

# Race, Violence, and Anti-Irish Sentiment in the Nineteenth Century

Kevin Kenny

For most of the nineteenth century, the Irish were the dominant immigrant presence in the cities and towns of both the United States and England. They were also among the poorest and most disadvantaged people that either country had ever hosted, especially during the traumatic generation from 1845 through the 1870s. Historians have recently begun to tell the history of the Irish in America and in Britain as part of the same larger Atlantic story of migration and settlement, labor and race, politics and culture.<sup>1</sup> There were, of course, major differences as well as similarities between the national contexts in which Irish migration history unfolded. Proximity and politics dictated that Ireland and the Irish posed a direct threat to British political sovereignty in a way the American Irish never did to the United States, and this obviously had a significant influence on how the Irish were perceived. Still, insofar as Irish migration is concerned, the United States and Britain represent nationally specific variations on common themes. This essay examines one of the most controversial of these themes—the emergence of a distinctive form of anti-Irish racial sentiment on both sides of the Atlantic in the nineteenth century. In the American case, it is argued, the key to understanding this sentiment lies in the history of Irish collective violence, enacted in the context of a racial hierarchy defined by the existence of chattel slavery.

This essay takes a new look at a familiar image: that of the Irish savage, or ape-man. Descriptions of the Irish as inherently savage stood at one extreme of a wide spectrum of representation, much of it relatively mild and some of it richly comic. There were many images of the Irish in currency in the nineteenth century. These included the tall, respectable, northern Protestant farmer; the dull-witted but comic and harmless “Pat” or “Mick” with his Irish bulls and illogical banter; the somewhat menacing “Pat” or “Paddy” with his projecting mouth and jaw; and the full-blown simianized “Paddy,” who in Perry Curtis’s words “looked like a cross between monstrous ape and primitive man, owing to his high and hairy upper lip or muzzle, concave nose, low facial angle, and sharp teeth,” and whose “destructive instincts were engraved on every line of his body.” This version of “Paddy,” Curtis argued, starkly portrayed the Irish as racially inferior to Anglo-Saxons—an inferiority inscribed in

their phenotype and manifested in acts of savagery. By concentrating almost exclusively on this extreme image, to the exclusion of more benign varieties, Curtis may have given the impression that this was the *only* way that Englishmen saw Irishmen, or at least that they saw them this way most of the time. In the revised edition of *Apes and Angels*, he acknowledged as much by mapping out the wider spectrum of representation just alluded to. But not before his work had ignited a firestorm of controversy among historians.<sup>2</sup>

Citing images of the sort Curtis presented, some historians detected a racism that was apparently no different from that inflicted in the Americas on people of African descent. Others, however, insisted that the satirical distortions of political cartoons should not blind us to the fact that anti-Irish sentiment was really about economics, or religion, or politics—or anything but race. Today this seems like a false opposition, an unnecessary choice. There were many reasons why people disliked the Irish: their poverty and manners, their physical appearance, their perceived indolence, their relation to alcohol, their religion, their capacity for criminality or collective violence. But what these different forms had in common was that they could be, and were, expressed both verbally and visually in the language of race. Race is a powerful way of interpreting the world and explaining how it works. Victorian Englishmen and Gilded Age Americans presumably did not believe that the Irish actually *were* gorillas, but they found it effective to describe the Irish and their actions in ape-like terms. In other words, the language of race—whether verbal or visual—tells us less about why some people hated other people than about *how* they hated them. The detractors of the Irish did not hate the Irish because they were apes; they described them as apes because doing so could be a devastatingly effective mode of explanation and condemnation.

The term “race” carried no single meaning in the nineteenth century, and its valences changed over time. Americans and Englishmen often used the term loosely, to denote peoplehood. They sometimes used it in a specific scientific sense, whether environmental, phrenological, physiognomic, or hereditary. In this essay, one quite specific and readily identifiable meaning is at stake: race as a particular mode of social perception and representation that casts the world and its peoples in terms of fixed, hereditary group characteristics, discernible in physical appearance, which can explain and predict behavior. The closest equivalent in nineteenth-century terms was the science, or pseudo-science, of physiognomy: the belief that physical, and especially facial, features expressed the true character of men and women.

Race in this sense was an undeniable feature of the stark, and still shocking, forms of anti-Irish sentiment in the nineteenth-century Atlantic world. Several historians of the Irish in Britain have examined this question, as have several historians of the Irish in the United States, but these two schools of scholarship have rarely engaged each other. They deal with the same types of people, during the same period—people who originated in the same country and dispersed across the same Atlantic world—yet the artificial barriers of national history have produced quite separate, and barely related, stories. Bringing the American and British stories together, while also allowing for their differences, helps clarify what is useful and what is not about race as a category of analysis in Irish migration history.



When *Harper's Weekly* ran this cartoon on 21 October 1876, Fenians had been replaced by the Clan na Gael as the power behind Irish nationalism in America. But even without the moniker "Champion of the Fenians," little more than his facial features were needed to indicate this gentleman's ethnicity. From the 1830s the Irish had regularly been dehumanized—first in verbal descriptions, then in illustrations such as this one—depicted with ape-like faces and characterized as racially inferior to Americans of Anglo-Saxon origin. (Mick Moloney Irish American Collection)

# I

The forms of racial representation under consideration had a relatively brief heyday, stretching at most from the 1840s through the 1880s, with some prefiguration before that and some faint echoes thereafter. They reached a peak in the 1850s, 1860s, and 1870s. That these three decades should coincide with the worldwide dispersal of some three million Irish migrants is hardly a coincidence. The expression of racial sentiment against the Irish in Britain and the United States was in large part an adjustment to the shock of their presence, and the particular form this sentiment took was determined by developments in the otherwise unrelated fields of natural history and Irish political history: the controversy ignited in the 1860s by Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* and the rise of militant physical force nationalism with the Fenians. The simianization of "Paddy" had begun before then, as had the natural scientists' debate over

the ancestry of man. But both crystallized in the 1860s. If gorillas were now to be man's closest relative, then some breeds of men might at least be closer to them than others.<sup>3</sup>

The Irish immigrants of the mid-nineteenth century were certainly the poorest and most disadvantaged the United States had seen. While prejudice has a way of producing its own statistics, the Irish of the famine era topped the charts in figures for arrest, imprisonment, and confinement in poorhouses and mental hospitals in both the United States and Britain.<sup>4</sup>

Immigrants accounted for a higher proportion of the U.S. population in the 1840s and 1850s than ever before or since, and the Irish made up between one-third and one-half of the total flow. Because they settled in towns and cities, the American Irish—and not the slightly more numerous but more rural Germans—came to symbolize immigration and its attendant problems. They, and not the Germans, became the primary target of nativist, or anti-immigrant, sentiment. Many native-born Americans came to believe that this vast pool of impoverished unskilled labor threatened the welfare of the republic. Unable or unwilling to move upward through the social scale, the Irish poor heralded the arrival of forms of class stratification and social conflict that were considered typical of Europe, not America. Were such people, the nativists asked, really fit candidates for American citizenship and assimilation?

At the heart of the antipathy toward the new arrivals was their religion. In the generation before the Civil War, the Roman Catholic Church was transformed from an insignificant, genteel, largely southern and French-dominated institution into the largest single Christian denomination in the United States. Would these new Americans be loyal to the United States or to Rome? asked the American nativists. Were they capable of thinking independently on matters of religion and politics, or were they beholden to their priests? (This question conveniently ignored that Protestant immigrants tended to vote in a bloc for the Whig or Republican Party to the same extent as Catholics voted Democrat.) Was the hierarchical and authoritarian structure of the Roman Catholic Church compatible with basic republican values? Surely, the nativists argued, the self-governing structure of Protestant denominations was inherently more American. Furthermore, why did Irish Catholics want to organize their own schools instead of sending their children through the new public system that stood as one of the crowning glories of America's experiment in republican democracy? The presence of the Irish in America raised big questions, then, just as their presence in Britain raised a similar but distinctive set of questions in the United Kingdom. Because these questions had to do with labor, social conditions, politics, and religion, some historians have argued that race is irrelevant or at best peripheral in explaining anti-Irish sentiment. But does one really have to choose in so stark a manner, and does this choice do justice to the historical evidence?

In developing an answer to this question, Americanists might benefit from reviewing the strengths and weaknesses of an earlier debate about the Irish and race in British historiography. In *Apes and Angels*, Perry Curtis took as his subject "the gradual but unmistakable transformation of Paddy, the stereotypical Irish Celt of the mid-nineteenth century, from a drunken and relatively harmless

ape-man or simianized agitator." "In cartoons and caricatures, as well as in prose," Curtis argued, this fearsome figure of Paddy, came to resemble "the chimpanzee, the orangutan, and, finally, the gorilla."<sup>5</sup>

Sheridan Gilley's forceful critique of the Curtis thesis, published in 1978, was apparently quite influential at the time, but it does not stand up very well today. Gilley began by drawing a fundamental distinction between contemporary anti-black racism and nineteenth-century anti-Irish attitudes—something that Curtis, an "American liberal" blinded by the contemporary history of race in his own country, had allegedly been unable to do. For Gilley the matter was straightforward: equating what he called "anti-Negro racism" with "English dislike of the Victorian Irish" simply ignored "objective differences of race." "A Negro," he insisted "is identifiable at once: a 'Celt' does not have this separate racial character so visibly stamped upon him." The Irish, in other words, were not a race, because their skin color or physical appearance did not differ significantly from that of their putative Anglo-Saxon oppressors, who were themselves a motley crew. And, because they were not a race, they could not have suffered racism.<sup>6</sup>

Whatever about its plausibility a quarter-century ago, this formulation ignores what most historians today take as their starting point: *all* racial types are human inventions, and skin color in itself signifies nothing until, historically, it is made to do so. That this process may be stretched over centuries or millennia rather than decades should not place it beyond the grasp of a nineteenth-century historian. Unless, that is, race is held to stand outside history altogether and the inferiority of dark skin or physical difference asserts itself the moment it is perceived. Gilley was correct, in an obvious sense, to point out that the absence of what he called "an objective criterion of race like skin colour" made discussions of anti-Irish or anti-Celtic racial prejudice ambiguous and difficult.<sup>7</sup> But his response to this difficulty was to jettison the concept of race altogether, whereas Curtis had responded by trying hard to determine the racial content of the rich store of images he had unearthed in his research. If, as Gilley charged, Curtis's scheme was sometimes too rigid and all-encompassing, Curtis did at least directly confront the challenge his sources presented. Gilley, by contrast, sought to explain that challenge away.

If race was not the issue, then why did the British dislike the Irish so much? Gilley acknowledged a "fleeting," "euphoric" moment of Anglo-Saxon hereditarian racism in the 1860s, but he insisted that anti-Irish sentiment was at bottom political, social, cultural, or religious—again, anything but racial. To the extent that the Victorian English disliked the Irish, he concluded, the main reason was "the Irish rejection of English values," specifically religious and political ones. The Irish, after all, were Catholics, and they kept going on about constitutional autonomy, or even in some cases political independence. "Romanism and the revolutionary temper," as Gilley put it, were the true cause of English antipathy toward the Irish, and these were manifestly "non-racial factors."<sup>8</sup>

In retrospect at least, the weakness in this argument is clear: regardless of its origins, the antipathy in question could, and plainly did, assume a racial form. Even so restrained a contemporary critic as Gearóid O'Tuathaigh, who shared some of Gilley's discomfort with Curtis's intrusion into British historiography, found Gilley's rebuttal

unpersuasive. "There was," O'Tuathaigh wrote, "an almost universal tendency from the 1840s onwards to describe the immigrant Irish and their problems in distinctly racial terms. . . . While the ineluctable fact of colour is missing here, it is still difficult to describe this kind of language as other than racial."<sup>9</sup>

Without conceding this minimal threshold of racial sentiment, how is one to explain the extent and character of anti-Irish prejudice? Given that all stereotypes about national character contain truth as well as falsity, Gilley asked, "can a prejudice be so called when what it alleges is true?" Not only did the Irish have deplorably bad taste in religion and politics, they lived in squalor, dressed in rags, and actually "looked like savages," as everyone from Froude to Engels attested. The English stereotype of the Irishman, in short, "rested on a body of social fact, however misinterpreted": rural squalor in Ireland, slums and criminal statistics abroad, a predilection for violence and drink everywhere. It is no wonder, Gilley concluded, that "so unlikeable a body was actively disliked." And one hardly needed to invoke "racial prejudice" to explain why this was so.<sup>10</sup> Unless, that is, the prejudice happened to be expressed in racial form—which is why Curtis wrote his book in the first place.

While Curtis's conception of race surely emerged strengthened rather than diminished in light of criticisms of this sort, he did acknowledge some of its flaws in the revised edition of 1997. The original book had been concerned primarily with the extreme form of anti-Irish racism, and to the extent that it had implied that this was the only image deployed against the Irish, *Apes and Angels* was partial and misleading. Moreover, as Roy Foster argued in his analysis of Irish imagery in *Punch* magazine, much of the material Curtis had drawn upon was plainly satirical and needed to be read as such. It was a matter of caricature, not sociology, and hence it ought not to be treated as though it were a literal account of English Victorian attitudes toward the Irish. Nor was it surprising, Foster suggested, that some Victorian Englishmen thought of the Irish in brutish terms, for portraying the plebeian and the foreign in dark or brutish terms was standard practice on both sides of the Atlantic in the nineteenth century.<sup>11</sup>

Yet a significant distinction is needed here. French simians, as Curtis pointed out in his response to Foster's criticism, may well have been commonplace; but they appeared as dandified monkeys, not as savage gorillas. The British poor and working classes may have been brutalized by their detractors, but they were not dehumanized nearly to the extent of the "Celtic Calibans." The extreme, full-blown simian Paddy was a uniquely bestialized and racialized figure. Why, then, was this particular form applied to the Irish, and apparently to them alone? And why was it applied in America as well as in Britain?<sup>12</sup>

## II

That the Irish, alone among European immigrant groups in the mid-nineteenth century, were subject to forms of racial caricature is a proposition generally accepted by historians of the United States. To the extent that this proposition has won grudging acceptance among British historians as well, the most convincing explanations point

to the effect of Irish nationalism in Britain, especially its extreme and violent forms. Gilley and Curtis agreed that anti-Irish sentiment in Britain peaked at times of Irish political agitation, whether Fenianism or the Phoenix Park murders—the only difference being that Gilley saw this correlation as proof of the priority of politics over race, whereas Curtis, more convincingly, detected a racial response to political agitation. While this response often came in the form of caricature, political cartoons nonetheless surely served a serious political purpose, as Peter Gray has demonstrated in his analysis of *Punch* and the Great Famine.<sup>13</sup>

The problem is that Irish nationalism cannot provide an explanation for the emergence of a similar type of anti-Irish racialism in the United States. Irish nationalism directly threatened the sovereignty of the United Kingdom, but it had no such influence on American life.<sup>14</sup> Another tradition of Irish violence—collective and social, and transplanted to America from the Irish countryside—did pose a direct threat to American social order, in a way that never applied in Britain to nearly the same extent. The United States also presented a distinctive racial and political context, one where chattel slavery survived until 1865 and where race, consequently, shaped the meaning of freedom and democracy in a direct and pervasive manner. These two considerations—the nature of violence and of race in the United States—call for a particular form of historical explanation that significantly distinguishes the American from the British case.

While nationalism was central to the emergence of anti-Irish racial sentiment in Britain, it was peripheral in the United States. Irish nationalism certainly had a prominent American dimension, as is well known. All of the major Irish nationalist movements since the 1790s have had American branches or offshoots, some of them peaceful and gradual in the constitutionalist tradition, others sanctioning violence in pursuit of a full-fledged republic.<sup>15</sup> The American Irish are generally better known for the latter tradition, even if the former has always been dominant. New York City, the home of John Devoy, was the principal center of Irish physical-force nationalism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Furthermore, America was the launching ground for dynamite campaigns in Britain in the 1880s, for collaboration with the Germans during World War I, for significant gunrunning in the 1970s and 1980s, and for massive financial contributions throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. But while Irish Americans gained the reputation, partly deserved, of supporting extremism with reckless detachment, Irish nationalism—even in its violent forms—never posed a threat to the sovereignty of the United States the way it did to the United Kingdom and the British Empire. The Irish never exploded bombs in American cities, even if they sometimes planned their British bombing campaigns from Boston, Chicago, or New York.

Ethnic nationalism did raise troubling questions of divided loyalty in the United States. On which side of the hyphen, Irish or American, would the immigrants come down? And when that nationalism involved support for physical force, as with the Fenians or the dynamiters of the 1880s, it reinforced a prevailing racist sentiment that the Irish were by nature an inherently violent people. But retaining—or acquiring—an ethnic identity, far from hindering assimilation, was actually a precondition to becoming American. Many such ethnic identities—whether Irish-American,

Italian-American, Lithuanian-American, or Cuban-American—contained a nationalist component. Furthermore, the moderate forms of ethnic nationalism that predominated often served American ends, as Thomas N. Brown argued in the Irish case, enhancing the immigrants' respectability and demonstrating their political skills and their capacity for citizenship.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, even if the support of a vocal minority of immigrants for physical force nationalism enflamed anti-Irish sentiment in America, the critical point is that this sentiment was already firmly entrenched. How, then, had it originated?

Its origins in nineteenth-century America lay partly in the broad social, economic, and religious determinants of the famine era. But there was another, quite specific cause: the Irish tradition of collective violence. In the United States, the real grounds for concern were not so much the Fenians or the followers of O'Donovan Rossa as the numerous gangs, riots, secret societies, and general social turbulence with which the immigrant Irish were associated. The American Irish, for a generation on either side of the Famine, suffered from an alarming variety of social pathologies. Nativists may have exaggerated some of the problems, but the poverty and deprivation—and the social problems they gave rise to—were real enough. Among other things, the American Irish became notorious for their rough and boisterous culture. But there was much more going on than drinking, carousing, and urban gang life. Only the most blinkered historian could deny that the American Irish engaged in sustained and sometimes spectacular episodes of collective social and political violence throughout the nineteenth century. This side of Irish life in America had nothing at all to do with nationalist politics, but in the eyes of nativists it posed a serious threat to the stability of the United States and cast grave doubts on the suitability of the Irish as citizens in a democratic republic. This threat called forth an explanation of the violence cast in terms of fixed attributes of Irish character that were ostensibly discernible in physical appearance—in other words, a racial explanation.

To the extent that collective violence determined racial perceptions of the American Irish, it should be noted that this violence was by definition largely and often exclusively male. A full account of anti-Irish racial perception would require extensive consideration of how Irish-American women were perceived as well, especially in the already racialized form of labor for which they were best known and which they shared with African Americans: domestic service. There is some evidence that the racial response to the rough culture of Irish-American men was extended to cover women as well, with one famous image comparing Florence Nightingale with her Irish counterpart, "Bridget McBruiser."<sup>17</sup>

In both men's and women's history, labor is the best starting point. The story of Irish-American labor is bound up with the story of race, but with a significant twist: it involves not just racial sentiment directed against the Irish but also the forms of racism deployed against Americans of African and Asian origin. As labor history is the key, it will be useful first to clarify what it was like to be a working-class Irish American in the mid-nineteenth century, and what forms of discrimination and prejudice working-class Irish immigrants did and did not endure.

Richard Jensen has recently argued that "No Irish Need Apply" signs may actually be one of the great myths of Irish-American history. No historian, at any rate, has ever

372 held one of these... Jensen implausibly infers from this absence of evidence that the American Irish therefore encountered no real prejudice at all, a conclusion that no historian of the field endorses. But his basic point about labor is a good one: demand for unskilled male heavy labor and unskilled female domestic labor in the nineteenth century was simply too great for the Irish to have suffered much by way of anti-hiring discrimination, racial or otherwise. As for skilled jobs: Irish immigrants lacked the qualifications for them rather than being excluded from work they might otherwise have done. To the theory of discrimination, then, must be added the fact that, more than any other immigrant group in the mid-nineteenth century, the Irish arrived in America and Britain without marketable skills. The tendency of the Irish to work at low wages in unskilled labor, along with their use as strikebreakers, led to considerable hostility from native-born American workers. But Irish Americans were not generally consigned to those positions by discrimination, whether legal or informal.<sup>18</sup>

Irish Americans quickly came to harbor strikingly similar sentiments against African Americans and Chinese Americans, lashing out at their use as strikebreakers and their apparent willingness to work for low wages. In the period up through the Civil War, Catholic Irish immigrants steadfastly opposed the abolition of slavery, convinced that it would lead to an influx of cheap black labor into northern cities, undermining their hard-won but still precarious niche in the economy. To build and protect that niche, they tried to drive African Americans out of work on the docks and in other forms of manual labor, replaced them in domestic service, and forced them out of neighborhoods like the Five Points section of New York City. Deep-rooted tensions between Irish and black workers, aggravated by the Emancipation Proclamation and the Conscription Act of 1863, exploded in violence in July of that year on the streets of New York. Irish workers lashed out against symbols of power and privilege in the city, especially those connected with the federal government, conscription, and the anti-slavery Republican Party. They harassed, beat, and lynched African Americans and burned the Colored Orphan Asylum to the ground.

Contemporary nativists, who had good reason to exaggerate, estimated the number killed in the riots at between twelve hundred and fifteen hundred. The official police figure of 119 dead is probably too low, but that would still make it, until recent reckoning, the worst riot in American history.<sup>19</sup> Only seven years later, massive Irish violence once again rocked New York City, this time involving internecine ethnic conflict rather than an anti-black uprising.

Irish Protestants had been holding parades in American cities on July 12 since the early nineteenth century, and there had been limited violence between these "Orange-men" and their Catholic opponents during several such celebrations. When the two sides clashed in 1870, at least nine men were killed and as many as 150 were injured. A year later, when Irish Catholics attacked the parade with stones, missiles, and gunfire, troops opened fire on the mob killing at least sixty and injuring about one hundred more.<sup>20</sup> Elite native-born Protestant northerners responded to the Irish racial violence of 1863 and 1870 with a racism of their own, producing some of the most sustained and virulent anti-Irish sentiment in American history. In this way, the racist Irish were themselves reduced to the level of the animal kingdom. In the wake of the draft riots,

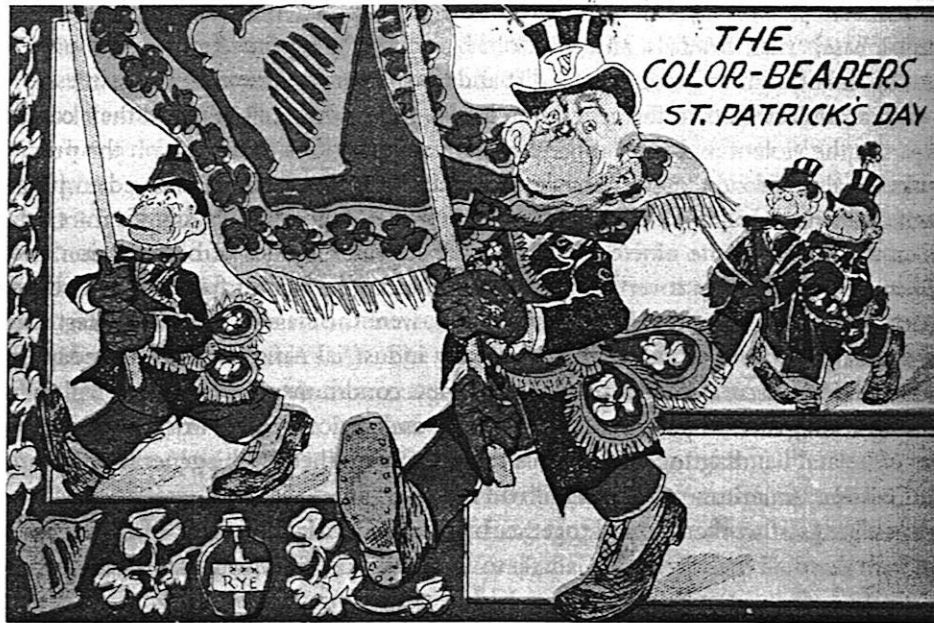
labeled by "creatures that crawl and eat dirt and poison every community they infest."<sup>21</sup>

Irish anti-black riots in the generation leading up to the Civil War had their counterpart in the violent and often secretive labor organizations that arose on the public works, canals, railroads, and mining communities where Irish laborers found employment. As a predominantly rural country, Ireland did not have a significant trade union movement in the nineteenth century. Instead, its modes of organization and protest were marked by covert activity and violence: the faction fight and the secret society, rather than negotiation and arbitration, were the classic forms of protest. On the canals, public works, and railroads of early industrial America, the Irish adapted their traditions of rural violent protest to the new conditions they faced. 373

At first, the patterns of affiliation were local and regional, with workers from one part of Ireland banding together against those from another. In the generation before the Civil War, American canal and railroad construction projects saw frequent clashes between gangs of workers bound together by county of origin. Reports of their activities were heard all the way from Canada to New Orleans. They fought each other not for the fun of it, as the prevailing anti-Irish stereotype suggested, but in a desperate struggle for access to employment, with each side attempting to drive the other off the job. They also retaliated against bosses who were late in paying them by destroying the work they had done, a tactic strikingly reminiscent of the pattern of violence in contemporary Ireland whereby the rural poor tore down fences or dug up pastureland overnight to restore it for potato cultivation. Just as in Ireland, tightly organized secret societies soon emerged in Irish immigrant communities on the canal and railroad works—bearing names like "Whiteboys" and "Ribbonmen"; deploying the familiar paraphernalia of handgrips, passwords, recognition signs, oaths of secrecy and coffin notices; and using direct and brutal violence as their favored strategy in labor disputes. This adaptation of Irish rural protest strategies to early American industrial conditions reached its tragic finale in the case of the "Molly Maguires," twenty of whom were hanged in the Pennsylvania anthracite region in the 1870s after having been convicted of sixteen murders.<sup>22</sup>

Episodes of this kind greatly reinforced the notion that the Irish were a uniquely violent people. To make sense of this violence, the historian needs to move beyond two poles of interpretation. On the one hand, hostile contemporaries tended to reduce groups like the "Whiteboys," "Ribbonmen," and "Molly Maguires" to the level of depraved killers who engaged in violence largely for the sake of it, that being the sort of people the Irish were. On the other hand, the American Irish undeniably did engage in collective social and political violence on a significant scale in the nineteenth century; they were not merely the innocent victims of oppression, whether economic, religious, or ethnic. The historian's task is to acknowledge and try to explain the violence that did take place, while at the same time treating contemporary explanations by nativists, corporate capitalists, and trial lawyers with the skepticism they deserve.<sup>23</sup>

The first part of this twofold task, explaining the nature of the violence, is not at issue here; the second, analyzing anti-Irish sentiment, is the main theme and



By the turn of the twentieth century, Irish Americans had generally succeeded in improving their public image—indeed the “Stage Irishman” had all but met his demise in the theatre—when new forms of popular culture provided a vehicle for old stereotypes. In silent cinema and penny postcards, such as this 1905 example by the New York printer Arthur Livingston, the simianized Irishman breathed anew, accompanied by iconography that was becoming increasingly hackneyed in non-Irish hands. (Mick Moloney Irish American Collection)

discussion. In Pennsylvania, hostile contemporaries responded to the violence of the Molly Maguires by detaching it from any rational or causal context. As a result, the violence was deprived not simply of a legitimating cause (whether social, economic, or political) but of social or historical explanation of any kind. Instead, it was presented as a fixed attribute of the Irish people, an unchanging essence that stood outside historical time altogether. Thus originated the myth of the Molly Maguires.

But where does race fit into this explanatory scheme? A discourse that posits innate, timeless savagery as a national attribute sounds awfully like a racial discourse. But is race really useful or necessary in this case? To answer that question, the historian needs to stake out a position on the recent, highly influential debate on “whiteness.”<sup>24</sup>

### III

Historians in the last decade have embarked on an intensive study of Irish racism and racial identity in the nineteenth-century United States. The thesis on “how the Irish became white” was put forth first (and best) by David Roediger in his study of the antebellum era, *The Wages of Whiteness*, and it has since been applied to American history and culture at large. The Irish, it is argued, arrived in the United States with-

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