

St. Patrick's Day in the USA

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Dr Laura Laubeová

St. Patrick's Day in the USA

How the Immigrants' Culture became popular

Bernd Ostermayer

Ernst-Derra-Str. 41,
40225 Düsseldorf

Bernd.Ostermayer@uni-duesseldorf.de

+49 211 545 18 01

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Introduction

Quite obviously, 17 March of each year goes green, at least if Americans are close. It occurs, Americans have a special occasion to feast. One might be surprised, the occasion is actually Irish.

How could history develop such an oddity, that 300 Millions celebrate an occasion that refers to the national saint of a mere 4 Millions, in a country dozens of thousands kilometers away? Even if almost 30 percent of the Americans claim Irish ancestry, all the others see no obstacle to join them in parades and become *Irish for a day*. To enlightened these chain of events, I will discuss it from the very beginning.

1. The Saint

It must be mentioned that because of the religious meaning of the story, and since one of the most important sources is Patrick's biography "Confessio", biographical data cannot be clearly distinguished from myths and Catholic historians who were always influenced by the official dogma.

St Patrick was born in the 4th century in England, although according to other sources he might equally have had his birthplace in Wales or France. Historians do suspect that it might have been two persons, Patrick and Palladius, who historically were "melted" into one (cf. O'Rahilly 1942). The information about Patrick are actually so contradictory that "he might not have existed at all." (Eagleton 1989:137)

In his early childhood he was abducted by Irish raiders and traded to Ireland as a slave. He was used for simple work such as shepherding. Living an almost eremite life in the countryside, he was enlightened by a prophetic dream after several years. He ran away from slavery to Britain but returned "more than fifteen years...[later] ...After his ordination as a priest, he was sent to Ireland with a dual mission—to minister to Christians already living in Ireland and to begin to convert the Irish " (History Channel 2006). There he wrote against slavery and converted the Irish, who at that time were mostly members of rural cults. His death date was relatively unquestioned before the 20th century and believed to have been March 17, 461. Although Patrick was not the first missionary to Ireland, he was probably the most important one. Since canonizations were usually not performed by the

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Catholic church before the 900s, Patrick was believed to be a very holy person relatively early after his death but was never officially canonized by the Pope. Since Christianity and the end of slavery were very progressive steps in Ireland, the population considered him *the* national saint (nowadays together with St. Brigid and St. Columba) (cf Catholic Online, Wikipedia a)

2. The Holiday in Ireland

Since his death, Patrick's anniversary is on the 17th of March and therefore usually in the period of Christian Lent between Ash Wednesday and Easter. Still, Lent is always waived in Catholic tradition on the *first class* holidays (e.g. on every Sunday – although not known by many Catholics). Patrick's meaning in the Irish Catholic church was so high, that very soon after his death the feast of his anniversary was celebrated one of these first class holidays.

The traditional way of spending the holiday involved going to the church in the morning and after that eating lunch with the family. Because of the Lent season and the last days of winter which were just passing, fresh meat and vegetables were rare. Cabbage and “Irish” bacon became very popular as a traditional St Patrick's meal.

There was no social life outside the family involved in the holiday tradition, except for the morning service. Until the 1970s even pubs were closed on March 17th (as they were on Sundays afternoon generally) (Böll 1956).

3. Emigration

From the 18th century on, Irish people began to move to America. The first group of mass migration were *Scotch-Irish* i.e. people from the families King George had sent to Ireland as settlers to establish the power of the crown. Their ancestors were mostly from Scotland. One source of permanent quarrel between those Scottish settlers and the Irish population was religion: the settlers were members of the Presbyterian church. Being the minority in the region of Ulster, they tried to find a more peaceful life in the new world. This group of immigrants is nowadays still referred to as Scots- or Scotch-Irish Americans, whereas the Catholic group is referred to as Irish-American. Scots-Irish settlers mostly moved to the northern part of the *Colonies* and Canada.

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After the British waived the limitation on legal emigration from Ireland in 1835 and in the years of the great potato famine (1840s) the Catholic Irish from the area of the today's Republic of Ireland started to move to the United States in greater numbers. In this decade half of the immigrants to the States were from Ireland (although the mortality rate of the migrants was higher than of those who remained in Ireland). The Catholic Irish settled mostly in the East Coast Area, many in Boston and New York City (Library of Congress *a*) (cf image 1). Usually they could only afford very small rooms in the suburbs where many families often lived together in small houses without toilet facilities.

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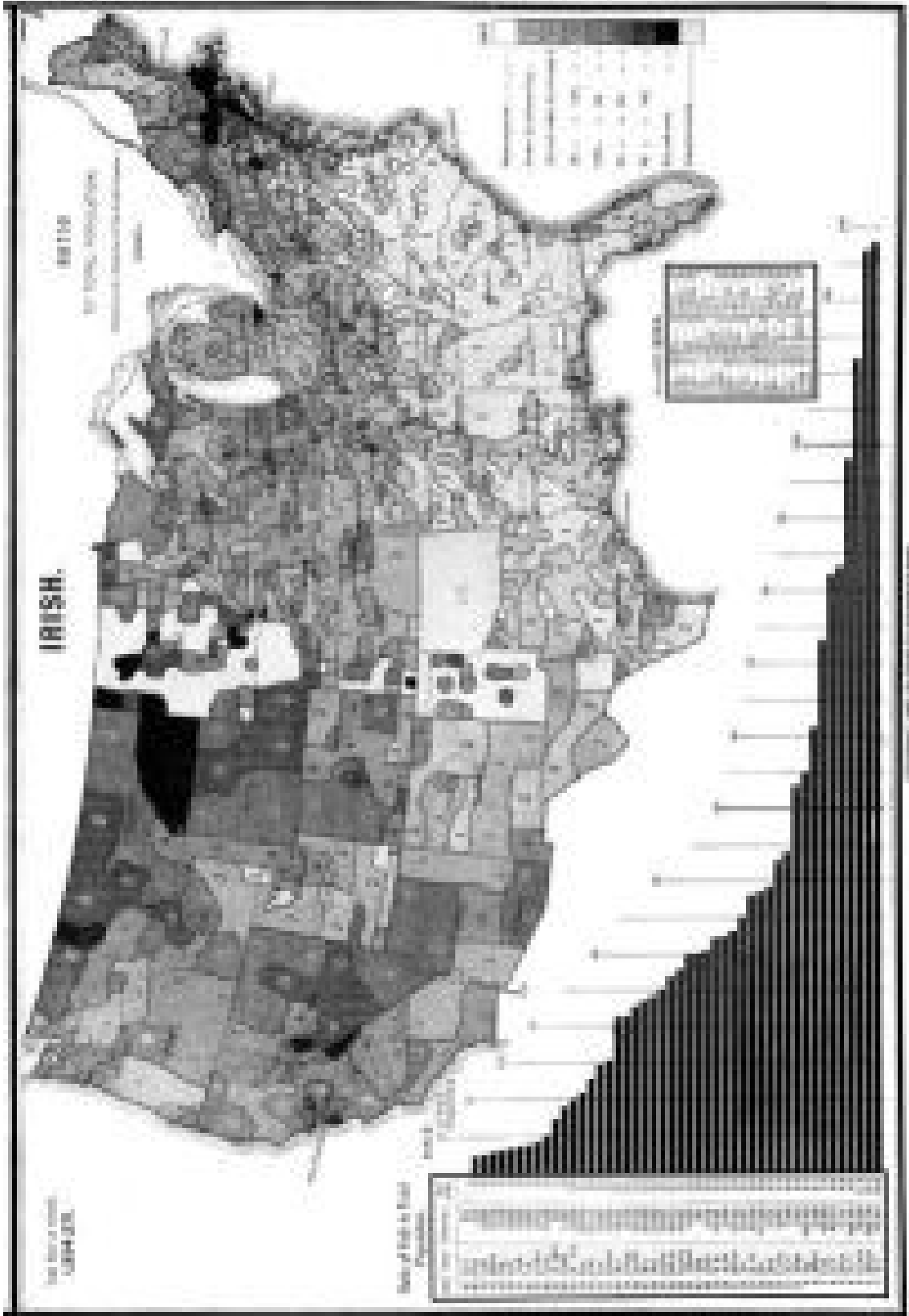


Image I: ratio of Irish settlers in USA

5. Religious Discrimination

Apart from prejudices due to the Irish-Catholic settlers' housing conditions religion became a cause of discrimination. Of course, the huge number of Irish settlers frightened the naturalized Americans and religious difference seemed a perfect distinguisher between the *gratae* old Protestant immigrants and the *non gratae* new Catholics. It must be seen in the context that at this time in America Catholics were the absolute minority: only 50 out of more than 2,000 Christian churches were Catholic in 1775 (cf Parillo 1994:531) and Catholics were discriminated against in a similar way to Jews, "banning their immigration or right to vote" [ibid].

The Irish workforce was dominant in the areas they settled, since most of them would settle in urban areas and take work in steel mills, coal mines and other unqualified labour.

Xenophobic Americans founded parties like the nativist American Party, whose member could only become who was "native born citizens of America, of this Country to the exclusion of all Foreigners, and to all Roman Catholics, whether they be of native or Foreign Birth" (Library of Congress *b*). Although these parties and organizations tried hard to drive the Irish out of the States or at least out of good working positions, third and fourth generation Irish were well educated, successful and wealthy, the Kennedy family providing an excellent example.

6. St. Patrick's Day in the USA

Although the first Irish settlers to the American continent were mostly Protestant, they felt a certain connection towards celebrating St. Patrick's Day (SPD) as a sign of their "Irishness". Therefore, in the American War of Independence (1775-1783) British military forces tried to make the service attractive to Loyalists of Irish ancestry by organizing a military march on March 17th. In 1779, one march "consisted of ... Catholics in the British army, was led by its Protestant leader Colonel Lord Rawdon" (Cronin Mike, Daryl Adair 2002:11). "[T]hough Irish Americans were welcome to parade, they were obliged to do so on terms that were acceptable to Protestants" [ibid]. Although these parades are often mentioned as the first SPD's parades in America, they had not much in common what today is understood as a Paddy Parade. Those parades were strictly militarily organized

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and had no religious connotation so far. After the recruiting marches during the Independence War, parades were discontinued and the Irish (Protestant dominated) charitable societies mostly organized beneficial dinners on SPD mostly to the support of groups in Ireland. As public celebrations of that time, 4th of July was more important to all Americans, including those of Irish ancestry.

After 1800, situation began to turn. More and more Irish Catholics moved from the southern counties to Boston and New York (chain migration) since in the USA they were granted freedom of worship, whereas in Ireland they had been suppressed by the British Crown. By 1830, the Catholics had gained not only the vast majority of the current migrants, but also dominated the Irish charitable societies in the USA. So, in 1937, New York's Irish Support Committee decided that SPD should be celebrated more publicly (Cronin, Adair 2002:13). They involved the Irish American representative of the Catholic church and got a special permission to "breach" the Lenten observation. They organized a march to the church with the participation of the *Young Catholic Friends* and several representatives of the communal government [ibid]. Still, a feast dinner was the most important part of the celebrations and it was always organized as a fund-raising event for the benefit of Catholic Charitable Societies and church-operated corporations like orphanages. By then Irish Americans had gained a valuable position in US society, they celebrated SPD as a symbol of their connection with homeland.

In the years of the Great Famine (1845-1849) a vast number of new Irish immigrants came to America, who "were, yet again, stereotyped as economically backward and socially disfunctional [sic]" (Cronin, Adair 2002:34). Whereas the "old" Irish Catholics celebrated SPD with their posh dinner parties, collecting not less than \$105 per person – a hefty sum at that time – Famine immigrants were widely excluded by their economic situation, comparable to that of the others 50 years before. Therefore, they organized a populist SPD march, which was the true beginning of the SPD Parades nowadays. These marches were "important for promoting an Irish identity within America" but at the same time were "threatening and unnerving" for the Anglo-Protestant Americans (Cronin, Adair 2002:35).

In the 1850s, the Ancient Order of Hibernians (AOH), a well-organized corporation of Irish Americans, took place in the parade for the first time and by 1860 they had taken over the organization in New York and have controlled it ever since. "The modern organization of

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the AOH again raised the profile of St. Patrick's Day...By 1860, the New York parade included over 10,000 marchers..."[ibid].

7. Influence of the Struggle for Irish Independence

From the second half of the 19th century on, the Irish fight for independence from the British crown became more and more important and also visible in the US. Especially in New York the growing population of Irish ancestry provided "support and funds" for "[a]ll radical groups, such as the Fenians, Clan na Gael and the Land League" (Cronin, Adair 2002:65).

Although struggle for independence from Britain should have been familiar to America, the "Young Irelanders [i.e. the activists B.O.]" were "closely monitored" by American authorities [ibid]. In the late 1860s, there was (again) much criticism of the large sums spent on the parades and the inappropriate connection to the suffrage and hunger Ireland was suffering from:

Irishmen throughout America should serve their land well and nobly by taking example from these men. All demonstrations, banquets, etc., should be avoided, and every assistance given to redeem our country from its thralldom. If we do our duty at this crisis, on next St Patrick's Day we will be proud of our land and our race. No demonstration at this time, but work like men for Ireland.(Father Matthew Society 1867)

Though these pleas were unheard, SPD was too important to the community, especially to show the other ethnic groups of the population that the Irish Americans were too numerous and too important to shut their demands out of politics. SPD worked as a counterbalance to the nativist American Party and at the same time urged to influence the foreign policy of US government. The other demand of the parade was to show the numeric relation between the Catholics and the Protestants, who mostly were understood as anti-Catholic and Pro-British. Since the parades in New York, Boston, and Chicago were organized by the AOH, the manner and slogans often were insulting to the Anglo- and Irish-Protestants (cf Cronin, Adair 2002:68f).

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In the last two decades of the 19th century, though, the political struggle in Ireland needed more and more support, and as the anti-Catholic movement was still on the rise the parades had less backup in the US. Therefore, in the 1880s, parades were discontinued - even in Boston for several years - in favour of monetary donations to the Emerald Isle and completely abandoned in other cities, but with no effect on the New York parade.

After the turn of the century, support within America rose again, which may have been a sign of tolerance, and SPD became an event on the social calendar of the respective cities. More and more important to the celebrators was the issue of Home Rule, seeing themselves as the free Irish “whereas Ireland lay broken under the yoke of British rule”(Cronin, Adair: 2002:75).

The speeches at patrician charity dinners at that time were often dealt with the issue and at the same time helped the Irish American community to consolidate their business. Apart from the AOH several elite organisations were founded, eg. The Friendly Sons of Patrick, which consisted nearly exclusively of business owners and executives. The public celebration of SPD at the same time became more and more popular amongst Americans, as Shamrocks were imported from Ireland and grown in New York greenhouses to decorate the city on March 17th. Thereby it “helped redefine Irish Americans ... [and] served to push the Irish closer towards their American context and redefine themselves as Americans.”(Cronin, Adair 2002:76).

8. Politics in 20th Century

The Irish Americans were closely affiliated with the Democratic Party, whereas the Scots Irish were more Republican. In the 20th century, many representatives of the Democratic Party were of Irish ancestry or relation, most prominently John F. Kennedy. They were known to be “very well organized” and “since 1850 have produced a majority of the leaders of the Catholic Church in the U.S., labour unions, the Democratic party in larger cities, and Catholic high schools, colleges and universities.”(Wikipedia b)

Therefore SPD was generally used for addressing the US public and politicians by Irish representatives, for example once in 1969 the Irish ambassador visited Richard Nixon and “made a presentation of shamrock to the First Lady, Mrs Nixon, as the 17 March [*sic*] was the day on which she celebrated her birthday in line with her Irish father's wishes”.

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(Cronin/Adair 2002:213). President Nixon, as a thank you, “stated that all Americans 'are Irish for today'” [ibid] and was cheered not only by Irish American congressmen.

Apart from that, SPD was in the 1960s and '70s connected with the unwanted British presence in Northern Ireland. Amongst Irish Americans, the IRA and Sinn Féin had a lot of wealthy and noticeable supporters.

On the other hand, many Americans and Irish Americans rejected the use of violence in the Northern Irish conflict. This was clearly visible when Michael Flannery was elected Grand Marshal of the New York parade, who was affiliated with the Irish Northern Aid committee (NORAI), which was widely understood as an IRA support group.

During Flannery's serving not only former Grand Marshals stayed away from the parade, but also Cardinal Cooke, who openly stated his opposition by leaving St. Patrick's Cathedral's doors closed as the parade marched by.

During this conflict, succeeded by the one between Grand Marshal Peter King, a NORAI supporter, and Archbishop John J. O'Connor, not only the public audience on the street declined during SPD parade, but also the biggest sponsors, Aer Lingus and Bord Fáilte ceased their financial support (cf Cronin, Adair 2002:218).

Generally, SPD in the 90s more and more showed the alienation of Irish Americans and distinguished their own opinions from the country of their origin. For example it was heavily criticized by the AOH that the Irish government held no celebration on the 75th anniversary of the 1916 Rising whereas the SPD parade in New York was completely themed according to that important date of Irish independence.

Another point which showed the different views on everyday issues was the gay debate in New York and Boston, the latter case even brought the Boston organizational committee to Supreme Court, because they, like AOH in New York, denied the Irish Gay and Lesbian League the right to march within the parade. In Dublin, where the first SPD parade was held – in a rather American manner – in 1996, the local Gay and Lesbian League was involved from the very beginning as one of the marching groups. So to say, Ireland seems more progressive than Irish Americans, at least than the East Coasters. In New Orleans, where the parade was introduced in the 1930s, gay and lesbian marchers were welcome from the very beginning (cf Cronin, Adair 2002:210,222ff; Johnson 2006).

Conclusion

It so becomes obvious that the adaption of SPD by American society a quasi-American holiday and celebration was not a sudden change of attitude at all. Step by step and overfighting obstacles and prejudices, Irish community in the USA changed the world they live in. Even if it is only for one day per year, the longterm assimilation process the went through, was not a oneway process. American society changed, too, by their influence.

It has to be answered, yet, how far this example can be outstretched to other societies and other influencing minorities. Will Germany and France move Lent to Ramadan due to their Islamic immigrants? The situation, however, cannot be compared. American society was more a mosaic at the time the Irish manifested their culture there. US culture is a potpourri of the immigrants' cultures, mixed with a small part that was created there.

It is most unlikely, in my opinion, that similar event will occur in any other part of the world, so the transfer of SPD from Ireland (and partly back) is a most unique event in history. Still, it can serve as an example of the outcome of a long integration process.

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