pounds sterling. His companions were more amused than annoyed, with good reason. They were free men now after serving years in British prisons for their part in fomenting a failed rebellion in Ireland in 1860s, each having received amnesty from British Prime Minister William Gladstone on condition that he leave the United Kingdom forever. They collectively chose to come to New York, center of Ireland’s far-flung diaspora, where they planned to use their

freedom and the political opportunities that awaited them to continue their fight against their one-time jailers.<sup>279</sup>

The *Cuba's* arrival was much-anticipated in New York, for Rossa was a trans-Atlantic celebrity and a hero to many Irish Americans because of his defiant behavior while in Her Majesty's custody, publicized in letters he smuggled out of prison. His companions were less well-known, but their stories were similar. Like Rossa, they came of age in Famine-stricken Ireland, and, not coincidentally, like Rossa, they were militant Anglophobes who saw the United States as a model for the republic they still sought for Ireland.<sup>280</sup>

As word arrived that the *Cuba* was in sight, the city's newspapers sent reporters to the waterfront to cover their arrival, although one city editor, Mike Kelly of the *New York Herald*, had to improvise his coverage when he learned that the reporter assigned to cover the event was drunk. Kelly turned to a freelancer named Joseph I.C. Clarke, who was a poet and, like the men on the *Cuba*, a failed Irish revolutionary who came to New York in hopes of supporting rebellion from across the sea. Clarke, Kelly, Murphy, and O'Gorman represented a generation of immigrant or first-generation Irish emerging from the slums of lower Manhattan to achieve a modicum of power in two vital centers of New York civic life – politics and the press.

With cannons along the shore booming a salute, Murphy's cutter pulled alongside the *Cuba* first. The five Irish passengers assembled in the ship's cabin to hear Murphy read a proclamation of welcome from none other than the president of the United States, Ulysses S.

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<sup>279</sup> For details of the *Cuba's* journey and its entrance into New York Harbor, see John Devoy, *Recollections of an Irish Rebel* (New York: Charles Young, 1929), pgs. 329-331, and Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, *Rossa's Recollections* (New York: Mariners Harbor, 1894) as well as accounts in the *Irish World*, January 22, 1871, and the *New York Herald*, January 21, 1871. See also Devoy's journal in the Papers of John Devoy, MS 18,004, National Library of Ireland, Dublin.

<sup>280</sup> The political writings of Rossa and his companion John Devoy are numerous. In addition to their memoirs cited above, they wrote hundreds of autobiographical articles in the weekly newspapers they published in New York, the *Gaelic American* and the *United Irishman*, respectively.

Grant. One of the felons, a 29-year-old veteran of the French Foreign Legion named John Devoy, concluded that the proclamation was fraudulent. He and his companions, after all, were convicted felons and unapologetic rebels. Why would the president of the United States welcome their arrival? <sup>281</sup>

The Tammany boat arrived just as Murphy finished reading Grant's welcome. O'Gorman burst into the cabin and demanded the floor on behalf of the city of New York. The two politicians and their parties began to scuffle, verbally and otherwise, to the astonishment and disgust of their audience. A member of the federal party, F. F. Millen, an Irish immigrant and, it was revealed decades later, a British spy, declared that he would protect the new arrivals from the clutches of those he called "Tammany tricksters." <sup>282</sup> The city's health commissioner, on board to monitor the health and condition of the new arrivals, reminded the contesting parties that he had the power to quarantine the ship and all on board, although he said he would not do so if the Irish exiles left the *Cuba* at once – aboard Tammany's boat. The commissioner, as luck would have it, was a Tammany man himself. The rival politicians must have resorted to quiet promises involving the exchange of money, because Devoy grumbled to Clarke, the reporter, "Do they think that by dangling the dollars before us they can influence us? We are not children ...," <sup>283</sup>

The Cuba Five, as they came to be known, dismissed the politicians and arrived in Manhattan the following day in a nonpartisan Cunard tugboat. Three thousand people, including Boss Tweed, greeted them at their hotel. Tweed also raised more than \$25,000 to hold a parade in honor of the exiles, assigning himself the modest role of grand marshal. A month later, the

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<sup>281</sup> See Devoy's recollection of the ceremony in the *Gaelic American*, March 7, 1925

<sup>282</sup> *Gaelic American*, March 7, 1925

<sup>283</sup> William O'Brien and Desmond Ryan, eds., *Devoy's Post Bag*, Vol. I (Dublin : Fallon, 1948), pgs. 4-5

Cuba Five and nine more Irish felons exiled to the United States visited the White House as guests of President Grant, while Benjamin Butler, a Radical Republican member of Congress from Massachusetts, saluted them during a speech on Capitol Hill.<sup>284</sup>

The arrival of the Cuba Five was a milestone for New York's Irish community because two of the five – Rossa and Devoy – would go on to become legendary figures in the trans-Atlantic Irish nationalist community and well-known political activists in the city. Rossa was the driving force behind a campaign of terrorism exported from New York to London in the 1880s, when Irish and Irish-American nationalists bombed Scotland Yard, Parliament, and the London subway system. Devoy became the chief organizer of Irish-American nationalist politics from the 1870s until his death in Atlantic City in 1928, shifting his alliances between Republicans and Democrats as he sought to win American political support for Irish independence movements. During the last quarter-century of his life, Devoy was aligned with a prominent Tammany judge named Daniel Cohalan who helped him raise money for the Easter Rebellion in Dublin in 1916. Decades earlier, he worked with the national Republican Party on behalf of presidential candidates James Blaine and Benjamin Harrison, both of whom, he believed, were more sympathetic to Irish nationalism than their Democratic counterparts.

The political maneuvering between O'Gorman and Murphy also was noteworthy, because it showed that both major U.S. political parties actively contested for the Irish-American vote in New York even as late as 1871, just before John Kelly became the first in the long line of Irish-Americans to lead Tammany Hall. While it is certainly true that at the ward and municipal level Irish Americans were fairly reliable Democrats beginning in the 1840s, it would be incorrect to assert, as critics and reformers did regularly, that Irish-American voters cast their

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<sup>284</sup> *New York Herald*, January 22, 1871; John Devoy, *Recollections*, pg. 331

ballots for Democrats without thinking, because of tribal loyalty or simply because they were the beneficiaries of a patronage job or a political favor. “As for the Irish, they have gone in a drove – as they always do – for the regular Democratic ticket,” wrote *The New York Times* in 1856.

“They will probably never do anything else, as long as they remain Irish, and it takes at least two generations to convert them into Americans.”<sup>285</sup> Relations between Tammany and its constituents were, however, far more complicated than the *Times* realized. The relationship was subject to constant negotiation, and voters were not afraid to walk away from the bargaining table when Tammany overindulged in shady practices or was unable to deliver promised services.

In fact, within months of the *Cuba*’s arrival, Rossa challenged no less a figure than Boss Tweed himself after the *New York Times* famously revealed how Tweed was at the center of a massive corruption scheme which would define Tammany Hall for generations to come. Rossa’s campaign for Tweed’s Senate seat won the support of the city’s reformers, including the *Times*, despite his rather speedy naturalization process, a process which the *Times* and others criticized when it was implemented on behalf of Fernando Wood and Tammany Hall. The *Times* dismissed Tammany’s equally hypocritical contention that Rossa was not a citizen and therefore was ineligible for elected office. “Rossa was arrested at the polls ... when attempting to cast his vote, on the pretext that he was not a citizen of the United States,” the *Times* reported on the day after the contentious election. “When taken before a Magistrate he was immediately discharged, the complaint being of course groundless.”<sup>286</sup> Tweed managed to defeat Rossa, his last electoral triumph before his fall, but Rossa insisted to his dying day that Tammany stole the election. The *Times* and other newspapers supported Rossa’s claim. “Boxes were destroyed containing reform

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<sup>285</sup> *The New York Times*, November 6, 1856

<sup>286</sup> *The New York Times*, November 9, 1871

tickets,” the *Times* reported. “In many parts of this Senatorial district the whole election was a farce and the count a barefaced fraud.” A state commission investigated the election, but the outcome was not reversed.<sup>287</sup>

The Rossa-Tweed election of 1871 took place as Tammany was becoming a national symbol of excessive political corruption which critics quickly associated with urban life and immigrants, especially the Irish. George Templeton Strong wrote in his diary even before the Tweed scandals that he and his fellow civic elites were “fast coming to the conclusion that democracy and universal suffrage will not work in crowded cities.”<sup>288</sup> As Tammany and the Irish became inextricably linked in the years just after the Civil War, native-born Protestant New Yorkers like Strong increasingly despaired not only of their city’s government but of the benefits of universal male suffrage. The Irish, on the other hand, reveled in their growing political clout, understanding that they were no longer powerless in the face of antagonists like Strong and other Anglo-Protestants who so resembled their tormentors in Ireland. A contemporary song entitled “Two Aldermen from Tyrone” celebrated Irish success in New York politics:

*We are two solid men and well known in the state*

*Our political influence, sure it is great;*

*In the Seventh and Tenth Wards we are first candidates,*

*And our names in the paper in big letters you will see.*<sup>289</sup>

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<sup>287</sup> *The New York Times*, November 9, 1871.

<sup>288</sup> Allen Nevins and Milton Halsey Thomas, eds., *The Diary of George Templeton Strong*, Vol. I, pg. 404.

<sup>289</sup> The Mick Moloney Collection of Irish-American Music and Popular Culture, Box 48, Archives of Irish America, New York University, Bobst Library. The song is undated, but a reference to President Grant (not quoted) would indicate that the song was written between 1869 and 1877.



Tammany's place in the annals of American urban corruption was firmly established after the *Times* exposed the depredations of Tweed and his allies in 1871, and a young artist named Thomas Nast created an image of the corpulent boss which became the face of Tammany and urban politics. No book about Tammany Hall or machine politics, it would seem, is complete without a Nast image of Tweed, even though Tweed led Tammany for less than a decade (from 1863 to 1871) and should by no means be considered its most significant boss.<sup>290</sup>

The story of Tammany in the last half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century is far more complex than Nast's cartoon image of the organization. Just before and even during Tweed's infamous leadership, Tammany served purposes beyond the accumulation of raw political power and illicit riches, becoming an advocate for and partner with the enormous immigrant population that was transforming the city, to the chagrin and disgust of New Yorkers who supported a revival of Know-Nothing nativism in the 1850s. After Tweed was arrested for his role in swindling millions of dollars in public funds, a native-born Irish-American named John Kelly rebuilt the organization through a shrewd cross-class alliance between some of the city's most-prominent citizens and its poor immigrant population. During Kelly's tenure, Tammany Hall became a tightly disciplined, top-down organization that expanded its reach beyond the city to influence state and even national politics, consistently positioning itself as an advocate for cities, for immigrants, and for workers at a time when all three were considered suspect or less than authentically American.

From the 1850s, when the Famine emigration drew to a close, to the opening of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, when New York's Democratic Party was on the verge of producing some of the most

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<sup>290</sup> For example, Tweed is featured on the cover of a compilation of essays edited by Bruce M. Stave and Sondra Astor Stave, *Urban Bosses, Machines, and Progressive Reformers* (Malabar, Fla.: Robert E. Krieger Publishing Company, 1984) and Oliver Allen, *The Tiger: The Rise and Fall of Tammany Hall* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1993), to cite just two examples.

progressive local politicians in the nation (two of whom, Al Smith and Robert Wagner, became national figures), Tammany Hall and its signature constituency created a new kind of urban politics, populist in practice as well as in word, pluralistic, and resistant to Anglo-Protestant cultural norms. Kelly, as the only Catholic member of the House of Representatives during the height of Know Nothing power in 1855, defined the new urban politics as rooted in American ideals, summoning the language of tolerance which O'Connell and his party deployed in Ireland during the Catholic emancipation crisis of the 1820s. Speaking on the House floor after colleagues assailed the Catholic Church as an enemy of republican government and civil liberties, Kelly said that in rising to defend the rights of his fellow Catholics, "I but vindicate the constitutional rights and liberties of every American citizen, whether Protestant or Catholic. For let me warn my fellow representatives that, in a government like ours, the rights of no class, however humble they may be, can be assailed without endangering the rights of all. The persecutor of today, when religious intolerance has fairly started on its disastrous course, will inevitably become the victim of tomorrow." <sup>291</sup>

In the immediate aftermath of Famine immigration, coinciding as it did with the nation's growing sectional differences over slavery, the Irish in New York defined their political concerns in cultural, not economic, terms. Kelly, their spokesman in Washington and the man who would act on Irish cultural grievances as head of Tammany Hall, demanded tolerance for his constituents at a time when intolerance was driving the nation closer to civil war. Before the Irish could formulate a broader critique of their new nation, they first had to defend themselves from suspicions that they were incapable of authentic citizenship in a supposedly nondenominational

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<sup>291</sup> *Speech by John Kelly in Reply to the Charges of Hon. Thomas R. Whitney against Catholicism*, delivered in the House Aug. 9, 1855 (Washington, Union Office, 1856).

but clearly Protestant republic. Tammany Hall became, for New York's Irish Catholics, a reliable redoubt in the face of hostile attacks.

While Irish success in New York politics took place under the patronage of Tammany, Irish support for Tammany was not historically inevitable, nor, for that matter, was Tammany's support for the Irish. Nativists in the early 1840s found a sympathetic hearing from non-Irish Tammany officials worried about losing a powerful voting bloc, even as William Seward, the Whig Governor of New York, sought to win over Irish immigrants by denouncing anti-Irish bigotry, supporting Catholic schools, and echoing calls for Irish self-government. A significant number of Irish voters supported Dagger John Hughes' third-party insurgency, Carroll Hall, in the 1841 municipal elections when Tammany was not quick enough to support the Maclay legislation which put the anti-immigrant Public School Society out of business. And, of course, Fernando Wood brought thousands of Irish voters with him when he split from Tammany and created his own ticket, Mozart Hall, in his successful mayoral campaign in 1859. The *Irish World* newspaper complained in 1874 that the "Republican Party has treated the negroes as *men*; the Democratic party has treated the Irish as *niggers*." <sup>292</sup>

Throughout Tammany Hall's long domination of municipal and state politics, the Irish vote rarely was as automatic, and Irish voters hardly as unthinking, as journalists portrayed them at the time. "The Irish are all Democrats and implicitly believe and obey their leaders," wrote antebellum diarist Sidney George Fisher of Philadelphia. <sup>293</sup> In fact, the Irish in New York were a presence in various factions which sought to challenge Tammany's dominance, from Charles O'Connor, who prosecuted Boss Tweed, to John Morrissey, a prizefighter and congressman who

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<sup>292</sup> *Irish World*, October 3, 1874.

<sup>293</sup> Quoted in Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York: Routledge, 1995), pg. 168.

won Tweed's old Senate seat in 1875 despite Tammany opposition, to the Rev. Edward McGlynn, an Irish-American Catholic priest who campaigned for Henry George's third-party candidacy for Mayor in 1886.

Viewed as a cultural institution, Tammany certainly did become an expression of singular Irish-American values, anxieties, prejudices, and solidarities after the Famine. As a political organization, however, Tammany had to work for its votes and had to respond to the needs and aspirations of core supporters. When its leaders put the Hall's priorities ahead of voters' concerns, defeat or defection often followed. Tammany suffered a series of damaging splits in the 1880s leading to the election of dozens of anti-Tammany aldermen who sought to purge the Democratic Party of Tammany's influence. In an attempt to win the support of conservative Democrats during the age of Grover Cleveland, Tammany selected a wealthy industrialist Abram Hewitt as a mayoral candidate in 1886, a move which led immigrant-stock voters, including many Irish, to support George's radical independent candidacy. Even the Hall's greatest leader, Charles Francis Murphy, was humiliated in successive elections for mayor and governor in 1913 and 1914, respectively, when political scandals – now virtually forgotten – overshadowed historic legislative victories which placed New York at the forefront of social progressivism.

So when Port Collector Murphy, a Republican, outmaneuvered Tammany to get to the *Cuba* first on that January afternoon in 1871, and when President Grant, another Republican, greeted the exiled Irish felons at the White House, they were conscious not only of the political power of Irish Americans but also of their shifting loyalties. Of the seven Mayors who served New York during the height of the Civil War and Reconstruction era (from 1862 to 1874), four were Republicans, elected with significant support from Irish-dominated wards. A new organization called the Irish Republican Campaign Club called on the Irish New Yorkers to

“emancipate” themselves from “corrupt Democratic leaders.”<sup>294</sup> On the national level, Republicans Blaine and Harrison actively solicited support from New York Irish Americans in the presidential elections of 1884 and 1888, respectively, with Harrison accomplishing the formidable feat of defeating a sitting Democratic incumbent, Grover Cleveland, in his home state in 1888. A New York group called the Irish-American Anti-Cleveland and Protective League, an arm of the Republican National Committee, took credit for delivering New York to Harrison.<sup>295</sup>

A popular political song from the period called “The Hibernian Delegates” indicates that Republican efforts to woo Irish voters in the 1870s were not entirely in vain:

*We’re both well-acquainted with General Grant,  
Ben Butler and all of the boys,  
And when we’re elected and sent to the front,  
You’ll know of the fact by the noise.*<sup>296</sup>

The fluidity of the Irish vote, or at least an electorally significant portion of it, shows that Irish immigrant and immigrant-stock voters were more open-minded than commonly portrayed, otherwise Republican operatives surely would not have wasted energy and resources on a voting bloc considered to be monolithic and, more to the point, unthinking. The success of Republican presidential candidates, Tammany dissidents, and nonpartisan independents in appealing to Irish-American voters indicates that their political concerns involved more than tribal loyalty, deference to authority, or gratitude for patronage jobs and Christmas turkeys. In his aside to Joseph Clarke while aboard the *Cuba* in 1871, John Devoy unwittingly spoke to this more-

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<sup>294</sup> The *New York Times*, June 23, 1889.

<sup>295</sup> For John Devoy’s account of the Harrison election and the efforts of the anti-Cleveland movement, see his journal in the Papers of John Devoy, MS 18,136, National Library of Ireland, Dublin. Devoy also was involved in Blaine’s campaign. See his post-mortem of the campaign in the Papers of John Devoy, MS 18,096, National Library of Ireland.

<sup>296</sup> Sheet music located in the Mick Moloney Collection of Irish-American Music and Popular Culture, Archives of Irish America, New York University, Bobst Library

complicated relationship between Tammany Democrats the Irish when he insisted that his political suitors would need more than dollars to win his loyalty because, he said, “we are not children.”

That said, there also is no question that the Irish in New York eventually did become inextricably linked with Tammany Hall and the Democratic Party for a century, from the age of the horse-drawn omnibus to the construction of the interstate highway system. So why, despite the overtures from Republicans, radicals, and dissenters, did the Irish eventually respond to Tammany Hall and the Democrats? Frances Perkins, who served as Franklin Roosevelt’s Secretary of Labor after years of working with Tammany figures in New York, suggested that the Irish “became Democrats for no other reason in the world than it was a better position from which to pull the British lion’s tail. It had nothing to do with the Democrats themselves.” That simplistic formulation ignores the Republican Party’s energetic tail-pulling after the Civil War, including Grant’s well-publicized reception for the newly arrived Irish felons in 1871.<sup>297</sup>

Scholars who focus on race suggest that the Democrats offered the Irish a privileged position over free blacks in the north.<sup>298</sup> More commonly, Tammany Hall is credited with manipulating or exploiting ignorant immigrants, naturalizing them with untoward speed and striking one-sided deals which called for the delivery of crumbs in exchange for the power of the franchise.<sup>299</sup> In other words, the Irish became Democrats and supporters of Tammany Hall

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<sup>297</sup> *The Reminiscences of Frances Perkins*, Columbia Center for Oral History, pg. 312. British Home Secretary William Harcourt complained that the Republican administration of Chester Arthur refused to crack down on Irish Americans who openly supported terrorism against British targets in the early 1880s. See K.R.M. Short, *The Dynamite War*, (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1979).

<sup>298</sup> Noel Ignatiev makes this point explicit in *How the Irish Became White*, pg. 89.

<sup>299</sup> See, for example, Steven P. Erie’s reference to Fernando Wood’s mass naturalization efforts in *Rainbow’s End: Irish-Americans and the Dilemmas of Urban Machine Politics, 1840-1985* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), pgs. 51-52. Erie argues that Wood’s “army of fraudulent voters” helped him to defeat Tammany after he formed his own organization, Mozart Hall.

almost by accident, and certainly without any thought given to anything so weighty as a common belief system or shared values.

This argument is in need of revision in light of new historical research which portrays women, African Americans, and other groups as active agents of their own lives and narratives, as genuine historical actors and not simply as powerless victims of political dictation.<sup>300</sup> If the Famine Irish brought with them an understanding of the importance of organization, of the possibilities of democratic politics, and of the terrifying effects of powerlessness based on their experience in the old country, they could hardly have been pliable, exploitable tools of American political bosses who represented only their own interests, not those of their easily fooled constituents. The relationship between Tammany and the city's Irish community should be seen as collaborative and mutually supportive as it took shape in fits and starts through the Civil War and into the Gilded Age, leading to the maturation of the machine and the community in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

The Democratic Party's self-image as the defender of ordinary voters certainly resonated with Irish immigrants familiar with the populism of Daniel O'Connell. "Everything and everybody has a party, save only the people," O'Connell said in 1830. "I go to Parliament to form 'The Party of the People.'" <sup>301</sup> While O'Connell was hardly a man of the people based on his education, social station, and income, he won the adoration of the Irish because he articulated their cultural grievances and sense of victimization. His anti-elitist, culturally-driven political discourse conditioned the Irish to gravitate towards the Democracy and Tammany Hall once they

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<sup>300</sup> Martin Shefter argues that Tammany during the Gilded Age was organized top-down in conjunction with utility companies and other interests, with voters dutifully ratifying Tammany's hold on city government. See his essay, "The Emergence of the Political Machine: An Alternative View," in Willis D. Hawley, ed., *Theoretical Perspectives on Urban Politics* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1976)

<sup>301</sup> *Dublin Evening Post*, January 12, 1830

arrived in New York – an historic irony, given that O’Connell was a staunch abolitionist, while Democrats like Fernando Wood and others were most decidedly not. But Tammany officials and politicians did share with O’Connell a world view which separated “us and them,” the “us” being workingmen, or Catholics, or Irish, or immigrants, and “them” being reformers, Anglo-Saxons, Protestants, abolitionists, or the rich, depending on context and circumstance.

The Irish gravitated to Tammany and the Democratic Party because these organizations mobilized the rhetoric of grievance which O’Connell deployed with such success in Ireland from the 1820s until the Famine. Grievance was central to the formation of a new Irish-American political and cultural identity in New York after the Famine. As they reorganized their lives and recreated a sense of community in a city that must have been both tremendously alien and profoundly familiar, Irish immigrants defiantly held on to qualities which, in the eyes of native-born Protestant New Yorkers, made them suspect and something other than American, even if they had white skin. They retained Catholicism as an essential part of their identity and culture even though they understood that doing so would inspire fear and loathing. They developed their own ideas of civic morality which challenged the Protestant framework of disinterest, temperance, sabbatarianism, and laissez faire. And they insisted on retaining a portion of their Old World identity in their settlement patterns, their continued interest in Irish affairs, and in their demands on and expectations of government.

Expressions of Irish cultural and political grievance took many forms, but one of the most prominent was a rejection of the abolitionist movement in the North, a movement which was, of course, associated with northern Whigs and, after the Whigs’ demise, the Republican Party. Some historians have interpreted Irish anti-abolitionist sentiment as evidence that Irish immigrants wished to be accepted as white people, entitled to the rights and privileges set aside



for fellow citizens of a white republic.<sup>302</sup> According to this view, the Irish refused to make common cause with African Americans, another oppressed minority group, and instead sought to establish their bonafides as white people by joining in the oppression of blacks and otherwise seeking to prove themselves worthy of white-skin privilege.

To be sure, Irish-American hostility towards abolitionists is curious in light of their hero worship of O'Connell, one of the Atlantic world's most-eloquent critics of American slavery. O'Connell's demands that Irish Americans make common cause with abolitionists inspired an extraordinary backlash from supporters in America, including Daguer John Hughes, who argued that it was inappropriate for a foreigner to tell the United States how it should resolve internal problems. (O'Connell did not help matters when he compared Irish Americans who refused to support abolition to the "poisonous and venomous reptiles" which St. Patrick drove from Ireland.)<sup>303</sup> But O'Connell, as noted earlier, also framed oppression in Ireland as a form of slavery, and often referred to the Catholic Irish as slaves, or to Ireland as enslaved.<sup>304</sup> He was not alone, for the language and imagery of slavery was constantly invoked to describe the plight of the Irish in Ireland as they struggled against Anglo-Protestant oppression and the legacy of the Penal Laws. Irish historian Alice Stoppford Green wrote in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century that the Irish

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<sup>302</sup> Some scholars, including Ignatiev, cited above, David Roediger, *Working Toward Whiteness: How America's Immigrants Became White* (New York, Basic Books, 2006) and Theodore W. Allen, *The Invention of the White Race: Racial Oppression and Society Control* (New York: Verso, 1994) have theorized that the Irish sought to prove their whiteness in order to gain acceptance from the Anglo-Protestant mainstream. This is a curious divergence from modern scholarship, which tends to emphasize the ways in which oppressed groups retain their identity while resisting or negotiating with their would-be oppressors. The leading journalists, Protestant preachers, and elite reformers of the Gilded Age no doubt would have been amused to learn that the Irish desperately wished to cast aside their "otherness" – which included their Catholicism -- in order to fit into mainstream New York society.

<sup>303</sup> Quoted in Christine Kinealy, *Daniel O'Connell and the Anti-Slavery Movement*, (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2010), pg. 53.

<sup>304</sup> References to the Irish as slaves abound in O'Connell's speeches. To cite just one example, in the introduction to a collection of his letters, O'Connell referred to Ireland as the "bond slave of Britain." See Daniel O'Connell, *Letters to the Reformers of England on the Reform Bill for Ireland* (London: J. Ridgway, 1832), pg. 8.

existed in “semi-slavery.”<sup>305</sup> The popular 19<sup>th</sup> Century Irish poet Thomas Moore frequently drew on the language of enslavement in describing his fellow countrymen and their plight:

*The nations have fallen, and thou still art young  
Thy sun is but rising, when others are set;  
And tho' slavery's cloud o'er thy morning hath hung  
The full noon of freedom shall beam round thee yet.*<sup>306</sup>

One of Moore's best-known works, “The Minstrel Boy,” narrates the death of an Irish warrior who, in his dying act, tears the strings of a harp he carried into battle, rendering it useless:

*Thy songs were made for the pure and free,  
They shall never sound in slavery.*

Those who opposed Irish-Catholic attempts to shake off the bonds of oppression did not disagree with the references to enslavement. A popular Irish-Protestant ballad entitled “Croppies Lie Down” (a reference to the close-cropped hair of Irish rebels during the failed uprising of 1798) included this warning:

*Oh, Croppies, ye'd better be quiet and still  
Ye shan't have your liberty, do what ye will*<sup>307</sup>

The enduring conception of Irish oppression as a form of slavery remains evident in a song performed before every state occasion in the Republic of Ireland, *A Soldier's Song*, the Irish national anthem.

*Sworn to be free,*

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<sup>305</sup> “Essay on the Irish in the United States, Alice Stoppford Green Papers, MS 10,445, National Library of Ireland, Dublin. The essay is not dated, but a reference to Richard Croker as the leader of Tammany means the essay very likely was written during Croker's tenure, from 1886 to 1901.

<sup>306</sup> “Erin, oh Erin,” and “The Minstrel Boy” by Thomas Moore, in Seamus Deane, ed., *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* (Derry: Field Day Publications, 1991), pgs. 1061 and 1064

<sup>307</sup> Quoted in Michael A. Gordon, *The Orange Riots*, pg. 33. The ballad remains popular in the Protestant community of Northern Ireland.

*No more our ancient sire land  
Shall shelter the despot or the slave.*

Significantly, the Irish remembered O'Connell as their "liberator," and his cause as "Catholic emancipation." The Irish were not unique in seeing themselves as little better off than slaves. Frederick Douglass visited Ireland on the eve of the Famine, and was shocked to see living conditions even before the potato failures. "Men and women, married and single, old and young, lie down together, in much the same degradation as the American slaves," he wrote, although he later added that while the "Irishman is poor ... he is not a slave ... He is still the master of his own body."<sup>308</sup>

Unlike slaves in the American South, however, the Irish found themselves without advocates in the Atlantic world, their plight ignored and their degradation worsened by the very people who condemned slaveholding. One of O'Connell's aides, Richard Sheil, complained as early as 1824 that "the common negro enjoys more practical liberty than the wretched Irish peasant, oppressed as he is by the landlord ... the philanthropists of England pity the state of the African and yet were insensible to the condition of the Irish peasant."<sup>309</sup>

Once in the United States, Irish immigrants continued to invoke the language of enslavement to describe their former condition in Ireland. The efforts of the Protestant-led Five Points Mission to remove poor or neglected Irish-Catholic children from their families and place them with Protestant families in the Midwest inspired comparisons with Southern slavery. The *Irish-American* newspaper carried a sensational report in November, 1863, that Irish-Catholic

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<sup>308</sup> Patricia Ferreira, "All But 'A Black Skin and Woolly Hair': Frederick Douglass' Witness of the Irish Famine," *American Studies International*, June 1999, Vol. XXXVII, No. 2, pgs. 78-80

<sup>309</sup> Fergus O'Ferrall, *Catholic Emancipation*, pg. 50.

children swept from the streets of New York were being offered “for sale” to Protestant families in Indiana. The paper blamed the “canting admirers of African ebony” for this outrage, linking abolitionists with the most-heinous sort of anti-Irish activity.<sup>310</sup> The same newspaper attacked an Irish landlord and abolitionist named James Haughton for speaking out against slavery in the United States, arguing that as a landlord, Haughton “has white slaves in Ireland as uneducated and uncivilized as the colored race he wants to extend his sympathy to.”<sup>311</sup>

The harsh living conditions of impoverished Irish immigrants did little to soothe the sense of resentment and grievance which many felt after fleeing the Famine. Even so critical an observer as Noel Ignatiev noted that the Irish were without allies and advocates in the United States, writing that “no one gave a damn for the poor Irish.”<sup>312</sup> Abolitionists agitated for the end of slavery and advocated for the welfare of those they would set free, but there was no similar organized effort to offer Irish Catholics sympathy and friendly assistance, a circumstance Irish America could not help but notice. The *Irish World* newspaper referred to the Irish in the U.S. and in Ireland as “the best abused people in the world” and, more than a decade after the end of the Civil War, continued to condemn the “abolition party” as a “notoriously lawless faction [which] appealed from the established law of the land to the ‘higher law’ – that is, their own notion of what the law ought to be.”<sup>313</sup>

Viewed in a purely American context, Irish hostility towards abolitionists would appear to be evidence of a white supremacist, pro-slavery ideology which fit the world view of leading Democrats, including the darling of reformers, Samuel Tilden, who said in 1866 that the party

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<sup>310</sup> The *Irish American*, November 14,, 1863

<sup>311</sup> The *Irish American*, October 29, 1853

<sup>312</sup> Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White*, pg. 182

<sup>313</sup> The *Irish World*, August 12, 1871

should stand for “condemnation and reversal of negro supremacy.”<sup>314</sup> But the Irish political framework was not purely American, for its foundation was based on political and power arrangements in Ireland. The evangelical Protestant leadership of the abolitionist movement could not help but inspire distrust from a population which associated evangelical Protestants with oppression in Ireland. During John Kelly’s speech in the House of Representatives in defense of Catholic Americans, he noted that “Protestant ministers may, in fact, be said to be at the head of the Abolition party in the North, and some of them ... I see sitting as legislators before me now.” Abolitionists complained about Catholic influence in politics, Kelly said, but as he surveyed the House floor, “I look around me in vain for a representative of the Catholic clergy here.”<sup>315</sup>

Just as Irish immigrants could summon little sympathy for free blacks and slaves, abolitionists offered Irish immigrants little in the way of comfort and assistance. The Republican Party’s tacit alliance with the Know Nothing movement in the 1850s did little to quell Irish-Catholic fears that they would find themselves at the bottom of America’s economic pile if the Republicans and Know Nothings had their way, a circumstance they understandably sought to avoid. In the aftermath of the deadly draft riots in New York in 1863, during which Irish Americans murdered dozens of African Americans, an exhausted and dying John Hughes told his friend Seward, now Abraham Lincoln’s Secretary of State, that the “discontent will be found in what the misguided people imagine to be a disposition on the part of a few here and elsewhere to

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<sup>314</sup> Francis S. Barry, *The Scandal of Reform: The Grand Failures of New York’s Political Crusaders and the Death of Nonpartisanship* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2009), pg. 33

<sup>315</sup> *Speech by John Kelly in Reply to the Charges of Hon. Thomas R. Whitney against Catholicism*, delivered in the House Aug. 9, 1855 (Washington: Union Office, 1856)

make black labor equal to white labor and put both on the same equality with the difference that black labor shall have local patronage over that of the white man.”<sup>316</sup>

In Hughes’ view, “some misguided people” feared not just labor equality between black and white, but the loss of patronage under an abolitionist-Republican regime. There was nothing theoretical about this fear: The Republican Party in Massachusetts (where the Know Nothings held a near monopoly on public office in 1854) made common cause with nativism through its support for literacy tests and a two-year waiting period before immigrants could vote (a watered-down version of the 14-year wait which most Know Nothings preferred).<sup>317</sup> Closer to home, in 1857 Albany Republicans adopted temperance legislation designed to make liquor more expensive and thus out of reach of the poor Irish who were so intimately associated with the use of alcohol. They also replaced the city’s police department, an important source of jobs for Irish-Americans, with a state-funded force in 1857, leading to a riot outside City Hall. These initiatives, with their overtly anti-Irish, anti-immigrant overtones, offered the Irish a glimpse of where they stood with the Republican Party’s amalgam of abolitionists and nativists. The *Irish World* complained that in the Republican-dominated Congress of 1871, there were just two Irish-Americans among the 252 members of the House of Representatives and just one U.S. Senator. “The negroes, who form but a tenth of the population, have 5 representatives in Congress,” the paper noted. But the *World’s* editors did not view this early exercise in identity politics as a zero-sum game between two competing groups. “This is not too many for the negroes,” the paper

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<sup>316</sup> Hughes to Seward, July 19, 1863, Hughes Papers, Roll 2, Archives of the Archdiocese of New York, Yonkers, N.Y.

<sup>317</sup> For connections between nativism and the Republican Party, see, among others, Tyler Anbinder, *Nativism and Slavery: The Northern Know Nothings & The Politics of the 1850s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992)

said, “but see the inequality between them and us.”<sup>318</sup> Inequality, not equality, once again surfaced as a concern for Irish Americans under Republican rule.

Some Irish Americans began to emphasize the trans-Atlantic nature of abolitionism, arguing that British and American Protestants were in league not simply to end slavery but to deprive Irish Catholics of political power. The *Irish-American* condemned what it saw as a conspiracy between “British philanthropists (!) and fanatics” and “certain insane abolitionists of this country.”<sup>319</sup> In the Irish world view, any combination between British elites and American abolitionists could only have dire consequences for Irish Catholic immigrants in the U.S. The Irish collective memory of Ireland, recounted in editorials and poetry in the Irish-American press, reminded them that they were exiles from a land where power had raised up one group, Protestants, at the expense of another, Catholics.<sup>320</sup> What had happened in Ireland through patronage and discriminatory laws could happen again in the United States if the same hostile forces came into power. The Irish, then, looked to Democrats to protect them not simply from the competition of free black labor but also from the power of a Republican Party aligned with Know Nothings who were determined to strip them of patronage and influence, and to impose Protestant culture on them.

The anti-draft riots of July, 1863, were a terrible milestone in the history of race relations and racial politics in New York City. Irish Americans heard their great champion, Fernando Wood, denounce the Union’s cause as hopeless and the Lincoln Administration as incompetent and hostile. The national draft law was implemented in mid-July, 1863, days after the great Union victory at Gettysburg but also after more than two years of horrific slaughter during which

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<sup>318</sup> The *Irish World*, May 5, 1871

<sup>319</sup> The *Irish American*, October 28, 1849.

<sup>320</sup> Most Protestants, of course, were of English or Scottish background, while the Catholics were, by and large, the island’s native Gaelic population.

Irish-American units like the 69<sup>th</sup> New York volunteers paid a heavy price. While the riot was undeniably and murderously racist (although targets also included Republican newspapers and politicians), it also clearly was directed at a government which the Irish perceived to be hostile and aligned with their enemies. The innocent African Americans who were lynched, and the African American children who escaped a horrific death by fire when Irish-American mobs set slight the Colored Orphan Asylum, were viewed not only as racial “others,” but as the patronage spoilsmen of abolitionists and nativists who were intent on depriving the Irish of political and economic power. It was not equality which the Irish feared. It was inequality of the sort they experienced in Ireland – in reality, or in collective memory – where Anglo-Protestants presided over a government that privileged one group over another. Tammany offered a powerful means to resist these hostile forces.

Northern Democrats and Tammany Hall have been rightly called to task for their overt pro-slavery sentiments or their studied agnosticism on the subject. Republicans and abolitionists, however, have escaped the scorn of history for their embrace of or alliance with overt nativism. For example, the Rev. Edward Beecher, a member of the celebrated Beecher family, authored a tract subtly entitled *The Papal Conspiracy Exposed and Protestantism Defended in the Light of Reason, History, and Scripture* during the height of antebellum nativism. Historian David Potter noted decades ago that it has been “psychologically difficult” for historians “to cope with the fact that anti-slavery, which they tend to idealize, and nativism, which they scorn, should have operated in partnership.”<sup>321</sup> But this insight is critical to understanding Irish-American political consciousness in the years just before the Civil War. Irish affinity for Democrats and Tammany Hall was not always uniform and automatic, but Irish-American hostility towards nativism, or

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<sup>321</sup> David Potter, *The Impending Crisis* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), pg. 252



anything that hinted at nativism, was visceral and instantaneous, which is why Fernando Wood so adamantly denied accusations that he was a closet Know Nothing in the early 1850s. New York's Irish-American newspapers patrolled the nation's political culture for signs of nativism, and their forays were rarely in vain. Horace Greeley's *New York Tribune*, one of the antebellum era's most-powerful abolitionist organs, breathlessly reported on an "alleged Catholic conspiracy" against the city's public schools in 1858, identifying its chief informant as a "foreigner by birth, educated a Roman Catholic of the most bigoted description." The paper went on to list the names of public school teachers in heavily Irish Fourth, Seventh and Fourteenth wards – Mary A. Mahoney, Mary A. O'Brien, Mary S. McDermott, Mary B. Dolan, and three dozen others with similarly Gaelic surnames and suspiciously Catholic first names. "The foregoing names," the paper's correspondent wrote, "are given as a sample to show the sort of instructors placed over our school children, and who are expected to educate them for the responsibilities of American citizenship."<sup>322</sup>

The almost reflexive defensiveness of Irish-Catholic politicians, clergy, and ordinary communicants has been noted in many studies of New York politics, and to be sure, at times the anti-Irish or anti-Catholic card has been played to the point of exhaustion. For example, Joseph P. Kennedy, the father of three U.S. Senators (one of whom, of course, was elected president in 1960), once complained that he was denied membership in an old-money country club in Brookline, Mass., because "I was an Irish Catholic and the son of a barkeep."<sup>323</sup> It is important to note, however, that the chip-on-the-shoulder rhetoric of Irish-American politicians and the grievance-charged headlines of New York's Irish-American newspapers come out of an era in which a respectable and indeed widely admired newspaper such as the *New York Tribune*, edited

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<sup>322</sup> The *New York Tribune*, May 17, 1858.

<sup>323</sup> Michael Coffey, ed., *The Irish in America*, pg. 107.

by the famed abolitionist Greeley, published dire warnings of Irish-Catholic infiltration of public schools, and when a figure like Thomas Nast rose to fame in part thanks to his deplorable images of simian, violent, knuckle-dragging Irishmen published in *Harper's Weekly*, which called itself a "Journal of Civilization."

So when non-Irish political bosses like Bill Tweed offered the Irish immigrant community a friendly hand, the Irish responded, even if the gesture was merely the product of cold calculation, as perhaps it was. Several years before Tweed became Tammany's leader and placed the organization firmly on the side of immigrants, he admitted to supporting an unnamed nativist candidate for local office. "I can assure you never having voted for a Whig as a Whig although I did once as a Native," Tweed confessed in a letter written in 1846.<sup>324</sup> Within a decade, however, Tweed was firmly in the anti-nativist camp, and wound up losing his congressional seat to a Know Nothing in the great nativist wave of 1854. Whether he was motivated by that loss or by genuine sympathy for the city's immigrants, Tweed became a staunch opponent of nativism and so, for the Irish, he was a reliable advocate in a city where hostile forces lurked. Tweed not only talked an anti-nativist game – he told a political ally named Murphy in 1855 that the Know Nothings "must be beaten at all hazards" -- but he acted on his beliefs. During a discussion about political patronage, Tweed told Murphy to look into the politics of a man named Newcombe, who had applied for a job as a letter carrier with Tweed's support. But after having "heard stories," about Newcombe, Tweed had second thoughts, which he relayed to Murphy. "I think you had better see if [Newcombe] is not one of the K.Ns & if he is I would advise his dismissal," Tweed wrote, adding a touch which showed how and why he

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<sup>324</sup> Tweed to Henry L. Davis, October 24, 1846, the Papers of William Tweed, Folder 1, New-York Historical Society

became Tammany's first true boss. "But be careful what you do," he advised Murphy, "and have some other reason for his removal. Dugan can furnish you one." <sup>325</sup>

Tweed and Tammany protected Irish New Yorkers not only from political nativism, but its softer but no less determined manifestation, Protestant charity. Noel Ignatiev was not entirely correct in arguing that nobody "gave a damn" about poor Irish immigrants and their families. Groups such as the Children's Aid Society, the New-York Ladies Home Missionary Society, and the New York Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor were created in reaction to the huge influx of immigrants, most of them Famine survivors, who were poor, unskilled, intemperate and otherwise not in conformance with Anglo-Protestant norms. These organizations were earnest about their wish to do something for the poor in neighborhoods like the infamous Five Points, but their efforts at amelioration were steeped in Protestant cultural attitudes towards the largely Catholic population they encountered in their missionary work. The Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor, for example, conditioned their assistance on the worthiness of their clients – the group sought to divert charity away from "clamorous and worthless" poor people, redirecting assistance to "the most ... deserving." <sup>326</sup> The Ladies Home Missionary Society was affiliated with the Methodist Church, and its priority was the salvation of souls, because the journey out of poverty required the poor to put aside the false religious tenets which were holding them back. When the Society announced plans to build a new mission in the Five Points, Catholic spokesman objected to the use of public funds on the project because of the group's overt evangelizing mission. The *New York Times*, in dismissing the Catholic objections, implicitly conceded their validity, asking why Catholics would not allow the missionaries "the

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<sup>325</sup> Tweed to Murphy, January 20, 1855 and February 5, 1855, Tweed Papers, Folder 1, New-York Historical Society.

<sup>326</sup> Tyler Anbinder, *Five Points*, pg. 244

chance of making a possible convert to their faith” in exchange for “the unquestioned good they have done.”<sup>327</sup>

The Irish viewed the efforts of the Protestant missionaries and charitable organizations in New York with suspicion and hostility that was rooted in their experience with Bible societies and missionary organizations in Ireland. Here again memories of Famine-era Ireland may explain why some, though not all, Irish Catholics believed reformers were more interested in proselytizing than in feeding them.<sup>328</sup> During the starvation in Ireland in the late 1840s and early 1850s, evangelical Protestants set up soup kitchens, but aid often was contingent on conversion. In Irish folklore, souperism became a by-word for moralizing elites whose apparent good intentions were part of an effort to convert Catholics, an act with political and ideological implications as well as spiritual implications.<sup>329</sup>

Religious conversion, in the separatist ideology of Irish-America, meant not simply a renunciation of Catholicism but literal deracination. Irish Catholics viewed Protestant New Yorkers of British descent not as fellow members of a white race, but Anglo-Saxons – the ancient oppressors of a separate Irish race. The *Irish World* described “the Anglo-Saxon race ... in England and in America” as “our traditional enemies,” and featured a poem with the unsubtle title of “I Am Not an Anglo-Saxon.”

*Out upon the very name ...*

*It tells of wrong and outrage,*

*Of slavery and crime ...*

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<sup>327</sup> The *New York Times*, October 11, 1852

<sup>328</sup> Tyler Anbinder notes that mission records indicate that some Catholics responded to the spiritual and material outreach of the Protestant charities. See *Five Points*, pgs. 246-248.

<sup>329</sup> See Irene Whelan’s essay “The Stigma of Souperism,” in Cathal Poirteir, ed., *The Great Irish Famine*. Whelan argues that Protestant charitable work during the Famine was part of a large ideological effort to convert the Irish to Protestantism, which, in their view, would resolve many of the island’s problems.

*O! I'm not an Anglo-Saxon,  
I am Irish blood and bone.*<sup>330</sup>

The *Freeman's Journal* condemned those who claimed “an Anglo-Saxon divine right to domination in a land of such various and inextricably mixed races as ours.”<sup>331</sup> This construction of separate and distinct Irish race continued into the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, when Irish Americans in New York organized a series of “Irish Race Conventions” just after World War I to advocate for the Irish independence movement.

The experience of the Irish with religiously inspired reform movements led them to conclude that Protestant reformers in the United States were no different – surely no friendlier – than were their Protestant oppressors in Ireland, even or perhaps especially those who offered charity. When an enthusiastic Methodist missionary named Lewis Pease sought to teach industrial skills to the poor of the Five Points, he shocked his fellow evangelicals who emphasized salvation first. But for Pease's intended clients, the language he employed did not sound very different from the language of moral reform mobilized in Ireland during the Bible war. Pease sought “moral reformation” as part of his charitable works, and in the framework of Irish-Catholicism, moral reformation meant, in essence, a rejection of faith and identity.<sup>332</sup> Souperism, by another name.

The searing experience of the Famine, where charity often was either punitive, judgmental, or designed to evangelize, taught tens of thousands of Irish New Yorkers to be wary of the street corner preacher, the mission, the high-minded societies which announced their concern for the welfare and education of children. All were suspect, and with reason. And if

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<sup>330</sup> The *Irish World*, August 12, 1871, June 6, 1874

<sup>331</sup> The *Freeman's Journal and Catholic Register*, July 8, 1854

<sup>332</sup> For a discussion of Pease's methods, see Tyler Anbinder, *Five Points*, pgs. 243-257

reformers were suspect, so were the Whigs and later the Republicans who spoke the trans-Atlantic language of moral reform and spiritual uplift and who found common ground with anti-immigrant, anti-Catholic nativists.

The Irish in New York took the lead in creating separatist institutions where they would be shielded from the Protestant proselytizing, widening rather than narrowing the cultural gap between Irish Catholics and Anglo Protestants in the city. These institutions created a parallel civic life and culture for the city's Irish Catholics, often duplicating the same services and governing philosophies as Protestant or supposedly secular institutions that were explicitly targeting Catholics for "reform." For example, John Hughes established The Society for the Protection of Destitute Roman Catholic Children to counter the efforts of reformer Charles Loring Brace and his Children's Aid Society, which, like the loathed Five Points Mission, removed poor children – most of them Catholic – from their homes and sent them to rural families, most of them Protestant. Similarly, the Irish-led Catholic clergy and orders of nuns established their own network of orphanages, insane asylums, hospitals, sanitariums, and other fledgling social-service institutions where Catholics would be spared from the evangelizing of Protestant reformers who, as they did in Ireland, saw the Irish poverty as evidence of Catholic inferiority.

Tammany Hall encouraged and partly funded this explicit Irish rejection of Protestant, Anglo-Saxon charitable institutions. The government-funded growth of Catholic social service institutions introduced new actors in the city's ongoing political and cultural debate about how best to care for the immigrant poor. The Sisters of Charity, Sisters of Mercy and other orders of Irish-based nuns were recruited to staff New York's Catholic hospitals, orphanages, and other such facilities, and they were not shy about capitalizing on Irish influence in City Hall to win

government support for their initiatives. The Sisters of Mercy lobbied judges to remand destitute children to their institutions, rather than to non-Catholic private charities. Their efforts were a huge success – a Mercy-run institution for poor boys received \$77,000 in city funds in 1880 to look after the welfare of nearly a thousand orphaned or neglected children.<sup>333</sup>

The Children's Law of 1875 required that poor children in need of institutional care should be housed in institutions reflecting their religious upbringing, with the city required to pay for the care. This inevitably led to an expansion of Catholic social service institutions through the expenditure of public funds at a time, not coincidentally, when John Kelly was the first Irish Catholic leader of Tammany Hall. But the fledgling alliance between Tammany and the Irish nuns who cared for the Catholic poor was not simply about funding separatism and building empires. As Maureen Fitzgerald noted in her study of Irish nuns in New York, Catholic facilities emphasized "the parental rights of the poor" by viewing their intervention as a temporary remedy for families in severe distress.<sup>334</sup> This approach contrasted with Protestant charities, including the Children's Aid Society, which sought to remove children not only from the homes of the poor, but in many cases from the city altogether. It also contrasted with the approach of some government institutions, such as the state Board of Charities, which were beyond the control of Tammany politicians.

The moralistic critique of the poor with which the Irish were so familiar was evident in the Board of Charities annual report in 1877, which blamed most "cases of pauperism" on "idleness, improvidence, drunkenness, or other forms of vicious indulgence, which are frequently, if not universally, *hereditary in character*." Because these problems were hereditary,

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<sup>333</sup> See Maureen Fitzgerald, *Habits of Compassion: Irish Catholic Nuns and the Origins of New York's Welfare System, 1830-1920* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006), pg. 132-33.

<sup>334</sup> Maureen Fitzgerald, *Habits of Compassion*, pg. 135 (emphasis added).

the board argued, “the sooner (families) can be separated and broken up, the better it will be for the children and for society at large.”<sup>335</sup> Irish Catholic nuns believed in keeping families together – and away from Protestant influence. Irish influence over government purse strings allowed them to build facilities to achieve their humanitarian goal.

Even as Boss Tweed was depleting the city treasury of millions for his own purposes, he used his well-chosen position as chairman of the state Senate’s worthy-sounding Charitable and Religious Societies Committee to assist his Catholic constituents in their ambitious building program. In doing so, he aligned Tammany with the Church’s social welfare network, to the chagrin of reformers who controlled the more-formal institutions of relief. During Tweed’s three years as committee chairman, state spending on charitable institutions totaled \$2.2 million, with about \$1.8 million designated for charities in New York City. Of that sum, Catholic institutions received a huge share, about \$1.3 million, to fund the Archdiocese’s separatist social services network.<sup>336</sup> It was the beginning of a partnership between two powerful and profoundly Irish institutions that shaped the course of modern New York.

The Irish responded enthusiastically to the overtures of Tweed and his operatives, who offered assistance without demanding proof of need or demanding changes in behavior or belief, rather than to the ministrations of those ardent Protestant reformers who built missions and visited homes in hopes of transforming the overwhelming the Irish Catholic poor into something else, something more Protestant, more respectable, more hard-working. Tammany enabled the Irish to build their own institutions, and, as the Hall grew through the 19<sup>th</sup> century to become an ad-hoc provider of social services, it broke the linkage between charity and moral reform.

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<sup>335</sup> Maureen Fitzgerald, *Habits of Compassion*, pg. 121.

<sup>336</sup> Kenneth D. Ackerman, *Boss Tweed*, pg. 66; Amy Bridges, *A City in the Republic*, pg. 151.



This more-humane approach to amelioration perhaps was best articulated by Tammany's Al Smith during a debate over state funding of pensions for widows with children in 1915. "The State of New York, under the provisions of this act, reaches out its strong arm to [the] widow and her children and says to them, 'We recognize in you a resource to the state and we propose to take care of you, not as a matter of charity, but as a matter of government and public duty,'" Smith said.<sup>337</sup>

Smith's description of the poor as a "resource" and of government assistance as a "duty" was a far cry from the attitudes of moralizing reformers on both sides of the Atlantic in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Tammany, infused with Irish-Catholic suspicion of traditional reformers and their methods, helped to create that change in attitude.

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<sup>337</sup> Henry Moskowitz, ed., *Progressive Democracy: Addresses and State Papers of Alfred E. Smith* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1928), pg. 160.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### RECONSTRUCTION

Like Walt Whitman, Tammany Hall contained multitudes during the last half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It was home to members of the city's civic elites like Samuel Tilden and Abram Hewitt, and to working-class alderman aligned with the city's burgeoning union movement.<sup>338</sup> It became a profoundly Irish Catholic institution partly under the guidance of an Irish Protestant, Richard Croker. Its most-reliable supporters lived in self-contained urban villages below 14<sup>th</sup> Street in Manhattan, but it sought influence at the state and even national levels. Its Irish-American leaders guarded their hard-won power and influence with care, but they created a space in the city's civic life for new immigrants, most of them Italians and Jews, without much of the conflict and violence which characterized the flood of Irish-Catholic immigration to New York after the Famine.

Tammany contradicted itself, like Whitman, without blushing. It denounced the power of industrial monopolies during the Gilded Age, but it supported a succession of conservative business leaders who sought the mayoralty in the 1880s. Leaders like John Kelly emphasized toleration, but the organization kept its African-American supporters at a distance, segregated in their own annex called the "Colored Democracy." Some of its leaders, including Croker and George Washington Plunkitt, grew rich in service to the poor. The contradictions even extended to the organization's propaganda sheet, the *Tammany Times*, which contained warnings that "there is probably no other business that affords so many temptations in the way of drinking as

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<sup>338</sup> To cite just two examples, Tammany's candidate for coroner in 1896, Jacob E. Bausch, was secretary of the Central Labor Union, and one of its candidates for Assembly that year, Thomas J. Murray, was a member of the plasterers' union. See candidate profiles in the *New York Times*, November 1, 1896.

that of politics” – an assertion with which temperance reformers surely concurred -- on a page adjacent to large advertisements for Old Crow Rye and Dewar’s Scotch Whiskey.<sup>339</sup> Tammany did not exert itself in trying to explain these divergent attitudes. Rather, its collective attitude was the same as Whitman’s: Do I contradict myself? Very well. I contradict myself.<sup>340</sup> As Richard Croker said when his leadership of Tammany came under attack in 1892, “I do not propose to defend the Tammany organization, neither do I propose to defend sunrise as an exhibition of celestial mechanics.”<sup>341</sup>

Tammany Hall developed its reputation for gross corruption, cynical manipulation, and outright exploitation during the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, especially after non-Irish Boss Tweed was driven from power in 1871, leading to the era of Irish-American hegemony over the machine’s leadership. Tweed’s depredations remain breathtaking in scale – he and his allies famously built a courthouse on Chambers Street for millions more than it should have cost, with the overcharges going into the pockets of Tammany’s leaders. The scheme was made public in a series of stories in *The New York Times* during the summer of 1871, and became a defining moment in the narrative of 19<sup>th</sup> Century urban politics. Tweed’s corruption is a tale of many astonishing details, only one of which needs repeating: A carpenter billed New York County for \$360,000 for a month’s work on the new courthouse, a sum so gigantic that it would set off alarm bells (presumably) in City Hall even in the early 21<sup>st</sup> Century.<sup>342</sup> By way of comparison, total construction costs for a new Tammany Hall building in the mid-1860s were about

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<sup>339</sup> *Tammany Times*, July 2, 1904, found in the Kilroe Collection, New York Historical Society

<sup>340</sup> Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1926), pg. 76.

<sup>341</sup> “Tammany Hall and the Democracy,” by Richard Croker, *The North American Review*, Vol. 154, No. 423, February, 1892, pg. 227.

<sup>342</sup> Figures from Kenneth D. Ackerman, *Boss Tweed*, pg. 170. Ironically, the so-called Tweed Courthouse remains in use in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, serving as headquarters of the city Department of Education as of 2011.

\$300,000, and that sum was considered extravagant. Most other details of the Tweed Ring's crimes are variations on the carpenter's story.

Tweed's disgrace, however, was only the beginning of Tammany's crimes, at least in the view of contemporary journalists and reformers who saw political organizations that cultivated immigrant voters as threats to the city's treasury, morality and traditional power structure. "According to the opposition, the first requisite for admission into Tammany Hall is that you must be a sinner," noted a Tammany stalwart, state Senator Thomas Grady.<sup>343</sup> In this saga of sinners, the criminal genius Tweed begat John Kelly, who grew wealthy by pocketing fees and commissions during a term as sheriff of New York County, and Kelly begat Croker, who returned to Ireland to race thoroughbreds after his retirement from Tammany in 1901. Croker begat Murphy, whose family-owned trucking company benefited from government contracts, allowing Murphy to build a home on Long Island complete with a nine-hole golf course. For Tammany's critics, there was little to distinguish Tweed from Murphy, Kelly from Croker. At a political rally in 1894, the Rev. David H. Geer of St. Bartholomew's Church, a pillar of elite Anglo-Protestant New York, invoked the memory of Tweed as an argument against Croker's rule. "Twenty years ago, a man named Tweed, of unsavory memory, asked 'What are you going to do about it?' ... The same question, asked by Tammany Hall, confronts us today."<sup>344</sup>

It was left to George Washington Plunkitt, Tammany Hall's chief theorist-practitioner, to draw a distinction between Tweed's crimes and the methods of enrichment chosen by the Irish-American leaders who followed him. Plunkitt argued that men like Tweed were fools for

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<sup>343</sup> *The New York Times*, November 4, 1901.

<sup>344</sup> *The New York Times*, October 23, 1894. Tweed's infamous question – "What are you going to do about it?" – is part of the narrative of Tammany's arrogance. However, Tweed biographer Kenneth D. Ackerman argues that Tweed very likely never said those words. There is no record of the quote other than its use in a Thomas Nast cartoon. Ackerman draws the plausible conclusion that Nast simply "made it up." See Ackerman, *Boss Tweed*, pg. 130.

engaging in brazen theft, because as an officeholder himself, Plunkitt welcomed the opportunity to engage in what he famously called “honest graft.” There was, he argued, nothing wrong with politicians who took advantage of their status as political insiders to benefit financially from government decisions, including contracts and land purchases.<sup>345</sup> Frances Perkins wryly noted many years later that Plunkitt’s explanation of honest graft “was quite an advanced ethical concept for me.”<sup>346</sup> She was not alone, although her bemused tone may have been exceptional.

Tammany’s methods challenged traditional notions of civic disinterest – not to mention simple honesty -- leading outraged middle-class reformers to conclude that men like Plunkitt were little more than common thieves, and that the voters who returned them to office were the ignorant dupes of unprincipled politicians who purchased their loyalty with public-sector jobs and other trinkets. The Rev. Thomas R. Slicer, pastor of All Souls Unitarian Church and a member of the reform-minded Citizens Union, referred to Tammany’s leaders as “the piratical exploiters of the very people” who supported them.<sup>347</sup> E.L. Godkin, founder and editor of *The Nation* and one of the foremost interpreters of Gilded Age politics in New York, complained that “foreigners ... ignorant [and] credulous” regarded their vote as “simply a means of getting jobs.”<sup>348</sup> Godkin was an Irish-born “foreigner” himself, but he was a Protestant, and that made all the difference in Gilded Age New York. His attitude toward “foreigners” despite his own immigrant experience is yet another reminder of the important dividing line of religion in 19<sup>th</sup> century culture and politics. As a Protestant immigrant, Godkin did not consider himself to be a “foreigner.” That description was reserved for Catholics and Jews, who remained outside mainstream culture despite their

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<sup>345</sup> William L. Riordon, ed., *Plunkitt of Tammany Hall: A Series of Very Plain Talks on Very Practical Politics* (New York: Signet Classics, 1995), pgs. 3-7.

<sup>346</sup> *Reminiscences of Frances Perkins*, Columbia Center for Oral History, pg. 95.

<sup>347</sup> *The New York Times*, September 25, 1899

<sup>348</sup> Michael McGerr, *The Decline of Popular Politics: The American North, 1865-1928* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), pg. 48

white skin. What's more, his contempt for those who might be willing to trade their vote for a job – presumably through Tammany Hall – reflects his isolation from the age's cruel realities. He clearly had no need for a job on the Police Department or in the coroner's office. But in 1877, when he wrote so scathingly his fellow immigrants, many New Yorkers no doubt considered their votes a fair price to pay in exchange for work during the hard times that followed the Panic of 1873.

It was the transactional nature of Tammany politics, in which the right to vote became, in part, a means to an end rather than an exercise in civic virtue, which appalled reformers like Godkin and led them to demand disenfranchisement of the poor in the 1870s. When that failed, reformers sought limits on the power of political parties over the electoral process and the hiring of government employees. Tammany, not surprisingly, embraced a more-pragmatic approach to mass politics: Plunkitt argued that people became involved in politics because they expected benefits, not because of some abstract principle. Or, more to the point, *Tammany's* people expected incentives, like the chance for a government contract or access to neighborhood political figures, in exchange for their participation in the process. Those who led reform movements – middle-class professionals, journalists, Protestant clergy – already had access to power and were unlikely to regard a job in the coroner's office as some kind of reward. Notable anti-Tammany critics like Godkin, Richard Watson Gilder (editor of *Century Magazine*), and George William Curtis (writer, editor and advocate of civil service reform) were well-situated to spend their time thinking about the ways in which men like themselves could better govern New York. Tammany's constituents did not have such luxuries; if Tammany required their services, Tammany would have to find them work, or contracts, or other kinds of incentives.

Tammany's casual disregard for the accepted rules of political behavior inspired reformers to organize a raft of “nonpartisan” institutions in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century, including the

Citizens Union, the City Reform Club, and the Good Government Clubs, and prompted journalists to sift through the city's muck with rake at the ready. They did not rake in vain: From protection rackets to election fraud to graft of the honest and dishonest sort, the muck in New York was thick indeed during the Gilded Age. In one of the era's more-egregious schemes, twenty aldermen were arrested or fled the city to escape prosecution after a state investigation in 1886 revealed that they accepted bribes from a railroad company seeking to build a surface line along Broadway. (Alderman Hugh Grant, a Tammany member and protégé of Richard Croker, refused the bribe and voted against the franchise.)<sup>349</sup> It is a historical curiosity, however, that Tweed and Tammany came to figure so prominently in the narrative of 19<sup>th</sup> Century corruption, while the Grant Administration's depredations inspired far less outrage from well-placed editors and political cartoonists.

The New York Irish could not help but notice the selective outrage of those who regarded themselves as guardians of civic purity.<sup>350</sup> Jay Gould did not go to prison for his attempt to corner the gold market, but his friend and business partner Tweed died in Ludlow Street Jail, a broken man. Reformers and newspaper editorials accused Kelly of using his position as sheriff to collect high commissions and other fees, but lionized Samuel Tilden, whose political connections helped him build a law practice that represented half of the region's railroads just before the Civil War.<sup>351</sup> Richard Croker implicitly expressed the resentments of the era's political figures who inspired moral outrage among journalists and reformers while private citizens accumulated

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<sup>349</sup> Why Grant declined the bribe remains a question – although perhaps it was a simple matter of integrity. After all, even the hostile writer M.A. Werner conceded that Grant had a “reputation for honesty.” See Werner, *Tammany Hall*, pg. 323. Werner does go on to raise questions about Grant's tenure in the patronage-rich office of New York County Sheriff. See pg. 324.

<sup>350</sup> The *Irish World* of October 20, 1877 lashed out at those who “plunder more in a week than Tweed did in his whole lifetime.” The editorial singled out the “monarchist or oligarch” for this criticism, but it directed most of its fire at monarchists, presumably British.

<sup>351</sup> This characterization of Tilden's law practice can be found in Kenneth D. Ackerman, *Boss Tweed*, pg. 44

power and riches without giving offense. During a hearing called by Republican critics in 1899, an annoyed Croker blurted out a line which was used against him long after he retired and returned to Ireland. “I am working for my pocket all the time,” he said to Frank Moss, a well-known lawyer who served as chief counsel for the Mazet Commission, a state entity charged with investigating the city’s finances. The phrase became emblematic of Croker and Tammany, just as Tweed’s supposed question – “What are you going to do about it?” – came to symbolize his and Tammany’s arrogance.

Croker, however, added a phrase designed to remind his inquisitor that he might be no position to judge him. After admitting that he was indeed looking after his own interest, he directed a comment toward Moss: “Same as you.”<sup>352</sup> For Tammany’s constituents, the final three words of Croker’s response to Moss may have been as significant as the first nine were to reformers.

For Gilded Age reformers, Tammany Hall symbolized more than just bad or inefficient government, but irredeemably evil government, representing a close approximation to the movement’s former foe, Southern slavery. In arguing in favor of civil service reform in 1897, one of the age’s great reformers, Carl Schurz, asserted that the struggle over civil service reminded him of “the struggle against slavery.” Just as the “virtue and wisdom of the American people ... wiped out the blot of slavery ... so they will surely at least sweep away the barbarism and corruption of the spoils system.” Schurz warned the governor of New York, Frank S. Black, that if he supported a Tammany-backed civil-service bill, which critics saw as an attempt to thwart genuine reform, he would be remembered as “the Buchanan of New York,” a reference,

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<sup>352</sup> David C. Hammack, *Power and Society: Greater New York at the Turn of the Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), pg. 169



of course, to President James Buchanan and his listless leadership during the pre-Civil War violence in Kansas.<sup>353</sup>

If Schurz believed that Tammany's "barbarism" were comparable to slavery, it is clear who the masters and agents were, and who the slaves were. Nearly three decades earlier, when slavery was very much a fresh memory, Thomas Nast drew a picture of an ape-like Irishman chained to a post, watched over by one of Tweed's trusted aides, Peter Sweeny. In smaller images surrounding the main picture, Nast depicted Tammany operatives wielding cat o'nine tails as they drove Irishmen to the polls. Nast entitled the image, "The Slave Drivers."<sup>354</sup>

Unlike Nast, Schurz was not a virulent nativist (they were both immigrants from Germany). He was interested in issues other than low taxes, ballot reform, temperance, and violations of the Sabbath – the major concerns of so many other reformers. His was a voice on behalf of social reform as well as more-prosaic changes to political procedures. But in his eagerness to portray Tammany as the new slave power exploiting the city's poor, he misunderstood the machine's relationship with its core constituents. The people whose votes kept Tammany in power – and whose votes could and did take that power away – ultimately looked on the machine's network of clubs, district leaders, and aldermen as their protectors. If there was a new slave power lurking in Gilded Age New York, it was not based in politically connected saloons or in the local political clubhouse, at least not in the view of Tammany's constituents. Instead, it was based in the well-appointed salons of the reform movement, where hostile forces were believed to be plotting to take away the votes, pleasures, and power of the poor through disenfranchisement, sabbatarianism, and civil service reform.

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<sup>353</sup> *The New York Times*, May 7, 1897.

<sup>354</sup> *Harper's Weekly*, April 16, 1870.

Tammany unquestionably deserves to be part of the Gilded Age narrative of excess, as Croker's rise from gang leader to boss to country squire would indicate. But as Kelly and Croker moved away from Tweed's outrages and developed Tammany into a block-by-block, clubhouse-based political powerhouse in the last three decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the organization also developed a critique, halting and uncertain but a critique all the same, of the age's winner-take-all capitalism. It did so even as it built a new urban political culture that embraced ethnic and religious differences, treating newcomers not as threats to the social order but as potential citizens to be accorded respect and given access to the republic's ultimate power, the vote.

The conflict between reformers and Tammany politicians during the Gilded Age was not simply a battle between advocates of good government and the forces of corruption. It was, at its most elemental level, a fight over the meaning of democracy and tolerance in a rapidly changing city, an ideological struggle over the role of government in a modern industrial life, and a debate over the very construction of Americanism in a cosmopolitan, global city. Tammany Hall and the Irish who led it treated democracy as an inclusive spectacle designed to encourage mass participation. In a propaganda pamphlet, Tammany's leaders asserted that the organization believed "there is nothing more dangerous to our country than the indifference of a large class of our citizens who neglect to vote on public questions."<sup>355</sup> Tammany's critics, however, saw politics as a solemn duty that ought to be left to the enlightened few, the so-called "best men" who saw themselves as disinterested, public-spirited guardians of civic order and morals. "It would be a great gain if our people could be made to understand distinctly that the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness involves, to be sure, the right to good-government, but not

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<sup>355</sup> Pamphlet entitled "Plain Facts About Tammany for All Americans," dated 1921, found in the Collection of Material Related to Tammany Hall, New York Historical Society.

the right to take part, either immediately or indirectly, in the management of the state,” wrote the *New York Times* in 1878.<sup>356</sup> Tammany could not have disagreed more profoundly.

Anxiety over the merits of universal suffrage grew in proportion to the influence of “the Tammany liquor dealers and ward politicians,” in Godkin’s phrase.<sup>357</sup> But even Tammany with all its powers could not explain away the Tweed scandals of the early 1870s, leading to an across-the-board revulsion that threatened the organization’s hold on the city’s Democratic Party and led to a virtual corporate takeover of City Hall. The elections of 1871 were a disaster for Tammany, thanks to *Times*’ revelations about Tweed and his two main co-conspirators, Sweeny, the city’s chamberlain, and Richard (“Slipper Dick”) Connolly, the city’s comptroller. While Tweed did win re-election to the state Senate despite his arrest just before Election Day, Tammany lost its four other state Senators from Manhattan and was reduced to a pitiful few aldermen and state Assembly members. Irish voters, save for those in Tweed’s district, joined reformers and the just-plain disgusted in the anti-Tammany rout. But Irish anger at Tammany was not entirely the product of disgust over the Hall’s thievery. Tammany had let them down, fatally, earlier in the year when it failed to protect the city’s Irish Catholics from their traditional antagonists, Irish Protestants descended from English and Scottish settlers.

On the morning of July 12, 1871, a group of Irish Protestants associated with the American Protestant Association and an organization called the Orange Order – a sectarian society known for its violent anti-Catholic activities in Ireland -- prepared to march down 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue from 29<sup>th</sup> Street to celebrate the anniversary of King William of Orange’s victory over the deposed King James II at the Battle of the Boyne in County Meath in 1690. The battle marked

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<sup>356</sup> *The New York Times*, August 14, 1878.

<sup>357</sup> “A Key to Municipal Reform,” by E.L. Godkin, *The North American Review*, Vol. 151, No. 407, October, 1890, pg. 424.

the end of a civil war between James, dethroned as king of Britain in large part because of his Catholicism, and William, a Dutch Protestant who was invited to take the throne in James' place in 1688. William's victory over James ensured the future of Protestant hegemony in Britain and Ireland, and so Protestants in Ireland commemorated the battle annually with parades and music designed to remind Irish Catholics that while they had numbers, the island's Protestants had power.<sup>358</sup>

The annual ritual was just as provocative in New York as it was in Ireland. After several people were killed in street fighting between Protestants and Catholics on July 12, 1870, the *New York Tribune* pointed an accusatory finger at Tammany Hall and Tweed, asserting that they represented the "ruffians who have committed this crime." The *Tribune* and other newspapers, including *The New York Times*, argued that Irish Catholics and Tammany were to blame for the riot.<sup>359</sup> The Irish newspapers in New York, on the other hand, lashed out at the Orange Day marchers as un-American, literally. The *Irish-American* newspaper charged (without providing evidence) that the British government helped to found and finance Orange lodges in New York, and so it was the Orangeman, not the Catholic Irishman, whose loyalty to the U.S. and republican institutions that ought to be suspect.<sup>360</sup>

As another July 12 approached in 1871, city officials had reason to worry that religious tension, much of it fueled by events overseas, would again lead to violence in New York. In the months leading to summer, Prussia defeated France in a short war, leading one prominent New York minister to declare a victory over popery and superstition, while a group of prominent citizens gathered in the Academy of Music on 14<sup>th</sup> Street, near the new Tammany Hall building,

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<sup>358</sup> Celebrations of July 12 continue in Northern Ireland today, although tensions have been reduced since the beginning of the Irish peace process in the 1990s.

<sup>359</sup> The *New York Tribune*, July 14, 1870; see also the *Tribune* and *Times* coverage of the riot, July 14, 15.

<sup>360</sup> *Irish-American*, July 23, 1870.

to celebrate the end of papal rule over the city of Rome. (The city was part of the Papal States until September, 1870, when the Italian government seized control from Pope Pius IX.)<sup>361</sup>

The city's Irish-Catholic population found itself on the defensive as summer approached, for not only was their faith once again under attack, but their champions, Tweed and Tammany, were under assault in the pages of *The New York Times* and *Harper's Weekly*. Thomas Nast's memorable images of the ravenous Tammany tiger, the gross Tweed, and the drunken Irish thugs who supported both earned him fame and a large following that summer. The *Times* had not yet been given copies of Tweed's secret accounts – the smoking gun that would lead to his downfall – but by early summer it already was engaged in a campaign to discredit the boss and the machine he led. “People cry out in outrage,” the newspaper's editors insisted as they began their crusade against Tammany.<sup>362</sup> But there were no discernable cries from the city's Irish-Catholic community. On the contrary: They were looking to Tweed and Tammany to put an end to the annual display of Irish Protestant hostility on July 12. The Orange marchers, on the other hand, demanded that the Mayor, a Tammany man named A. Oakley Hall, and the Governor, John Hoffman, who served as Tammany's grand sachem from 1866 to 1868, resist Catholic calls to ban the parade despite concerns about renewed violence. The city's newspapers were filled with speculation that the city might see a return to the appalling violence of the anti-draft riots of 1863.

Irish Catholic objections to the parade inspired ringing denunciations in the city's secular press. Among the critics were self-professed Democrats who complained that “foreigners have ... ruled long enough.” Letters to the editors of the *Times*, the *Sun*, the *Herald* and other

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<sup>361</sup> For a superb treatment of this background to the riots of July 12, 1871, see Michael A. Gordon, *The Orange Riots*, cited above.

<sup>362</sup> *The New York Times*, July 1, 1871.

newspapers warned of Jesuit conspiracies to deny native-born Americans of their liberties, efforts that required vigorous opposition from “one grand Vigilance Committee” that should “take this matter into their own hands. It should have been done long ago.”<sup>363</sup> The threats of violence, the assertions of Catholic conspiracies, the accusation of a plot against republican liberties, the whistle of Protestant fifers and the ferocious thumping of Lambeg drums, all would have sounded frighteningly familiar to the residents of downtown’s Irish wards. This was more than nativism. This was a revival of Ireland’s ancient conflict, a trans-Atlantic variation of the old tunes – “Croppies Lie Down,” “The Protestant Boys,” “The Boyne Water,” and other Protestant supremacist marching songs. Pro-Orange factions circulated a broadside which insisted that the “claims of Roman Catholicism are incompatible with civil and religious liberty,” an almost word-for-word adaptation of the arguments used against Daniel O’Connell’s Catholic Emancipation movement of the late 1820s.

Irish Catholics, however, continued to develop an argument that they were the defenders of American ideals, and their intolerant opponents were the real threats to republicanism and democracy. An Irish-American interviewed by the *New York Herald* argued that the Orangemen were not a religious faction, but “Englishmen,” and it was the duty of “American citizens” to “put them down.”<sup>364</sup> The reference to “Englishmen” spoke to the tangled question of ethnic and religious identities in Ireland, and in the United States – many Protestants born in Ireland saw themselves as British, rather than Irish. Religion, then, was not just a matter of belief; it was a badge of nationality as well.

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<sup>363</sup> See the letters pages in the *New York Herald*, the *New York Times*, and the *New York Sun* on July 12 and July 13, 1871. See also, Michael A. Gordon, *The Orange Riots*, pg. 79-82.

<sup>364</sup> The *New York Herald*, July 11, 1871.

Under pressure from Irish Catholic newspapers and spokesmen, the city's superintendent of police, James J. Kelso, banned the Orange Day parade on July 10, with the full support of Mayor Oakley and, by extension, Tammany Hall. The city's newspapers were aghast: The *Times* asserted that the city "is absolutely in the hands of Irish Catholics" – a situation it did not look upon kindly – while the *Tribune* contended that the Police Commissioner, the Mayor, and Tammany Hall had surrendered "to the mob."<sup>365</sup> Governor Hoffman, looking to distance himself from Tweed and Tammany as he prepared to run for president in 1872, arrived on the scene on July 11 and promptly reversed Kelso's order just after midnight on July 12. The march would proceed, and five hundred state militia and police officers were deployed to protect two hundred marchers.<sup>366</sup>

Just before the march down 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue began, one of the parade's organizers addressed his fellow marchers, telling them that the parade was a "conquest over all our enemies."<sup>367</sup> Those enemies – presumably the city's Irish Catholics – were gathered on the streets by the scores. U.S. flags flapped in the summer breeze as the marchers stepped off, with one unit carrying a banner bearing a beautified likeness of Prince William himself. The message was unmistakable: The Orangemen were the true Americans, and the American tradition of liberty included the great Protestant victory won on July 12, 1690. Catholics on rooftops and in the streets disagreed, with one loud voice referring to the marchers as "infernal Englishmen."<sup>368</sup> Orange fife and drum bands played only American music, by order of city authorities, but in the tense atmosphere, the sound of the fife and drum – so intimately associated with Protestant

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<sup>365</sup> The *New York Times*, July 11, 1871; the *New York Tribune*, July 11, 1871.

<sup>366</sup> This account is based on reports in the following newspapers: The *New York Times*, the *New York Herald*, and the *New York Tribune*, July 13-15, 1871, as well as Michael Gordon, *The Orange Riots*, and Kenneth A. Ackerman, *Boss Tweed*.

<sup>367</sup> *New York Sun*, July 13, 1871.

<sup>368</sup> Michael Gordon, *The Orange Riots*, pg. 113.

displays in Ireland -- mattered more than the music the instruments played. This was New York City, but to an Irish Catholic, it looked and sounded like home – for all the wrong reasons.

As brickbats and insults began to fly, the Seventh Regiment, New York National Guard, led the parade south. Several shots rang out, to no great effect amid the torrent of bottles and stones. But as the main body of Orangemen moved towards 26<sup>th</sup> Street, troops opened fire on what they believed to be snipers in a tenement apartment house. Marchers came under physical attack from Catholic protesters who used large stones as weapons. Militia men fell to the ground, hit by objects thrown from rooftops. The march continued, and more shots rang out as the marchers reached 23<sup>rd</sup> Street. Members of the 84<sup>th</sup> Regiment fired a fusillade into the crowd as Orangemen and militia men lay sprawled on the street, some looking for cover, others knocked off their feet by missiles. Other units opened fire on the crowd. Mounted police charged into the crowds, cracking skulls. The streets quickly were covered with bodies and shards of broken glass.

In no more than a few minutes, scores of people were dead or injured. The official tally found that sixty-two civilians were killed and a hundred wounded. Twenty-eight of the dead and forty-two of the wounded were natives of Ireland. Three militia men and two police officers also were killed. Newspaper accounts of the violence described the sight of blood, brain matter, and chunks of flesh in the streets, in the nearby shops, and on window sills. Amazingly, the parade continued to its planned termination point near the American Bible Society building in Greenwich Village.

In the Irish-American weeklies, the violence of July 12, 1871, was portrayed as yet another outrage perpetrated on Irish Catholics by Protestants and their enablers in positions of



political and cultural authority. The *Irish World* newspaper reversed the lead rules separating its columns, creating a black, mourning effect on its pages. The paper condemned what it called “the Hoffman massacre,” blaming the governor for caving into Protestant prejudice. The paper’s illustrations clearly were designed to portray the violence as part of a continuing narrative of trans-Atlantic oppression of Irish Catholics: One drawing showed a triumphant Orangeman carrying a banner reading “King William” and stepping past two dead children and a grieving mother. Another depicted soldiers firing their muskets point blank at a crowd of unarmed civilians, an image certain to play on folk memories of one-sided rebellions in Ireland. The *Irish World’s* editor called the violence “the most atrocious murder ever done by official authority” in New York history.<sup>369</sup>

The city’s mainstream press, however, had a very different reaction, with very different illustrations. The *New York Observer* said the violence was carried out “in the interest of Romanism” and was inspired by “Roman Catholic hatred of Protestants,” while the *New York Sun* referred to Irish Catholics as “barbarous assailants.”<sup>370</sup> Thomas Nast, who experienced the riot first hand as a reservist in the Seventh Regiment, offered his interpretation in *Harper’s Weekly* two weeks later. He drew the feminine figure Columbia with a whip (labeled “law”) in her right hand, with her left hand on the throat of the by-now clichéd image of an ape-like Irishman. The caption read, “Bravo! Bravo!”<sup>371</sup> For the rest of the summer, indeed, for the rest of his career, Nast continued his depiction of Irish Catholics as thuggish, drunken apes whose religious and political leaders posed a violent threat to the city’s social and civic order.<sup>372</sup>

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<sup>369</sup> The *Irish World*, July 22, 1871.

<sup>370</sup> Michael A. Gordon, *The Orange Riots*, pg. 164; the *New York Sun*, July 14, 1871.

<sup>371</sup> *Harper’s Weekly*, July 29, 1871.

<sup>372</sup> See, for example, Nast’s depiction of Catholic bishops emerging as crocodiles from “The American River Ganges” in *Harper’s Weekly*, May 8, 1875.

The Orange riot and its aftermath are critical in understanding Irish-American political consciousness on the eve of Tweed's downfall and the reorganization of Tammany under its first Irish-American leader, John Kelly. The intensity of anti-Catholic, anti-Irish commentary from the likes of Nast and the city's newspapers showed that nativism had not disappeared or become less-respectable after Irish Americans served with conspicuous gallantry in the Union army and helped preserve the Union. A police official named Henry Smith expressed regret that more civilians weren't killed.<sup>373</sup> The *New York Tribune* referred to the violence as "the Tammany riot," asserting that such "frightful scenes" would continue as long as Tammany "depends for its existence upon the votes of the ignorant and vicious." A letter published in the *New York Herald* argued that the city was "governed too much by foreign influence. This should not be. Let Americans govern America. Let the offices be held by American-born citizens."<sup>374</sup> A Presbyterian minister named David Gregg hailed the militiamen who fired on the Catholic crowds as "American patriots," telling members of his congregation that if they had been on 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue that afternoon, they would have heard "rifles ... ringing out salutes to religious freedom, and proclaiming death to religious tyranny and prejudice."<sup>375</sup>

For Irish Catholics raised on a narrative of grievance and violent oppression at the hands of Protestant enemies, efforts to justify and even celebrate the Orange Day killings and the revival of nativist political argument showed that they remained vulnerable despite their growing political clout. The *Times* campaign against Tammany and Tweed, along with Nast's offensive caricatures of Irish Catholic enablers of corrupt politics, furthered the notion of a growing Protestant political backlash against the influence of the city's immigrant-based institutions. In

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<sup>373</sup> The *New York Tribune*, July 16, 1871

<sup>374</sup> The *New York Herald*, July 16, 1871

<sup>375</sup> Michael Gordon, *The Orange Riots*, pg. 159.

an editorial entitled “The Church of Aggression,” the *Times* warned that Catholics had gained “a political power that is dangerous to our future” and were seeking “the control of our schools and our charities.”<sup>376</sup> The formation in early September of a new reform organization nicknamed the “Committee of Seventy” demonstrated that New York civic elites were preparing to re-assert their political and cultural authority over the city by toppling Tweed and Tammany.

John Kelly inherited the leadership of Tammany Hall in 1872, with memories of the Orange Riot still fresh and the city still attempting to come to terms with the enormity of Tweed’s failed scheme. Kelly immediately sought to rebuild the organization in conjunction with fellow Tammany members like Samuel Tilden, the corporate lawyer who helped bring down Tweed, August Belmont, a banker and chairman of the Democratic National Committee, and Abram Hewitt, a lawyer, iron manufacturer, and son-in-law of the noted reformer Peter Cooper. These men were far removed from the Five Points and the other Irish neighborhoods that were so important to Tammany’s success. But Kelly needed these pillars of New York civic life to help him restore Tammany’s credibility and power, and they, in turn, needed the Irishman Kelly’s help to refashion Tammany as a more-respectable vehicle for a new Democratic politics which emphasized lower taxes and more-efficient government. The alliance between Kelly and the likes of Tilden and other elites has been described as the Five Points joining forces with Fifth Avenue, although Kelly, a middle-class former congressman who married the niece of John Hughes’ successor, John Cardinal McCloskey, would have been no more likely than Tilden to find himself in the slums near Bayard Street.

Nevertheless, the cross-class alliance forged under Kelly’s leadership very likely saved Tammany Hall from collapse and demonstrated a philosophical agility that would serve the

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<sup>376</sup> The *New York Times*, March 10, 1871.

institution well in the future. It is hard to imagine the burly, onetime gang leader Tweed collaborating with the chilly, sallow Tilden. But under Kelly, and later, under Croker's successor Charles Francis Murphy, Tammany found a way to blur distinctions between reformer and machine politician to the benefit of both.

The relationship between Kelly and Tilden formed the center of New York politics in the immediate aftermath of the Tweed scandals, until Kelly broke with Tilden just before the latter's presidential campaign in 1876. Although both men were Tammany members during Tweed's leadership, they were untainted by the leader's crimes, in fact, Kelly's opposition to Tweed from within the organization and Tilden's prosecution of him marked them as reformers. While Kelly represented a proverbial changing of the guard at Tammany as the first Irish Catholic to become the organization's boss, he was difficult to caricature. True, he was Irish at a time when moral reformers associated the group with the so-called "dangerous classes."<sup>377</sup> And he was a Catholic at a time when Nast and an assortment of like-minded cartoonists in a new publication, *Puck*, continued to warn of the dangers of Catholics in high places (*Puck* portrayed Kelly in the robes of a clergyman, and the pope as a scheming Tammany politico).<sup>378</sup> But Kelly was cautious and respectable – an ally of Tilden, no less – and he shared with reformers a skepticism of government spending that was born of the trauma Tweed caused the city and people like Tilden who worried about the government's level of debt. "The country is suffering ... by a want of confidence on the part of the people in the present management of our Governmental finances,"

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<sup>377</sup> See Charles Loring Brace, *The Dangerous Classes of New York and Twenty Years' Work Among Them* (New York: Wynkoop & Hallenbeck, 1872).

<sup>378</sup> See, for example, a cartoon entitled "The Catholics are Coming" in *Puck*, October 27, 1880. For a full treatment of *Puck*'s importance in Gilded Age New York, see "Mugwump Cartoonists, the Papacy, and Tammany Hall in America's Gilded Age," by Samuel J. Thomas in *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation*, Vol. 14, No. 2. (Summer, 2004).

Kelly wrote in 1875 <sup>379</sup> Tilden was a so-called Swallowtail Democrat – a reference to the formal coats they wore to society functions – who believed that Tammany should return to its Jeffersonian roots as a force for limited government. “What the country now needs, in order to save it, is a revival of the Jefferson democracy, with the principles of government ... which were established by the political revolution of 1800,” Tilden wrote to Kelly in 1873. “The reformatory work of Mr. Jefferson in 1800 must now be repeated.” <sup>380</sup>

After Tilden was elected Governor in 1874, Kelly quietly became a power in state politics, and he was unafraid to remind his ally that Tammany’s wishes must be respected. In May, 1874, he instructed Tilden not to sign several pieces of legislation until they spoke in person about the bills’ merits (or perhaps the lack thereof, in Kelly’s view).<sup>381</sup> Kelly also thought nothing of sending patronage seekers to the governor’s office, writing, for example, a letter of introduction to Tilden for a civil engineer named Albert Hill who, Kelly wrote, wanted “an interview with you matters connected with the Public Works of the state.” <sup>382</sup>

Kelly and Tilden also shared a bond in that neither man had any interest in revisiting the scandals of the early 1870s, when Tilden emerged as a national figure thanks to his part in putting Tweed in prison. In the late 1860s, Tammany Hall under Tweed’s leadership created a virtual assembly line to begin the process of naturalizing immigrants as citizens and enabling them to become voters, leading to a congressional investigation of voting practices in New York in December, 1868. Tilden was called to testify about a letter sent over his signature, fraudulently, instructing poll watchers upstate to report their results as quickly as possible after

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<sup>379</sup> John Kelly to unnamed recipient, November 20, 1875, Samuel Tilden Papers, Box 15, New York Public Library

<sup>380</sup> Samuel Tilden to John Kelly, August, 1873 (undated), the Papers of Samuel Tilden, Box 15, New York Public Library.

<sup>381</sup> Telegram from Kelly to Tilden, May 24, 1875, Samuel Tilden Papers, Box 15, New York Public Library.

<sup>382</sup> Kelly to Tilden, March 21, 1875, Samuel Tilden Papers, Box 15, New York Public Library.

voting stopped on Election Day several weeks earlier. The scheme was set up so that Tweed and Tammany would know how many votes they would have to deliver, by hook or by crook, to deliver the state's presidential votes to its Governor, Horatio Seymour. The letter was proven to be a fake, and Tilden was exonerated. But the cloud of suspicion might never have lifted if the public knew that Tilden supplied Kelly with cash from the Democratic State Committee in 1866 to pay for Tammany's mass naturalizations. In a letter dated Oct. 22, 1866, Kelly acknowledged receiving one thousand dollars from the state committee for "the naturalization of our adopted citizens," but added that he needed more. "Our expenditures for naturalization alone will be at least eight thousand dollars and perhaps more," Kelly wrote, adding that Peter Sweeny, Tweed's right-hand man, generously gave a thousand dollars to the cause.<sup>383</sup>

Tilden's cooperation in Tammany's naturalization scheme and his willingness to allow the organization's new boss, Kelly, to influence policy and personnel matters speaks to the larger issue of how reformers and political machines are portrayed and understood. Machines like Tammany continue to be depicted as power hungry and without principle, while reformers continue to wear the mantle of service and disinterest. A closer examination between these two forces in New York's political life, however, reveals how similarly bosses and reformers behaved when they had access to power. Tilden, starchy, cold, almost comically grave and censorious, was a prototypical Gilded Age reformer who, nevertheless, was a Tammany sachem and the underwriter of the machine's notorious naturalization mill. Kelly, who may have controlled up to forty thousand jobs on the city payroll, put Tammany on the side of economical government, low taxation, and sound borrowing practices in the aftermath of the Tweed

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<sup>383</sup> Kelly to Tilden, October 22, 1866, Samuel Tilden Papers, Box 15, New York Public Library.

scandals.<sup>384</sup> Kelly once sent an urgent telegram to an ally in Albany, insisting that a prospective bridge project – a potential source of patronage and employment – should be funded in a “clearly comprehensible” way. Otherwise, he added, “we will be censured. It would be very improper to give unlimited power to spend money.”<sup>385</sup> During a four-year term as the city’s comptroller in the late 1870s, Kelly made municipal debt reduction his top priority, achieving enough spending cuts to reduce the city’s debt level by \$2 million. Kelly’s concerns about inappropriate municipal expenditures and Tilden’s role in funding a naturalization scheme suggest that generalizations about the relationship between bosses and reformers should be made only with great care.

The organization which Kelly rebuilt with the help of civic elites like Tilden remained vulnerable to other Democrats on the left and right, leading to critical defections that threatened Tammany’s power over the party throughout the 1870s. While these splits within Tammany often are portrayed as disputes over the distribution of patronage or the dramatic unraveling of Kelly’s relationship with Tilden, the fights also involved issues of principle and ideology.<sup>386</sup> In the first instance, Tammany sided with its elite members against the economic interests of its core voters. In the second instance, Tammany reversed its role, abandoning the wishes of civic elites and protecting the voting rights of the city’s poor. While Kelly’s machinations in these two instances suggest ideological incoherence, they were not without practical purpose: In both cases, Tammany preserved its power and thus prevented its enemies from achieving control of

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<sup>384</sup> See Steven P. Erie, *Rainbow’s End*, pg. 5.

<sup>385</sup> Undated telegram, Kelly to James Fox, Samuel Tilden Papers, Box 15, New York Public Library. Kelly also opposed construction of the Brooklyn Bridge (after first supporting the plan) beginning in 1878. He believed it was too costly and would help Brooklyn more than New York.

<sup>386</sup> See, for example, Martin Shefter’s article, “The Emergence of the Political Machine: An Alternative View,” in Willis D. Hawley and Michael Lipsky, eds., *Theoretical Perspectives on Urban Politics* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1976). Shefter argues that Tammany dissenters sought patronage as eagerly as Tammany itself did, and that there was little substantive difference between Tammany and its rebellious factions during the 1870s.

the city. That was no small issue in the context of the Orange Day riot and the ongoing campaign of vilification aimed at Irish Catholics, including Kelly himself.

In the spring of 1875, two years after the Panic of 1873 plunged the city and nation into a deep recession, the city commissioner of public works, Fitz John Porter, cut the daily pay of laborers on the city payroll from \$2 to \$1.60. The measure may have been designed to show that the government of Mayor William Wickham, an anti-Tweed Democrat and a member of both Tammany Hall and the Committee of Seventy, was serious about reforming municipal spending after Tweed's excesses. The laborers, however, did not share this view, and were quick to blame Kelly and Tammany for acquiescing in the pay cut. John Morrissey, a friend of Kelly who made the leap – perhaps not a very long one – from prizefighting to municipal politics, helped organize opposition to the pay cuts, arguing that the city's commissioners should have cut their own pay, and pointing out that “ninety-five percent of the laborers of this city are Democrats.”<sup>387</sup> Morrissey was a colorful and popular figure in the city's Irish-American community. On one occasion, he attempted to call on Mayor Wickham, a well-to-do diamond merchant, in City Hall but was denied permission because he could not produce a calling card when a gatekeeper in City Hall requested one. The next time Morrissey, a rough-and-tumble character, set foot in City Hall, he was dressed in a swallowtail coat like those associated with Tilden, Hewitt, Wickham and the other new powers at Tammany. He explained to the press corps that he was “going in full dress” to see “our dandy Mayor” because formal attire was “the style at the Hotel Wickham. No Irish need apply now.”<sup>388</sup>

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<sup>387</sup> *The New York Times*, June 22, 1875.

<sup>388</sup> Oliver E. Allen, *The Tiger: The Rise and Fall of Tammany Hall* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Publishing Co., 1993), pg. 158.



The battle between Morrissey, portrayed as the tribune of the city's very Irish working class, and Kelly, viewed as an agent for the swallowtail Democrats, dominated city politics for months in 1875. "You can't run a political organization without working men in it," Morrissey said.<sup>389</sup> Morrissey helped sponsor rallies against the city's pay cuts, forcing Kelly on the defensive even as the organs of reform praised the measure as precisely what the city needed. Kelly made the unlikely but novel argument that he had no control over city officials who put the policy in place, insisting that he was on the workers' side. "The laborer should receive adequate wages for his services," he said, adding that two dollars a day was not "too much."<sup>390</sup> Tammany, fearing a wholesale defection of working-class voters, played to lingering Irish-American distaste for the onetime abolitionists who now were among the leaders of the Radical Republicans in Congress. The organization's leaders issued a long pamphlet addressed to the city's working men, claiming that the "enemies of the Democratic Party," in alliance with "the Radical party in the state and nation" sought to "array them in opposition to their Democratic faith."<sup>391</sup> The language was carefully chosen: To minimize defections among its key supporters, Tammany conjured the image of Radical Republican "enemies" who were associated not only with demands for racial equality but also with evangelical Protestant reform efforts before the Civil War. Tammany accused them of attempting to lure working people away from their "faith," an image certain to invite memories of Famine soupism and other Protestant proselytizing efforts both in Ireland and in New York.

Morrissey, however, continued to attack Kelly and Tammany, to the delight of the city's newspapers, which reported "hourly defections" of low-level Tammany operatives to Morrissey

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<sup>389</sup> *The New York Tribune*, July 24, 1875.

<sup>390</sup> John Kelly speech, August 13, 1875, quoted in pamphlet "A True Statement of the Position of Tammany Hall on the Labor Question," found in the Kilroe Collection of Tammany Material, New-York Historical Society

<sup>391</sup> "A True Statement of the Position of Tammany Hall on the Labor Question," Kilroe Collection of Tammany Material, New-York Historical Society.

in the fall of 1875.<sup>392</sup> There certainly were defections, for Kelly had alienated many of Tammany's lower-ranking members when he took patronage out of the hands of aldermen and other elected officials and commissioners, rewarding instead the more-disciplined district leaders (that is, Tammany men in charge of party organization in the city's Assembly districts). Kelly and Tammany's Committee on Organization changed the organization's culture by doling out jobs based on performance on Election Day: District leaders who turned out the most votes received the most jobs. This sort of accountability and discipline were new to Tammany, and the aldermen and other minor officials who gathered around Morrissey resented Kelly's centralized control. Nevertheless, Kelly's methods turned Tammany from a mere vehicle for individual ambition to a disciplined, results-driven political organization that eventually crushed its internal Democratic opponents.

But it still was not quite the machine it would later become. In the fall of 1875, Morrissey, now in open rebellion against Tammany, defeated Kelly's candidate in a race to fill the state Senate seat once held by Boss Tweed. Kelly suffered other defeats as well – all of his judicial candidates lost, as did four of his five state Senate candidates. The Hall won just eight of twenty-one Assembly races in Manhattan. It was a shocking result, and it inspired Morrissey to create his own faction, dubbed Irving Hall, in hopes of unseating Tammany Hall as the city's dominant Democratic faction. Irving Hall in essence replaced the Republican Party as Tammany's main rival for municipal office, and with charismatic leaders like Morrissey, Irving Hall drained Irish voters from Tammany in enough numbers to win aldermanic seats and, in 1877, the mayoralty. While Irving Hall and yet another challenger, dubbed the County Democracy, could not match Kelly's Tammany in discipline and organization, the presence of a

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<sup>392</sup> The *New York Times*, October 24, 1874.

strong Democratic dissident movement that included a conspicuous Irish-American presence indicates yet again that Tammany's signature constituency did not cast its votes reflexively.

The next challenge to Tammany's power came from the right, in the form of a top-down campaign to eliminate or dilute universal male suffrage in the city. In one of his first actions as Governor, Samuel Tilden asked 11 prominent citizens, including journalist E.L. Godkin, to serve on a commission to study the problems of urban governance. The Commission to Devise a Plan for the Government of Cities in the State of New York, which the press mercifully shortened to the Tilden Commission, began its deliberations in the shadow of the Tweed scandals and in the midst of Nast's vitriolic campaign that warned of Irish-Catholic influence over city politics. Powerful voices already had been raised on behalf of a smaller and presumably "better" electorate: Walt Whitman, the poet who celebrated himself and the common man, complained about "half-brained nominees" and the "appalling dangers of universal suffrage" in 1871.<sup>393</sup> Historian Francis Parkman dismissed the "flattering illusion that one man is essentially about as good as another," and argued that in the hands of immigrants, the right to vote led to nothing but "mischief."<sup>394</sup> The New York Citizens Association, a reform group of prominent citizens founded by Peter Cooper, maintained that "it is not safe to place the execution of the laws in the hands of the classes against which they are principally enforced."<sup>395</sup> Godkin, of course, already was on record with his meditations on the worthiness of the city's poor, mostly Irish, voters.

Liberal commentators complained about the character of candidates raised to office under Tammany and, more broadly, under the system of universal suffrage. The *Times* singled out several Tammany delegates to the Democratic state convention of 1875, arguing that they were

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<sup>393</sup> Francis S. Barry, *The Scandal of Reform*, pg. 33.

<sup>394</sup> Michael McGerr, *The Decline of Popular Politics*, pg. 46.

<sup>395</sup> Francis S. Barry, *The Scandal of Reform*, pg. 34.

“even more disreputable than ever.” As evidence, the newspaper listed the delegates’ professions: The phrase “keeps a drinking saloon” or “keeps a drinking place” was used to describe seven of the fourteen delegates – nearly all of whom had Irish surnames -- who offended the Times’ sensibilities.<sup>396</sup> (The others tended to be holdovers from the Tweed days and so were disreputable by association.)

The Tilden commission announced its findings in March, 1877. Tilden himself was no longer governor, having given up his seat in a failed attempt to win the presidency in 1876 – he won the popular vote, but in the bargaining over contested electoral votes, Democrats agreed to the election of Republican Rutherford B. Hayes in return for Washington’s promise to withdraw federal troops from the post-war South. As Tilden traveled though Europe in search of solace after his loss, his commissioners unveiled a state constitutional amendment that would have limited the popular vote in New York to taxpayers who owned property valued at more than five hundred dollars or who paid annual rent of two hundred and fifty dollars or more.<sup>397</sup> Those taxpayers would choose a new board of finance would oversee the city’s treasury, leaving other elected officials with little control over how the city spent its money. One of the commissioners, Simone Sterne, argued that his fellow civic elites had an “almost solemn duty” to take away the votes of the poor.<sup>398</sup> At least one historian recently estimated that the measure would have denied suffrage rights to half of the city’s three hundred thousand voters.<sup>399</sup>

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<sup>396</sup> The *New York Times*, September 12, 1875.

<sup>397</sup> The proposed amendment covered all cities in New York State. Those with twenty-five thousand residents or fewer were subjected to no new restrictions. Qualifications were lower in cities with populations of twenty-five thousand to a hundred thousand.

<sup>398</sup> David Quigley, *Second Founding: New York City, Reconstruction, and the Making of American Democracy* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2004), pg. 158.

<sup>399</sup> See Francis S. Barry, *The Scandal of Reform*, pg. 35.

The *Irish World* newspaper greeted the commission's recommendations with a one-word headline: "Disfranchisement."<sup>400</sup> The very word, in an Irish context, was fixed to a very particular memory: After O'Connell's election in 1828, the British increased the property threshold for voting rights in Ireland (with O'Connell's reluctant approval) from 40 shillings to 10 pounds, thus disenfranchising tens of thousands of poor Irish freeholders whose support for O'Connell so disturbed the social and political order in the United Kingdom. .

Elite opinion hailed the commission's work. Business and trade groups, including the city's Chamber of Commerce, supported the measure, as did Theodore Roosevelt, Whitelaw Reid, and Levi Morton, all of whom would go on to run for national office as Republicans. The commission's chair, William A. Evarts, also was a Republican who would serve in the U.S. Senate and as Rutherford B. Hayes' secretary of state. A Republican majority in the state Legislature passed the amendment in 1877, but implementation required passage by two consecutive legislative sessions.

That interval allowed Tammany to stand and fight the commission's proposed amendment. It had no choice, really, for the amendment was intended to deprive Tammany of its power by stripping its chief supporters of their votes. But as the Hall organized a massive, street-level campaign against the amendment in the fall of 1877, Tammany's rank-and-file members called on the language of class warfare rather than revisit the usual themes of anti-Catholic or anti-Irish grievance (although there was some of that as well). Tammany's Swallowtail allies certainly would have cringed when they heard speakers denouncing the Tilden commission's proposal as plan to create "an oligarchy of wealth."<sup>401</sup> The *Times* objected to Tammany's

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<sup>400</sup> *Irish World*, April 21, 1877.

<sup>401</sup> *The New York Post*, October 30, 1877.

interpretation of the proposed measures, insisting that they were not an infringement of voting rights but simply the delegation of public responsibilities to “a certain class of citizens who, from their position, are best situation for judging who will discharge (civic) functions satisfactorily.”

<sup>402</sup> The period’s intimate class relations, which had allowed the Swallowtails to mingle with the Five Pointers (or their slightly more upwardly mobile friends) at Tammany Hall, became more confrontational during the campaign against the Tilden commission. <sup>403</sup> Many, but not all, Swallowtails left Tammany because of Kelly’s support for universal suffrage. <sup>404</sup>

More to the point, the Tilden commission’s recommendations were released just six years after the Orange riot of 1871 and the overthrow of Tweed several months later. Both events reminded the city’s Irish-Catholic population of its vulnerability to hostile forces, whether in the streets, where hostility was at least in the open, or in board rooms, where powerful forces combined to deprive them of their friendly protector, Tweed. Shortly after the commission’s recommendations were released, the *Times* complained of Tammany control over the city’s treasury, a control made possible by “the mass vote of the ignorant and the vicious, and upon the support gained by political hints dropped in front of Roman Catholic altars.” <sup>405</sup> The roster of those who supported the Tilden commission’s proposed re-ordering of the electorate – Republican reformers, hostile newspaper editors, and civic moralists – resembled the Anglo-Protestant oligarchy that rendered Irish Catholics powerless in Ireland.

Tammany successfully mobilized its base to protest the Tilden commission’s recommendation, and when the proposed amendment came up for a second vote in the spring of

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<sup>402</sup> The *New York Times*, July 14, 1877.

<sup>403</sup> For more on social relations between Tammany’s elites and its working-class base, see Michael McGerr, *The Decline of Popular Politics*, pgs. 29-33.

<sup>404</sup> For more on Swallowtail disaffection with Kelly, see Seymour J. Mandelbaum, *Boss Tweed’s New York*, pgs. 172-174.

<sup>405</sup> The *New York Times*, July 15, 1877.

1878, it failed. But it was not forgotten. The *Times* still was complaining about universal suffrage in 1880, with the city about to elect its first Irish-Catholic mayor. The paper noted, correctly, that the Democratic Party in the South engaged in “cheating and intimidating the ignorant negro voters,” but in the north, the party counted on “the adhesion of voters beside whom the negro is an educated, virtuous, and law-abiding citizen.” The Democrats, the paper asserted, could succeed nationally only by repressing “the vote of the plantation negro” while protecting “the vote of the citizen who is not the negro’s peer from the slums of New York.”<sup>406</sup>

Several years later, a Protestant clergyman named Joseph Hartwell published a thirty-page pamphlet entitled “Romanism in Politics: What It Costs – Tammany Hall the Stronghold of Rome.” In the course of complaints about Jesuits and “imported voters” ruining “the United States of Protestant America,” the reverend argued that the city needed “leaders” like “a William of Orange,” the man in whose name the Orange Day parade took place in 1871.<sup>407</sup>

Having beaten back the reformers over suffrage, Kelly and Tammany staged another cultural confrontation in 1880 when they supported the mayoral candidacy of William R. Grace, an Irish-Catholic immigrant who founded a shipping company that earned him millions of dollars. Grace shared more in common with Swallowtail Democrats than he did with the Tammany legions below 14<sup>th</sup> Street. But in his election campaign, his religion mattered more than his riches, his business success, and his uptown respectability. During the course of an ugly campaign, newspapers and reformers questioned Grace’s citizenship and general fitness for office. At a late-October meeting of anti-Tammany forces in Cooper Union, Elihu Root – future U.S. Senator, Secretary of War, Secretary of State, and Nobel Peace Prize winner – warned

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<sup>406</sup> The *New York Times*, September 11, 1880.

<sup>407</sup> The Rev. Joseph Hartwell, *Romanism in Politics: What it Costs – Tammany Hall the Stronghold of Rome* (New York: Phillips & Hunt, 1887), pgs, 1, 14.

listeners that Grace's election threatened the "fundamental principle of our Republic that Church and State shall be separate ...". After Root's speech, two Protestant ministers, the Rev. Stephen H. Tyng Jr. and the Rev. John P. Newman, delivered speeches on behalf of Grace's opponent, with Tyng conjuring the ghost of Archbishop John Hughes in arguing that Grace, as a Catholic, would undermine public schools just as, he alleged, Hughes did, while Newman suggested that New York under Catholic rule was doomed to suffer the fate of Spain, a nation kept illiterate under the rule of Catholics. Another speaker, Lawson N. Fuller, built on the clerics' arguments, noting that, "The Irish and Germans and the Scandinavians are placed in the public schools, have the dirt washed off them, and are turned out refined American citizens. They lose their identity as they should."<sup>408</sup>

Faced with the possibility that New York might elect an immigrant from Ireland as its first Catholic mayor, the *New York Tribune* questioned the legality of Grace's naturalization in 1867 (the year after Kelly received funds from Tilden for Tammany's mass naturalization efforts). The paper quickly withdrew the charge when proper documentation was produced, but editors complained that the Democrats were "running a man for Mayor of the greatest city on the Continent about whom old and well-informed residents ask whether he is even a citizen!"<sup>409</sup> Despite the virulence of the campaign against him, Grace prevailed and won the election.

For Kelly and Tammany Hall, the election of William Grace was a cultural triumph but a political setback. The presence of an Irish-Catholic immigrant in City Hall just nine years after dozens of Irish Catholics were gunned down during the Orange Day parade, and after several years of anti-Irish invective in publications like *Harper's Weekly* and *Puck*, marked a symbolic

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<sup>408</sup> The *New York Times*, October 30, 1880.

<sup>409</sup> *New York Tribune*, October 26, 1880.



success against the old order. Grace's election was not unlike O'Connell's in 1828, an important victory for Irish Catholics in a trans-Atlantic cultural struggle for power and respect against Anglo-Protestant hostility. Grace shared O'Connell's privileged position with his community and inspired similar cultural fears among his opponents. But O'Connell was the head of his electoral machine; Grace was not. When the new mayor proved to be less than accommodating to John Kelly's demands for patronage, Tammany withdrew its support. Grace lost re-election in 1882, but won another term in 1884 as an anti-Tammany candidate.

Kelly's parting with Grace, which followed the defection of other Swallowtail Democrats from Tammany in the aftermath of the Tilden commission debacle, seemed to liberate the Hall from post-Tweed anxieties about tax rates, debt levels, and other concerns important to conservative Democrats. The *Times* had noticed a change of emphasis as early as 1877, asserting that Kelly, then the city's comptroller, "is not an advocate of reducing salaries" and so taxpayers "can expect no quarter at his hands." The *Times* noted with alarm that the city's debt was increasing again after several years of decline.<sup>410</sup> The controversy two years earlier over pay reductions for city laborers, which led to Morrissey's defection and a deep split in Tammany, may well have played a role in Kelly's retreat from post-Tweed fiscal conservatism. While Tammany did not pose a direct challenge to the *laissez faire* economics of the Gilded Age, it expanded the city's public payroll and encouraged constituents to look to local district leaders as mediators capable of softening the blows of the free-market economy. This was hardly a social revolution, but the friendly district leader with a job or a contract in hand was a sharp contrast with the swallowtail Democrat or liberal reformer who emphasized low taxation and minimalist government.

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<sup>410</sup> *New York Times*, July 14, 1877.

After Grace's election in 1880, Kelly struggled to maintain organizational discipline, barely surviving a vote on his continued leadership in 1882. The restiveness in Tammany clearly was related to a series of political setbacks, including the election of the conservative-minded Grover Cleveland as Governor (and then, despite Kelly's opposition, as president in 1884) and the rise of yet another Democratic competitor, the New York County Democracy, made up of Swallowtails sympathetic to Cleveland's emphasis on limited government and lower taxes. But Tammany's core constituency was concerned about more than the preservation of power, important though that was. A new political movement aligned against landlords in Ireland electrified the city's Irish community in the 1880s, with broad implications for the community's evolving political consciousness. With the energy and danger of neo-nativism seemingly spent by the early 1880s, and with an Irish Catholic presiding over the city as Mayor, the city's Irish community could afford to discuss the ends, rather than simply the means, of holding political power.

The discussion took place amid growing discontent over economic and social disparities in Gilded Age New York and anxieties about renewed famine in Ireland in the late 1870s. New York became the center of political activity and debate in the trans-Atlantic Irish world. Patrick Ford, editor of the *Irish World*, and John Devoy, head of the Irish nationalist movement in New York., supported land reform efforts in Ireland championed by Michael Davitt, a onetime Fenian, and Charles Stewart Parnell, an austere Anglo-Protestant member of the House of Commons. Their challenge to the power of landlords inspired a social revolution in Ireland with radical implications for Irish-American industrial workers in New York. During the late 1870s and early 1880s, three of these four men (Devoy, Davitt, and Parnell) held meetings on both sides of the Atlantic in an effort to build support among the Irish diaspora for anti-landlord agitation in

Ireland. They reached on consensus on the radical idea of land redistribution and peasant ownership of the land on which they worked – ideas that challenged the very structure of British rule in Ireland.

Although Patrick Ford was not part of these private talks, his newspaper – renamed the *Irish World and American Industrial Liberator* – became an important voice for social reform in both the U.S. and Ireland. The newspaper broadened its reach through free distribution in Ireland, where its campaign against landlords had truly revolutionary implications. Ford sent Henry George, author of *Progress and Poverty*, to Ireland to cover the agitation as both a journalist and a provocateur. The British government suppressed the newspaper and arrested George twice, but not before both the newspaper and its famous correspondent helped bring radical American critiques of Atlantic world’s economic framework to the fields and villages of Ireland.<sup>411</sup>

When Parnell traveled to New York in early 1880 to raise funds and awareness for his growing campaign of boycotting and social protest in Ireland, his allies in the city packed Madison Square Garden with five thousand supporters. The visiting MP did not impress the usual critics of Irish-American politics in the city. The *New York Times* dismissed him as an “Irish agitator,” a characterization that surely stirred up anxieties about social radicalism just three years after the great railroad strike of 1877.<sup>412</sup> The *New York Herald* argued that the city’s Irish community had no right to meddle in the political affairs of the United Kingdom. “The land system of Ireland is a British, not an American, question,” the *Herald* argued. “It is hardly decent

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<sup>411</sup> See the *Irish World and American Industrial Liberator*, February 5, 1881, for a description of its campaign in Ireland.

<sup>412</sup> The *New York Times*, January 6, 1880.

for Americans to organize a crusade for dictating the legislation of a foreign government.”<sup>413</sup>

Nevertheless, two months later Parnell presided over the creation of a new anti-landlord organization called the American Land League, which had the support of mainstream fraternal organizations as well as several labor unions. The League’s New York branch borrowed its organizational strategy from Tammany, establishing points of contact at the ward level in New York but with a strong, centralized leadership. Within a year, the League raised more than \$500,000 (in 1882 dollars) to fund Parnell’s anti-landlord campaign in Ireland<sup>414</sup>

The mass support which Parnell generated for his anti-landlord campaign indicates that the Irish community in New York was prepared for a radical new departure in achieving justice for Ireland. Spokesmen for the agitation downplayed the traditional emphasis on achieving an independent Irish republic free of British rule. Instead, they argued that a change of flags meant nothing without a change in the island’s social system. “I believe in Irish independence,” said New York’s leading Irish nationalist, John Devoy, “but I don’t think it would be worthwhile to free Ireland if that foreign landlord system were left standing.”<sup>415</sup> Other Irish-Americans concluded that the struggle over land in Ireland was part of a piece with labor discontent in the United States. The Central Labor Union, one of the nation’s most-important organizations of workers in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century, was founded after several unions came together to advocate for land reform in Ireland.<sup>416</sup> One Irish-American figure symbolized the coming together of nationalism, social reform, and politics: Terence V. Powderly, a member of the Irish-American

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<sup>413</sup> *The New York Herald*, January 5, 1880.

<sup>414</sup> Eric Foner, “Class, Ethnicity and Radicalism in the Gilded Age: The Land League and Irish America,” *Marxist Perspectives*, 1 vol. 2, (1978), pg. 156.

<sup>415</sup> *Irish World and American Industrial Liberator*, October 26, 1878.

<sup>416</sup> For more on the importance of the Central Labor Union and its connection to land reform in Ireland, see “Boycotting the Politics Factory: Labor Radicalism and the New York City Mayoral Election of 1884,” by David Scobey, *Radical History Review*, 28-30, 1984. The title incorrectly described the article’s focus, which was on the mayoral race of 1886.

nationalist organization Clan na Gael (Family of the Irish), the Grand Master Workman of the Irish-dominated Knights of Labor and mayor of Scranton, Pa. (Powderly later came to New York to serve as a commissioner of the Ellis Island Immigration Station in the early 1900s.)<sup>417</sup>

Catholic social thought in the United States also was beginning to move ever so slowly to the left during this time of labor strife and management suppression of workers' movements. Despite the presence of an arch-conservative, Michael Corrigan, in St. Patrick's Cathedral, Catholic prelates like Bishop John Ireland of St. Paul, Minnesota, and Cardinal James Gibbons of Baltimore urged the Church to take up the cause of its working-class flock in America. With Catholics in prominent positions in the labor movement, the liberal prelates argued, it was imperative that the Church understand the conditions which led to worker discontent. Corrigan and other conservative bishops pushed for a formal Vatican condemnation of the heavily Catholic Knights of Labor and of Henry George, but Gibbons successfully argued against such a statement, especially at a time when "land grabbers are stealing thousands of acres of land with impunity."<sup>418</sup> The voice of American laissez-faire liberalism, *The Nation's* E.L. Godkin, condemned the cardinal's sympathy for working-class discontent, accusing the prelate of "partaking freely of the labor beverage."<sup>419</sup>

As Irish-American attitudes towards Gilded Age excess and injustice became more confrontational, critics began to cite a new danger to the political status-quo: The Irish radical agitator. When a secret society called the Invincibles murdered two British administrators in Dublin's Phoenix Park in 1881 and several Irish-Americans from New York bombed Scotland

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<sup>417</sup> For more on Powderly in New York, see Vincent J. Cannato, *American Passage: The History of Ellis Island* (New York: Harper, 2009).

<sup>418</sup> Kenneth C. Wenzer, editor, *Henry George, The Transatlantic Irish, and Their Times* (Bingley, U.K.: JAI Press, 2009), pg. 523.

<sup>419</sup> Robert D. Cross, *The Emergence of Liberal Catholicism in America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1958), pg. 118.

Yard and Parliament in the early 1880s, New York's opinion leaders were quick to leap on accusations, later proved to be fabricated, that Parnell knew of the Phoenix Park killings and was in league with Irish-American terrorists from New York. The *New York Times* reported, perhaps with tongue in cheek, that some Tammany figures wished to bring Parnell across the Atlantic as Tammany's new boss after John Kelly's death in 1886. "With Parnell at the helm, it was claimed that Tammany would be invincible," the *Times* reported, clearly referring to the terrorist group which carried out the shocking Phoenix Park murders.<sup>420</sup> The magazine *Puck* asserted that Parnell wished to give American money, some of it raised by Tammany, to "enable turbulent Irishmen to commit a few more outrages, and conceive diabolical plots to slaughter or injure innocent people."<sup>421</sup>

Tammany and the Catholic Church both struggled to find their ideological bearings as its core voters and believers appeared to be drifting towards the left. A prominent Catholic priest in New York, the Rev. Edward McGlynn, emerged as a staunch critic of both Tammany Hall and industrial capitalism, aligning with Henry George during the writer's independent mayoral candidacy in 1886. Corrigan, the New York archbishop, sought to discipline the priest. "I have read with great regret a printed circular in which you and several others call a political mass meeting to be held in this city," Corrigan told Glynn on the eve of a pro-George campaign rally. "As Your bishop, I now forbid you in the most positive manner to attend the proposed meeting."<sup>422</sup> McGlynn went anyway and was excommunicated. But his efforts had an impact: Irish voters, perhaps remembering George's advocacy for Ireland's tenant farmers and his arrests by British officials, responded to the candidate's platform of a single tax on property. Tammany scurried to counter George with the eminently respectable Abram Hewitt as the candidate of a united Democratic Party. Hewitt won, but George finished a strong

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<sup>420</sup> The *New York Times*, June 9, 1886.

<sup>421</sup> *Puck*, November 3, 1880.

<sup>422</sup> Archbishop Michael Corrigan to the Rev. Edward McGlynn, October 26, 1886, Papers of Archbishop Michael Corrigan, Box 10, Seton Hall University Special Collections.

second, ahead of the young Republican candidate, Theodore Roosevelt.<sup>423</sup> Hewitt, however, was simply a means to an end – the end being a Tammany victory. The organization's new leader, Richard Croker, quickly dumped Hewitt when he publicly supported immigration restriction and refused to review the St. Patrick's Day parade in 1887.

Hewitt was the last of the Swallowtails to win the mayoralty. As Tammany passed into the hands of Croker, a onetime gang member and a rogue of the first order, the Hall adopted a more conciliatory attitude toward Irish discontent than Corrigan did. It successfully sought allies in the Central Labor Union and other unions, so that by the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Tammany members were among the leaders of unions representing such trades as granite cutters, plasterers, and paper hangers.<sup>424</sup> While the alliance between the political hall and the union hall was never a perfect fit, Tammany's awareness of working-class concerns became evident in its anti-monopoly rhetoric and its private advocacy for workers. In 1889, as the city prepared for the possibility of a rail strike, Croker, advised his protégé, Mayor Hugh Grant, to consider the plight of workers before taking a position on the dispute. "There is no doubt in my mind that their request is reasonable as their hours are very long with small pay while their employers are drawing large dividends from their labor," Croker wrote.<sup>425</sup> Four years later, a Tammany district leader named Thomas Dunn argued that his district was "solidly Democratic because it ... is largely a working people's district. We have little of the brownstone element." The *New York Times* described Dunn, a native of Tipperary who started as a stonecutter and became a successful businessman, as "one of the most liberal leaders in Tammany Hall."<sup>426</sup>

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<sup>423</sup> Hewitt polled 90,552 votes to George's 68,110. Roosevelt finished with 60,435.

<sup>424</sup> See the *New York Times*, September 24, 1900, for an account of a meeting of the Central Federated Union during which Tammany-affiliated union leaders addressed several topics.

<sup>425</sup> Richard Croker to Hugh Grant, January 31, 1889, Papers of Hugh Grant, New-York Historical Society.

<sup>426</sup> The *New York Times*, August 7, 1893.

The phrase sounds like a contradiction in terms more than a century later. But as Tammany neared its most-productive years, it produced a generation of new, young leaders who would be eager to claim the title



## CHAPTER SIX

### AN ADMIRABLE ORGANIZATION?

Nearly every night in the mid-1890s, a lone figure stood under a gas lamp on the corner of Second Avenue and East 20<sup>th</sup> Street, waiting to engage in quiet conversation with neighborhood residents. Charlie Murphy, a solidly built man verging on middle age who grew up not far from this corner of Manhattan's Gas House District, would have been well-known to many passersby. Just a few steps away from his listening post, he owned a saloon where laborers and dock workers paid a nickel for a beer and a serving of soup. He also was a local baseball hero, a gum-chewing catcher on a barnstorming team that toured upstate New York and caught the attention of professional teams. But by late 1892, Charlie Murphy was known best as a district leader for Tammany Hall, an important neighborhood link to the power and patronage of the city's dominant Democratic Party organization. Tammany's local clubhouse, the Anawanda Club, was based on Murphy's saloon.<sup>427</sup>

In several important ways, Charlie Murphy seemed ill-suited to the job of Tammany ward-heeler. Nicknamed "Silent Charlie," he was quiet and reserved in a line of work that seemed to require ebullience and a proverbial gleam in the eye. He was as puritanical as any moral reformer – vice, especially prostitution, offended him -- but under Richard Croker's leadership of the Hall, some Tammany figures were deeply entangled with illicit rackets. Murphy's first foray into local politics was as campaign manager for an insurgent candidate who

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<sup>427</sup> Details on the life of young Charles Francis Murphy come from coverage of his death and funeral in late April, 1924, in the *New York Times*, the *New York American*, the *New York Sun*, and the *New York Evening World*. See also Nancy Joan Weiss, *Charles Francis Murphy, 1858-1924: Respectability and Responsibility in Tammany Hall Politics* (Northampton, Mass.: Smith College Press, 1968). Weiss' short study of Murphy is a masterful attempt to go beyond stereotypes of Tammany bosses in general and of Murphy in particular. See also Harold Zink, *City Bosses in the United States*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1930). Weiss correctly notes that Zink's chapter on Murphy did not consider the importance of Murphy's relationships with Al Smith, Robert Wagner, and his son-in-law, James A. Foley – all of whom were prototypical urban liberals. Such an oversight would seem almost willful, and helps to explain why Murphy has not received the credit he deserves as a force for social change in the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

defeated a Tammany favorite in an Assembly race in 1883. Although he owned four saloons at a time when barkeepers were a vital component of Tammany culture, he was at most a moderate drinker, hardly the image of a hard-drinking, back-slapping Irish politico. “Charley Murphy takes a glass of wine at dinner sometimes, but he don’t go beyond that,” noted the grammatically challenged Tammany sachem, George Washington Plunkitt, a contemporary of Murphy.<sup>428</sup>

Despite these apparent handicaps, Murphy was a young man on the rise in Croker’s organization in the late 1880s and 1890s. He may have been taciturn, temperate, and even independent (at the beginning of his career, anyway), but he also knew how to get people to the polls, and that talent mattered more than anything else in a political organization whose power rested not on claims to moral or cultural authority but on the perception of mass public approval and the reality of loyal voter turnout. Eligible voters in the 18<sup>th</sup> Assembly District could expect a hand-delivered card from Murphy if they did not show up to cast their ballots by late afternoon on Election Day.<sup>429</sup> Like other district leaders, Murphy developed a personal loyalty among his constituents – when they went to the polls, they voted the straight Democratic ticket not necessarily because of the candidates’ merits but because of the connection they made with Tammany’s local operatives.

Charles Francis Murphy was a political professional, or, to put it another way, he was a professional politician. He had no other hobbies (except for golf) and few other interests. He spent his mornings in Tammany Hall, gathering intelligence from the Hall’s operatives and listening to constituent complaints. Many afternoons were spent in a sumptuous private room in Delmonico’s restaurant, where he entertained important allies. While Tammany was, by the early

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<sup>428</sup> William L. Riordon, ed., *Plunkitt of Tammany Hall*, pg. 78.

<sup>429</sup> Nancy Joan Weiss, *Charles Francis Murphy*, pg. 21.

20<sup>th</sup> century, the country's most-powerful political machine, Murphy could take nothing for granted. He lost several key elections during his tenure, threatening his hold on the organization and once again calling into question the notion that Tammany enjoyed the unthinking loyalty of its immigrant-stock constituents.<sup>430</sup>

Murphy became Tammany's citywide leader in 1902, after Croker resigned and retired to Ireland. He took over just as a new threat to Tammany's dominance took shape in the formation of a multitude of reform groups, ranging from the Citizens Union to the Civic Reform League, determined to remove Tammany figures from places of influence after the geographic expansion of New York to a five-borough city in 1898. In the new, greater New York City, Manhattan-based Tammany faced the prospect of having to win allies and elections in the far reaches of Queens, the Bronx and even Staten Island, places that might as well have been a thousand miles from the congested streets of the Lower East Side and the thick air of the Gas House District, the traditional strongholds of the Hall.

Reformers, having failed to dislodge Tammany from power even after another series of scandals in the 1890s, hoped that municipal consolidation would dilute Tammany's voting base. They failed, in part because Tammany was quick to form alliances with like-minded figures in other boroughs, especially Brooklyn, and because, as George Washington Plunkitt observed, reform movements lacked the staying power of professional political organizations.<sup>431</sup> If reformers seemed will o' the wisp, and they surely did to the professionals at Tammany, it may have had something to do with their tenuous connection to the people whose interests they claimed to represent. Of the 2,312 members of the New York Reform Club in 1902, only 314

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<sup>430</sup> The worst disasters under Murphy's rule were Tammany's defeats in the mayoral campaign of 1913 and gubernatorial races of 1914 and 1920.

<sup>431</sup> See William L. Riordan, ed., *Plunkitt of Tammany Hall*, pgs. 17-20.

lived in Manhattan, while only 138 lived in one of the outer boroughs or in suburbs no farther than thirty miles from City Hall. The vast majority of the club's members, some 1,842, lived more than 30 miles from downtown Manhattan.<sup>432</sup> Small wonder, then, that the club, which advocated civil service laws and municipal electoral reform, ran short of money in 1903 and was forced to move from high-priced Fifth Avenue to more-modest quarters on East 35<sup>th</sup> Street in 1903.

Tammany figures, on the other hand, lived in the districts they represented, although, to be sure, Murphy had his golf course and country home on Long Island. The organization's success depended on a personal connection with voters and their families and friends. Reform groups, on the other hand, were contemptuous of the sort of retail politics which Tammany perfected. They drew their inspiration from the muckraking journalism of Lincoln Steffens and his contemporaries in *McClure's* magazine who were, in the view of historian Richard Hofstadter, the most important element of the burgeoning Progressive movement.<sup>433</sup> The new reform groups shared with Steffens and his fellow muckrakers a belief that municipal government was too important to be left to professional politicians, and that campaigns and elections produced only inefficiency and corruption. Power was best left to disinterested professionals who, in Steffens' words, believed in "the New York theory that municipal government is business, not politics, and that a business man who would manage the city as he would a business corporation would solve for us all our problems."<sup>434</sup>

Charlie Murphy might have concurred with Steffens' assertion that running a government was indeed a business, and one that required single-minded focus – which was precisely why he

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<sup>432</sup> The New York Reform Club Papers, annual report of the treasurer, 1912, New York Public Library.

<sup>433</sup> Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform* (New York: Vintage Books, 1955), pgs. 186-214.

<sup>434</sup> Lincoln Steffens, *The Shame of the Cities* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1957), pg. 201.

stayed away from drink, according to his colleague Plunkitt. But Murphy would have turned Steffens' logic against him. If running city government were a business, it should be handled by political professionals, not amateurs like Columbia University President Seth Low, a Steffens favorite who was elected mayor on an anti-Tammany ticket in 1901 but who lost re-election in 1903 in part because he simply was not a politician. "A politician can say 'no' and make a friend, where Mr. Low will lose one by saying 'yes,'" wrote Steffens, who regarded Low as a champion of disinterested, apolitical municipal administration. Steffens argued that Low's cold personality, personal unpopularity, and inability to command the loyalty of allies should not matter. "Why should anybody like him?" Steffens wondered.<sup>435</sup>

Charles Murphy was hardly the most genial of men – his silence in meetings was legendary, and he was certainly not the backslapping type – but he understood that likability mattered. The achievement of power required victory in elections, and victory in elections required a popular candidate. But more than anything else, victory and the maintenance of power required empathy, an understanding of the real-life travails faced by voters and their families. Steffens, writing as Murphy consolidated his leadership, conceded that "Tammany kindness is real kindness, and will go far ..." <sup>436</sup> By contrast, Tammany's foes often had little patience with citizens whose daily concerns blinded them from the abstract principles which inspired reformers. Richard Welling, who co-founded the New York Reform Club with Theodore Roosevelt in the 1880s, looked back on the reform movement's attempts to win the support of labor leaders in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century with some frustration. In a speech in 1942, he noted that the club had sought to educate the labor leaders in "Tammany misrule" in the 1880s, but the effort to create a cross-class reform movement ultimately failed. "It was a tremendous blow to find all

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<sup>435</sup> Lincoln Steffens, *The Shame of the Cities*, pg. 201.

<sup>436</sup> Lincoln Steffens, *The Shame of the Cities*, pg. 205.

these men pre-occupied with wage questions,” he noted. “As Bryce has said, the conspicuous example of failure of democracy is the misgovernment of American cities.”<sup>437</sup>

Welling’s inability to understand the concerns of the city’s working classes was as telling as his reference to James Bryce, the British aristocrat, writer, and onetime ambassador to the United States. For elite urban reformers at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Lord Bryce’s study of Gilded Age America, *The American Commonwealth*, was a foundational document in their narrative of corrupt political bosses who presided over urban misgovernment based on the support of unthinking immigrant-stock voters. (Bryce’s observations about growing economic inequality in the U.S. did not receive similar attention from his elite readers.)<sup>438</sup> When Welling cited the book in his speech in 1942, nearly sixty years after the initial publication of Bryce’s work, he saw no need to identify Bryce other than to cite his last name – indeed, he did not feel the need to cite the book’s title. His listeners would have recognized the reference, and very likely would have nodded their agreement.

Bryce’s analysis of American urban politics foreshadowed the journalism of Steffens and other muckrakers, and so remains part of the canon of Gilded Age America. For that reason, Bryce’s book should be seen not just as the author intended it – as an update of Alexis de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America* -- but as part of an Anglo-American narrative of hostility towards Irish capability of self-government in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century. A more-polemical exposition of Irish-Catholic rule in the nation’s cities, written by a Protestant clergyman in New York named Joseph Hartwell, asserted that the “government of New York City is an unbroken reign of the worst element of imported voters” and urged “the descendants of the Pilgrim fathers” to

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<sup>437</sup> The Papers of Richard Welling, Box 13, New York Public Library.

<sup>438</sup> James Bryce, *The American Commonwealth*, Vols. I and II (London: Macmillan and Co., 1888, 1889).

resist Jesuit-inspired corruption.<sup>439</sup> Bryce's somewhat more-subdued condemnation of political bosses and machines was written and published just as Charles Stewart Parnell's movement to win home rule for Ireland was gathering momentum with American financial and political support (including money which Tammany raised), outraging British conservatives and Ireland's Protestant Unionists.<sup>440</sup>

Critics saw a continuum of interest, style and corruption, in Irish political figures, whether they were based in Ireland or in the United States. As noted previously, the *New York Times* suggested that some Tammany figures wished to bring Parnell across the Atlantic as Tammany's new boss after John Kelly's death in 1886.<sup>441</sup> During another crisis over Irish self-government in 1914, a leader of the anti-home rule Irish Protestants of Ulster, John N. Dancey, asserted that Charles Murphy would return to his father's native land to become the "head" of a new home rule government in Ireland. Dancey, in fact, blamed the agitation for Irish home rule on Tammany Hall. "If we could get rid of the Irish-Americans and then could banish the priests, we'd settle the whole Home Rule question in a day," Dancey said, adding that under those circumstances, "Charley Murphy will be beaten back to his American stronghold."<sup>442</sup>

Murphy certainly harbored ambitions, although they were not necessarily trans-Atlantic in nature. He sought a prominent place for Tammany in national politics, grooming Alfred E. Smith, a poor child of the Lower East Side, to become a transformative political and cultural figure in Democratic Party politics in the 1920s. Unlike his critics, Murphy was not much for

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<sup>439</sup> The Rev. Joseph Hartwell, *Romanism in Politics: What it Costs: Tammany Hall the Stronghold of Rome* (New York: Phillips & Hunt, 1887), pgs. 8, 22 and 23.

<sup>440</sup> Tammany raised slightly more than \$18,000 for Parnell's party in early 1886, including about \$1,200 from the predominately Jewish 8<sup>th</sup> Assembly District, led by a Tammany operative named Moritz Herzberg. See the *New York Times*, February 19, 1886.

<sup>441</sup> The *New York Times*, June 9, 1886.

<sup>442</sup> The *New York Times*, May 21, 1914.

speeches, memoirs, or even letters. He operated much as Bryce described bosses in the abstract in *The American Commonwealth* – in urban political organizations, Bryce observed, “usually ... one person ... holds more strings in his hand than do the others.”<sup>443</sup> Murphy held more strings and used them to greater effect than any other Tammany leader in the organization’s history.

Perhaps because he was quiet by nature, Murphy developed the invaluable political gift of listening, and he was known for interrogating his constituents as well as his colleagues. “His long suit is asking questions,” a journalist wrote in the *New York Times*. “He is an insatiable interrogator.”<sup>444</sup> His colleagues also had reason to believe Murphy retained a very Irish understanding of politics as a rigged game in which victory over social and cultural elites sometimes required a certain degree of improvisation. In 1886, the year of Henry George’s dramatic challenge to the city’s political establishment, Murphy managed the congressional campaign of a Tammany stalwart named Francis Spinola, who shocked political observers by defeating the publisher of the elite journal *North American Review*, Allen Thorndike Rice, in one of Manhattan’s more-exclusive districts. (Rice’s consolation prize was an appointment as U.S. Minister to Russia, although he died before he could assume the post.) An investigation showed that some Republican ballots featured Spinola’s name, not Rice’s, at the top of the ticket, and so they were counted for Spinola. Murphy was suspected of engineering the deception – at the time, ballots were printed and distributed by the parties themselves, and they displayed only the names of an individual party’s nominees. The charges against Murphy only enhanced his reputation in Tammany, although the Republican Party blamed one of its own district leaders who held a grudge against Rice.<sup>445</sup>

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<sup>443</sup> James Bryce, *The American Commonwealth*, Vol. II, pg. 109.

<sup>444</sup> *The New York Times*, February 22, 1914.

<sup>445</sup> *The New York Times*, January 22, 1887.



Murphy's political acumen and authentic generosity during the infamous Blizzard of 1888 also marked him as a man of influence in local politics. The storm left the city paralyzed and short of supplies, with the poor left to shoulder a disproportionate share of the suffering. Murphy, performing the role expected of a Tammany operative on behalf of his constituents, raised nearly \$1,500 in charitable contributions to alleviate conditions in the Gas House District, a sum that accounted for more than a quarter of the machine's total fundraising effort for the entire city. Murphy delivered the money to one of the neighborhood's civic pillars, Saint George's Episcopal Church in the affluent Stuyvesant Square section near Gramercy Park. The Rev. George Rainsford, pastor of St. George's, was so appreciative of Murphy's efforts that he singled out the young Irish-Catholic politico in a sermon. "If Tammany had more leaders like Charles F. Murphy, it would be an admirable organization," he told his congregation.<sup>446</sup>

Tammany never did have a leader quite like Charles F. Murphy, even though his political biography and narrative arc seemed familiar enough to friend and foe alike. Born in 1858 in the Gas House District, which extended from 14<sup>th</sup> Street to 28<sup>th</sup> Street on the East Side, Charles Francis Murphy seemed to personify a stereotypical Irish-American success story in politics. His parents were Irish immigrants – his father fled during the Famine in 1848 – who lived in one of the district's many tenement houses that surrounded Stuyvesant Square's island of affluence. One of nine children, young Charlie dropped out of school at the age of 14, taking a succession of jobs near the East River waterfront before becoming a horsecar driver in the late 1870s. He opened his first saloon in 1880, and soon had enough money to open three more. Murphy's two older brothers already were active in city politics, so Charlie followed their path. His reputation as an athlete and his involvement in the saloon trade were important credentials that allowed

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<sup>446</sup> The *New York Evening World*, April 25, 1924.

Murphy to rise quickly in local politics, but for Tammany's critics, the rise of baseball players, prize fighters, and saloon owners to places of political influence was further confirmation of the organization's vulgarity. When Tammany bestowed a congressional nomination on Big Tim Sullivan, a product of Five Points poverty who gained local fame when he slugged a prize fighter accused of wife-beating, *The New York Times* fulminated that "anywhere outside a Tammany barroom it would be supposed that Sullivan could be elected to Congress only in a district inhabited by the very scum of the earth." Sullivan, the paper charged, was "simply not fit to be at large in a civilized community."<sup>447</sup> Perhaps, but voters decided that Big Tim Sullivan was fit enough for Capitol Hill.

Despite Murphy's slender academic credentials, tenement upbringing, athletic interests, and saloon ownership, characteristics associated with the likes of Sullivan and other disreputable sorts, he quickly earned a reputation for running a clean operation in the Gas House District. "One thing that I learned from my political preceptor, Charles F. Murphy of Tammany Hall, was a firm belief in the strength of clean government," wrote Edward Flynn, who took over the Bronx Democratic Party at Murphy's behest in 1922. "Mr. Murphy did not believe that politics should have anything to do with either gambling or prostitution. He further believed that politicians should have very little or nothing to do with the Police Department or the school system."<sup>448</sup> Flynn's testimony on Murphy's behalf spoke to the very different definitions of clean government which characterized civic discourse in Progressive Era New York. For Flynn (and Murphy), clean government meant an end to Tammany's lucrative involvement in gambling, prostitution, and outright bribery. But it did not preclude the awarding of contracts to politically connected companies, such as the trucking firm which one of Murphy's brothers

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<sup>447</sup> *The New York Times*, October 4, 1902.

<sup>448</sup> Edward J. Flynn, *You're the Boss: The Practice of American Politics* (New York: Collier Books, 1962), pg. 46.

owned (and which Murphy was thought to have an interest – a silent interest, of course). Nor did it include support for the Progressive era's moral and cultural crusades, ranging from temperance legislation to gambling restrictions, which were dear to reform groups such as New York's Civic League.

For example, the Civic League's organizers bombarded the state legislature with thirty thousand letters in 1913, demanding that lawmakers kill a bill that would have allowed saloons to conduct business on Sunday. The League's mobilization came in the middle of a monumental effort in Albany to pass more than two dozen bills aimed at making workplace conditions safer and more humane in the wake of the infamous Triangle Shirtwaist Fire in 1911. The Sunday opening bill did, in fact, expire (temporarily), and the Civic League celebrated its demise but ignored the legislature's other reforms, including a workers' compensation bill which Samuel Gompers described as the best law of its kind "ever passed in any state or any country."<sup>449</sup>

The Rev. Rainsford, who was so grateful for Murphy's charitable work after the Blizzard of '88, was correct to suggest that Murphy was different from the organization's top leaders at the time. Other high-ranking Tammany figures, including Croker himself, were involved in the very activities which so offended Murphy. "In those days, I'm afraid, prostitution was more or less their business," recalled Jeremiah T. Mahoney, a Murphy-era Tammany figure himself and law partner of Robert F. Wagner.<sup>450</sup> But when Murphy took over the Gas House District in 1892, vice was shut down in his jurisdiction. Journalist Arthur Krock recalled that Murphy "would have nothing to do with what he considered immoral things. He was a devout Catholic family man. He would not take money from a whore or a criminal."<sup>451</sup> Not everybody realized

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<sup>449</sup> John Buenker, *Urban Liberalism and Progressive Reform* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1978), pg. 50.

<sup>450</sup> *The Reminiscences of Jeremiah T. Mahoney*, Columbia Center for Oral History, pg. 12.

<sup>451</sup> *The Reminiscences of Arthur Krock*, Columbia Center for Oral History, pg. 3.

this. When Murphy took over Tammany on his own in 1903 (after briefly serving as one of a trio of leaders), some fellow Tammany members believed he represented more of the same – not an unreasonable deduction, given that Murphy’s background was so similar to older Tammany leaders. They quickly discovered otherwise.

William Devery, a notoriously incompetent and corrupt chief of police under Croker, described Murphy as a “good sport” when he, Devery, sought a leadership position on Tammany’s executive committee early in Murphy’s tenure. Murphy took offense, and not only denied him a place on the committee but ordered his removal as a district leader. Murphy then singled out for criticism a district leader, Martin Engel, known for his ties to prostitution and gambling rackets. Murphy replaced Engel with an ally of his own, Florence Sullivan (a cousin of “Big Tim” Sullivan, the Bowery leader) and ordered an end to Tammany’s involvement with the vice trade.<sup>452</sup> Sullivan’s men immediately shut down houses of ill repute in Engel’s district.

Murphy surprised in other ways as well. When James J. Walker succeeded Robert Wagner as state Senate majority leader in 1919, he prudently contacted Murphy to ask about Tammany’s patronage requirements. Murphy never felt the need to apologize for his insistence on the spoils of office, although critics like Bryce and his American counterparts found the practice corrupt -- at least when the spoils were distributed by characters like Murphy.<sup>453</sup> In his introduction to George Washington Plunkitt’s book, Murphy delivered what was, for him, a long-winded exposition of his pragmatic political philosophy. Referring explicitly to Plunkitt but implicitly to politicians like himself, Murphy wrote: “He is a believer in thorough political

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<sup>452</sup> Nancy Joan Weiss, *Charles F. Murphy*, pg. 28-29. There are indications that Big Tim Sullivan was strong enough to maintain connections with the gambling underworld of the Bowery despite Murphy’s disapproval, although he consistently denied involvement in prostitution. See Richard Welch, *King of the Bowery*, pgs. 74-75.

<sup>453</sup> For Bryce’s criticism of the spoils system in American cities, see *The American Commonwealth*, Vol. II, pgs. 120-121.

organization and all-the-year-around work, and he holds to the doctrine that, in making appointments to office, party workers should be preferred if they are fitted to perform the duties of office.”<sup>454</sup>

With that thought in mind, Jimmy Walker, who was no fool, asked Murphy for the names of party workers who ought to receive preference for jobs with the state Senate. “You’re the leader, aren’t you, Senator Jim,” Murphy asked. A no-doubt startled Walker answered in the affirmative. “Use your own judgment,” Murphy said. “If it’s good, you’ll be an asset to the party. If it isn’t, well, the sooner we find it out, the better.”<sup>455</sup> Walker served capably as Wagner’s successor, but as Mayor of New York Beau James proved to be something other than an asset for Tammany.

Murphy’s tenure at the helm of Tammany was the longest in the organization’s history, from 1902 to his death in 1924, just months before the name of his most-famous protégé, Al Smith, was placed in nomination for president at the Democratic National Convention in New York.. (Smith failed to get the nomination after an epic 103-ballot marathon, but he succeeded four years later.) Murphy ruled Tammany during one of the most-tumultuous and contested periods of New York. history, a time during which muckrakers like Steffens, reform groups like the Citizens Union, and emerging national figures like Franklin Delano Roosevelt arraigned themselves against Tammany in the name of good government. The traditional boss vs. reformer narrative, with reformers cast in the role of dispassionate advocates for progressive change while bosses served the reactionary status-quo through their manipulation of immigrant-stock voters, is rooted in transformative experience of Progressive Era politics. But a serious study of Murphy’s

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<sup>454</sup> William L. Riordan, ed., *Plunkitt of Tammany Hall*, pg. xxvi.

<sup>455</sup> Gene Fowler, *Beau James: The Life and Times of Jimmy Walker* (New York: The Viking Press, 1949), pg. 85.

long tenure as Tammany's boss shows a far-more complicated picture, for under his administration, Tammany responded aggressively to discontent with laissez-faire capitalism, protected immigrant culture and identity from reformers who demanded conformity with middle-class norms and accepted definitions of Americanism, and continued to develop a pluralistic critique of the nation's self-image as a Protestant, Anglo-Saxon nation of rugged individuals. While these attitudes and accomplishments often are forgotten, devalued, or simply condemned as merely opportunistic, there have been sporadic attempts to place Tammany within the broad outlines of a progressive agenda that reformers and some bosses shared.<sup>456</sup>

During Murphy's 22 years as the organization's boss, Tammany Hall became an engine for progressive reform even as it continued to endure almost hysterical criticism from Progressives, reformers, muckrakers, Republicans, and clergymen. In 1913, as Murphy and Tammany were in the midst of re-writing New York's social contract to include greater protections for workers, widows, children, and other innocent victims of urban industrialization, a weekly periodical called *The Independent* asserted, "In the American political lexicon Tammany Hall and municipal misgovernment are interchangeable terms."<sup>457</sup> During a celebrated – and well-calculated – confrontation with Murphy in 1912, Franklin Roosevelt, a

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<sup>456</sup> In his study of the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire, Richard A. Greenwald argues that too often "historians have seen ... urban machine politicians as either reacting against reform or using it for their own selfish purposes." See *The Triangle Fire, The Protocols of Peace, and Industrial Democracy in Progressive Era New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005), pg. 154. As an example, M.A. Werner's oft-quoted history of Tammany Hall argued that Big Tim Sullivan wrote legislation penalizing the carrying of firearms without a permit because Tammany operatives wished to plant weapons on gangsters and pimps who refused to cooperate with them. In Werner's telling, Sullivan's Law, as it still is called, was a device used to imprison Tammany foes. Werner lamented that the maneuver prevented "citizens from protecting themselves from thieves ..." See M.A. Werner, *Tammany Hall* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1968). Pg. 506-507.

<sup>457</sup> *The Independent*, vol. LXXV, August 7, 1913. In another example of anti-Tammany rhetoric in the press, the *New York Times* welcomed a new edition of the socialist writer Gustavus Myers' highly critical narrative of Tammany, *A History of Tammany Hall*, with a headline reading: "Tammany's Evil Ways Are Told in a New History." See *The New York Times*, October 28, 1917. Myers' new edition, published in 1917, contained not a word about the rise of Robert Wagner and Al Smith, and nothing about Tammany support for reforms both before and after the Triangle fire.

two-term State Senator, said that “C.F. Murphy and his kind must, like the noxious weed, be plucked out ... From the ruins of the political machines we will construct something more nearly conforming to a democratic conception of government.”<sup>458</sup> Roosevelt, in his short tenure in the state Senate (he left to become Assistant Secretary of the Navy in 1913, after serving fewer than three years), made a show of his opposition to Tammany in an effort to burnish his Progressive credentials, for he, like so many of his contemporaries, saw Progressivism and Tammany as irreconcilable enemies.<sup>459</sup> And yet, when Roosevelt picked a fight with Tammany over the appointment of a U.S. Senator in 1911, Murphy already had set out on a course that would provide New Dealers with a blueprint for the changes they would bring about in the 1930s. Murphy had, for example, thrown Tammany’s support behind the 16<sup>th</sup> Amendment, which created a federal income tax – a measure which New York’s proto-Progressive Republican Governor, Charles Evans Hughes, declined to support during his tenure, from 1907 to 1910.<sup>460</sup> With Murphy’s approval, Tammany legislators provided Hughes with the votes he needed in 1909 to create a Public Service Commission to regulate public utilities – a measure which many of his fellow Republicans opposed. And in 1910 Murphy handpicked two young legislators, thirty-three-year-old Robert Wagner and thirty-eight-year-old Al Smith, to lead the state Senate and the Assembly, respectively, even though seniority and custom should have dictated other, less-enlightened choices.<sup>461</sup>

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<sup>458</sup> Frank Freidel, *Roosevelt: A Rendezvous with Destiny* (New York: Back Bay Books, 1990), pg. 20.

<sup>459</sup> Some historians continue to concur with the young FDR. David von Drehle, in his book on the Triangle Shirtwaist fire, referred to Murphy and Tammany as the “enemies of reform” in 1910. See *Triangle: The Fire That Changed America* (New York: Grove Press, 2003), pg. 189.

<sup>460</sup> New York ratified the amendment in the spring of 1911, after Murphy’s candidate for governor in 1910, John Dix, succeeded Hughes.

<sup>461</sup> Before Wagner and Smith were formally elected as Senate Majority Leader and Assembly Speaker, the press speculated that Murphy would anoint veteran state Senator Thomas Grady, a conservative lawmaker known for his loquaciousness and fondness for drink, to lead the Senate .

Liberated from the defensiveness that marked its rhetoric and actions during much of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, Murphy's Tammany finally developed a forward-looking agenda which one historian described as "the creation of a quasi-welfare state."<sup>462</sup> Murphy's allies supported and implemented sweeping new social legislation, from workers compensation to the beginnings of minimum wage laws to stricter regulation of businesses, making New York a hothouse of progressive reform long before the New Deal. In fact, Wagner referred to Tammany Hall under Murphy's rule as "the cradle of modern liberalism in America," a description which, it seems safe to say, has not found a place in the liberal narrative of Tammany Hall.<sup>463</sup>

The oversight is hard to explain, given that some contemporary observers took notice of the change at Tammany, albeit without the sensational headlines reserved for minor and now-forgotten scandals. The reliably anti-Tammany *New York Post*, for example, noted in 1915 that Murphy's men were no longer "hacks," but "strong partisans, waging keen partisan war but with clean weapons. They have ideas of their own."<sup>464</sup> The *New York Times*, also no friend of Tammany, observed that "out-and-out Tammany members" displayed a "zeal for reform" under Murphy's leadership.<sup>465</sup>

Some of this zeal surely could be attributed to plain and simple politics. Murphy was a shrewd tactician who knew how to co-opt his enemies – in 1903, when Seth Low sought re-election as mayor on a reform program, Murphy extended Tammany's endorsement to the incumbent's two running mates, city Comptroller Edward M. Grout and president of the Board of Aldermen Charles F. Fornes. They accepted, were unceremoniously dumped from Low's

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<sup>462</sup> Richard A. Greenwald, *The Triangle Fire*, pg. 157.

<sup>463</sup> Quoted in J. Joseph Huthmacher, *Senator Robert F. Wagner and the Rise of Urban Liberalism* (New York: Atheneum, 1971), pg. 35.

<sup>464</sup> The *New York Post*, April 9, 1915.

<sup>465</sup> The *New York Times*, December 9, 1913.



reform ticket, and so helped Tammany's candidate, George McClellan, foil Low's re-election bid. But in 1905, Tammany nearly lost the mayoralty again, this time to William Randolph Hearst, who ran a populist campaign centered on municipal ownership of services and utilities. Murphy chose Hearst as Tammany's candidate for governor the following year, a move that was both pragmatic and substantive. Hearst was co-opted, but Tammany not only adopted municipal ownership in principle, but acted on it in 1909 when it supported Hughes' Public Service Commission, and again several years later, when Tammany supported the creation of state-run power facilities.<sup>466</sup>

According to Frances Perkins, Murphy once conceded that social reform measures like the 54-hour work week "made us many votes."<sup>467</sup> But if votes were all that interested Murphy during the height of the Progressive Era, he might well have questioned the utility of social reforms. In the elections immediately following the historic legislative session of 1913, when Tammany passed a raft of social and political reforms, Murphy's candidates suffered devastating losses in the state Legislature and in New York City's mayoral election in New York City. An Irish-Catholic reformer, John Purroy Mitchel, was elected mayor on an explicitly anti-Tammany ticket, while Republicans gained control of the state Assembly.

Murphy did not help Tammany's cause in 1913 when he ordered the impeachment and removal of one of his former stalwarts, Governor William Sulzer, on corruption charges months before the elections. That spring, Sulzer publicly defied Murphy over patronage requests and a

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<sup>466</sup> Daniel Rodgers argued that "the stink of Tammany Hall" prevented the adoption of progressive European ideas like municipal ownership. But Tammany actually favored municipal ownership. It opposed the extension of civil service rules to city-owned services, viewing those rules as a barrier to the hiring of Tammany constituents. See Daniel Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2000), p. 135.

<sup>467</sup> Frances Perkins, *The Roosevelt I Knew*, (New York: Penguin, 1946), pgs. 24-25.

version of a direct primary bill which Murphy vehemently opposed.<sup>468</sup> Press coverage of the impeachment drama and Murphy's high-handed tactics to remove Sulzer overshadowed the legislative achievements of that year, which certainly hurt Tammany candidates in the fall.<sup>469</sup>

Despite the uproar over Sulzer's impeachment and Democratic losses in November's elections, Tammany forged ahead with reform during a special lame-duck session in Albany in December of 1913. The *New York Times* warned that Sulzer's successor, Martin Glynn, supported "radical" new laws, including what the *Times* called a "liberal workmen's compensation" bill, a direct primary bill that was more acceptable to Murphy than the Sulzer version, a bill designed to implement direct election of U.S. Senators, and a call for a new state constitutional convention in 1915.<sup>470</sup> One Tammany figure, John H. McCooey, said that Murphy would "give the people all they want and perhaps a bit more."<sup>471</sup> But if pleasing the people were Tammany's sole intention, it failed. In the fall of 1914, Charles Whitman, a reactionary who sought to dismantle much of what the legislature achieved in 1913, easily defeated Glynn's attempt to win a term in his own right, adding to the string of Tammany disasters.

There was some thought in Washington, D.C., that religion played a role in Tammany's defeat in 1914. Glynn was the first Roman Catholic to become governor of New York, and a Democratic official in New York, Thomas D. McCarthy, detected anti-Catholic bias against Glynn. In a memo to Colonel Edward House, Woodrow Wilson's all-purpose advisor, McCarthy

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<sup>468</sup> Sulzer and Murphy differed over the number of signatures that would be required to allow a would-be candidate access to the ballot. Sulzer favored a lower number (1 percent of the total number of voters registered with a political party) while Murphy wanted a higher threshold, no doubt to make life difficult for insurgents. See John D. Buenker, *Urban Liberalism and Progressive Reform*, pgs. 142-145.

<sup>469</sup> See, for example, coverage of Albany politics from March to October, 1913, in the *New York Times*, *New York Tribune*, *Albany Knickerbocker News*, and other newspapers.

<sup>470</sup> The *New York Times*, December 9, 1913.

<sup>471</sup> The *New York Times*, December 7, 1913.

noted the activities of a Protestant supremacist organization called the Guardians of Liberty, which actively campaigned against Glynn and a Catholic candidate for U.S. Senate, James Gerard, in portions of upstate New York. After examining the vote in Erie County and several other reliably Democratic upstate counties, McCarthy told House that Glynn “may have lost many votes because he was a Catholic” and that Gerard’s candidacy “suffered greatly by the injection of the religious issue.” <sup>472</sup>

Charles Murphy survived these political catastrophes and returned Tammany to power in the 1917 mayoralty election and 1918 gubernatorial campaign, but he did not, after all, reassess his commitment to social and political change. In fact, Tammany aggressively resisted Republican efforts under Whitman to roll back some of the post-Triangle reforms, including workers’ compensation and state pensions for widows. (Robert Wagner regarded the Tammany-supported workers compensation law as a forerunner to FDR’s social security legislation. <sup>473</sup>)

During a Republican-dominated state constitutional convention in 1915, Al Smith furthered his reputation as a progressive reformer, fighting state Republican chairman William T. Barnes’ efforts to repeal laws that granted privileges to a single “class of individuals,” such as widows or disabled workers. <sup>474</sup> Later, as Governor, Smith expanded on the reforms enacted while he was in the legislature, countering popular portrayals of the 1920s as a time of reaction.

So if Murphy allowed and even encouraged his protégés to push for (and, when necessary, defend) political and social reform even after the public rejections of his leadership in

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<sup>472</sup> Thomas D. McCarthy to Colonel House, November 16, 1914, the Papers of Joseph Tumulty, Box 44, Library of Congress.

<sup>473</sup> See J. Joseph Huthmacher, *Senator Robert F. Wagner and the Rise of Urban Liberalism*, pg. 31.

<sup>474</sup> Alfred E. Smith, *Up to Now: An Autobiography* (New York: The Viking Press, 1929), pg. 139.

1913 and 1914, what, besides mere political calculation, led Tammany to become an agent for change at the height of the Progressive Era?

Murphy's biographer, Nancy Joan Weiss, noted that even Murphy's friends "were unable to explain the motivations of Charles Murphy."<sup>475</sup> Murphy left behind no letters and, in keeping with his nickname, "Silent Charlie," he gave few interviews. Not long before his death, however, he did say that he "encouraged the selection of young men for public office" because they "gave you a different viewpoint of what Tammany Hall is and its aims and aspirations."<sup>476</sup> But Silent Charlie Murphy had little else to say about why he acted as he did in the second decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Al Smith said that Murphy supported expansive social legislation because he "had come up from lowly surroundings."<sup>477</sup> Did his father, a Famine exile, impress on young Charlie the misery of hunger and the failures of government during the Irish Famine? It is certainly possible, although there is no clear evidence suggesting a connection.

One possible explanation for Murphy's actions generally has been ignored: They reflected a growing sense among some – although by no means all or even most -- American Catholics that they should be more vocal in defense of the Church's generally poor and potentially alienated flock. Murphy was a devout Catholic; his bookshelves at home were lined with works devoted to the history and dogma of his faith.<sup>478</sup> He came of age politically at a time when Catholic liberals such as Cardinal James Gibbons of Baltimore, Bishop John Ireland of Minnesota and New York's own radical clergyman Edward McGlynn advocated greater Catholic support for issues of social justice, including the right of workers to organize. Bishop Ireland, in fact, argued that Pope Leo XIII's landmark 1891 encyclical on social justice, *Rerum Novarum*,

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<sup>475</sup> Nancy Joan Weiss, *Charles F. Murphy*, pg. 3.

<sup>476</sup> Nancy Joan Weiss, *Charles F. Murphy*, pg. 75.

<sup>477</sup> Alfred E. Smith, *Up to Now: An Autobiography*, pg. 121.

<sup>478</sup> Nancy Joan Weiss, *Charles F. Murphy*, pg. 35.

gave tacit papal approval for specific social welfare measures, including the eight-hour work day. Pope Leo, prodded by liberal American bishops, acknowledged the “misery and wretchedness pressing so unjustly on the majority of the working class,” and argued that those in “exceeding distress” should be “met by public aid.”<sup>479</sup> Jeremiah Mahoney, who described himself in an interview in 1957 as Murphy’s most important political advisor, contended that Leo XIII’s encyclical had a “marvelous” impact on young Catholic political leaders.<sup>480</sup>

This is not to say that Murphy took his all of his cues from liberal Catholic social teaching, or that he completely embraced an activist government role in regulating private enterprise. Far from it. Because of opposition from Tammany allies in the candy-making and canning industries, Murphy singlehandedly killed legislation that would have limited the work week for women to 54 hours in 1911.<sup>481</sup> The bill passed in 1912 with some exemptions, but only after Big Tim Sullivan – the man whom the *Times* found unfit for civilized company -- and his brother Christy dramatically cast decisive votes after being summoned to the Senate floor by Frances Perkins.

Despite his reservations about the 54-hour bill, Murphy supported the pro-labor politicians and, for the most part, the policies which made New York a leader in progressive legislation in the second decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. With Murphy’s unequivocal approval, Al Smith and Robert Wagner became national figures because of their advocacy of social welfare legislation and an expanded regulatory role for governments at all levels. Another Murphy protégé, Ed Flynn, boss of the Bronx, became an important political advisor to Franklin

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<sup>479</sup> An English-language transcript of *Rerum Novarum* is available on-line at the Vatican website, [www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/leo\\_xiii/encyclicals](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/leo_xiii/encyclicals)

<sup>480</sup> *The Reminiscences of Jeremiah T. Mahoney*, Columbia Center for Oral History, pg. 195.

<sup>481</sup> For more on Murphy’s opposition to the 54-hour bill, see the *Reminiscences of Frances Perkins*, Columbia Center for Oral History, Pg. 99.

Roosevelt, while others, like James A. Foley (who married Murphy's step-daughter) and Mahoney (a onetime Olympic athlete who advocated a boycott of the 1936 Olympics in Berlin) won sterling reputations for honesty and stalwart liberalism. They helped create a different kind of Tammany Hall, a Tammany Hall which embraced the label of "liberal," and with which open-minded Progressive reformers, most famously Frances Perkins, found they could work in harmony – often to their delight. Perkins once said of the Sullivan brothers, "if I had been a man serving in the Senate with them, I'm sure I would have had a glass of beer with them and gotten them to tell me what times were like on the old Bowery."<sup>482</sup> Perkins recognized in Murphy's Tammany a change that her future boss, Franklin Roosevelt, did not perceive until years later. Tammany's support for social welfare and regulatory legislation in the second decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century was, she wrote, "a turning point" in changing "American political attitudes and policies toward social responsibility."<sup>483</sup> Mahoney argued that the young men Murphy promoted "made the party a liberal progressive party, and we advocated the cause of the underprivileged [and] the cause of labor" even though Murphy would certainly have not considered himself a "progressive."<sup>484</sup>

Murphy and Tammany adopted the language and ethos of the Progressive movement, but at the same time challenged the Progressives' assumptions and definitions of reforms.<sup>485</sup> The challenge came in the form of a counter-narrative of what progressivism could, or should, be.

The Tammany counter-narrative was not restricted to local issues like the 54-hour bill or other domestic reforms. For example, while figures such as Theodore Roosevelt, Albert

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<sup>482</sup> *The Reminiscences of Frances Perkins*, Columbia Center for Oral History, pg. 240.

<sup>483</sup> Frances Perkins, *The Roosevelt I Knew*, pg. 23.

<sup>484</sup> *The Reminiscences of Jeremiah T. Mahoney*, Columbia Center for Oral History, pg. 63.

<sup>485</sup> The complexity of the progressive project, which includes groups and people who avoided the label of "progressive," is narrated in John Whiteclay Chambers II, *The Tyranny of Change: America in the Progressive Era, 1890-1920* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2000). See especially Chapter 5.

Beveridge, and Woodrow Wilson saw overseas expansion as part of the Progressive mission to bring Anglo-Saxon civilization to races deemed barbaric or undeveloped, Tammany Democrats – perhaps drawing on the Irish narrative of oppression and defeat -- argued that there was nothing progressive about imperialism. “Let me explain what I mean by anti-imperialism,” said the Irish immigrant Richard Croker in 1900. “It means opposition to the fashion of shooting down everybody who doesn’t speak English. It seems to be the fashion nowadays when a people don’t speak English to organize an army and send troops to shoot them down.”<sup>486</sup> Tammany Congressman William Bourke Cochran was an even more-vocal critic of American expansion, serving as one of the keynote speakers – along with Samuel Gompers – at an anti-expansion rally in Manhattan’s Academy of Music on 14<sup>th</sup> Street in 1899. He mobilized the language of morality – usually deployed against Tammany – to argue against U.S. domination of Cuba and the Philippines as a result of the Spanish-American War. Imperialism, he said, “is a policy which, from its material point of view, is a policy of folly, and from its moral point of view, a policy of infamy.” He took pains to wonder why “any person who gives out an interview in New York favoring imperialism ... will find his remarks paraded in all the London newspapers and terms of encomium showered on his head.” While not explicitly linking the Irish experience as a conquered people to his opposition to imperialism, the reference to London seems clear enough.

For Tammany politicians like Cochran, imperialism was an Old World practice which they regarded as literally un-American. “We are not going to abandon the American policy of justice,” he said, “to engage in the European policy of conquest and ruin.”<sup>487</sup> Cochran later

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<sup>486</sup> *The New York Times*, June 27, 1900.

<sup>487</sup> The Papers of William Bourke Cochran, Speech of January 22, 1899, Box 23, New York Public Library.

became involved in Irish nationalist politics and was an outspoken critic of British colonialism, perhaps to the dismay of his friend and frequent correspondent, Winston Churchill.<sup>488</sup>

Tammany also resisted the insistence of some Progressives that there was only one acceptable American identity, one that was stripped clean of Old World practices and customs. Tammany embraced hyphenated Americanism at a time when Progressive spokesmen such as Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson insisted on one hundred percent Americanism. Indeed, Irish-American activists in New York noted that Progressive concerns about hyphenated identities apparently did not apply to those who spoke favorably about Anglo-Saxon or Anglo-American virtues.<sup>489</sup>

Tammany figures were singularly unimpressed with the ravings of the popular nativist writer Madison Grant, whose anxieties about the demise of Protestant Anglo-America helped to inspire the eugenics movement in the 1920s.<sup>490</sup> Grant's lament for the passing of "the great race," as he phrased it, helped establish the moral framework for some Progressives, most notably birth-control activist Margaret Sanger, to embrace eugenics as a scientific solution to social problems associated with immigrants as well as those with mental disorders. Others mobilized the language of race to support immigration restrictions in the early 1920s. A professor of biology at the University of Virginia, Dr. Ivey F. Lewis, told the university's Anglo-

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<sup>488</sup> Friendly correspondence between Cochran and Churchill can be found in the Papers of William Bourke Cochran, Box 7, New York Public Library.

<sup>489</sup> John Devoy, leader of New York's Irish nationalist community from 1871 to his death in 1928, challenged Senator John Sharp Williams of Mississippi when complained about the political agendas of hyphenated Americans in 1911. "Aren't the Anglo-Saxons hyphenated?" Devoy asked. See Devoy's account of the meeting in the *Gaelic American* newspaper, March 1, 1924.

<sup>490</sup> Madison Grant, *The Passing of the Great Race* (New York: Scribner's, 1922).



Saxon club that “immigration has diluted our stock with millions of unassimilated aliens ...

There is no such thing as a melting pot.”<sup>491</sup>

Tammany had no official position on eugenics, but its spokesmen were clear about their opposition to immigration restriction, which, as Dr. Lewis of Virginia explained, was closely connected with racial identity. Congressman Cochran, who occasionally strayed from the Tammany reservation but who also served as the organization’s grand sachem from 1905 to 1908, was among the most-vocal opponents of restriction in the early 1920s.<sup>492</sup> In a letter to the Hebrew Sheltering and Immigrant Aid Society of America in 1921, Cochran called immigration restriction “a renunciation and an abandonment of the policy which has made this country since its discovery the greatest agency for civilization in the history of mankind.” Restriction supporters, he said, “appealed to that peculiar but sinister spirit of hate and distrust that seems to be sweeping over the world.”<sup>493</sup> Cochran was dead when the Immigration Act of 1924 came to the floor of Congress, but his colleagues from New York maintained his sense of outrage. Congressman Christopher Sullivan and U.S. Senator Royal Copeland, both longtime Tammany members, voted against the legislation, as did reform congressmen Fiorello LaGuardia and Emanuel Celler, among others. The measure, however, passed with ease.

The immigration restrictions of 1924 could be interpreted as a part of the country’s turn to the right in the aftermath of the war years. Conversely, the legislation could be seen as an extension of Progressive Era denunciations of political pluralism and hyphenated identities articulated by Progressive icons like Roosevelt and Wilson. In either case, Tammany’s position

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<sup>491</sup> The *New York Times*, April 6, 1924.

<sup>492</sup> Cochran is among the grand sachems listed in a pro-Tammany pamphlet, “Plain Facts About Tammany for All Americans,” found in the Kilroe Collection of Material Relating to Tammany Hall, New-York Historical Society.

<sup>493</sup> William Bourke Cochran to Hebrew Sheltering and Immigrant Aid Society of America, April 27, 1921, Cochran papers, Box 10, New York Public Library.

was clear and unchanging. Tammany supported immigrants' rights at a time when they were under assault from both major political parties as well as prohibitionists, the Ku Klux Klan, social Darwinists, and eugenicists. From the perspective of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, Tammany was very much on the left – perhaps even the far left – in its defense of immigrants' rights.

Of course, it is fair to point out that a political organization led by the children of immigrants, catering to the needs of immigrant or immigrant-stock constituents, could hardly have done otherwise, just as Tammany could hardly have stood idly by when the Tilden Commission recommended disenfranchisement of the poor in the mid-1870s. But it would be equally wrong to dismiss Tammany position on immigration as merely cold political calculation. Some Tammany politicians drew on their biographies, family narratives, and lived experiences to explain their positions, philosophy, and votes. When Frances Perkins lobbied Big Tim Sullivan on the merits of the 54-hour bill, telling him about the horrific conditions in which many women and girls worked, Sullivan drew on his own life, not abstract theory, to explain his position. “I seen me sister go out to work when she was only fourteen,” he told Perkins, “and I know we ought to help these gals by giving ‘em a law which will prevent ‘em from being broken down while they’re still young..”<sup>494</sup>

Sullivan did not simply vote for the 54-hour bill; he demanded its passage, and outmaneuvered opponents who tried to kill it. Jeremiah Mahoney said that he and other Tammany politicians supported reforms like workers' compensation and, later, Social Security because they remembered “the days of adversity” when they were children growing up in Manhattan. Mahoney's father died young; Mahoney and his five siblings lived with their mother in a \$25-per-month walkup on Third Avenue. Mahoney went to work in a hardware factory

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<sup>494</sup> Frances Perkins, *The Roosevelt I Knew*, pg. 14.

when he was 14 years old. Even in his old age, when he achieved a degree of affluence, he insisted that he and other Tammany figures never forgot the struggles of their youth, and acted accordingly once they were in public life.<sup>495</sup> While there surely were votes to be had in Tammany's support for social welfare legislation, it is undeniable that many politicians who supported these measures knew first-hand what poverty and struggle were like. To dismiss their politics as issueless or without an ideological core is to ignore the possibility that they may have voted as they did because they saw in the plight of the young, the ill, the weary, and the disabled a glimpse of their own life stories.

Murphy's Tammany also used the constitutional changes of the Progressive Era to outline its definition of what was progressive – and what was not, regardless of how muckrakers or elite reformers defined the progressive agenda. Tammany supported those Progressive Era amendments which expanded ideas of social justice and democracy, that is, the 16<sup>th</sup> Amendment, which created a federal income tax, and (somewhat less enthusiastically), the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment, which granted women the right to vote. Tammany even supported the 17<sup>th</sup> Amendment, which allowed for the direct election of U.S. Senators, even though reformers naively believed direct elections would dilute the power of organizations like Tammany. But Tammany did not support, indeed, it adamantly opposed, the 18<sup>th</sup> Amendment, which made Prohibition the law of the land. In Tammany's version of Progressivism, there was no room for evangelical moralism, the bane of the trans-Atlantic Irish Catholic community. This more-pragmatic vision of progressivism conflicted with the agenda of reform groups like the Civic League, which in 1915 published a pamphlet celebrating “five years of moral victories.” Its reform priorities included a ban on Sunday baseball games, restrictions on racetrack gambling,

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<sup>495</sup> Mahoney mentioned this in several passages in his oral history. For example, see *The Reminiscences of Jeremiah T. Mahoney*, Columbia Center for Oral History, pgs. 3, 106, 107, and 194.

and opposition to Tammany-based legislation that would have allowed Jewish peddlers to conduct business on Sundays. The League's summary of the reform movement's victories included no mention of the Tammany-backed legislation implemented after the Triangle Shirtwaist fire.<sup>496</sup>

In any narrative of reform that includes Tammany as an advocate for, rather than an obstacle to, social and political change, the defining moment of Murphy's tenure over Tammany came in the aftermath of the Triangle fire, which killed more than 140 workers, the vast majority of them young Jewish and Italian women, on March 25, 1911.<sup>497</sup> The fire earned a place in U.S. history not only because of the terrible toll it took, but also because it led to the creation of a state investigative committee which brought together civic reformers, social scientists, labor activists, and Tammany members Robert Wagner and Al Smith, who served as the committee's chairman and vice chairman, respectively. The Factory Investigating Committee's (FIC) public hearings and investigations of factory conditions, begun at a time when Murphy dominated not just Manhattan but Albany as well, no doubt were in part a response to an unspeakable tragedy. But a disaster of an even greater magnitude had taken place in New York just seven years before, when more than fifteen hundred people, mostly women and children of German immigrant stock, perished when the pleasure boat *General Slocum* burst into flames on a church excursion. Subsequent investigations revealed that the ship's life preservers were inadequate, and other safety measures were ignored due to lax regulation and oversight.<sup>498</sup>

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<sup>496</sup> Civic League material from the Kilroe Collection of Tammany Material, Box 26, Columbia University Special Collections.

<sup>497</sup> See, for example, the previously cited works of J. Joseph Huthmacher, John Buenker, Nancy Joan Weiss, and David von Drehle.

<sup>498</sup> See Edward T. O'Donnell, *Ship Ablaze: The Tragedy of the Steamboat General Slocum* (New York: Broadway Books, 2004).

The *Slocum* fire, however, did not find a place in U.S. history. The Triangle fire did, in large part because New York workers demanded historic changes in the relationship between municipal government and the private sector. But another variable was the maturation of Tammany Hall – during the years between the two catastrophes, Murphy began to reconfigure Tammany as an agent for political and social change and a virtual laboratory for progressive government. He replaced his main political advisors, including Daniel Cohalan, a conservative lawyer deeply involved in Irish nationalist politics, and conservative businessman Thomas Fortune Ryan, with his young protégés Smith, Wagner, Mahoney and lesser-known figures in New York government. Dubbed the “war board,” these young politicians were an important influence over Murphy. As they matured and gained greater influence in the years following the Triangle fire, they met regularly, sometimes as often as once a week. They served as a bridge between politically independent reformers and traditional machine politicians in Tammany Hall. “We told [Murphy] that a political party had to become an instrument to serve the people,” Mahoney recalled. “We made the party into a liberal progressive party, and we advocated the cause of the underprivileged [and] the cause of labor ...”<sup>499</sup>

The war board did not invent progressive politics, nor did these pragmatic politicians spend a good deal of time studying social problems that most of them knew about from personal experience. But they built on the reforms and proposals of the Factory Investigating Committee (the FIC’s two leaders, after all, also served on Murphy’s war board), and set the stage for Smith’s four terms as governor, during which New York gained a reputation for efficient, progressive government – with a Tammany man in charge, no less.

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<sup>499</sup> *The Reminiscences of Jeremiah T. Mahoney*, Columbia Center for Oral History, pgs. 13 and 63.

Murphy himself, in a rare moment of public reflection, said that a political party could not remain static.<sup>500</sup> Under his leadership, the organization moved towards collaboration, rather than confrontation, with those reformers or progressives who shared the organization's emphasis on pragmatic social change and who were less than evangelical in their approach to moral or, in some cases, political reform. And so Frances Perkins and Charles Murphy found common ground. But Tammany and Civic League, the latter with its emphasis on temperance and sabbatarianism, did not.

This change in Tammany's approach unfolded as Irish New Yorkers outside of Tammany's ranks began to emerge as advocates for broad progressive changes. It surely was a coincidence that the first two witnesses called at the FIC's first hearing were both Irish-Americans who were, in their own way, reformers. But that coincidence did speak to the role of non-Tammany Irish in New York politics during the Progressive Era. The first witness, Edward Croker, chief of the Fire Department of New York, told FIC members that they would have to act decisively and harshly to force the city's business community to install proper workplace safety measures. "You have got a class of people ... with whom you've got to deal severely, and give them to understand that there is the law, and they have got to obey it, for the protection of property and the people that they employ," Croker said. "If you don't have drastic legislation you can't get anything from them."<sup>501</sup>

Croker's presence before the committee would have been unthinkable a decade earlier, when he was fired from his position by the reform administration of the unlikable Mayor Seth Low. Croker's chief offense apparently was his last name – he was the nephew of Richard

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<sup>500</sup> *The Reminiscences of Jeremiah T. Mahoney*, pg. 14.

<sup>501</sup> *Preliminary Report of the Factory Investigating Committee*, Vol. II (Albany: J.B. Lyon Co., 1912), pg. 19.

Croker, who left the city amid scandal and opprobrium just after Low's election. Edward Croker, who compiled a heroic record as a rank-and-file firefighter in Gilded Age New York, was reinstated as chief when Low lost re-election in 1903. Just before the Triangle fire, Croker warned that "there are more fire traps in the lofts and office buildings ... than you can realize." He antagonized the city's business community when he repeatedly demanded installation of sprinklers and modern fire escapes in multi-story factory buildings.<sup>502</sup> In his retirement, Croker continued to demand greater government regulation of workplaces over the opposition of the city's business community, gaining a reputation as a reformer and advocate for stricter government oversight over private property.<sup>503</sup>

The Commission's second witness was Leonora O'Reilly, the daughter of Irish immigrants, a garment worker, and a renowned advocate for labor unions and women's suffrage. Asked to state her business and her profession before offering testimony, she replied, "My business is shirtwaist maker. My profession, labor agitator." She told panel members of horrendous conditions in ten wig factories she inspected at the committee's behest – the workers, she said, appeared to be 13 or 14 years old, the odor of dyes was suffocating, and windows were routinely kept closed.<sup>504</sup> Her testimony moved the discussion of reform from moral abstraction to the highly personal – precisely that way Tammany framed issues ranging from immigration rights to workers' compensation.

The prominent roles accorded to Croker and O'Reilly at the very beginning of the Factory Investigating Committee's historic work, even if unintentional, focused attention on the

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<sup>502</sup> The *New York Times*, March 26, 1911. See also the Fire Department of the City of New York Annual Report, 1912, Municipal Reference Library, New York.

<sup>503</sup> For more on Croker's career as a fire prevention crusader after his retirement as chief in 1911, see *The New York Times*, July 27, 1913.

<sup>504</sup> *Preliminary Report of the Factory Investigating Committee*, Vol. II (Albany: J.B. Lyon Co., 1912), pgs 44-48.

presence of New York Irish-Americans – including one named Croker – in the evolving Progressive Era critique of the assumptions and dogmas of the expired 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Their demands for reform were based on conditions they experienced, O'Reilly as a garment worker, Croker as a firefighter, and the remedies they sought were specific and pragmatic, based on conditions they knew and not on abstract theory. Like Tammany Hall itself, Croker and O'Reilly were part of the age's demand for change, even if time and interpretation have muted their voices or diminished their advocacy. Joining their demands for change at around the same time was a future Tammany supporter and confidante of Franklin Roosevelt, Frank Walsh, who chaired the U.S. Commission on Industrial Relations, formed after the *Los Angeles Times* building was bombed in 1910.<sup>505</sup> Just as Wagner and Smith expanded the FIC's mission beyond fire prevention, Walsh used hearings in New York's City Hall as a venue to explore reforms he supported, including the eight-hour work day and minimum wage legislation, and arguing for public ownership of natural resources. "We must restore to the people the natural resources which have been embezzled from them," Walsh said. The New York press denounced him as a dangerous radical, with the *New York Times* insisting that his investigation was biased against business interests, while the *New York Tribune* condemned his assertion that married women should work outside the home, and their husbands should assist in raising their children.<sup>506</sup>

Irish Americans in New York, then, were part of the age's demands for change, and Murphy understood that Tammany had to become an agent for change or risk losing its core

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<sup>505</sup> Twenty-one people died when a bomb exploded in the *Times*' offices on October 1, 1911. Two brothers, John and James McNamara – members of the ironworkers' union – were arrested. James McNamara confessed; his brother was convicted of bombing a factory. The bombing was part of a larger campaign of violence by the iron workers against targets viewed as anti-union, which the *Times* certainly was. Regarding Walsh, he regularly contributed to Tammany Hall's campaign funds in the early 1930s. See the Papers of Frank P. Walsh, Box 35, New York Public Library.

<sup>506</sup> The Papers of Frank P. Walsh, Box 83, news clippings, The *New York Times*, January 19, 1915 and the *New York Tribune*, February 2, 1915, New York Public Library.



supporters. The founding document of this new Tammany Hall was the Factory Investigating Committee's five voluminous reports which expanded on its initial charge – to investigate safety conditions in the state's factories – and went on to recommend an array of measures such as minimum wage legislation, restrictions on child labor, and workers' compensation. The FIC, with Murphy's approval, did more than call for greater regulations to keep workers safe from fire. It led to legislative remedies that provided a practical alternative to the laissez faire ethos of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. These reforms were written, voted upon, and signed with the explicit approval of the one man who had the power to block them, Charles Francis Murphy. His critics unwittingly conceded the point: The anti-Tammany Civic League noted that after Democrats won control of the legislature and the governor's office in 1910, "Murphy was in the saddle and Tammany controlled everything in sight."<sup>507</sup>

Tammany, however, did not stop with simply fixing the conditions which led to the Triangle fire. Other successful bills required employers to allow workers at least one day off per week, created state-supported college scholarships for poor high school students, strengthened government regulation of workplace safety and of public utilities, and gave the state Labor Department new powers to enforce labor laws, including those limiting the number of hours women and children could work and banning children from performing dangerous work. The legislature approved the construction of new hydroelectric plants which the state, rather than the private sector, would own and operate. Tammany's Jimmy Walker introduced legislation that tightened government regulation of the fire insurance industry. Assembly Majority Leader Aaron Levy, a Tammany operative from the Lower East Side and the state's highest-ranking Jewish politician, authored legislation that forced the New York Stock Exchange to incorporate.

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<sup>507</sup> Civic League correspondence in the Kilroe Collection of Tammany Material, Box 26, Columbia University Special Collections.

Tammany legislators also proposed measures to regulate stock speculation – including a bill that forced brokers to provide transaction information to buyers -- and protested mightily when Governor Sulzer announced that he would not sign legislation that would have doubled the tax on stock transfers, a populist measure unrelated to the FIC reforms but one that gave further indication that Murphy’s Tammany possessed a core ideology that foreshadowed New Deal liberalism.<sup>508</sup>

Murphy’s predecessor, the undoubtedly corrupt Richard Croker, articulated that ideology as he neared the end of his contentious tenure as Tammany’s boss. “If we go down in the gutter,” Croker said, “it is because there are men in the gutter, and you have to go down where they are if you are going to do anything with them.”<sup>509</sup> Observers such as Frances Perkins remarked on the ability of Tammany figures – not just Smith and Wagner, but also more-complicated characters like the Bowery’s Big Tim Sullivan and the West Side leader Thomas McManus – to engage with and not simply advocate for the poor and downtrodden. Not long after she arrived New York and went to work in a settlement house called Hartley House on the West Side, Perkins found herself dealing with the case of a young boy who was arrested, referred to the settlement house, and threatened with imprisonment. The boy was the sole support of his widowed mother and two younger sisters, so the family faced the prospect of economic ruin if the boy were sent to jail. Perkins’ colleagues began an investigation into the family’s background before offering assistance. They concluded, in Perkins’ words, “that the mother was somewhat less than worthy” of help. Startled and angry, Perkins recalled hearing about the work of the local Tammany leader, McManus, and his clubhouse, which was nearby. Unannounced and unknown to

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<sup>508</sup> For Sulzer’s announcement, see the *New York Tribune*, March 11, 1913.

<sup>509</sup> Blaine A. Brownell and Warren E. Stickle, eds., *Bosses and Reformers* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1973), p. 27.

McManus, Perkins showed up at the McManus club and received an audience with the leader himself. The boy was released from jail the following morning.

“I’m sure it was irregular,” she said of the process which unfolded after she met with McManus. But she concluded that the result, not the process, mattered.<sup>510</sup> This pragmatic attitude often divided the process-driven reform from the results-driven clubhouse politician.

Clubhouses were the physical articulation of Tammany’s ad-hoc ideology of service and social welfare. The clubhouse system, which Croker implemented in the 1890s, strengthened the role of district leaders like John Ahearn and Thomas Foley on the Lower East Side and the West Side’s McManus, who, in the tradition of Gaelic chieftains known simply by their family name, called himself “The” McManus. The network they presided over was remarkably similar to the system of Liberal Clubs which Thomas Wyse founded in Ireland during the Catholic Emancipation campaign in the late 1820s.<sup>511</sup> Wyse described the clubs as part of a “well-digested system of political tactics, emanating from a single point, and extending in circle upon circle, until it shall embrace the entire nation.” The clubs, in Wyse’s view, were necessary because the passions of mass meetings and campaigns were soon spent and forgotten. A permanent organization, he argued, would achieve the “precision, constancy, unanimity, and uniformity” required to win and hold political power.<sup>512</sup>

The clubhouse system in New York achieved those very goals, finally allowing Tammany to achieve undisputed dominance over Democratic Party politics in the early 20<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>510</sup> *The Reminiscences of Frances Perkins*, Columbia Center for Oral History, pgs. 87-89.

<sup>511</sup> Political historian Martin Shefter notes that the Croker’s clubhouse system also resembled labor clubs that were important in mobilizing support for Henry George’s mayoralty campaign in 1886. See Shefter’s essay, “The Emergence of the Political Machine: An Alternative View,” in *Theoretical Perspectives on Urban Politics* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1976), pgs. 14-44.

<sup>512</sup> The Papers of Thomas Wyse, MS 15,026, National Library of Ireland; also published in the appendix of Wyse’s previously cited book, *Historical Sketch of the Late Catholic Association of Ireland*, Vol. II, pgs cxiv-clvi.

Century. The strong challenges from dissident Democrats in the Irving Hall and County Democracy movements were crushed by 1890, in part thanks to the powerful influence of the clubhouse, which served as providers of social services, employment, judicial review, and entertainment throughout the city. The clubhouse was where those in need of coal, a meal, a job, or a political favor met with district leaders (except for Murphy, who apparently preferred night air and gaslit shadows when conducting constituent outreach). “Thousands of new citizens and soon-to-be citizens found an impersonal government translated and interpreted here by the personal touch,” wrote Tammany operative Louis Eisenstein, whose mostly Jewish neighbors were introduced to New York culture and politics in the clubhouse of the John F. Ahearn Association (named for and run by the popular district leader and state Senator) on Grand Street and East Broadway on the Lower East Side. “The harshness of life in an unfamiliar New World was cushioned for newcomers who could not fill out citizenship papers or meet excessive rent payments and for those in need of jobs or peddlers’ licenses.”<sup>513</sup>

Of course, these were not entirely philanthropic enterprises, any more than the professional politicians who inhabited Tammany Hall were paragons of disinterested republican virtue. The clubhouse represented not government – for government did not provide many constituent-based services at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century – but the Democratic Party under control of Tammany Hall. Favors and services, then, were designed to win the loyalty of those who needed them. This transactional republic continued to infuriate reformers and journalists who saw Tammany not as a supplier of necessary services but as an exploiter of need. But Tammany figures like Eisenstein asked a pertinent question: “At the turn of the century ... who else offered aid? Certainly not the stiff, aloof Republicans ... the Socialists were too busy

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<sup>513</sup> Louis Eisenstein and Elliot Rosenberg, *A Stripe of Tammany's Tiger* (New York: Robert Speller & Sons, 1966), pg. 15.

preparing for the brave new world of the future to bother with the immediate needs of the present.” So families like Eisenstein’s “would seek out our Irish leader” to intervene on their behalf.<sup>514</sup>

Clubs and Tammany-aligned political associations fostered a sense of community and common purpose in neighborhoods that were home to newcomers from southern and eastern Europe as well as older immigrant or first-generation Irish-Americans. For example, the Ahearn Association sponsored an annual cruise that took thousands of families from the Lower East Side to bucolic picnic grounds on the Hudson River. The *New York Times* described the event on July 31, 1893 as the “biggest pleasure party that ever left this city by way of water,” noting that some twenty thousand people took part. They started boarding six barges and two steamboats at eight o’clock in the morning, and by 11 o’clock, “they were still coming, married men and women with their whole brood, like young ducklings, along with them, young men and young women, girls of all ages, sizes and descriptions, and the multitudinous, copper-lunged east-side small boy.”<sup>515</sup>

The cruise and picnic certainly enhanced Ahearn’s popularity and emphasized Tammany’s commitment to spectacle and service, but his success on the Lower East Side – and the success of other mid-level Tammany figures elsewhere – was not simply a matter of bread and circus. As a state Senator at the dawn of the Progressive Era, for example, Ahearn supported public pensions for teachers, firefighters, and police officers, and he wrote legislation making it easier for mothers to keep dependent children when their fathers died, disappeared or were otherwise unable to provide for their families.<sup>516</sup> He represented a district that changed from

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<sup>514</sup> Louis Eisenstein and Elliot Rosenberg, *A Stripe of Tammany’s Tiger*, pg. 15.

<sup>515</sup> The *New York Times*, August 1, 1893.

<sup>516</sup> See Ahearn’s obituary, The *New York Times*, December 20, 1920.

predominately Irish to predominately Jewish during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries, but his role and that of his political club remained the same. George Washington Plunkitt noted that Ahearn ate “corned beef and kosher meat with equal nonchalance,” and was as likely to be found in the district’s synagogues as he was in his own Catholic parish.<sup>517</sup> “As a district leader Ahearn exemplified to a high degree the Tammany type in his intense and constant playing of the political game and his devotion to the intimate personal needs of the men and women in his district,” the *New York Times* wrote upon Ahearn’s death in 1920.<sup>518</sup>

The clubhouses also produced elected officials who saw themselves as representatives of the city’s working classes and who sought rudimentary forms of government remediation and intervention even before the rise of Wagner and Smith. In 1893, for example, the Tammany caucus in the state Assembly reflected the organization’s tentative forays into a more-ideological form of politics. Among Tammany’s assembly members during the legislative session of 1893-94 were Meyer Joseph Stein of the 20<sup>th</sup> District, who supported pensions for public school teachers, Philip Wissig of the 8<sup>th</sup> District, a native of Germany who wrote legislation regulating the type of manufacturing that could take place in tenement houses, and, most notably, Big Tim Sullivan of the 2<sup>nd</sup> District, who introduced bills regulating the price of gas and lowering the fees which pawn brokers charged their customers. The state legislative manual for 1893 noted that Sullivan, a child of Irish immigrants and Five Points poverty, authored “some of the greatest and most-important legislation” of the previous session.<sup>519</sup>

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<sup>517</sup> William L. Riordan, ed., *Plunkitt of Tammany Hall*, pg. 48.

<sup>518</sup> The *New York Times*, December 20, 1920.

<sup>519</sup> Biographical details for the all Assembly members in 1893 can be found in *The Red Book: An Illustrated Legislative Manual of the State of New York* (Albany: James B. Lyon, 1892) in the New York State Library, Albany. Subsequent editions of the Legislative Manual provided much less information about legislators. They did not, for example, describe bills the legislators supported in the preceding two years.

These were, then, men of substance – not so easily dismissed as mere ward heelers or political henchmen -- whose backgrounds provided them with first-hand knowledge of conditions in the city’s immigrant and working-class neighborhoods. They were very different from the members of reform organizations like the College Campaign Committee for Fusion, which made a point of advertising its “best men” credentials on its letterhead – the committee’s chairman was singled out as an 1869 graduate of Harvard, the vice-chair, an 1878 graduate of Columbia, and the treasurer, an 1895 graduate of Yale. Graduates of Princeton, Williams, Amherst, New York University and Cornell made up the committee’s executive committee.<sup>520</sup>

The College Campaign Committee was formed to bolster the re-election bid of Mayor Seth Low, who turned to his fellow elites to manage the city but was spared accusations of tribalism so often hurled at Tammany. (For example, historian John M. Allswang noted that a third of Low’s 46 appointments to the city Board of Education were listed in the *Social Register*.)<sup>521</sup> Of course, Tammany politicians were more than happy to turn the reform movement’s supposed strengths into a weakness. “Does the college graduate who talks politics in evening dress at Carnegie Hall ... ever think of bailing out a poor fruit peddler who has been run in by some too-officious policeman? Does he know how many votes a ton of coal will bring in?” asked yet another member of the Bowery’s Sullivan clan, “Little Tim” Sullivan, who was “Big Tim’s” cousin.<sup>522</sup>

Tammany did not, however, live by coal alone. Late in Croker’s tenure and throughout Murphy’s reign, Tammany reinforced the organization’s long-standing commitment to cultural pluralism and immigrants’ rights at a time when both continued to come under attack from a fresh outbreak of nativism. Newcomers from eastern and southern Europe, with customs and

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<sup>520</sup> College Campaign Committee for Fusion letterhead, the Papers of Richard Welling, Box 13, New York Public Library.

<sup>521</sup> John M. Allswang, *Bosses, Machines, and Urban Voters* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), pg. 75.

<sup>522</sup> The *New York Times*, December 23, 1902.

languages that were alien even to the once-exotic Irish, were assimilated into the body politic and into the city's culture without the violence and conflict that marked relations between the Irish and nativists in the 1840s and '50s. Jews, the city's other minority religion, made particularly quick inroads in Tammany. For example, five of the six new members inducted into Tammany Hall on February 1, 1897 were named Simon H. Stern, Edgar Levy, Nathan Straus, Randolph Guggenheimer, and Herbert Merzbach.<sup>523</sup> Several years later, the organization's propaganda arm, *The Tammany Times*, celebrated the promising career of a young new member named Benjamin Goldberger, who had been appointed secretary to Tammany Congressman (and future Governor) William Sulzer. Goldberger came to the organization's attention after he organized impressive rallies to support Alfred Dreyfus in 1894, when he was 18 years old.<sup>524</sup> Murphy also promoted the career of Aaron Levy, the son of Russian Jewish immigrants, who was elected to the Assembly in 1908 and quickly became one of the Tammany caucus's leaders. His friend Louis Eisenstein described Levy as having "liberal credentials that were impressive. He supported primary laws, direct election of United States Senators and women's suffrage," measures that are – wrongly -- more associated with traditional reform movements than with Tammany Hall.

Again, it would be wrong to say that Tammany functioned as a flawless agent of assimilation. While Tammany certainly did promote promising Jewish politicians like Aaron Levy, it was less enthusiastic about Italian newcomers, in part because Italians did not participate in electoral politics as enthusiastically as the Irish did. Political historian Thomas Henderson's research showed that Italians made up more than 60 percent of the Manhattan's 3rd Assembly District in 1912, but accounted for only about a quarter of the vote. There were no Italian district

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<sup>523</sup> Membership rolls in the Kilroe Tammany Collection, New York Historical Society.

<sup>524</sup> *The Tammany Times*, July 4, 1903.



leaders in Tammany's ranks as late as 1916, when there were five Jews in those positions.<sup>525</sup>

Many Italian-Americans abandoned the Democratic Party in 1920, Henderson found, because of their dissatisfaction with Woodrow Wilson and because they found a champion in the Republican Party, Fiorello LaGuardia.<sup>526</sup>

Still, however imperfect Tammany's embrace of cultural pluralism, the organization's leaders actively solicited the votes of African Americans and sponsored black-run local political organizations even as fellow Democrats in the South presided over the disenfranchisement of blacks. The *New York Times* noted in 1894 that seven "colored men" were "holders of lucrative positions in this city under Tammany."<sup>527</sup> The presence of a few African Americans in a city work force numbering in the tens of thousands should not be taken as evidence of Tammany's forward thinking on race.. But it does indicate a desire, driven no doubt by political considerations, to extend Tammany's reach to the city's traditionally Republican black community at a time when Jim Crow laws were being passed in Southern states. A *New York Times* article bearing the headline "Negroes As Tammany Men" took note of Croker's efforts to recruit black support for Democrats outside of Manhattan.<sup>528</sup> The newspaper's characterization of "negroes" as "Tammany men" may not have been purposely designed to stir up even more fear and loathing of the organization, but it could not have done otherwise.

Under Murphy's tenure, Tammany appointed enough African Americans to city jobs that a white supremacist newspaper, the *Fellowship Forum*, complained that "there has been official

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<sup>525</sup> Thomas M. Henderson, *Tammany Hall and the New Immigrants: The Progressive Years* (New York: Arno Press, 1976), pgs. 134-135, 167.

<sup>526</sup> Thomas M. Henderson, *Tammany Hall and the New Immigrants*, pgs. 242-243. According to Henderson, Italian-Americans vehemently opposed Wilson's effort to give Yugoslavia the traditionally Italian port city of Fiume on the Adriatic. Italian-Americans already were wary of Wilson, Henderson found, because of Wilson's criticism of hyphenated Americans.

<sup>527</sup> The *New York Times*, September 4, 1894.

<sup>528</sup> The *New York Times*, January 26, 1898.

Tammany approval of race equality in the [city's] Municipal Civil Service Commission.”<sup>529</sup>

Tammany's William Bourke Cochran, in the final months of his life, was one of eight Democrats nationwide who voted in favor of an anti-lynching bill sponsored by Republican congressman L.C. Dyer of Missouri in 1922.<sup>530</sup> (Other Tammany Congressmen, however, did not break ranks to vote for the bill, despite lobbying in support of the bill from prominent Catholic clergymen, including New York's archbishop Patrick Hayes.)<sup>531</sup>

The extent of Tammany's support for social and political change was evident at the state Democratic Party convention in 1922, when Al Smith was re-nominated for governor after having failed to win re-election in 1920. The convention's temporary chairman, state Senator James J. Walker, opened the proceedings with a gleeful attack on incumbent Governor Nathan Miller for his opposition to an eight-hour work day and for a minimum wage for women workers.<sup>532</sup> The platform, written by Jeremiah Mahoney, supported public ownership of bus lines, penal reform, state control over the distribution of hydroelectric power, a continuation of rent regulations put in place during World War I, popular referenda on amendments to the U.S. Constitution, income-tax exemptions for those earning less than five thousand dollars a year, and a restoration of powers taken away from the state Labor Department during Miller's tenure.<sup>533</sup> One plank did not make it into the final document – a clause which called for strict government regulation of the stock exchange. Mahoney desperately wanted it included, but it was removed at the request of Joseph Proskauer, a Wall Street lawyer and a key advisor to Smith. Mahoney later

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<sup>529</sup> From an undated copy of *The Fellowship Forum* found in the Private Papers of Alfred E. Smith, New York State Library, Manuscripts and Special Collections, Box 1, Folder 4. The newspaper contains stories about Smith's presidential campaign, so it must have appeared in 1928.

<sup>530</sup> See Corpus Christi NAACP to Cochran, April 26, 1922, and NAACP of Washington D.C. to Cochran, April 13, 1922, the Papers of William Bourke Cochran, Box 11, New York Public Library.

<sup>531</sup> *The New York Times*, July 9, 1922.

<sup>532</sup> *The New York Times*, September 29, 1922

<sup>533</sup> *The New York Times*, September 30, 1922

argued that the plank foreshadowed the New Deal's creation of the Securities and Exchange Commission.<sup>534</sup>

Smith and Tammany portrayed Miller and the Republicans as reactionaries determined to reverse the progressive reforms which they had fought for and delivered during the previous decade. Their arguments clearly found an audience; Smith captured 1.4 million votes in the fall of 1922 to win a second two-year term as governor. It was the biggest landslide in state history.

Charles Francis Murphy, the unschooled Tammany Hall boss whose father fled Famine in Ireland for a hard life in Manhattan's Gas House District, saw in Al Smith a chance to show the nation that a poor Irish-Catholic child of the Lower East Side was as good as any other American. Not long after Smith returned to Albany as governor in 1923, Murphy began quiet discussions with other Democrats about the possibility of Al Smith as a candidate for president of the United States. Those discussions were well underway on the morning of April 25, 1924, when Murphy died after collapsing in his home on 17<sup>th</sup> Street, not far from the tenement in which he was born. He was buried three days later. Fifty thousand people stood on Fifth Avenue as his casket was taken from St. Patrick's Cathedral to a waiting hearse for a trip to Calvary Cemetery.

The organization Murphy led was never the same. But many of the Tammany Hall politicians whom Murphy sponsored and mentored continued to influence New York politics and culture through the Jazz Age and the Great Depression. And at least one former enemy came to realize that the quiet man from the Gas House District was more than a cartoon figure from a Thomas Nast illustration. "In Mr. Murphy's death, the New York City Democratic organization

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<sup>534</sup> *Reminiscences of Jeremiah T. Mahoney*, pg. 86, Columbia Center for Oral History, pg. 46.

has lost probably the strongest and wisest leader it has had in generations ... He was a genius who kept harmony and at the same time recognized that the world moved on. It is well to remember that he has helped accomplish much in the way of progressive legislation and social welfare in our state.”<sup>535</sup> So said Franklin D. Roosevelt, just four months before he shuffled to a podium in Madison Square Garden to nominate a Tammany man for the office of President of the United States.

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<sup>535</sup> The *New York Times*, April 26, 1924.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### PARTNERS FOR PROGRESS

Less than a week after he lost his bid for a second term as New York governor, a disappointed but philosophical Alfred E. Smith wrote a short note to another New York Democrat who had suffered an historic defeat in the election of November 2, 1920 – Franklin D. Roosevelt, the party’s vice-presidential candidate that year. “Maybe it is for the best,” Smith wrote of his dispiriting loss. “I do not know what I would be able to accomplish here in the next two years standing alone by myself.” With Warren G. Harding pledging a return to “normalcy” after Woodrow Wilson’s tumultuous two terms as president, Republicans nationwide swept Democrats from power in 1920 – across the Hudson River in New Jersey, only a single Democrat was left standing in a General Assembly of 60 members.<sup>536</sup> “The people of this country, in no uncertain terms, gave responsibility to the Republican party,” Smith wrote. “Probably it is but right that they not be handicapped to even the slightest degree.”<sup>537</sup>

The following day, no doubt before Smith’s letter from Albany arrived in Hyde Park, an equally reflective FDR echoed his friend’s sentiments. “Now that the smoke has cleared away it all seems in many ways for the better,” FDR wrote.<sup>538</sup> It is hard to imagine that either of these ambitious men really believed that the electoral disaster somehow was “for the better.” In the prime of their careers, they had suffered an ignominious defeat and now faced a highly uncertain future, as Roosevelt acknowledged in his letter to Smith. The two of them, he conceded, “will in all probability not run for state office” again.

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<sup>536</sup> Republicans even carried heavily Democratic Hudson County. See the *New York Times*, November 4, 1920.

<sup>537</sup> Governor Alfred E. Smith to Franklin Roosevelt, Nov. 8, 1920, FDR Family, Business and Personal Papers, Box 5, FDR Library, Hyde Park.

<sup>538</sup> Franklin Roosevelt to Governor Al Smith, November 9, 1920, FDR Family, Business and Personal Papers, Box 5, FDR Library, Hyde Park.

While Smith seemed to believe, at least in this moment of despair, that his fellow Democrats should stand aside while Republicans pursued an agenda which was hostile to the progressive reforms he supported as governor and as a legislator, Roosevelt was of quite a different mind.<sup>539</sup> He wanted to build a viable, effective opposition to the new Republican regime, noting that New York voters would return to the polls in two years for a new round of state elections. He told Smith that the two of them ought to meet soon to begin rebuilding their party north of the Bronx, in a region where a heavily Republican vote doomed Smith's re-election effort and delivered New York into Harding's column despite the presence of FDR on the national Democratic ticket. "I feel that you and I have about as broad an insight into the affairs of upstate as any other two people," Roosevelt wrote. He promised to get in touch with Smith again "after I come back from a little shooting trip."<sup>540</sup>

It is not hard to imagine Smith rolling his eyes as he read about Roosevelt's vacation plans. Smith, a child of the Lower East Side, was not much for shooting trips or, for that matter, any other kind of diversion other than the care and feeding of the eccentric menagerie of house pets he kept in Albany. Self-taught and hard-working, he often thought of his privileged colleague from Hyde Park as something of a lightweight, "a little boy," in the words of Roosevelt's devoted political advisor, Louis Howe.<sup>541</sup> Smith might well have wondered why FDR suggested that somehow they were equally knowledgeable about upstate politics and party organization matters. Smith never was particularly interested in upstate New York and generally campaigned only in the larger cities there. But after serving as governor, as majority leader and

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<sup>539</sup> President-elect Harding, writing within days of his election, asserted that there was "too much Government in business." See the *New York Times*, November 5, 1920. Smith's record and positions from 1910 to 1920 indicate that he disagreed profoundly with Harding's position.

<sup>540</sup> Franklin Roosevelt to Governor Al Smith, November 9, 1920, FDR Family, Business and Personal Papers, Box 5., FDR Library, Hyde Park.

<sup>541</sup> Robert K. Murray, *The 103<sup>rd</sup> Ballot: Democrats and the Disaster in Madison Square Garden* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), pg. 287.

speaker of the Assembly, and as a delegate to the state's constitutional convention in 1915, Smith certainly understood New York state politics as few others did. In fact, the chairman of the constitutional convention, former U.S. Secretary of State Elihu Root, said Smith was "the best informed" delegate "on the business of New York State."<sup>542</sup>

Roosevelt, on the other hand, left Albany for Washington in 1913, only months after beginning his second two-year term in the state Senate. His departure was unlamented, for he made few allies, but more than a few enemies, during his short career in the legislature. (While presiding over a debate in the state Senate in 1911, Robert Wagner cut off FDR by saying, "Senator Roosevelt has gained his point. What he wants is a headline in the newspapers.")<sup>543</sup> If FDR considered himself Smith's equal on matters such as party organization, he very likely was alone in that judgment. And perhaps even he knew that he was no match for Smith. Only two years earlier, FDR told an admiring upstate correspondent, "You flatter me very much when you say that I know the political situation in Erie County. I never did know the political situation in Erie County, and I doubt if any human being ever could know the political situation in Erie County."<sup>544</sup> That was a curiously humble self-assessment, considering that Democratic operatives considered Erie County to be an important swing county in the upstate region.<sup>545</sup>

Nevertheless, Roosevelt clearly was less inclined than Smith was to concede the field to the Republicans in the aftermath of the 1920 elections. Roosevelt's instincts proved to be correct: The Democratic Party in New York, very much under the control of Tammany Hall's Charles Murphy, revived quickly during the two-year term of Republican Governor Nathan Miller, who

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<sup>542</sup> Robert Slayton, *Empire Statesman: The Rise and Redemption of Al Smith* (New York: Free Press, 2001), pg. 111.

<sup>543</sup> *The New York Globe*, June 2, 1911.

<sup>544</sup> FDR to George B. Burd, May 6, 1918, quoted in Frank Freidel, *Franklin D. Roosevelt: The Apprenticeship* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1952), pg. 340.

<sup>545</sup> For references to Erie County's importance, see Thomas R. McCarthy to Col. Edward House, Nov. 16, 1914, Joseph Tumulty Papers, Library of Congress.

defeated Smith in 1920. The state Democratic Party which Roosevelt sought to rebuild after the disaster of 1920 was very much a creature of Tammany, the organization he so energetically defied during his three years in the state Senate. As he contemplated not only the party's future, but his own, Roosevelt knew he had to consider the still-potent influence of Tammany and Charles Murphy.

FDR proved to be wrong in his assessment of his own future, and of Smith's, in state politics. The two of them did, of course, run for state office again. Beginning in 1923, they presided over New York state politics for a decade, becoming national figures because of their progressive accomplishments during a time of reaction and laissez-faire politics in Washington. The strategic partnership they formed, the imperfect friendship they enjoyed, and the political coalition they built changed not just New York, not just the Democratic Party, but the very nature of U.S. politics during the height of the American century. Roosevelt and Smith represented a coming together of two traditional antagonists – the elite Protestant reformer and the urban, ethnic Tammany politician – in an alliance that would have been impossible during the height of the Progressive Era, when reformers saw machine politicians as part of the problem rather than a potential source of change, and when Irish-Catholic machine politicians automatically viewed reformers as dreamy-eyed idealists at best, bigoted nativists at worst. But the combination of Tammany Hall's Smith and the reform movement's Roosevelt proved to be electoral magic in New York during the 1920s and served as an important building bloc in the construction of the New Deal coalition, which dominated U.S. politics from the Great Depression to the 1960s.

Roosevelt's relationship with Smith and, more broadly, his cautious embrace of Tammany Hall in the 1920s is critical in understanding how FDR transformed himself from a



prototypical Anglo-Protestant reformer to a patron of some (though not all) urban political machines during his years as president. Likewise, Tammany's toleration of and even support for FDR in the 1920s offers an insight into the machine's maturity under Charles Murphy, for Tammany and Smith offered Roosevelt a chance to remain active in New York politics after the debacle of 1920 despite his earlier opposition to the machine.

During those years, Roosevelt paid close attention as Smith built on Tammany's post-Triangle progressive credentials to create historically important relationships with open-minded progressives like Frances Perkins, Belle Moskowitz, Joseph Proskauer, Herbert Lehman, and Robert Moses – two women, four Jews, and one WASP, hardly the traditional talent pool which filled Tammany's ranks and payrolls.<sup>546</sup> Through vehicles like the state's postwar Reconstruction Commission, created in 1919 to devise a more-assertive role for state government in 20<sup>th</sup> Century society, Smith brought together elite Progressives (Felix Adler, founder of the Ethical Culture Society), labor activists (Sara A. Conboy of the state American Federation of Labor), and prominent business leaders (Bernard Baruch) as his partners in building a new governing paradigm in Albany. By doing do, Smith obliterated outdated distinctions between progressive reformers and traditional machine politics, welcoming as he did the advice and guidance of outside experts and policy advocates while remaining an unapologetic and indeed staunch son of Tammany Hall.

The Reconstruction Commission, chaired by Abram Elkus, a prominent attorney and reformer who worked with Smith on the Factory Investigating Commission, is perhaps as important as the factory commission in understanding Tammany's evolution and the ways in

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<sup>546</sup> Letters between Smith and Roosevelt during from 1923 to 1928 are filled with references to state politics, patronage, and Smith's presidential campaigns. See FDR Family, Business and Personal Papers, Box 5. See other references to New York politics in the 1920s, see Louis Howe Official Papers, Correspondence with Franklin Roosevelt, 1921-1928, FDR Library.

which some Progressive reformers found common ground with political leaders like Murphy, Smith, and Wagner. If, as Tammany's Jeremiah Mahoney asserted, the FIC's work marked "the beginning of the liberal program of the Democratic Party," the Reconstruction Commission's agenda sought to expand on that liberal program through more-aggressive government action in fields ranging from chronic unemployment to housing to public health..<sup>547</sup> The panel's goals were at odds with the prevailing postwar mood of the country in general and some New Yorkers in particular. Indeed, as he opened the new session of the state Assembly in January, 1919, Republican Speaker Thaddeus Sweet of upstate Oswego County noted that New Yorkers "had heard much of Socialistic and Bolshevik propaganda advocating social and civic reforms" in the months since Smith's election in November, 1918. (To drive home his point, Sweet asserted that "the foremost advocates of socialistic doctrines" happened to be "the most ardent proponents of liquor license," an argument that in essence joined together progressive social reformers and Tammany politicians.)<sup>548</sup>

In its statement of principles, the commission issued a ringing call to arms on behalf of better government, asserting that democracy "does not merely mean periodic elections. It means a government held accountable to the people between elections."<sup>549</sup> The wording and tone were the work of a self-style Progressive, Robert Moses, chief of staff of the commission's retrenchment committee, and they reflected the high-minded sentiments of the reform movement. But it took a Tammany politician, Al Smith, to implement them and to bring together these disparate interests and personalities in the name of progressive government. When critics charged that the commission's call for expanded government was merely a patronage grab by

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<sup>547</sup> *The Reminiscences of Jeremiah Mahoney*, Columbia Center for Oral History, pg. 181.

<sup>548</sup> See Assembly Speaker Thaddeus Sweet's speech in the *Journal of the Assembly of the State of New York*, 142<sup>nd</sup> Session (Albany: J.B. Lyon Co., 1919), pgs. 9-11.

<sup>549</sup> See the introduction to *Report of the Reconstruction Commission to Governor Alfred E. Smith on Retrenchment and Reorganization in the State Government* (Albany: J.B. Lyon Co., 1919).

Tammany, Smith was careful to note that among those who supported the commission's work were prominent Republicans Henry Stimson (FDR's future secretary of war) and former Governor Charles Evans Hughes. Referring to Hughes, Smith pointedly noted that "nobody ever accused him of being a member of Tammany Hall."<sup>550</sup> Under Smith's leadership, traditional foes of Tammany-style politics, from individuals like Hughes to organizations like the Citizens Union, found themselves working together with Tammany figures on behalf of proposals that represented the ideals of progressive reformers and yet also had the support of machine politicians.

Before Franklin Roosevelt, then, there was Al Smith. The fates of these two men were intertwined through the 1920s. Not only were they involuntarily returned to private life together in 1920, but they played important roles in each other's comebacks. Roosevelt publicly urged Smith to run for governor again in 1922, when Smith was inclined to remain in the private sector. Smith returned the favor in 1928, urging – indeed, practically commanding – Roosevelt to put aside doubts about his health and run for governor. Smith, the Irish-Catholic, city-dwelling, beer-drinking voice of immigrant culture, and Roosevelt, the patrician Protestant Progressive from rural Dutchess County, created a new Democratic Party – urban, ethnic, and tilted in favor of the industrial states of the north – after the party's cultural war of 1924, when Smith failed to win the party's presidential nomination during marathon balloting in Madison Square Garden. Smith relied on Roosevelt as a Protestant advocate for a Catholic politician, as the scion of a famous family who was eager to champion the cause of a son of the Lower East Side. (Smith, it must be said, did not always welcome the assistance; it took Joseph Proskauer, one of his aides,

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<sup>550</sup> Henry Moskowitz, ed., *Progressive Democracy: Addresses and State Papers of Alfred E. Smith*, pg. 92.

to remind Smith that “you’re a Bowery mick and [Roosevelt’s] a Protestant patrician and he’d take some of the curse off of you.”)<sup>551</sup>

Roosevelt, for his part, often relied on Smith for the bridges he built between reformers and Tammany, for his credibility with immigrant-stock voters, for the talented advisors he brought into government, and for his famously exhaustive knowledge of state government. Even after FDR succeeded Smith as governor in 1929, at a point when many historians see the beginnings of tension between the two men, Roosevelt continued to seek out his predecessor’s advice. For example, when Smith was on vacation in Florida in 1930, Roosevelt wrote to him about pressing business in Albany. “Let me know when you get back to New York,” Roosevelt wrote. “I want to talk to you about lots of things, including the Power bill.”<sup>552</sup>

The relationship went beyond politics, as FDR’s letter to the vacationing Smith showed. “A few weeks ago,” Roosevelt wrote, “when my granddaughter was here, your granddaughter came to the house to spend the afternoon and five minutes after I had joined the party, Mary [Smith’s granddaughter] was calling me ‘Ganpa.’ I felt highly honored and have certainly cut you out.”<sup>553</sup> Destined though they were to fight a bitter battle for the 1932 Democratic presidential nomination, leading to Smith’s break with his successor, Al Smith and Franklin Roosevelt clearly came to appreciate each other during the cultural and political battles of the 1920s – battles which found them on the same side rather than aligned as antagonists, as would have seemed natural a decade earlier. Even when the two men were in high office – even when

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<sup>551</sup> *The Reminiscences of Joseph Proskauer*, Columbia Center for Oral History, pg. 5.

<sup>552</sup> FDR to Smith, February 4, 1930, FDR Gubernatorial papers, FDR Library, Hyde Park.

<sup>553</sup> FDR to Smith, February 4, 1930, FDR Gubernatorial papers, FDR Library, Hyde Park. Many historians have argued that FDR sought to distance himself from Smith and some of Smith’s top aides when he became governor. See, for example, Jean Edward Smith, *FDR*, (New York, Random House, 2007), pgs. 230-232. This letter, and others like it, indicate that Roosevelt sought Smith’s advice, although they do not indicate if these gestures simply were designed to appease Smith, who was by 1930 a beloved elder statesman.

FDR was president – they addressed each other as “Frank” and “Al.” It seems fair to say that none of FDR’s Harvard and Hudson Valley friends referred to the squire of Hyde Park as “Frank.”<sup>554</sup>

It is nearly impossible to overstate the importance of Al Smith and Tammany Hall in understanding the rise and success of Franklin Roosevelt in New York politics in the 1920s. Roosevelt’s unlikely relationships with Tammany, with Murphy, and with urban machines in general were the result of the equally unlikely relationships that Smith formed with progressive reformers in New York even as he retained his bonafides as a Tammany politician. The eagerness with which Smith welcomed policy experts like Moses, advocates for social justice like Frances Perkins, and political reformers like Belle Moskowitz – all of whom entered politics as opponents of bosses and machines --anticipated the New Deal marriage of machine politicians like Edward J. Flynn of the Bronx and social welfare reformers like Harry Hopkins, both of whom were great admirers of Smith.<sup>555</sup>

In showing that the cultural gap between elite reformers and machine politicians could be bridged, Smith created political space for FDR to construct spans of his own, albeit from a different starting place. This, however, required a dramatic change in FDR’s attitude towards political bosses and his own elitist definitions of reform. The Franklin Roosevelt who turned to a protégé of Tammany’s Charles Murphy (Ed Flynn) for political advice throughout his presidency, who developed critical partnerships with urban political bosses, especially Edward Kelly, mayor of Chicago, and Frank Hague, mayor of Jersey City, and who employed the

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<sup>554</sup> Smith’s letters to FDR often began with the salutation of “Dear Frank,” even after FDR became president. See, for example, Smith to FDR, March 21, 1934, President’s Personal File, PPF 676, FDR Library, Hyde Park.

<sup>555</sup> Flynn considered many New Deal progressives to be “amateurs” in the world of electoral politics. See Edward J. Flynn, *You’re The Boss*, pgs 169-174.

machine's traditional language of "us against them" in his first Inaugural Address and in later campaign speeches, clearly was not the aloof, holier-than-thou Franklin Roosevelt of 1911.<sup>556</sup>

FDR's transformation from a "political prig" with no "human sympathy, human interests, human ties," in the words of a legislative staffer in 1911, to a more empathetic and personable public figure in 1928 often is attributed to the humbling experience of polio and to the influence of his wife, Eleanor Roosevelt, an indomitable advocate for social justice.<sup>557</sup> But it would seem equally possible that this shrewd, ambitious man learned valuable lessons about politics as he observed the wiles and ways of the down-to-earth, pragmatic and likeable Tammany figures who dominated his home state's political culture during the first two decades of his public life.

Albany boss Daniel O'Connell, namesake of but no relation to the great 19<sup>th</sup> Century Irish statesman, once said that State Senator Roosevelt "didn't like poor people. He was a patronizing son of a bitch."<sup>558</sup> By contrast, Al Smith reveled in his image as a man of the people – or at least a man of the immigrant-stock city dwellers who were his neighbors on Oliver Street on the Lower East Side. When wealthy landowners on Long Island complained that a new state park would become "overrun with rabble from the city," Smith delivered a cold and pointed reply. "Rabble? That's *me* you're talking about."<sup>559</sup> While Franklin Roosevelt clearly could never identify himself in such a fashion, his ability to sympathize with ordinary Americans during the Depression, best expressed in his fireside chats, reflected not the rational detachment of his Progressive heroes but the neighborhood-based politics of the urban machine.

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<sup>556</sup> Roosevelt's condemnation of "money changers" in his first Inaugural, and his assertion that he welcomed the "hatred" of his enemies during a campaign appearance in New York in 1936 were more in keeping with the Irish-Tammany understanding of politics than the calibrated tones of a Wilsonian Progressive.

<sup>557</sup> Jean Edward Smith, *FDR*, pg. 78.

<sup>558</sup> Jean Edward Smith, *FDR*, pg. 77.

<sup>559</sup> Robert Caro argues persuasively that Smith delivered this reply with anger in his voice, not as a light-hearted remark as some biographers have suggested. See Robert Caro, *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York* (New York: Vintage, 1975), pgs. 185-86. Moses notes that after Smith replied, he grabbed a pen and signed an appropriation authorizing the proposed park's construction – hardly a light-hearted act.

Roosevelt's journey from aloof political reformer to emphatic advocate for the jobless and hopeless was, to be sure, a long one, and it is worth recalling that it took place during a time when Tammany politicians in his home state wrote, defended, and then expanded sweeping changes in government's relationship with its citizens and the private economy. In 1911, FDR wanted no part of the 54-hour bill for which Tammany figures Tim Sullivan and The McManus fought so hard (and which Murphy initially opposed). "No, no," Roosevelt told Frances Perkins when his future Labor Secretary lobbied him on the issue. "More important things. More important things."<sup>560</sup> One of those "more-important things" included a well-publicized campaign to defeat Murphy's supposedly hand-picked candidate for one of New York's two U.S. Senate seats, William (Blue-Eyed Billy) Sheehan. Roosevelt eagerly assumed the role of Tammany foil during this high-profile battle to prevent Sheehan's election, earning him the admiration of contemporary newspapers and future historians, one of the latter insisting that his fight against Sheehan demonstrated that he was a "champion of Progressivism" because he had twisted "the Tammany tiger's tail."<sup>561</sup> Never mind that FDR was all but absent from the truly progressive battle to legislate fewer hours for women and children in New York, a battle which the enemies of traditional Progressivism -- Sullivan, McManus, and other urban ethnic politicians -- fought and won.<sup>562</sup>

The fight against Sheehan and Murphy marked freshman Senator Franklin Roosevelt as a prototypical Progressive in the mold of his heroes Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson. Those who celebrated FDR's defiance of Tammany, including TR himself, chose to ignore that fact that when Sheehan withdrew his candidacy in the face of internal Democratic opposition,

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<sup>560</sup> Jean Edward Smith, *FDR*, pg. 81.

<sup>561</sup> See Kenneth S. Davis, *FDR: The Beckoning of Destiny, 1882-1928* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1972), pg. 257.

<sup>562</sup> FDR, it should be noted, did testify on behalf of FIC-supported reforms in 1913, just before he left Albany.

Murphy chose an even more-loyal Tammany member, James O’Gorman, a well-respected judge with impeccable credentials, to become Senator. FDR reluctantly voted in favor of O’Gorman, having been outmaneuvered by the saloon-keeper and onetime baseball player from the Gashouse District. Roosevelt later asserted that he prevailed over Tammany, referring to the “final Murphy surrender” when Sheehan withdrew. Contemporaries, however, did not quite see it that way.<sup>563</sup> As Roosevelt spoke on the state Senate floor to explain why he was about to cast his vote in favor of O’Gorman, Tammany’s senators hooted and laughed openly as the young reformer tried to explain away his defeat. The *New York Times* proclaimed Murphy as the “victor” in the long standoff.<sup>564</sup>

FDR continued to occupy himself with “more important things” as his colleagues in the Legislature grappled with the aftermath of the Triangle fire. He assured reformers of his support for their efforts to regulate the behavior of urban immigrants who wished to attend baseball games or operate their businesses on Sunday. Reflecting the opinions of his rural upstate district and the anxieties of urban Progressives, he supported the Anti-Saloon League’s efforts to limit alcoholic beverages.<sup>565</sup> Years later, however, when he was running for Governor, FDR chose not to emphasize his battle with Murphy or his support for reformers’ cultural causes during his brief time in the Legislature. Instead, he portrayed himself as a leader in the fight for a 54-hour week, noting that it was “the most radical thing that had ever been talked about.” Louis Howe also claimed that FDR was responsible for Tim Sullivan returning to the Senate to cast the decisive

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<sup>563</sup> Frank Freidel, *Franklin D. Roosevelt: The Apprenticeship* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1952), pg. 116.

<sup>564</sup> The *New York Times*, April 1, 1911.

<sup>565</sup> For his correspondence on issues such as temperance, Sunday baseball, and Sunday business closings, see FDR’s Senate papers, Boxes 8 and 9, FDR Library, Hyde Park.



vote in favor of the bill, even though Frances Perkins, an eyewitness, mentions nothing about her future boss' role in the dramatic vote.<sup>566</sup>

These efforts to position Roosevelt as an advocate for the 54-hour week show how much Tammany Hall's legislative priorities changed the political landscape in New York in the 1920s. Gone from Roosevelt's rhetoric was the moralistic language of the traditional Progressive. In its place was a claim, however dubious, to leadership on practical, lunch-bucket issues that were at the core of Tammany's urban liberalism. The change in Roosevelt was clear to his contemporaries. Samuel Rosenman, who served as a speechwriter for FDR's gubernatorial campaign at Al Smith's request, recalled that when he took on his new assignment in 1928, he expected to be less than impressed, especially after working closely with Smith and his trusted aide, Belle Moskowitz. "I had heard stories of his being something of a playboy and idler, of his weakness and ineffectiveness," Rosenman wrote of Roosevelt. "That was the kind of man I had expected to meet."<sup>567</sup> But he met a very different man, no longer the haughty aristocrat who looked down on the world through his pince nez. Roosevelt was a changed man: More personable, more empathetic, more serious. But that change did not take place overnight, nor can it be attributed solely to FDR's heroic struggle with polio.

Several years earlier, as Al Smith sought to re-capture the governor's office in 1922, FDR wrote a letter which showed how far he had come as a politician and as a human being since he so rudely dismissed Frances Perkins and her cause in 1911. "You, in your whole public career, have shown a true understanding of the needs and desires of the average American man, woman

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<sup>566</sup> Jean Edward Smith, *FDR*, pg. 82. Smith noted that several newspapers, including the *New York Times*, reported Sullivan's vote, but none referred to any role which Roosevelt played in summoning Sullivan to the floor. The *Senate Journal*, as Smith notes, recorded only votes, not the debate. Smith concluded that Howe's version was false – it certainly was not how Frances Perkins, an eyewitness, told the story.

<sup>567</sup> Robert Caro, *The Power Broker*, pg. 292.

and child,” Roosevelt told Smith. “You have in your legislative career and your term as Governor, consistently aided changes in laws and in administration aimed to meet new conditions and a higher standard of living. Your attitude has been one of belief in progress, and you have not opposed measures of relief and improvement merely because they were new. In other words, you have been essentially human, for it is human to want to better conditions and to seek new things. That point of view is what has made America.”<sup>568</sup>

The Franklin Roosevelt of 1911 would not – could not – have written such a letter, certainly not to a politician who was the pride and joy of Tammany Hall. The concerns of the “average American man, woman and child” were not his concerns, as his attitude towards workplace reform showed. During the eleven years which separated his confrontation with Frances Perkins and this letter to Smith, Franklin Roosevelt had grown to appreciate the practical, human concerns of the ethnic machine politicians and their constituents, and had moved away from the abstract moral politics of the well-born civic reformer. His legendary ability as president to connect with voters, especially urban ethnics, would not have been possible had he continued to emulate the pinched Progressivism of his idol Woodrow Wilson, the ardent foe of hyphenated identity politics, or the high-minded detachment of elite reformers like one-term mayor Seth Low at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century

That FDR absorbed far more from Tammany than many of his biographers are willing to concede should be clear. Frances Perkins noted that while FDR wanted nothing to do with Tammany politicians at the beginning of his career, he came to appreciate their hard-won political values and their genuine humanity. In 1938, during a discussion with Perkins about the possibility of easing immigration restrictions imposed over Tammany’s fierce objections in

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<sup>568</sup> FDR to Smith, Sept. 15, 1922, FDR Family, Business and Personal Letters, Box 5, FDR Library, Hyde Park.

1924, Roosevelt invoked the memory of one of the machine's most-notorious legislators. "Tim Sullivan used to say that the America of the future would be made out of the people who had come over in steerage and who knew in their own hearts and lives the difference between being despised and being accepted and liked," the president said. "Poor old Tim Sullivan never understood ... modern politics, but he was right about the human heart."<sup>569</sup>

Perkins wrote that FDR's remark about Sullivan, who was undoubtedly involved in all kinds of shady enterprises on the Bowery despite Murphy's disapproval, showed that he had "learned" something about politics "from the rough Tammany politicians" for whom he had nothing but contempt early in his career.<sup>570</sup> As president, Roosevelt recalled that Al Smith's favorite method for settling a problem was by "sitting around a table" and hashing out the details.<sup>571</sup> During the Democratic National Convention in 1944, when FDR was sending mixed signals about his support for Vice President Henry Wallace, he conjured the memory of the man he once compared to a "noxious weed." "Charlie [Murphy] was a wise man," FDR told two aides in the White House. "When they asked him who was going to be lieutenant governor, he would always say, 'The convention will decide,' and he got away with it for years."<sup>572</sup> FDR's methods during the debacle over Wallace, which ended in Wallace's departure from the ticket in favor of Harry Truman, were as opaque as some of Murphy's maneuvers, perhaps to the frustration of Murphy's protégé, Flynn, who was at the center of the dump-Wallace movement and who believed he was doing FDR's bidding.<sup>573</sup> The agreement to replace Wallace with

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<sup>569</sup> Frances Perkins, *The Roosevelt I Knew*, pg. 13.

<sup>570</sup> Frances Perkins, *The Roosevelt I Knew*, pg. 13.

<sup>571</sup> Memo, July 7, 1938, President's Personal File 290, FDR Papers, Hyde Park.

<sup>572</sup> Frank Freidel, *Franklin D. Roosevelt: A Rendezvous with Destiny*, pg. 533.

<sup>573</sup> Edward J. Flynn, *You're the Boss*, pgs. 194-196. Flynn writes that FDR asked him to "inject Truman into the picture" during talks with other bosses over Wallace's possible replacement. Other accounts place Flynn at the center of the deliberations over Truman's suitability as vice president. See, for example David McCullough, *Truman* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992). For a discussion of the controversy over Wallace's departure from the ticket,

Truman rather than with a favorite of the party's left, William O. Douglas, was destined to be one of the most-fateful decisions in 20<sup>th</sup> Century American history. In a very real sense, the spirit of Charles F. Murphy was in the room when the bosses chose Truman, rather than Douglas, to replace Wallace, for it was Murphy's protégé Flynn who lobbied most effectively for the senator from Independence, Missouri. "It would be rather difficult to put your finger on one particular item or incident that would illustrate just what I learned from Mr. Murphy," Flynn later wrote. "It would be like trying to tell what you learned from your childhood nurse."<sup>574</sup> (Flynn's description, written in the late 1940s, spoke volumes about the journey which Irish-American politicians had made in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. A boss from the Gashouse District surely would have had a hard time relating to any reference to a "childhood nurse.")

While most chroniclers of Roosevelt's career emphasize the important roles that Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson played in FDR's political development, it should be clear that FDR did not emerge from New York politics during the Progressive Era and the Jazz Age without learning something – about politics, or about human nature – from the street-level Irish-American politicians who were such a presence in New York during his formative years. The prominent advisory roles which Flynn and James Farley played during FDR's years as governor and president show that he came to understand and appreciate the Irish-American style of practical, grass-roots politics, even as he attracted traditional progressives like Hopkins, Harold Ickes, Josephus Daniels, and others who would have been hard-pressed to imagine working alongside Tammany types when Woodrow Wilson was in the White House. (Although neither Flynn nor Farley was a member of Tammany Hall, each exemplified elements of the

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see Alonzo L. Hamby, *Man of the People: A Life of Harry S. Truman*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), pgs. 278-284. Hamby does not emphasize Flynn's role to the extent that McCullough does.

<sup>574</sup> Edward J. Flynn, *You're the Boss*, pg. 146. Flynn made repeated references to Murphy's role in mentoring him in the early 1920s. See especially Chapter 4.

Irish-Tammany political tradition, Farley with his emphasis on local organization and patronage, and Flynn with his Plunkitt-like disdain for “morning-glory reformers” dabbling in electoral politics.) What’s more, Roosevelt developed a memorable working relationship with another son of Tammany, Robert Wagner, during the New Deal. Wagner, whose conversion to urban liberalism was made complete during his work with Smith as co-chairs of the Factory Investigating Committee, possessed the practical skills necessary to get legislation passed, skills he learned as a protégé of Charles Murphy. “The New Deal,” recalled a colleague of Wagner’s, “owed as much to Robert Wagner as to Franklin Roosevelt.” <sup>575</sup>

Roosevelt’s transformation from Tammany scourge to an ally, or at minimum a benevolent neutral, of the machine during the 1920s could be seen as a necessary but unappetizing calculation which Roosevelt made because he realized that he could not advance his career without Murphy’s support. Murphy, after all, had thwarted FDR’s attempt to win the party’s U.S. Senate nomination in 1914 when he shrewdly backed Woodrow Wilson’s ambassador to Germany, James W. Gerard, for the post. With Tammany’s organizational support, Gerard crushed FDR in the state’s first primary election for a U.S. Senate nomination, although Gerard then lost to Republican Charles W. Wadsworth in the general election. Some observers have asserted that FDR eventually “learned to use” the bosses he once opposed, <sup>576</sup> an assertion that would seem to defy the evidence – if FDR figured out how to “use” Charles Murphy, it’s hard to see how it benefitted him.

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<sup>575</sup> Quoted in J. Joseph Huthmacher, *Senator Robert F. Wagner and the Rise of Urban Liberalism*, pg. 137.

Huthmacher, who coined the phrase “urban liberalism” to describe the ideology of machine politicians during the Progressive Era, makes it clear the Murphy exerted tremendous influence over Wagner during the latter’s formative years in Albany. (Huthmacher did not identify the political figure he quoted.)

<sup>576</sup> See Frank Freidel, *Franklin D. Roosevelt: A Rendezvous with Destiny*, (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1990) pg. 537.

Besides, if FDR's surprising rapprochement with Murphy, beginning with his featured role at Tammany's annual July 4<sup>th</sup> celebration in 1917, was simply a political calculation rather than evidence of a genuine change of heart, his timing was curiously poor and politically perilous. For on that Independence Day in 1917, Charles Francis Murphy, the bane of good government groups, the Hearst newspapers, and progressives throughout the nation, appeared to be yesterday's man. Newspapers had been speculating for several years that he was on his way out after Tammany suffered a dispiriting series of electoral defeats at the state and city level.<sup>577</sup> Republicans, already in control of the Legislature and the Governor's office, dominated a state constitutional convention in 1915 which sought to dilute New York City's representation in the Legislature.<sup>578</sup> When Republican Governor Charles Whitman won re-election in 1916, Murphy's leadership seemed very much in question. He was never so vulnerable and Tammany rarely so demoralized as when FDR paid his first visit to the Hall on July 4, 1917. If his appearance at Murphy's side that day was all about calculation and ambition, FDR seemingly was in the wrong place, at the wrong time, with the wrong people.

On the other hand, it is entirely possible that FDR was in the process of a more-profound change of heart towards the *bête noir* of his famous cousin, his own former self, and so many of his Progressive allies in Woodrow Wilson's Washington. FDR's actions after 1917 certainly suggest that he finally realized that whatever its past flaws, Tammany was on the right side of reform and progressive change, and that Smith represented the better angels of the machine's nature. He certainly no longer acted as though Tammany were the enemy. Roosevelt did not recoil in horror when Tammany's Thomas McManus announced his support for him for

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<sup>577</sup> For three predictions of Tammany's or Murphy's imminent demise, see the *New York Herald*, April 21, 1913 and the *New York Times*, October 12, 1913 and December 10, 1913. Murphy's candidates lost the New York mayoral race in 1913 and the governor's races in 1914 and 1916.

<sup>578</sup> The Constitution failed to win voter approval, thanks in part to Tammany's opposition.

governor in 1918, or when state Senator James J. Walker told him that it was “always a pleasure” to hear talk of Roosevelt’s future in New York politics. Although Tammany might well have supported him for governor in 1918, FDR withdrew from consideration, saying that his wartime duties as assistant secretary of the Navy precluded him from seeking elective office. He later insisted that he privately urged Murphy to back Al Smith for governor despite, ironically, Murphy’s own reservations about Smith’s religion (no Catholic had ever been elected governor of New York, and Murphy could not afford another gubernatorial defeat).<sup>579</sup> FDR later publicly endorsed Smith’s candidacy in a warm, personal letter in which he offered to speak on Smith’s behalf in New York City in the waning days of the campaign. Smith, in a “Dear Frank” letter of reply, told Roosevelt that his endorsement “made quite a hit with all the men around me,” a fair number of whom, it seems safe to say, were Tammany men.<sup>580</sup>

The burgeoning relationship between FDR and Murphy’s Tammany continued to mature in 1920, when FDR seconded Smith’s favorite-son nomination for president, and Murphy approved the party’s choice of FDR as its vice-presidential candidate. (Murphy certainly was not trying to rid the state of Roosevelt, for he was shrewd enough to know that Republican boss Thomas Platt had tried that strategy with another troublesome Roosevelt in 1900, and it did not work as planned.) After his defeat in 1920, Roosevelt worked diligently on behalf on Smith’s presidential bids in both 1924 and 1928, when liberal publications such as *The Nation* wondered if a Catholic politician raised by the Tammany tiger truly could be progressive. “Governor Smith

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<sup>579</sup> For comments by The McManus and Walker on FDR, see Frank Freidel, *Franklin D. Roosevelt: The Apprenticeship*, pg. 338. Freidel notes that FDR’s claim that he urged Murphy to support Smith in 1918 seems to contradict his public support for William Church Osborn, a longtime ally. See pgs. 341-342.

<sup>580</sup> See Roosevelt to Smith, October 14, 1918, and Smith to Roosevelt, October 19, 1918, Family, Business, and Personal Papers, Box 5, FDR Papers, FDR Library, Hyde Park. Frank Freidel argued that FDR “did little more” than endorse Smith with this letter, suggesting that his enthusiasm for Smith was lukewarm. But Freidel did not mention FDR’s offer to speak on Smith’s behalf, a generous gesture in a hotly contested election. See *Franklin D. Roosevelt: The Apprenticeship*, pg. 370, fn.

is personally, ecclesiastically, aggressively, irreconcilably Wet, and is ineradicably Tammany-branded, with all the inferences and implications and objectionable consequences which naturally follow from such views and associations,” wrote James Cannon Jr. in *The Nation* in July, 1928. Cannon took care to remind readers that *The Nation*’s editors only weeks earlier declared Tammany to be “a society held together by the cohesive power of public plunder.”<sup>581</sup>

FDR, who was more in the tradition of *The Nation*’s sort of Democrat, offered no apologies for his support for his fellow New Yorker whose faith, affiliations, and culture so disturbed some of the magazine’s writers and readers. In fact, in a small book released during the 1928 campaign, Roosevelt argued that Smith was “on the side of the progressives in the fields of legislation and of constitutional law” and that he “made it clear that he based actions on fundamentals and not on temporary expediency.”<sup>582</sup> Half a year into his first term as governor, Roosevelt was the featured speaker at the dedication of the new Tammany Hall building adjacent to Union Square. The stock market crash of 1929 still was months away, but Roosevelt took the occasion – no doubt with his working-class audience in mind – to lash out at monopolists who, he said, were leading the country to a new version of economic feudalism. They had to be resisted, he said, otherwise “all property would be concentrated in the hands of a few” while ordinary citizens “would become serfs.”<sup>583</sup> This was not the sort of rhetoric which young Senator Roosevelt used during his short stint as an anti-Tammany Progressive.

This important change in Roosevelt’s political development is treated as little more than a footnote in many biographies, of far less importance than his stint in the Department of the Navy

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<sup>581</sup> “Al Smith – Catholic, Tammany, Wet,” by James Cannon, Jr., *The Nation*, July 4, 1928.

<sup>582</sup> Franklin D. Roosevelt, *The Happy Warrior: Alfred E. Smith* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1928), pgs. 7-8.

<sup>583</sup> *The New York Times*, July 5, 1929.



during the Wilson years.<sup>584</sup> (FDR's appointment as assistant secretary of the Navy was the result of his pedigree -- cousin Theodore held the same post from 1897 to 1898 -- his ambition, and his support for Woodrow Wilson in 1912, although none dared attribute the appointment to political patronage.) For many chroniclers of the Roosevelt years, it seems important to position FDR as a natural-born enemy of Tammany Hall and all that it supposedly represented -- graft, dishonest elections, and government by, for lack of a better phrase, the "worst men."<sup>585</sup> One Roosevelt biographer, Kenneth S. Davis, has argued that FDR's fights with Tammany were consistent with his "liberal-progressive stance," a view which endorses the notion that Tammany and progressive politics were irreconcilable.<sup>586</sup> This view is almost literally written in stone at the FDR Library and Museum, where a plaque commemorating FDR's son James notes that both father and son broke into politics as enemies of Tammany Hall. The text, written by Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., implies that this adversarial role was permanent. But it was not.

In fact, when Roosevelt made his peace with Tammany during Woodrow Wilson's second term, it was not the peace of equally exhausted combatants, each willing to concede the other's points in the interest of ceasing hostilities. FDR's appearance at Charles Murphy's side on July 4, 1917 was a victory for Murphy and for the urban liberalism and cultural pluralism that he and Tammany represented in the second decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Roosevelt, in the end, came to Tammany. Tammany did not come to him.

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<sup>584</sup> Historian Kenneth S. Davis said that FDR showed "no signs of pleasure" when he posed with Charles F. Murphy at the ceremony. See *FDR: The Beckoning of Destiny*, pg. 514. Biographer Frank Freidel suggests that FDR appeared at the Tammany commemoration because he was interested in running for governor in 1918. See *Franklin D. Roosevelt: The Apprenticeship*, pgs. 339-341.

<sup>585</sup> Roosevelt's dealings with Tammany are barely mentioned in Arthur M. Schlesinger's account of FDR's pre-presidential years, *The Age of Roosevelt, Volume I: The Crisis of the Old Order* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957).

<sup>586</sup> Kenneth S. Davis, *FDR: The Beckoning of Destiny 1882-1928*, pg. 610.

In his speech in 1917, FDR displayed the charm that seemed so lacking just seven years earlier, when he carried himself above the sort of political figures he now addressed. He told his listeners, many of them certainly dubious about FDR's intentions, that the Tammany man who invited him to the ceremony – he did not identify him – remarked that that “if Tammany could stand it to have him, he could stand it to come.” Reporters noted that FDR prompted a few smiles from his listeners before he embarked on a somber address devoted to the nation's entry into the Great War a few months earlier.<sup>587</sup>

But if Roosevelt did learn something from these “rough” Tammany characters, as Frances Perkins insisted that he did, how did he apply those lessons? It seems fair to conclude that he realized that the reform tradition which he embraced as a freshman state senator, with its overpowering influence of high-minded Anglo-Protestant moralism and elitist disdain for the gritty details of politics, did not appeal to the party's core urban supporters who, thanks to Tammany's ad-hoc social welfare system, regarded government as an advocate and even as a friend, certainly not as a disinterested judge or passive mediator. The muckrakers who helped to define Progressivism during FDR's early years – and who were so associated with the politics of cousin Theodore --preached from the gospel of civic disinterest and administrative professionalism, looking askance at the inefficiencies and irrationalities of municipal politics. Charles E. Russell, one of the lesser-known journalists who help set the righteous tone of the Progressive movement, referred to electoral politics as a “fatal virus” and a “sign of something rotten.” A self-consciously Progressive periodical called *The Independent* wrote in 1903 that

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<sup>587</sup> The *New York Times*, July 5, 1917.

“more-intelligent” voters would be better served if they chose to “play golf” on election day, rather than participate in the irredeemable process known as democracy.<sup>588</sup>

Mister Murphy of Tammany Hall was no stranger to the links – after all, he had a nine-hole course on his property on Long Island – but on election day he put away his mashie and niblick as he supervised a sprawling organization that saw municipal politics not as evidence of moral disabilities, but as expressions of power and respect. Most of Tammany’s immigrant constituents knew neither power nor respect in their former homelands. Tammany, however, provided both. So if Tammany’s enemies chose to remain above mere politics, or if they preferred a day on the golf course to the exercise of their franchise, all the better for Tammany’s candidates, who, in any case, were more likely to prefer boxing or baseball to golf (save for Murphy, whose athletic interests were catholic, indeed).

As a young state senator, Roosevelt sought to identify himself as a high-minded Progressive and friend of the muckrakers, with all their disdain for the messy deal-making of local government. He righteously (and publicly) blocked a state-funded project in his Dutchess County district because he considered the work unnecessary, a piece of political patronage designed with politics, not efficiency, in mind. Tammany’s Tim Sullivan was aghast. “Frank,” he said, “you ought to have your head examined.”<sup>589</sup> Perhaps he did submit himself to such an examination, for as president, he took care to make sure that key allies like Flynn and New York Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia, to cite just two of many examples, received a huge share of public works projects, to the chagrin of those who charged that politics, not equity or even party loyalty,

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<sup>588</sup> Thomas Leonard, *The Power of the Press: The Birth of American Political Reporting* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), pgs. 210, 199.

<sup>589</sup> Christopher M. Finan, *Alfred E. Smith: The Happy Warrior* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2002), pg. 237-238.

played a role in the New Deal's spending on relief.<sup>590</sup> One dissident Democrat complained to James Farley, chairman of the Democratic National Committee, in 1934 that "the sole person consulted about distribution of Federal patronage of Bronx County is ...Mr. Edward J. Flynn. In this distribution of Federal patronage he has and still is discriminating against our group because of the local political situation," a reference to a split among New York Democrats in the 1933 mayoral campaign.<sup>591</sup>

Historians Richard Hofstadter and Otis L. Graham Jr. noted that some progressives who were active during the Wilson years came to regard Roosevelt's New Deal as an "outrageous departure from everything they had known and valued," in Hofstadter's words, leading them to conclude that "overpowering alien influences" were to blame for the "subversion" of the Progressive agenda.<sup>592</sup> Those critics were right. The powerful "alien influences" which made the New Deal different from traditional progressivism were the immigrant-backed machine politicians who were perceived as enemies of reform during the Progressive era but who became partners with FDR in implementing the reforms of the New Deal. That historic partnership was rooted in Tammany's creation of a new kind of liberalism – pluralistic, urban, pragmatic, and effective. Even a longtime Tammany antagonist, Woodrow Wilson, came to appreciate the change that had come over New York, thanks in part to Al Smith's tenure as governor. Joseph Tumulty, who served as Wilson's secretary, told Smith that in his last conversation with the former president before his death, Wilson spoke favorably "of everything you are seeking to do,

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<sup>590</sup> One in seven WPA dollars was spent in New York City during FDR's first term. See Nick Taylor, *American-Made: The Enduring Legacy of the WPA, When FDR Put the Nation to Work* (New York: Bantam Books, 2008), pg. 187.

<sup>591</sup> John E. McCarthy to James Farley, May 24, 1934, Papers of Edward J. Flynn, Box 9, FDR Library, Hyde Park.

<sup>592</sup> Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform*, pg. 303-304. See also Otis L. Graham Jr., *The Old Progressives and the New Deal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967).

and, I might say to you frankly, I felt while talking with him that he was a most responsive audience.”<sup>593</sup>

Ironically, of course, the man who brought ethnic-based urban liberalism to the national agenda, who empowered local political bosses with federal funding, who pointedly reminded the Daughters of the American Revolution that Americans were descended “from immigrants and revolutionists,” was the onetime patrician Progressive reformer from Dutchess County who once turned down a pork-barrel project for his district because he refused to sully his hands with mere politics.<sup>594</sup>

Historians have noted that Roosevelt shattered the bifurcated politics of native-Protestant-reformer vs. Catholic-urban-machine.<sup>595</sup> While this is undoubtedly true, it is important to note how FDR achieved this feat. He did by moving closer to Tammany’s vision of progressivism, which Tim Sullivan summed up when he said, “I never ask a hungry man about his past. I feed him not because he is good, but because he needs food.”<sup>596</sup> Traditional reformers, immersed in Anglo-Protestant traditions that emphasized worthiness rather than simple need, sought to change character and culture as part of a contract-like relationship with the poor and distressed. Tammany, by contrast, fed people because they needed food. Wardheelers asked no questions and demanded no behavioral changes of those who required a meal, a job, a favor. The entitlement programs of the New Deal, then, had more in common with Tim Sullivan’s methods of amelioration than they did with charities and settlement houses that saw

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<sup>593</sup> Tumulty to Smith, April 24, 1924, Joseph Tumulty Papers, Box 74, Library of Congress.

<sup>594</sup> Roosevelt’s speech to the DAR can be found in Samuel Rosenman, ed., *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt* (New York: Macmillan, 1939), pgs. 214-217.

<sup>595</sup> See, for example, Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform*, pgs. 300-310.

<sup>596</sup> *The New York Tribune*, September 14, 1913.

the poor as clients rather than as neighbors. No wonder that some Progressives did not recognize their agenda in Franklin Roosevelt's programs.

FDR's decision to work with, rather than against, the pragmatic Irish-American machine politicians he had campaigned against as a young man was an important turning point in his career. But he would not have had the trust of Tammany in the 1920s and the machines of Kansas City, Chicago, and Jersey City in the 1930s had he not jettisoned Progressive-era issues linked to culture and beliefs of urban immigrants, meaning Catholics and Jews. Those issues, it must be remembered, remained very much part of the nation's conversation after World War I. The anxieties of Progressives like Theodore Roosevelt, who feared for the nation's future because of declining birthrates among white Anglo-Saxon Protestants, were played out in politics and culture during the Jazz Age, with Tammany serving as a symbol of the power of the new dangerous classes – urban immigrants with alien beliefs and uncertain loyalties, at least in the eyes of many on all sides of the political spectrum.<sup>597</sup> The Ku Klux Klan, prohibitionists, and the eugenicist movement viewed immigrants and their immediate descendants as a source of social disruption, and the immigrants' advocates, symbolized by Tammany Hall, as a wellspring of corruption. "In the city of New York and elsewhere in the United States," wrote Madison Grant in *The Passing of the Great Race*, "there is a native American aristocracy resting upon layer after layer of immigrants of lower race." Those "lower" races, Grant predicted, would inevitably dominate political power because democracy rewarded "the average man" rather than "the man qualified by birth, education and integrity."<sup>598</sup>

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<sup>597</sup> For a discussion of Roosevelt's fears of "race suicide," see Thomas G. Dyer, *Theodore Roosevelt and the Idea of Race* (Baton Rouge, La., Louisiana State University Press, 1992).

<sup>598</sup> Madison Grant, *The Passing of the Great Race*, pg. 5.

Grant's book, overheated as it now seems, was very much a part of a post-Progressive Era discussion of the growing power of immigrants who were clustered in cities – traditional centers of corruption in American discourse, from Thomas Jefferson to William Jennings Bryan – and whose votes empowered enterprises like Tammany. Grant, who held a Progressive belief in the power of science to advance society's well-being, advocated the use of birth control to reduce "the number of offspring in the undesirable classes."<sup>599</sup> This sort of anxiety about the nation's future in the 1920s established the framework for a cultural war that would paralyze and then transform the Democratic Party in on the eve of the Great Depression. The Ku Klux Klan sought to prevent the rise of the very groups which so frightened Madison Grant. Meanwhile, eugencists sought a progressive, rational solution to the problem of immigrant poverty and social dysfunction, which Grant outlined in his book: "Mistaken regard for what are believed to be divine laws and a sentimental belief in the sanctity of human life tend to prevent both the elimination of defective infants and the sterilization of such adults as are themselves of no value to the community," Grant wrote in arguing for "the obliteration of the unfit." In a sense, Grant was behind the times: The Carnegie Institution, the Rockefeller Foundation and the Russell Sage Foundation – three Progressive vehicles for rational, top-down social reform – began funding the Eugenics Records Office in Cold Spring Harbor, N.Y., in 1910. The ERO eventually joined forces with the American Breeders Association, which was not, in fact, an organization of thoroughbred owners (in which case Tammany might have been supportive), but an avowed advocate for eugenics. Like FDR's first political hero, cousin Theodore, the ERO and the American Breeders Association feared the effects of the dwindling WASP gene pool. Among some Progressives in the latter stages of the era to which they gave their name, status anxiety gave way to performance anxiety.

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<sup>599</sup> Madison Grant, *The Passing of the Great Race*, pg. 49.

Tammany and Irish-American politicians in general had no time for the cultural anxieties of Anglo-Saxon Protestants who, of course, were the traditional tormentors of the Irish on both sides of the Atlantic. Edward Flynn, the son of Irish immigrants, saw Anglo-Saxon supremacy as an idea whose time had passed. “It seems to me that we can never have a complete settlement of world conditions until the Anglo-Saxon begins to realize that he is not of a superior race but that all races are equal,” Flynn told Eleanor Roosevelt in 1943, during the height of World War II. “Certainly, we are today fighting against the ideology of Hitler in which he sets forth the Aryans as superior people to all others. We do not seem to be consistent when we fight against this doctrine and on the other hand do nothing to try to bring about a better understanding” between the races.<sup>600</sup>

While it would be a gross exaggeration to suggest that Tammany was at the forefront of racial justice, it did continue to solicit, rather than suppress, the votes of African-Americans in New York City. (The *New York Times* saw the appointment of an African American as a deputy assistant district attorney in 1899 as “the most marked recognition of the negro vote Tammany has yet made ...<sup>601</sup>). Some white racists saw the machine as a threat to the racial status-quo because it embraced pluralism and inclusion. In 1928, the *Fellowship Forum* newspaper, an organ of the Ku Klux Klan, printed a picture of a black public official in New York, Ferdinand Morton, standing near his secretary, a white woman who, the paper asserted, was “assigned to him ... by a Tammany Hall administration.”

Morton, a Harvard University graduate, was the head of Tammany’s United Colored Democracy at the time. The picture should “nauseate any Anglo-Saxon,” the paper argued,

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<sup>600</sup>Ed Flynn to Eleanor Roosevelt, March 23, 1943, FDR Papers, President’s Official File, 1892, Box 2.

<sup>601</sup>The *New York Times*, October 3, 1899.



adding that Morton was one of three civil service commissioners – the others, the paper noted, were a Catholic and a Jew – who passed judgment over “the moral, mental, and physical qualifications of each and every person seeking employment in the Tammanyized city government. No white man or women can possibly enter the civil service of New York City until this triumvirate approves. What a chance for poor Protestants to ever get their names on any city payroll?”<sup>602</sup> The implications were clear: From the Klan’s perspective, a “Tammanyized” government was one which was blind to Anglo-Saxon racial and religious hierarchies. While the Klan was hardly a mainstream political organization in the 1920s, it was not without influence, as it demonstrated during the Democratic convention in 1924.

Tammany not only sought to strip Progressive reform of its Anglo-Saxon racial ideology, but fought for a more culturally inclusive liberalism devoid of the evangelical Protestant moralism which inspired proposals to ban baseball games and business activity on Sunday, proposals which targeted the pastimes and culture of immigrant-stock Catholics and Jews. Despite these fundamental disagreements with some forms of progressivism, Tammany figures like Smith, Wagner and Mahoney saw nothing wrong with describing their ideas and policies as “progressive” or “liberal.” To cite just two examples, Smith touted the achievements of his “progressive administration” during a speech in 1924, while Mahoney welcomed DNC chairman James Farley’s description of him as a “militant liberal” during Mahoney’s mayoral campaign against Fiorello LaGuardia in 1937.<sup>603</sup>

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<sup>602</sup> Clip from the *Fellowship Forum*, n.d. [1928], Private Papers of Alfred E. Smith, Box 1, New York State Library, Albany. *Time* magazine noted that in 1928, when Smith was a presidential candidate, the *Fellowship Forum* “showed a greater increase in gross revenue than any other U.S. publication.” See *Time*, November 12, 1928.

<sup>603</sup> For Smith, see Henry Moskowitz, ed., *Progressive Democracy: Addresses and State Papers of Alfred E. Smith*, pg. 19; for Mahoney, see the *New York Times*, October 27, 1937.

So when Franklin Roosevelt sought to build a stronger partnership with Smith and, by extension, with Tammany after the Democratic Party's debacle of 1920, he did more than simply ingratiate himself with the state's most-potent political organization. He announced, in essence, that he preferred the exuberant urban liberalism of Murphy's Tammany to the dour Anglo-Protestant progressivism of Woodrow Wilson. This was more than opportunism, and more than a convenient political straddle. This was an important but often ignored part of his journey from Albany's "mean cuss" to a politician with a "first-class temperament."<sup>604</sup>

From a purely political perspective, FDR's behind-the-scenes efforts to advance the career of Al Smith in the 1920s were more than a matter of simple calculation or political shrewdness. They were evidence of political courage, for FDR's support for Smith and relationship with Murphy unfolded during a time of renewed nativism, of a political and cultural backlash against immigrants, city dwellers, Catholics, and advocates for more-expansive government. Roosevelt's efforts, then, were critical in helping Smith overcome -- to a point -- the era's cultural barriers and political taboos, allowing him to go where no Tammany man (save for pseudo-reformer Samuel Tilden) dared go before -- to the brink of the White House.

Roosevelt's nomination speech on Smith's behalf at the Democratic National Convention in Madison Square Garden in 1924 is rightly considered a milestone in FDR's political comeback from defeat and from polio. His characterization of Smith as the "Happy Warrior" (a reference which FDR hated but which speechwriter Joseph Proskauer insisted upon) was memorable, but the oration itself was not nearly as remarkable as FDR's effort in giving it. In his

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<sup>604</sup> Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes is said to have described FDR as a "second-class intellect" with a "first-class temperament," but Jean Edward Smith, in his recent biography of Roosevelt, asserts that the comment is "apocryphal," arguing that the Holmes' supposed remark "was propagated principally by the literary critic Alexander Woollcott." See his *FDR*, pg. 311. Smith does not indicate why Woollcott should be considered a dubious source. In any case, the characterization of Roosevelt's personality has stuck. See Geoffrey C. Ward, *A First-Class Temperament: The Emergence of Franklin Roosevelt* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989).

first public appearance since he lost the use of his legs, Roosevelt acted out the role he would play for the rest of his career – a somewhat disabled man who still was able to stand and walk and move his legs almost like anybody else. Hidden from view until the last minute, he “walked” a few steps to the podium with one hand on a cane and the other on the arm of his son James. Sweating profusely from the effort it took to make that long short journey, the patrician Protestant reformer threw back his head, smiled, and delivered a speech that not only promoted the presidential aspirations of Tammany’s Al Smith – which was remarkable enough – but also placed Roosevelt firmly on Tammany’s side in the divisive cultural war underway on the convention floor. A dozen years earlier, Tammany delegates had opposed the nomination of Woodrow Wilson, Progressive icon and Roosevelt idol, whom they regarded as the very picture of the sort of moralistic Anglo-Protestant reform. But now, as Roosevelt, a Wilson acolyte, placed the name of a Tammany sachem in nomination for the nation’s highest office, New York Democrats erupted in a long, loud demonstration. Their enthusiasm, of course, was for Smith, but their admiration for Roosevelt was unmistakable.

At that famously raucous convention, Al Smith stood for cities, immigrants, hyphenated Americans, religious diversity, new ideas about government’s role in society, and saloons, issues which helped revive the Ku Klux Klan in the south and which inspired the pseudoscience of the eugenics movement in the north. His allies declared political war on their colleagues from the South when they demanded, in vain, that the convention formally condemn the Klan by name. The dusty ghost of conventions past, William Jennings Bryan, rose in righteous indignation to silence these rambunctious voices of a new Democratic Party, with their bands playing “The Sidewalks of New York” as if to herald a new age of an urban, ethnic, non-Protestant Democracy. He demanded an end to the Tammany-led assault on the Klan, arguing against

further debate over “three little words.” Later, as balloting started, Bryan rose again, this time to explain his vote. As Tammany delegates sought to shout him down, the aging Great Commoner tried to intimidate Smith’s supporters. “You do not represent the future of this country,” he thundered.<sup>605</sup>

They did, of course, and so did their new ally, Franklin Roosevelt. In that sense, Tammany, at the height of its power, was on the right side of history, for it stood for toleration and pluralism at a time of anxiety, reaction, and repression.

In the four years between Smith’s defeat in Madison Square Garden and his historic nomination at the 1928 Democratic convention in Houston, the Smith administration in Albany combined machine politics and reform ideas as it continued to develop a new social contract for its most-vulnerable citizens. Behind the scenes, Smith’s allies prepared the groundwork for a new Democratic Party. It did not unfold as a matter of course. Rather, the bitter divisions of the 1924 convention continued to roil the nation as well as the party. Thousands of hooded Klansmen paraded in Washington in August, 1925, to display their power as well as their opposition to the alien forces in the Democratic Party. The Klan’s imperial wizard, Hiram Wesley Evans, said the Klan opposed the granting of “political power to any Roman Catholic” because they were aliens of dubious loyalty. Evans saw the Democratic Party split between the “native, American-minded, Protestant, ‘Dry,’ and conscientious Democracy of the South and East, and the alien, Catholic, boss-ruled ‘wet’ ... Eastern Democracy, with priests instead of conscience.”<sup>606</sup>

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<sup>605</sup> Robert Slayton, *Empire Statesman*, pg. 214.

<sup>606</sup> See pamphlet by Evans in the Official Papers of Alfred E. Smith, Folder 200-341, New York State Archives, Albany, N.Y. Smith kept a large file of material relating to the Klan.

The Klan obviously was an extremist organization, But the sentiments its leader espoused were not restricted to Klan members or white supremacists in the South. They existed not only in Smith's home state, but in the very city he so loved. The Rev. Edwin D. Bailey, pastor of the Prospect Heights Presbyterian Church in Brooklyn, warned his congregation that the party of "rum, Romanism and rebellion now rules at Albany and is headed for Washington." Describing Smith as a "Roman Catholic Tammanyite Governor," the cleric argued that "with a Roman Catholic president in power, Rome will become the winner and America will be run by Rome."

<sup>607</sup> These were familiar sentiments, of course, and they would continue to haunt not just Smith's candidacy, but (to a lesser extent) John F. Kennedy's campaign in 1960. What is critical to note, however, is not simply the reminder of the bigotry which Tammany and Smith faced in the late 1920s, but the important symbolic role which FDR played as Smith's most-public and best-known advocate in both 1924 and 1928. <sup>608</sup> For just as Smith cleared the way for Roosevelt through his joining together of traditional progressives and machine politicians, Roosevelt and his impeccably Anglo-Protestant background and cultural values helped to promote the political fortunes of a "Roman Catholic Tammanyite Governor" who faced opposition from institutional progressives like the editors of *The Nation*, who withheld their endorsement from Smith in 1928 despite their acknowledgment that he was "a symbol of tolerance in American life." For them, but not for Roosevelt, what mattered more than tolerance was Smith's unforgiveable association with Tammany. "His is still the Tammany sachem who glories in that office and believes in that

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<sup>607</sup> Undated clip from the *New York World*, Official Papers of Alfred E. Smith, Folder 200-4-2, New York State Archives, Albany, N.Y.

<sup>608</sup> FDR was responsible for persuading somebody even more famous than he, Babe Ruth, to endorse Smith. Ruth told FDR that he was impressed by Roosevelt's description of Smith's rise from poverty. "No poor boy can go too high in this world to suit me," Ruth wrote. See Babe Ruth to FDR, May 9, 1924, Papers Pertaining to the Campaign of 1924, Franklin D. Roosevelt Papers, FDR Library, Hyde Park.

accursed institution against which stand charged a century of corruption, misgovernment, and uncalled-for human misery in the city of New York,” the editors wrote.<sup>609</sup>

*The Nation*, like so many elite critics of Tammany, was incapable of perceiving Tammany’s transformation during the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Rather than cite the progressive achievements of Smith’s years as governor -- including prison reform, increased state spending on public education (which rose from \$7 million in 1918 to \$70 million in 1927), expansion of state parks, and support for greater workplace safety -- *The Nation* chose to summon through implication the ghost of Boss Tweed and other Tammany sinners to assail Smith’s integrity.

Reviled by the right and abandoned by the left – ironically for the some of the same reasons (temperance, Tammany, and the Pope) – Al Smith never had a chance in the 1928 presidential election. Republican-led prosperity, which soon proved to be an illusion, also contributed to Smith’s defeat at the hands of Herbert Hoover, but for many of his supporters, Al Smith was the victim of nativist bigotry from east to west, north to south. The wounds inflicted were long in healing. More than a decade later, Joseph Tumulty revisited the insults, slanders, and lies that were heaped upon Smith because he dared believe that a Catholic child from an urban slum was qualified to be president of the United States. In a letter to Maryland Senator Millard Tydings, Tumulty wrote, “The memories of the campaign of 1928 with its ugliness, its meanness, and its intolerance will live with me until the day I die. As one associated with you in that campaign, I know how deeply your feelings and emotions were aroused. From every nook and cranny of the lower political world every contemptible means were resorted to ...to destroy

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<sup>609</sup> “Should Liberals Vote for Smith?” *The Nation*, Vol. 127, No. 3299, September 26, 1928. The editors did not answer their own question, advising readers to decide for themselves whether to vote for Smith or the Socialist candidate, Norman Thomas, who was a contributor to the magazine.

the man you and I supported, Governor Smith. No man who played a part in that campaign or subscribed to its maintenance is entitled to the smallest consideration at the hands of this administration.”<sup>610</sup> Even Smith’s beloved wife, Katie, was the subject of scorn. The Republican Party circulated a pamphlet entitled, “Mrs. Herbert Hoover: American Through and Through” which implied that the daughter of Irish immigrants was something other than American, while a prominent Republican National Committeewoman asked, with undisguised contempt, “Could you imagine Mrs. Smith in the White House?”<sup>611</sup>

From Smith’s defeat and humiliation, however, came signs of the changes sweeping the nation and the Democratic Party. The new Democratic Party of urban residents and immigrant-stock constituents was created not in 1932, when FDR won the presidency, but in Smith’s failed campaign of 1928. Smith captured a majority of votes in the nation’s 12 largest cities; Republicans won those cities four years earlier by 1.6 million votes.<sup>612</sup> White ethnic neighborhoods in Boston, Chicago, and other major industrial cities saw large increases in the Democratic column as Jews, Italians, and Poles joined with the Irish in supporting a candidate who was, in spirit and in fact, one of them.<sup>613</sup> The political realignment associated with the election of Franklin Roosevelt and the creation of the New Deal owed much to the personal narrative of Alfred E. Smith, a sachem of Tammany Hall. “Before the Roosevelt Revolution,” wrote political scientist Samuel Lubell, “there was an Al Smith Revolution.”<sup>614</sup>

It was Irish-America’s revolution, too, a revolution rooted in a trans-Atlantic Irish narrative of hunger, powerlessness and grievance, a revolution that created a more pluralistic,

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<sup>610</sup> Joseph Tumulty to Millard Tydings, March 28, 1939, Papers of Joseph Tumulty, Box 60, Library of Congress. Tumulty sought to block the appointment of a contributor to Hoover’s campaign to a minor office.

<sup>611</sup> Robert Slayton, *Empire Statesman*, pg. 315

<sup>612</sup> Samuel Lubell, *The Future of American Politics* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1951), pg. 32.

<sup>613</sup> See Slayton, *Empire Statesman*, pg. 325.

<sup>614</sup> Samuel Lubell, *The Future of American Politics*, pgs. 34-35.

activist political culture in New York, a revolution achieved under the auspices of the nation's most-famous political machine, Tammany Hall.



## CONCLUSION

If the story of Franklin Roosevelt and Al Smith ended with Roosevelt in the White House and Smith serving as an elder statesman and herald of the New Deal, if Tammany Hall had built on the legacy of Charles Murphy rather than succumbing to a new round of scandal and corruption in the 1930s, New York's political history – and perhaps that of the country itself – might have been different. But there would be no sentimental ending to the relationship between the son of the Lower East Side and the scion of one of New York's great families. Smith challenged Roosevelt for the Democratic Party's presidential nomination in 1932, after telling FDR's strategist Edward Flynn that he had no desire to run for national office again.<sup>615</sup> Tammany, under the tepid leadership of a longtime operative named John F. Curry, suffered through a sensational investigation of Mayor Jimmy Walker's administration by a longtime critic, Samuel Seabury, during the summer of 1932, leading to Walker's resignation and hasty flight to Europe with his longtime mistress. Once again, Tammany's reputation was in ruins, but this time was no Charles Murphy to clean house. Curry chose this moment of vulnerability to defy Roosevelt by supporting Smith for president in 1932. It was a foolish move, and one Roosevelt would not forget.

Tammany, however, was not alone in standing by Smith. Many of Smith's allies in New York's progressive movement, including Belle Moskowitz, believed the former governor deserved another opportunity to win the White House. Moskowitz explained to Felix Frankfurter that she and her colleagues “feel that the party needs a well-equipped candidate, able to lead, courageous and willing to take responsibility.”<sup>616</sup> Referring to Roosevelt simply as “the

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<sup>615</sup> See Edward J. Flynn, *You're the Boss*, pg. 100, for his description of a meeting with Smith during which the former governor ruled out a presidential bid in 1932.

<sup>616</sup> Quoted in Robert Slayton, *Empire Statesman*, pg. 366.

candidate” who was “leading the field,” Moskowitz was as blind to FDR’s capacity for growth, maturity and change as many of her fellow progressives had been to Tammany’s. (FDR, it should be noted, did not retain Moskowitz and her close ally Robert Moses when he became governor, despite Smith’s pleas.)

Smith failed to block Roosevelt, of course, and by 1936 he was allied with the Liberty League, campaigning for Alf Landon with a bitterness and anger that belied the nickname FDR gave him in 1924. Though they reconciled in the 1940s, the relationship between the two men was never the same after 1932. Nor, for that matter, was Tammany Hall. Once in the White House, Franklin Roosevelt starved Tammany of federal patronage – not because he believed patronage was wrong and wasteful, as so many in the Progressive and muckraking tradition maintained, but because he preferred to reward two dependable allies, Fiorello LaGuardia, the anti-Tammany mayor, and Flynn, boss of the Bronx.<sup>617</sup> The organization turned to criminal rackets, aligning itself with the notorious mobster, Frank Costello, in a desperate and obviously illegal attempt to revive its finances and its relevance. Carmine de Sapio, the organization’s first non-Irish leader since Boss Tweed, became its youngest, and last, boss in 1949. Although he embraced the liberal reforms of the Truman era, including fair housing laws, De Sapio’s career ended as Tweed’s did, in scandal and a jail term.<sup>618</sup>

Franklin Roosevelt may have played the decisive role in ending Tammany’s domination of state politics in the 1930s – for reasons having little to do with his once-upon-a-time

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<sup>617</sup> Journalists and reformers alike associated patronage, and all its unsavory connotations, with Tammany. For example, a headline in the *New York Herald* on April 18, 1913 warned of “Tammany’s Trick to Win Patronage.” On the very same page, the newspaper reported that FDR, Senator James O’Gorman and U.S. Secretary of the Treasury William McAdoo were supporting competing candidates for the post of Port Collector in New York, a job associated with control of federal patronage in the city. Yet none of contestants was portrayed as seeking undue influence over hiring and contracting practices.

<sup>618</sup> For more on De Sapio’s career, see his obituary in the *New York Times*, July 28, 2004.

progressive instincts and more to do with that most-pragmatic of political calculations, vengeance – but he surely did not abandon the Tammany-backed marriage of practical politics and social reform. He brought Frances Perkins, one of the first reformers to work closely with Tammany, to Washington as the nation's first female cabinet secretary. He supported the ambitions of another unlikely Tammany member and ally, New York Governor Herbert Lehman, who joined Tammany as an idealistic young reformer at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. But perhaps most revealingly, FDR relied for political advice – increasingly so after Louis Howe's death in 1936 – on Flynn, who was not just a political boss and a staunch defender of machine-style politics, but a protégé of Charles Murphy, albeit one who was a well-groomed, well-read, and well-traveled Fordham Law graduate.

Flynn watched over FDR's political fortunes as New York's secretary of state from 1929 to 1933, handled patronage requests from FDR and his wife during their White House years, reluctantly played a leading role in FDR's effort to purge conservative Democrats from Congress in 1938, and was at the president's side during the Yalta conference in 1945. Flynn and his wife, Helen, were frequent guests at Hyde Park, and Eleanor Roosevelt wrote the introduction to his memoirs, which were a straight-forward defense of boss-ruled machine politics. Unlike his colleagues and peers in the Roosevelt White House, Flynn was not an advocate for specific policies, but he also was not devoid of ideology. While he loathed interference from "New Deal amateurs," a term he used with contempt, he shared their belief in social justice and the necessity of government action on behalf of society's most-vulnerable citizens. He told FDR in 1936 that he ought to focus more on the concerns of urban residents, and less on farmers and rural areas, in

that year's campaign. City residents, he noted, were mostly "labor people," and the party "must attract them by radical programs of social and economic reform."<sup>619</sup>

Flynn's embrace of New Deal style reform was not, however, a simple campaign tactic. On November 1, 1948, just before Harry Truman seemed doomed to defeat, Flynn wrote a letter of encouragement to the president, and in doing so, offered the briefest of glimpses into his own world view. Flynn complimented the embattled president on the feisty campaign he conducted despite the odds against him. "I am certain that you could not have done it if you did not sincerely believe in the progressive and liberal platform that you presented to the American people," Flynn wrote. "As you said to me, 'Win, lose or draw, the Democratic Party must be the party of the masses in this country, and must maintain its liberal and progressive attitude.'" <sup>620</sup>

In part because he believed Tammany had lost the liberal and progressive attitude it developed during Charles Murphy's reign, Flynn – at Roosevelt's behest -- helped put an end to the organization's dominance when he and James Farley stage-managed a third-party candidate for mayor in 1933 rather than support Tammany's uninspiring nominee, John O'Brien. Flynn and Farley cobbled together an entity called the Recovery Party, saw to it that the party nominated a former Acting Mayor named Joseph McKee, and accomplished the avowed goal of humiliating Tammany's listless leadership, splitting both the Irish vote and the Democratic party. O'Brien finished in third place, a devastating defeat. But Republican Fiorello LaGuardia, running as an anti-Tammany Fusion candidate, finished first, the recipient of unspoken duplicity in the White House. FDR promised Flynn that he would endorse McKee but never got around to it – if FDR ever "used" New York's political bosses for his own ends, as biographer Frank

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<sup>619</sup> Flynn's contempt for New Dealers who dabbled in electoral politics is clear in his memoirs. See "You're the Boss," Chapters 12 and 13. For Flynn's comments about the need for social and economic reform, see Raymond J. Moley, *The First New Deal* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1966), pg. 378.

<sup>620</sup> Flynn to Truman, November 1, 1948, Papers of Edward J. Flynn, Box 22, FDR Library.

Freidel insisted, this was an example of it, although it took place after FDR left Albany for good. Roosevelt's machinations in that campaign might well have earned the condemnation of reformers had they been carried out by, rather than against, Tammany Hall, for they involved no small amount of evasion, misdirection, and mendacity. Or perhaps FDR simply was, even then, playing the role of juggler.<sup>621</sup>

Tammany faded as a force in New York politics during Roosevelt's years in the White House not simply because FDR funneled federal money to LaGuardia, and not simply because the machine's brains were buried in Calvary Cemetery, as Jimmy Walker observed after Charles Murphy's death. It faded and ultimately collapsed because its core constituency of urban Irish-Americans no longer lived in places like Al Smith's Oliver Street, and because the Irish were several more generations removed from inherited memories of famine and flight, deprivation and discrimination. The ancient struggle for Irish freedom was resolved, at least partially, in 1921 with the creation of an Irish Free State in twenty-six of the island's thirty-two counties. Solidarity in the face of a traditional enemy no longer worked as a political tactic. As John F. Kennedy demonstrated in 1960, Irish Americans were (for the most part) no longer embattled outsiders on the outskirts of mainstream American society. Dagger John Hughes was a forgotten figure, the resentments he articulated having given way to a sense of achievement. The Irish no longer looked to politics and government service as a way out of the ghetto, save for pockets in some of the old familiar places, like the Fire Department of New York. The world had changed, but Tammany Hall did not.

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<sup>621</sup> FDR acknowledged his preference for mixed signals, saying that his left hand often did not know what his right hand was doing. The implications of this leadership style are examined in Warren F. Kimball, *The Juggler*, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991).

And so it died, and with it, for better or worse, perished a culture of extreme local politics, of a block-by-block, building-by-building organization, of methods that were irregular, as Frances Perkins so delicately put it, but responsive all the same. “What is the Constitution between friends,” a Tammany ward-heeler named Tim Campbell is said to have asked President Grover Cleveland.<sup>622</sup> The story may be apocryphal, but only in its letter, not in its spirit. The Irish came to New York believing that the rules of politics were written to keep them powerless, as they surely were in Ireland. When they saw the same class in New York observing the same rules, speaking the words of reform that sounded more like demands to conform, they saw no reason to turn their backs on politicians who saw their opportunities and took them, no reason to stand in judgment of rogues like Jimmy Walker and George Washington Plunkitt.

Once installed in power, the Irish in New York looked to government as a friend in need, a provider of last (or perhaps first) resort, as an advocate in a system constructed by others but now in their hands. They saw how power worked in Ireland. They saw that the lack of power meant that they might be left to starve in the name of abstract ideology. When they attained power in New York, they knew what to do with it – they made certain that they would not starve again, and that those who might allow it would be denied the power to do so.

It was an imperfect institution, Tammany, sometimes egregiously so. But after it was done and the Irish scattered to the suburbs, corruption and crooked deals did not disappear from municipal government. Mayors and lesser officials still paid attention to the needs of banks, real estate, and other interests, just as surely as Charles Murphy took care to look after the fortunes of the businessmen who befriended him over dinner at Delmonico’s or who bought a fistful of tickets to Big Tim Sullivan’s boat rides.

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<sup>622</sup> Quoted in Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting Pot*, pg. 224.

But the machine's absence left a void in this city of immigrants, many of whom live in shadows which Tammany would have found unacceptable. Tens of thousands of immigrants living in the city without proper papers, unable to vote? Tammany's ward-healers would have found such a situation intolerable.

Gone, too, is the sense of participation, the connection between a block, an apartment house, a district, and those who represent them. Tammany provided spectacle, and while some of it may have been a screen for unsavory deal-making behind closed doors, the chowders and the cruises and the festivals made Tammany's immigrant-stock constituents feel like Americans – and New Yorkers.

Tammany, however, remains a symbol of corruption, thanks to the narrative which the Englishman James Bryce established during the Gilded Age and which traditional Progressives echoed in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Forgotten, now, are the reforms Tammany did not simply advocate, but wrote into law. Forgotten is Charles F. Murphy, the onetime baseball player and saloon owner who presided over the transformation of New York state into a model of progressive social change. Forgotten are Tammany's allies like Belle Moskowitz and Frances Perkins and, for a time, no less a figure than Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Brave would be the politician who dares suggest that 21<sup>st</sup> Century government has much to learn from Tammany's golden age. Nevertheless, the lessons are there for those willing to look beyond the stereotype.

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*New York Herald*

*New York Observer*

*New York Evening Post*

*New York Sun*

*New York Times*

*New York Tribune*

*New York World*

*Puck*

*The Independent*

*Truth Teller*

*United Irishmen*

#### UNPUBLISHED PAPERS

“Us Against Them,” delivered by Thomas Fleming at “Understanding the Irish in New Jersey: A Symposium on Irish and Irish-American Research Perspectives,” Drew University, November 6, 2009.



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### Professional Background

Kean University, Office of the President: Director of the Kean University Center for History, Politics and Policy, 2006-present

The *New York Times*, editorial board member, columnist, 2003-2006

The *New York Observer*, city editor and columnist, 1990-2003

*Staten Island Advance*, city editor and columnist, 1979-1988

### Select Publications

*Catholics in New York* (editor), Fordham University Press, 2008

*The Penguin Book of U.S. Presidential Inaugural Addresses* (with Robert Remini), Penguin, 2008

*Let Every Nation Know* (with Robert Dallek), Sourcebooks, 2006

*Washington's General: Nathanael Greene and the Triumph of the American Revolution*, Henry Holt, 2005

### Affiliations

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