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Irish-American History

The post-World War II period ushered in a new era in American history. For the American Irish working class – as for many other Americans – everything changed. The GI Bill, enacted in 1944, enabled many veterans to attend college, thus gaining an education that opened doors to new and better opportunities. Just as the post-World War II era ushered in an unprecedented age of affluence, it also marked the beginning of a transformation throughout urban America that forever changed the Irish neighborhoods of the prewar period.

As a mainly rural country, Ireland did not have a noteworthy trade union movement in the nineteenth century. It did, however, have a strong tradition of faction fighting and secret-society violence, many signs of which emerged on the canals and railroads and in the mines of North America. In both Canada and the United States, there were Irish faction fighters with names like “Corkonians, Fardowners, and Connaughtmen and secret societies like the Ribbonmen, the Whiteboys, and, most infamously, the Molly Maguires of Pennsylvania” (Kenny 160). Kenny further observed that “between 1910 and 1910, fully 50 of the 110 affiliate unions of the American Federation of Labor had Irish-American president” (160). The Irish went on to play a central role in the labor movement during the century that followed.

In the postwar era, the history of Irish America is one primarily concerned with the advance and assimilation of Irish Americans already in the United States. After World War II there were just two decades of significant Irish immigration to the United States – the 1950s and

the 1980s; immigration would never again reach the numbers or public presence of the late nineteenth century.

This decrease in the influx of new immigrants further loosened ties to an Old World heritage that had been receding with every generation, as the Irish became more and more American. Even the symbolic register of their ethnic identity – Catholicism – had since the end of World War II become a primary marker of their Americanism. During (Irish American) Senator Joseph McCarthy's high-profile crusade against communism in the 1950s Catholicism was established as the antithesis to communism and, as such, became for the Irish Americans the very marker of their American identity. With John F. Kennedy's ascension to the American presidency in 1960s (Kenny 275), Irish Americans achieved full acceptance as Americans, and Catholicism became the symbol of both their American and ethnic identity. By the time of Kennedy's assassination in Dallas, Texas, on November 22, 1963, Catholicism had become an American religion and the Irish Americans had firmly become American (276).

After World War II Irish power in municipal politics had faded. With the exception of Richard J. Daley in Chicago (mayor from 1955 until his death in 1976), the Irish municipal machine had succumbed to factors such as the loosening of ethnic ties and the rise of new immigrant communities. Along with this, their symbiotic relationship with the Democratic Party, which had seen them advance from foreigner to citizens, had also begun to dissolve. No longer synonymous with the Democratic Party, as Irish Americans ascended into middle- and upper-class society their politics became correspondingly more conservative. By 1980 a majority of American Catholics voted Republican, helping to elect Ronald Reagan as president.

As their relationship to Catholicism and the Democratic Party changed, so too did their relationship to nationalism. While Irish Americans continued to contribute to the cause of

nationalism in Ireland in the postwar era, the form of that contribution changed significantly as the century progressed. Ireland's neutrality in World War II had upset Irish Americans and led to a decline in interest in Irish affairs; however, the start of the Troubles in Northern Ireland in the late 1960s brought a renewed interest in Irish nationalism in the U.S (Kenny 199). The American Congress for Irish Freedom was founded in 1967; the National Association for Irish Justice in 1969; and the most famous of these organizations, the Northern Ireland Aid Committee or NORAID was founded in the 1970. Founded to assist the victims of violence in Northern Ireland, including political prisoners and their families, NORAID was repeatedly accused of sending guns to the Irish Republican Army.

Concerned that violence was not an answer, the "Four Horsemen" of Irish American politics – Edward Kennedy, 'Tip' O'Neil, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, and Hugh Carey – worked closely with the Social Democratic Labor Party's John Hume in the 1970s to find a political approach that would offer an alternative to violence. Though the hunger strikes of the early 1980s briefly escalated Irish American interest in physical-force nationalism and led to a resurgence in support for NORAID, by the mid-1980s (with Sinn Fein's Gerry Adams's recognition that a political campaign could support the republican agenda) interest in both Ireland and the United States had turned toward finding a possible political solutions to the troubles in Northern Ireland. This would lead to the declaration of cease-fires by the IRA in the 1990s, which would culminate in the Belfast (or Good Friday) Agreement in May 1998. President Clinton was one of the chief architects in bringing about this agreement and it remains his legacy, one that he still works to preserve.

Works Cited

Kenny, Kevin. *The American Irish: A History*. London and New York, 2000. Print.

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