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White, with a Class-Based Blight: Drawing Irish Americans

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White, with a Class- Based Blight: Drawing Irish Americans

INTRODUCTION

Let me make one thing clear at the outset: Irish Americans were not black. Despite similar economic conditions, they were not treated as blacks legally, politically, or culturally.¹ That is not to say that they escaped discrimination, nor does it minimize their suffering in the Great Famine of the 1840s as they fled from death and disease. Rather, this essay points out that the respective sufferings—and triumphs—of nineteenth-century Irish Americans and African Americans were different. From their arrival in the United States, Irish Americans suffered various forms of cultural prejudices that were expressed in caricature representations, but they were protected from the legal discrimination facing African Americans. Whiteness did not automatically confer freedom from repression and discrimination, nor did repression and discrimination automatically confer a designation of nonwhiteness or blackness.

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1. For more on the distinctions between the legal discrimination suffered by blacks and the cultural oppressions to which the Irish were subject, see Eagan, “Still ‘Black’ and ‘Proud’” 45.

This distinction is, by now, familiar. Many scholars, including Noel Ignatiev, Catherine Eagan, Kevin Kenny, and Diane Negra, have explored the relationship between Irish and blacks in the United States and Great Britain. This scholarship, particularly Ignatiev's controversial *How the Irish Became White* (1992), has sparked debates about the status of the Irish, debates that, in turn, have contributed to the growing and often controversial field of whiteness studies.² Rather than jump straight into the fray, I will approach the question from a perspective anchored in the visual representation of the Irish and the African American. The rich visual resources in the Prints and Photographs Department of the Library of Congress offer an opportunity to evaluate the status of Irish Americans through their representation in caricatures appearing in an array of illustrated magazines, newspapers, and independently circulated lithographs.

I turn to this body of caricature to reveal the class fluidity and growing political power of Irish Americans as well as the cultural discrimination they faced. Further study would engage with the reception of these images and interrogate how they were consumed. In my more modest approach, I conclude that the Irish occupied a fluid class position in American society, particularly as their political machine became more sophisticated, and caricaturists responded with a heightened awareness of the potential for Irish assimilation. Because identity initially was mapped through external symbols rather than inherent markers of difference such as skin color and facial features, the caricatures focused largely on class, with racial markers playing a secondary and, early on, usually invisible role. The physical markers emerging later in the century retained strong class connotations, even as they borrowed from racial tropes. A visual analysis of images from the 1840s through the 1860s indicates that Irish Americans occupied a range of social positions. In order to signal Irishness and assign visual difference, artists began by recording external markers of accent and background rather than ingrained characteristics. These contextual signals communicated class and status; but although Irishness and lower-class

2. Examples of this scholarship include work by Jordan, McIntosh, Frankenberg, Roediger, Jacobson, and Ignatiev.



FIGURE 1. “The Undecided Political Prize Fight,” 1860. Published by Rickey, Mallory & Company, Cincinnati. Image from the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/pp.print>.

status were layered together, class markers were mobile, capable of being shifted according to the specific position of the subjects being represented.

“The Undecided Political Prize Fight” (1860) (figure 1) demonstrates similarly subordinated roles of African Americans and Irish Americans just before the Civil War, but the caricature also makes clear that the Irishman was not depicted as black. Thus when an Irishman and a black man appear in the same 1860 print, they share a number of identifying class symbols but remain facially (and racially) distinct. The image shows the two candidates in the historic 1860 presidential campaign boxing in front of a crowd of spectators, with Southern Democrat John C. Breckinridge pointing the way to the White House in the background. A black man kneels in Lincoln’s corner, whereas Douglas is seconded by an Irishman. The Irish-American and African-American deputies share subordinate positions and an affinity for alcohol: the black man has a basket of liquor in front of him and a bottle in hand, whereas the Irishman clutches a bottle of beer. The Irishman is shown with a stovepipe hat

and striped breeches, whose repeated use became a visual shorthand for ethnicity despite the reality that such garments were not specifically Irish. In this image the identification of Irishness relies largely upon the political knowledge that the viewer brings to the image rather than upon obvious facial features or language cues. Lincoln's second, however, is undoubtedly black.

Exploring a discrete set of prints within a narrow geographic and chronological range (from 1840 through the 1860s on the United States East Coast), this essay offers modest answers to broad questions about Irish racial positioning in American society. The Irish were never slaves, nor were they subject to discriminatory Jim Crow laws. They had access to the vote, which they deployed to great advantage. Belonging to a recent immigrant group that had seized considerable political power and constituted the first major American voting bloc, the socially mobile Irish occupied an ambiguous space in U.S. society. Caricaturists initially negotiated such social mobility by assigning identity through movable external cues including language, clothing, geographical location, and props. Such markers both created Irish difference (in the absence of skin color as the primary indicator) and trained visually unsophisticated American viewers to see Irishness through an array of visual signals. The lack of a uniform physiognomic imagery in these early cartoons stands in sharp contrast to British visual convention, which relied heavily on bodily cues and frequently depicted the Irish as monstrous apes. Despite some inevitable similarities in two national styles of caricature, in America, images of the Irish reflected the meaning of the national experience for the new immigrants: a new prospect of unprecedented political power, albeit an opportunity fraught with discrimination and challenges.

THE FIRST FIGURES:

EARLY DEPICTIONS OF THE IRISH IN THE UNITED STATES

The first significant wave of Irish immigrants in the early eighteenth century were the Scotch-Irish Protestants, hailing largely from the Ulster region and distinct from the bulk of Catholic immigrants arriving in the nineteenth century and after (Kenny, *American Irish* 22). In a position to pursue wealth and opportunity when they

arrived, these Protestant arrivals sought fortune rather than salvation. As a group, they were largely male, somewhat educated, and at least a little adventure seeking, having actively chosen to come to the United States. But for Irish Catholics, particularly those arriving prior to Britain's 1829 Catholic Emancipation Act, immigration automatically conferred some rise in status: in America they had access to the vote, to universities, and to numerous civic positions of responsibility. Not all Irish immigrants were Catholic, but the two categories—immigrants and Catholics—became intertwined in both the British and the American imagination by the early nineteenth century. The Scotch-Irish blended almost seamlessly into the white American landscape, quickly assimilating in ways that, to this day, Irish Catholics have resisted.³ For the purposes of this essay, then, the term “Irish” refers to “Irish Catholics,” both in the United States and in Britain.

Caricatures of the pre-1840 immigrant Irish lack defining facial characteristics or class designation; artists relied, rather, on language and context to communicate their message. Political setting, which remained an important contextual theme in caricatures throughout the century, signals the growing importance of the Irish as a powerful voting bloc—regardless of the social status of the individual Irish voter. “A Democratic Voter” (1836) (figure 2) represents the battle between the Tammany Hall and Locofoco Democratic factions for Irish votes in the 1836 New York elections. A relatively early image, it appeared before American caricaturists had yet developed a visual language to identify Irishness and instead relied on actual words. Rather than evoking ethnicity by (imagined) facial features or even typical clothing, the image cues viewers through accent. In the caption, the prospective Irish-American voter states, “As I’m a hindependent Helector, I means to give my vote according to conscience and him as Tips most!” The pronounced “h” sound in front of

3. Irish Catholic immigrants formed early political and social alliances that remain important sources of community support and activism. Although there are a number of Scotch-Irish cultural institutions in the United States, they are largely historically and educationally focused and do not play the same life-cycle roles as do the Irish Catholic social, religious, and political organizations. For discussion of Irish immigrants to the United States prior to the Famine, see Wilson, *United Irishmen, United States* 58–76.

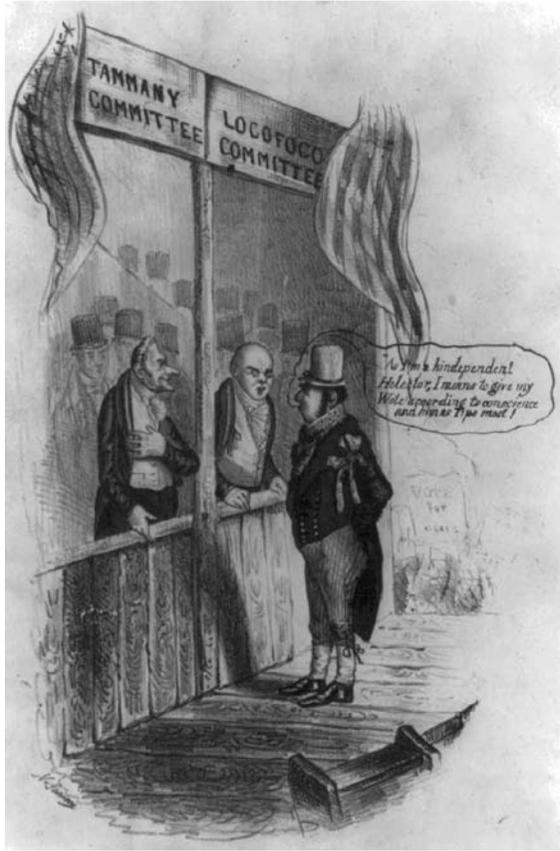


FIGURE 2. “A Democratic Voter,” 1836, Napoleon Sarony. Published by H.R. Robinson, New York. Image from the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/pp.print>.

words beginning with vowels, an indication of Irish speech, would have been a strong marker of identification. Ungrammatical language reveals the immigrant’s lack of education, whereas the content of his comment plays into developing notions of Irishness—as a mercenary use of the vote by Irish Americans was becoming an emerging focus of concern in the century (Erie 38). The caricaturist’s use of the term “hindependent Helector” represents a tongue-in-cheek jab at the creation of voting blocs that presumably deprived the Irish of the caricatured figure’s vaunted independence. The abil-

ity of the Irish American to give his vote “according to conscience” was, moreover, under scrutiny not only because of a rapidly developing ethnic political machine but also because of the fears that Irish-American’s allegiances to Rome rendered every Catholic voter subject to the governing power of religion, or “conscience.”

In the United States, caricaturists drew upwardly mobile Irish differently from their lower-class cousins. Rather than constructing a unitary Irish physiognomy through broadly identifiable visual cues, artists distinguished carefully between groups. Though often poor, uneducated, as well as subject to religious discrimination, the Irish developed considerable power through their political organization. Politicians and their chroniclers reckoned with this new kind of force by insisting that the Irish occupied multiple social niches. These distinctions, subtle or otherwise, both reflected and created the discrete, if mobile and overlapping, social categories into which viewers sorted the Irish—unlike the uniformly racialized depictions broadly applied to African Americans.

MOVABLE CUES: MARKERS OF IRISHNESS

Caricaturists were creative in finding visual markers for Irishness, sometimes turning to local geography. In the early print by Fanny Palmer “War! Or No War” (1846), two Irish immigrants discuss the compromise (of the 49th parallel) between the United States and Great Britain over the northern boundary of Oregon (figure 3). The debaters are identified as Irish through a variety of subtle sartorial cues, but most tellingly by their placement in front of the Bowery Theater. Primarily filled with working-class Irish immigrants, the Bowery section of New York City and its theater catered primarily to their interests. Whereas the disproportionately large upper bodies of the Irish figures indicate their occupation as physical laborers, and their prominent chins imply a lower order of development, these signs had not as yet developed into conclusive markers of Irishness. Instead, the caricaturist builds a visual vocabulary of identification by combining a geographical marker with more subtle facial cues.

Other early prints use both text and symbols to identify the Irish; “Jamie & the Bishop,” (1844) by H. Bucholzer, chronicles the cam-



FIGURE 3: "War! Or No War," 1846 by Frances Palmer. Image from the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/pp.print>.



FIGURE 4 "Jamie & the Bishop," 1844, H. Bucholzer. Lithography and print coloring by James Baillie, New York. Image from the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs, <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/pp.print>.

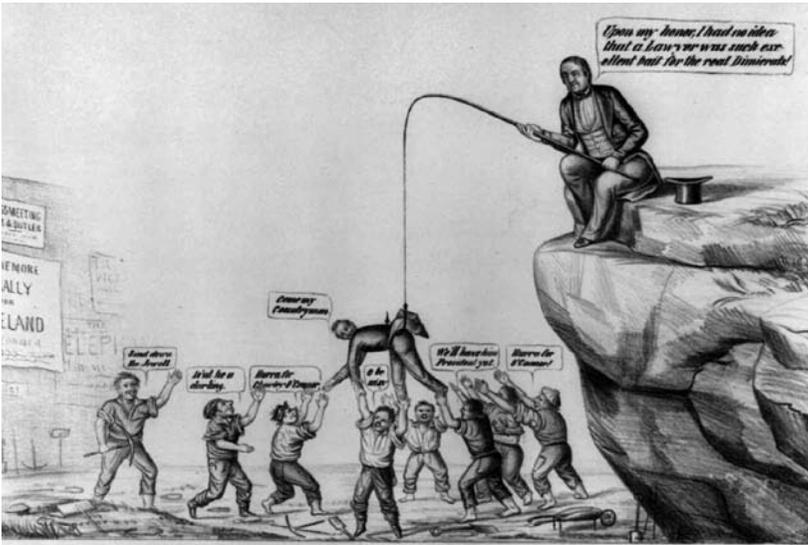


FIGURE 5: “An Old Hunker Fishing for Votes,” 1848. Published by H.R. Robinson, New York. Image from the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs, <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/pp.print>.

paign of James Gordon Bennett against John Hughes, the Catholic bishop of New York (figure 4). The Scottish Bennett stands on the left, with Hughes on the right; behind Bennett is one of his native supporters, a Scotsman identified solely by the accent indicated in his caption. The Irishman behind Hughes, however, appears with a broader array of markers; his caption reads “Be Jasus shtand back! Your honor’s worship, & let me have a shlap at him wid the shillaly!” With this drunken slur, the Irishman’s language identifies him immediately, but this verbal cue is reinforced by visual symbols, including a bottle of gin in his pocket and a club in his hand.

Typically caricatures deal with lower-class Irish in subordinate or threatening roles, but class positions can vary, signaling Irish social mobility. In the 1848 print, “An Old Hunker Fishing for Votes,” both upper- and lower-class Irish figures appear in the same image but are portrayed differently (figure 5). The print draws attention to growing Irish-American political power in its representation of Lewis Cass’s efforts to garner support for his Michigan campaign by backing the campaign of Irish-American lawyer Charles O’Connor.

(Although he eventually declined to run, in 1872 O'Connor became the first Catholic nominee for president.) The large figure of Cass dangles a smaller and devil-like O'Connor from a fishing rod above a group of O'Connor's "countrymen"—Irish laborers who reach out and up to touch the famous lawyer. Irishness is again delineated through the captions attached to the speakers, as well as by the posters hanging in the background advertising "One more rally for Ireland." O'Connor is framed as both bait and temptation, but he appears decidedly different from those who are both literally and figuratively below him. His superior clothing, as well as his face and figure, differentiate him from the Irish on the ground, who have round faces and undeveloped snub noses. The Irish-American lawyer's elegant features render his background largely unidentifiable. Although he addresses those above whom he dangles, his face is turned away from them, a gesture representing another layer of separation between him and the lower-class Irish-Americans beneath him. As O'Connor hangs in space, his physical position marks the mobility and ambiguity of his social role as an Irishman who has transcended his background and aspires to higher positions. However, he remains far closer to the Irish laborers than to Cass, the caricature's non-Irish representative of power and class.

NEW WORLD, NEW WAY: BRITISH AND AMERICAN IMAGES OF THE IRISH

In 1871, New York politician and Tammany Hall Boss William M. Tweed reportedly complained about damning depictions of him in Thomas Nast's cartoons, saying, "I don't care so much what the papers write about me. My constituents can't read. But, damn it, they can see pictures."⁴ Tweed's assumption makes intuitive sense; people who cannot read can still use their eyes. However, understanding caricature's representations of ethnic groups required its own kind of training. Unlike the British and continental Europeans, who became conversant with a wide array of political prints, adver-

4. Quoted in Paine 179. Thomas Nast (1840–1902) was a political caricaturist for *Harper's Weekly* whose images helped bring about the downfall of the Tweed corruption ring.

tisements, and illustrations from the mid-eighteenth century, Americans in the first half of the nineteenth century lacked a comparable access to images, a situation leading to a visually unsophisticated audience.⁵ Before the publication of the first American illustrated magazine, *Harper's Weekly*, in the 1850s, illustrations were expensive, reaching only small, educated audiences. As American audiences for visual material expanded in the nineteenth century, literacy levels were dropping; as verbal cues became less meaningful, a visual language of ethnic and racial type became correspondingly more explicit. Tweed's claim was truer in 1871 than in the 1840s, in that most viewers of images in the earlier period were educated and literate, but unlike Europeans, visually unsophisticated readers of imagery. Only by the second half of the nineteenth century had American caricaturists succeeded in creating a visual language to frame the Irish for mass audiences. By that period, however, British viewers had already been exposed to a pictorial vocabulary producing a consistent Irish image. For example, the "paddy cap" in *Punch* became a vital element in any literary description of an Irishman, and no stage Irish costume was complete without it (Pearl 219). Whereas the cap alone communicated Irishness and its associated backwardness, an even more pervasive symbol, the simian-featured Irishman, played into growing evolutionary concerns and an increasing obsession with ethnology and classification.⁶

Many scholars, notably George Stocking, L. Perry Curtis Jr., and R.F. Foster, have demonstrated that increasingly simian images of the Irish were offered to British audiences throughout the nineteenth century. The representation of specific national or racial types through physiognomy, an age-old practice that was revitalized in late-eighteenth-century Europe, held that external features were linked to internal character: the face, in other words, acted as a window to the soul. Inhabiting a highly visual culture, Victorian English cultural consumers quickly learned to interpret cues embedded in caricatures and other visual media. Images representing Irishness became tied to physiognomic messages offering character information that became increasingly legible to both artists and their view-

5. For a discussion of Victorian visual culture, see Flint 1–39.

6. See Stocking 238–69.

ers. As Curtis Jr. has shown, the recognition that simian imagery denoted Irish ethnicity was well established by the mid-nineteenth century. (Of course, given the unsubtle nature of many English caricatures of the Irish as apelike, a high degree of visual sophistication was not always essential to decode these images.)

Because Americans were interested in depicting aspects of social hierarchy, they seemed less explicitly engaged in the physiognomic aspects of identification—although interest in such practices began to increase in the 1850s. Rather than differentiating racial and ethnic communities through imagined facial features, Americans, especially northerners, were more concerned with distinguishing groups by class (Nowatzki 169). In the North, where most images were circulated, such class distinctions allowed for more ambiguity than the binary classifications of race—a system that failed to produce sufficiently useful information about social and economic status, particularly prior to the Civil War. Thus in American representations of the Irish through the 1860s, race was of secondary (though rising) concern, whereas politics and class were at the forefront—as were the clues to interpret how they were framed. American artists deployed a variety of physiognomic and ethnologic cues to anchor their representations in a classificatory context that drew from scientific rhetoric based around human hierarchy. Blacks, as the lowest in the human chain, occupied a more unitary representational space than the Irish, who were not as firmly categorized scientifically and thus visually. But as images reproduced here indicate, the Irish were depicted across the social and economic spectrum, from working-class gravediggers to important politicians. American images of the Irish, therefore, differ from caricatures of nineteenth-century Irish immigrants in London, a difference that highlights the contextual specificity of the power of caricature to create an imagined Irish face. Representation, of course, helps create a reality, raising yet another set of questions: in the American context, in which the caricatured Irish often looked different from their British counterparts, where did the Irish belong—socially, politically, and legally?

Although in Britain the Irish were firmly situated at the bottom of the social and evolutionary heap, Irish immigrants were less frequently defined as violent and mindless simians in early American



YOUNG IRELAND IN BUSINESS FOR HIMSELF.

FIGURE 6: "Young Ireland in Business for Himself," 1846, John Leech.
Punch 11: 79.

caricature.⁷ Figure 6, an 1846 image from the British comic periodical *Punch* entitled “Young Ireland in Business for Himself,” portrays the visual response to English fears of Irish agitation. The character of Young Ireland, a member of the radical group agitating for violent separation from English rule, appears simian; the arms dealer, a grotesque and degenerate character, is equally inhuman, if less obviously apelike.⁸ His hat resembles one worn in other *Punch* cartoons by Ireland’s Catholic political activist Daniel O’Connell, thus linking O’Connell to radical agitation—notwithstanding that leader’s repeated attempts to come to peaceful solutions. Despite important political and ideological distinctions among members of an ethnic group, British caricaturists tended to collapse Irish activists into one easily identifiable, bestial enemy (Douglas, Harte, and O’Hara 45). In the United States, however, different sorts of Irishmen, representing different social classes within a single ethnic group, remained visually distinct.

CHANGING VISUALIZATIONS OF THE IRISH

In the first half of the nineteenth century, a majority of printed images in America originated from and circulated in a small part of the Northeast. Many Irish immigrants arrived in the northern ports of New York, Boston, and Philadelphia/New Jersey without the energy, money, or motivation to move on.⁹ Against the backdrop of

7. Both U.S. and English representational trends were framed by a rising awareness of evolutionary debates from the 1840s onward, particularly following the publication of Darwin’s theories in 1859. Trends in physiognomy, phrenology, ethnology, and by the mid-nineteenth century, anthropology, created large-scale racial, ethnic, and class classifications, under which individuality was subsumed. These categorizations drew on the racial “science” claims of Johann Freidrich Blumenbach, Petrus Camper, and Robert Knox, among others. See Blumenbach, Lawrence, and Coulson; Camper, Camper, and Cuvier; Knox. An overview of Victorian anthropology is offered by Stocking. For more on the shift from individual to group classification, see Pearl 226. For more on the development of visual codes, see Gombrich 291–93.

8. The term “degeneration” became a major focal point for debate in the last twenty years of the nineteenth century; here I mean it only to refer to the animal-like nature of the subject. For more on late-Victorian degeneration, see Pick 1–36.

9. Although most Irish immigrants settled in New York, Philadelphia, and Boston, sizeable Irish-American communities developed in Chicago and San Fran-

rising racial tensions and a growing North-South divide, the influx of Famine-fleeing Irish in the midcentury faced a new world that, in images as well as in experience, welcomed and rejected them, empowered and belittled them, cartooned, lampooned, and flattered them. As already noted, these immigrants entered a country without a long history of legalized discrimination against Catholics; thus despite the significant prejudices facing them in America, Irish Catholics had access to social mobility and political power denied them in Britain. Rather than occupying the lowest rung on the social ladder, a position reserved for the African Americans, the Irish used their legal and political freedom to organize the first—and most powerful—organized political voting bloc in the history of the United States (Erie 2).

From the mid-1840s, during and following the Famine, Irish immigrants came in families, or what was left of them, with little considered decision making involved: they fled or starved.¹⁰ After the 1860s, however, as American economic recession set in—reflecting the destruction of the Southern economy and the drying of the gold rush—the Irish presented an increasingly competitive threat for scarce jobs and resources.¹¹ A shift in post-Civil War Irish-American imagery to a more uniformly simian designation reflects such economic tension; as the century progressed, the conferral of outsider status on the Irish became more explicit. In “The Great Fear of the Period That Uncle Sam May Be Swallowed by Foreigners. . . . The Problem Solved” (1860s, exact date unknown), the Irish are identified with the Chinese, another ethnic group figured to represent employment rivalry for Americans (figure 7). Chinese immigrants had arrived in great numbers to capitalize on the gold rush and contribute to the building of the American railway, whereas the Irish influx continued steadily through the 1860s, until economic downturns slowed immigration to the United States. “The Great Fear” features a series in which an Irishman and a Chinese man swallow Uncle Sam, and the Chinese man then eats his Irish counterpart. As

cisco (Kenny, *The American Irish* 105). The Chicago community, in particular, continued to grow and develop a strong political infrastructure.

10. For more on Famine conditions and their effect on health and immigration see Gribben 85–103.

11. See Erie 1–25, for more details on Irish economic participation.



FIGURE 7: “The Great Fear of the Period That Uncle Sam May Be Swallowed by Foreigners . . . The Problem Solved,” 1860s. Published by White & Bauer, San Francisco. Image from the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs, <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/pp.print>.

a sign of his victory and complete dominance over his rivals, the Chinese figure proudly wears the Paddy cap taken from the conquered and consumed Irishman. But whereas the Chinese immigrant is easily identified through facial features, hairstyle, and dress, the identity of the Irish required a certain amount of visual training. The tall hat and striped breeches are part of what had become an established visual convention of Irishness, and the wizened but large face was now familiar on both sides of the Atlantic.

Although the Irishman and the Chinese man would both have been identifiable to contemporaneous viewers, the visual difference assigned to the Chinese man mapped more directly onto viewers' experience. Audiences would recognize the Chinese figure without the training in reading caricature required to make sense of the Irishman. Both representations rest on physical features as well as moveable sartorial markers, but the Chinese man remains more strongly raced, whereas the white, if wizened, Irishman maintains some degree of racial mobility. The triumph of the insatiable Chinese man reflects the threat of America's newest interlopers, as well as the economic challenge now posed by a racially defined rather than socially flexible group.

Although increasing numbers of images appeared in the American press with the influx of Famine refugees, Irish immigrants had always been a source of interest and friction on both sides of the Atlantic.¹² But unlike those fleeing starvation and desolation in the midcentury, pre-Famine arrivals provided a very different set of characteristics from which caricaturists could draw. Given the paucity of printed images in the States during the period, they apparently did so only sparingly, if at all. With few visual codes in early nineteenth-century America, caricaturists relied in part on a set of traditions—visual, verbal, and even scientific—established across the ocean. The Irish landed on U.S. shores without the same constraints imposed on them as in Britain, but they still carried much of the same baggage.

12. The waves of Protestant Ulster immigration throughout the eighteenth century brought with it a number of instances of conflict. But Kevin Kenny observes that the Scotch-Irish, through slave ownership and plantation building, navigated these challenges and aligned themselves with the establishment (*American Irish*, 38–40).

A GREAT TIME FOR IRELAND!

WE copy the following paragraph from an article in the *Nation* Irish newspaper, written in anticipation of a war between this country and America:—

“Yes, then will the forces of England find in their front such desperate men as crushed their ranks at Fontenoy to the cry of ‘Remember Limerick.’ Yes, the men crowbarred out of their homes in Ireland; the men oppressed, insulted, scoffed at, and, wherever they went, pursued by English slander, scorn, and hate—those men will be in the van of the fight, and then will woe come to England! And what of Ireland in this great time? What will Irishmen do when comes this supreme opportunity, the like of which can only come once in many ages? We can tell what they may do, what they will be able to do, if they act well their part as brave men,—they can, most certainly, establish the independence of Ireland.”

And here is a portrait of the Author,



MR. G-O'RILLA, THE YOUNG IRELAND PARTY, EXULTING OVER THE INSULT TO THE BRITISH FLAG. SHOULDN'T HE BE EXTINGUISHED AT ONCE?

American caricaturists, well aware of the rhetoric of Irish simianity so popular and trenchant across the Atlantic, did not adopt that visual language wholesale, but neither did they utterly reject it.¹³ Although the United States represented a new frontier and a new life for fleeing Irish immigrants, it was never an entirely new page. The Irish ape also eventually emigrated, though he changed in his new environment of political and economic opportunity.

“A Great Time for Ireland,” *Punch* 41 (1861) (figure 8), demonstrates the extent to which the Irishman had become simianized by the second half of the nineteenth century in Britain—as caricaturists invited their audiences to share the joke of the Irish ape. Representations of the Irish as evolutionary throwbacks belittled their efforts at independence while reassuring viewers that they were in fact unable to govern themselves. Much like apes in the zoo, the Irish, too, needed keepers and caretakers.¹⁴ Aided by trends in ethnology and physiognomy, the classification of the Irish as a lower order of humanity took on the legitimacy of science combined with the entertainment of humor. The powerful image of the Irish ape appeared in America, as in “Paddy’s Ladder to Wealth in a Free Country,” 1857 (figure 9). The caricature depicts a laborer climbing the American ladder to success; but whereas Paddy’s face is brutish, his muscular body conveys the physical force enabling him to progress to greater opportunities.

American political and economic changes following the Civil War put the Irish in direct competition with black laborers, most of whom were newly freed slaves. As the Irish and the blacks came to occupy related social and economic niches in the Northeast, the two communities began to develop similarities in the American visual imagination. Nevertheless, African Americans remained firmly black and raced, and the Irish maintained their whiteness.¹⁵ Despite

13. Comparisons between the Irish and various kinds of apes gained strength throughout the nineteenth century in a variety of media. For different perspectives on this topic, see Curtis Jr., Foster, de Nie, Peatling.

14. The “missing link” claim was fantasized in a piece in *Punch* arguing that the Irish provided the connection between apes and Negroes (“The Missing Link”). See Pearl, chapter 4, on the use of ape imagery to calm growing imperial concerns.

15. Irish voters used their support of slavery to demonstrate distinction from American blacks. This strategy had only limited success, particularly following the



FIGURE 9: “Paddy’s Ladder to Wealth in a Free Country,” 1857, *Yankee Notions*. Image from the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs, <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/pp.print>.

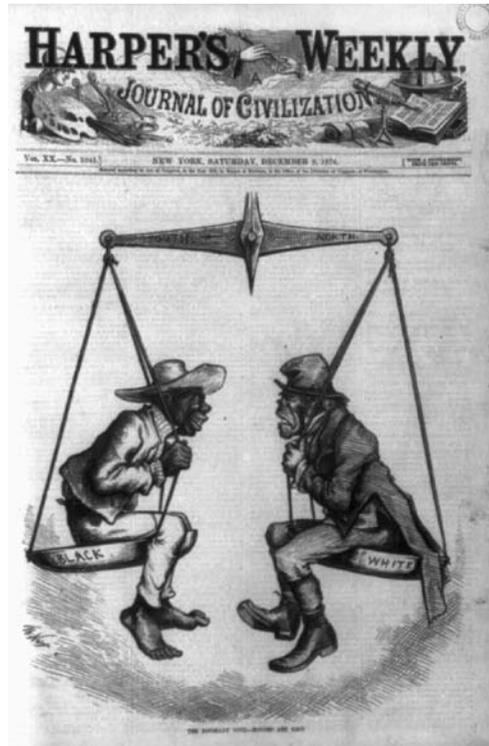


FIGURE 10:
“The Ignorant Vote—
Honors Are Easy,”
December 9, 1876.
Harper’s Weekly (cover).
Image from the Library
of Congress Prints
and Photographs,
<http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/pp.print>

the pressure of anti-abolitionist forces in the Irish community, the group's identity became marked not only by class-neutral symbols such as the shillelagh and the four-leaf clover—or lower-class markers such as bottles of alcohol and ragged clothing—but also through a brutish simianity long connected on both sides of the Atlantic with blacks. And so the Irish eventually became depicted as white, lower-class apes in the New World, as Irish-American apes now compared explicitly to a group of economically mobile blacks. These comparisons were certainly racially based but still maintained a strong class dialogue; even as the Irish were becoming more raced, the emancipated status of African Americans allowed for more nuanced class depictions. The post-Civil War 1876 caricature “The Ignorant Vote—Honors Are Easy” (figure 10) argues for an equality of corruption—between both a Northern Democrat represented as a simianized Irishman and a Southern Republican figured as a caricature of a black man. In the wake of tremendous voter fraud, the image argues, both sides were balanced in their proclivity for sham elections. As David T. Knobel demonstrates and as many caricatures illustrate, a marked change occurred in descriptions of the Irish after 1860—leading to a more explicit and negative focus on their facial features rather than their actions and behaviors (88). Knobel attributes such change to the emerging scientific discourse around an ethnology that categorized different groups into distinct racial and behavioral types (90). But I would argue that the changing visual imagery in caricatures—the emerging simian-featured Irish American—responded to growing Irish political power and assimilation, which influenced the changing patterns in verbal discourse that Knobel observes. As the Irish became assimilated, caricaturists emphasized their difference; as they became visualized as apelike, they began to be spoken of as apes. For example, Knobel notes how both the Massachusetts State Board of Charities and the New York Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor attributed rises in poverty and crime to the Irish, situating the cause in their racial inferiority, filth, and brutishness (88–90).

end of the Civil War. Nevertheless, the Irish continued to hold a higher legal and social status, despite the many comparisons made between the two groups. As David Wilson has shown, even at its height, anti-Irish prejudice was highly localized and significantly less actualized than anti-black racism (Wilson, “Comment” 157).

**“HINDEPENDENT” VOTERS: IMAGERY GENERATED
BY THE IRISH-AMERICAN POLITICAL MACHINE**

The Irish political machine did not spring fully built from the Famine coffin ships that carried the half-alive and starving immigrants across the Atlantic. The machine first ran slowly, and not entirely smoothly.¹⁶ From the outset, the Irish suffered discrimination in the workplace and in the voting booth. In the second half of the nineteenth century, many states attempted to enact legislation to deny these immigrants the right to vote, particularly with the rise of the nativist and know-nothing campaigns. In addition to their poverty and lack of education, Irish Americans raised anxiety about their political participation; as Catholics, their overall allegiance was purportedly to the pope and Rome, rather than to the president and the nation. Yet although Irish voters faced challenges in the United States, none were as severe as the laws denying eligible Catholics full suffrage until 1829 in Britain, and certainly none that even approached those facing free blacks for another hundred years.

Irish Americans began to support specific candidates en masse, only offering their own contenders toward the second half of the nineteenth century. As the first organized political bloc, the Irish were a force to be reckoned with, demanding jobs, patronage, protection, religious tolerance, and public funding. Most political machines were local networks, though national campaigns learned to attend to Irish needs and demands. Several images reproduced in this essay reflect local and national political concerns, with some unrelated to formal campaigns or voting procedures. Underlying them all, however, lies an anxiety about growing Irish political power and questions about how it should be negotiated. Some caricatures belittle the Irish by mocking their growing political ambitions and undermining any belief in their influence. Following the Civil War,

16. In New York, for example, a politically powerful Tammany Hall first allied itself with nativist bosses, though the machine consistently registered new Irish immigrants as voters. Only toward the end of the nineteenth century did Tammany support Irish leaders and candidates. Nevertheless, the Irish were strongly affiliated with the Democratic Party in most cities from the early nineteenth century. Philadelphia and Rochester are notable exceptions to this trend, as in these cities the Irish made strong alliances with Republican Party bosses (Levine 109).



FIGURE 12: “The Political Quadrille,” 1860. Image from the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs, <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/pp.print>.

his (unsuccessful) attempt to claim American rather than Irish birth. His claims show considerable cleverness, however, as he situates himself squarely in the two most Irish cities in America—Boston and New York. He begs Polk for a political position by asking: “Plaze yer honor’s worship, can’t ye do somethin’ for me? I was bor-r-n in Boston and rared in New-Yor-r-k, be the howly St. Patrick, and nivver a bit of an office have I had yet.” This early caricature again illustrates how much identity was still marked by language rather than facial features.

The 1860 election and its associated debates proved a fertile source for later caricaturists seeking to juxtapose African and Irish Americans. “The Political Quadrille” (1860) parodies the election by highlighting the impact of the landmark Dred Scott case, in which a slave sued for his freedom (figure 12). This image of four presidential candidates features an array of outsiders in American society—blacks, Native Americans, and the Irish—and represents how they were visually identified. Four candidates dance with their supposed

supporters, while Dred Scott sits in the middle fiddling the music. The upper left corner features John C. Breckinridge with James Buchanan, Breckinridge's ally and the Democrat incumbent, whose nickname "Buck" is referenced in his depiction as a goat. The upper right depicts Lincoln, the abolitionist candidate, dancing with a black woman, while the Constitution Union Party candidate John Bell is partnered with a Native American, identified through his headdress, just as Irish figures in contemporary caricatures might be signaled by paddy caps or striped breeches. Bell's passing interest in Indian affairs offers an opportunity for a visual representation of different kinds of outsiders. The bottom left corner shows Stephen A. Douglas dancing with a ragged Irishman whose wizened face and hat, the created caricature conventions of his particular ethnicity, by now identify him for visually trained audiences. Aside from the image of the goat, that of the Irishman appears least human; it suggests a significant level of social and racial marginalization. But his class status is represented through external symbols: shoddy clothing, a thin stature, and an unstable posture. Such representation is unlike that of the African American, whose skin color serves as a visual shorthand cue of difference—or that of the Native American, whose cultural costuming was widely recognizable. An unstable Irish difference predicated on class rather than simply on race was less obvious—needing to be carefully created by caricaturists.

Most Irish prints have an explicitly political theme, but as the century progressed, artists began to interrogate Irish social mobility and political power in a labor context. As the Irish improved their economic and social status, visual representations emphasized their facial features in order to imply an evolutionary and intellectual backwardness. An image from the second half of the nineteenth century layers such class and facial features. The 1864 print "I Knew Him, Horatio" presents an Irish gravedigger with childlike, undeveloped, apelike features (figure 13). As in figure 9, "Paddy's Ladder to Wealth in a Free Country," the Irishman is represented as low on the evolutionary ladder but with a potential for self-improvement and future riches. Though racially stunted, this gravedigger looks upon a model of wealth and aspiration as a Shakespearean scene is played out before him. He can, perhaps, aspire to the American dream.



FIGURE 13: "I Knew Him, Horatio," 1864, J.H. Howard. [Probably published by Thomas W. Strong], New York. Image from the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs, <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/pp.print>.

CONCLUSION

As Irish Americans and African Americans struggled to climb the social and economic ladder in the United States, the visual conventions initially separating depictions of them began to overlap. Although the Irish had access to rights and privileges denied to emancipated blacks, both were in direct competition for the most labor-intensive and lowest-paying jobs. The Irish managed to improve their social position in response to a highly effective political machine that distributed jobs, patronage, and protection among its supporters. Some Irish, having gained roles of political and economic prominence, looked back at the spectacle of poverty and struggle from a distance of merely one or two generations. But as they rose up the ladder, they never raised it behind them; they always acknowledged the role of their fellow Irishmen in helping them ascend.

Irish-American immigrants traversed a number of categories: poor and downtrodden starving Famine refugees; politically sophisticated and highly organized voting blocs; and essential laborers and

domestic servants. In that last category, they were a pliant lower order, living in deprivation and filth.¹⁷ Caricaturists struggled to make sense of these tensions, creating fluid class designations that could be easily altered according to the particular Irish subjects they depicted. The range of Irish class representations should not, however, be confused with a sustained and continuous racial ambiguity. In all the images explored in this essay, the difference assigned to the Irish focused on status and class as the primary means of assigning difference, even as racial themes emerged more strongly in the second half of the nineteenth century. But in the eyes of caricaturists and their audiences, the Irish—sometimes downtrodden, often laughable, and frequently pilloried—were consistently white. The eventual simianizing of them in the later caricatures rested on a class indictment that always accompanied any attention to race: in other words, Irish apes were never imagined to be anything other than white apes. Such classifications never challenged the racial status of the Irish; instead they complicated whiteness as an identity free of discrimination and repression.

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17. L. Perry Curtis Jr. offers a comparative approach to this topic. He explores the British case, which cannot be translated wholesale to the United States, given the differing political status of Irish Catholics and blacks, as well as a different set of associations with colonialism and immigration.

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