

Thomas H. O'Connor, *The Boston Irish: A Political History*. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1995. 359 pp; ISBN 1-55553-220-9; hardcover; \$30.

America was late in industrializing. Industrialization only really began after the Government decided on an official policy of westward expansion. The 'conquest of the West' depended on an improvement and extension of the infrastructure, i.e. digging canals and putting down rails. In this period of territorial and industrial expansion, a new wave of Irish immigrants was to play a key role in supplying the necessary manpower.

When accounting for Irish immigration to the United States it is important to distinguish between different waves and groups who neither arrived at the same time nor followed the same patterns of settlement, adaptation and assimilation. Irish Protestants (mainly of Scottish descent), frustrated by the discrimination of Presbyterians in Ascendancy Ireland, started arriving even in the mid-18th century, peaking in the years after Wolfe Tone's failed republican rebellion in 1798. By contrast, Irish Catholic immigration did not get seriously under way until the beginning of the 19th century, culminating dramatically, however, in mid-century when the Great Famine forced a million and half to leave the island. Protestant immigrants had mostly been people leaving Ireland for want of land and political rights. As English speakers, they were quick to assimilate in the new world and were, moreover, capable of living isolated from compatriots wherever land and economic opportunity were offered. Hence many of them would end up as settlers immediately behind the receding western frontier. The majority of Catholics, however, had been driven out of Ireland by sheer economic and physical hunger. As Gaelic speakers they were socially dependent on each other in the new anglophone world which they often would regard with as much suspicion as they had reserved for English speaking landlords and government officials at home. Consequently, most members of this wave of immigrants would settle in the ethnic ghettos in northeastern cities.

Their massive presence here was to cause some of the first serious confrontations in the history of the United States between 'natives' and ethnic immigrants, but it also helps to explain why the story of Irish immigration to the United States, though beginning in gloom, was to become a story of a successful integration into mainstream American society. This also appears from Thomas H. O'Connor's latest book, a political history of the Boston Irish. O'Connor himself identifies as such, and is a professor of history at one of the academic strongholds of Irish America, Boston College.

The thesis of the book is, in short, that it was the early social rejection of Irish

immigrants by the established economic upper class of Protestant Yankees which was to determine the political fate of the 'capital' of New England. For this conflict taught the Irish of Boston, and other cities of the Northeast, to organize politically. This process began after the Civil War when they succeeded in turning Jefferson's and Jackson's discredited Democratic Party into an instrument for their own adaptation to an industrializing America, a strategy fully described and documented by Noel Ignatiev in his recent award winning study, *How the Irish Became White* (1995).

Based in the ghetto network of churches, clubs and bars, the sometimes ruthless and always populist ethnic class politics of Irish party bosses would turn out to be an effective strategy against Anglo-American 'bribe-brokers'. By virtue of their sheer number and well oiled (and infamous) 'political machines' – the boss of the local precinct (such as John F. Kennedy's grandfather) acting the role of mediator between the individual and collective interests of his district and the municipal government – they were able to force the leaders of the Protestant Yankee establishment first to share and later to yield political power. With the election of John F. Fitzgerald (Rose F. Kennedy's father) as mayor of the city in 1905, the Boston Irish would take full control over the city and use their political power to further their own social and economic aspirations.

For nine decades the Irish possessed a political monopoly in Boston unequalled in any other American city. In this unbroken 'mayoralty' reign there would be colorful friends' friends and ghetto populists like James Curley (recently portrayed by Jack Black in *The Rascal King: The Life and Times of James Michael Curley*, 1992), who dominated the political scene in Boston during the first four decades of this century. After the Second World War, however, more 'modern' style politicians like John B. Hynes, John F. Collins and Ray Flynn would take over and build the 'new Boston'. After Flynn's electoral defeat in 1993, the office of mayor went to an Italian American for the first time in Boston history. The election of Thomas M. Menino showed that the Irish today no longer make up a social and political unity in Boston. Even from the 1950s the most successful among them had moved out from the ghettos and into the suburbs and had gained access to the world of higher finance and big business, which used to be a Yankee reserve.

The social, economic and political changes of the 1960s in the US caused tensions between the liberal Irish middle class living in the ethnically mixed suburbs and the more traditional and culturally conservative working class Irish, who had remained in the inner city ghetto. Among the latter there was little sympathy for many of the liberal causes of the 1960s and 1970s. With their limited social experience in ethnically insulated neighborhoods, they would feel betrayed, for instance seeing their 'own' in-city launch projects of urban development threatening the future of their ghetto which once had given them their identity and self-assurance as a group. Or when they tried to enforce racial integration in municipal schools by bussing children to and from ethnic neighborhoods.

It is by adding a wider historical perspective to his 'political history' of Boston that O'Connor succeeds in writing a book which is of more than local interest. The general history of Irish immigration to the United States has been written by William Shannon (*The American Irish*, 1966) and Keiby Miller (*Emigrants and Exiles*, 1985) and their political history by Steven P. Eick (*Rainbow's End: Irish Americans and the Dilemmas of Urban Machine Politics, 1840-1985*, 1988) and James B. Walsh (*The Irish: America's*

Political Class, 1976). O'Connor's portrait of the Boston Irish represents a new tendency in the study of the history of Irish Americans. Now our attention is directed towards the regional and local nuances in the strategies of assimilation of this first huge wave of ethnic immigrants to the United States (see, e.g., David M. Emmon, *The Butte Irish: Class and Ethnicity in an American Mining Town, 1875-1925*, 1989, and Dennis Clark, *The Irish and Regional Cultures*, 1986).

Michael Boss

Aarhus School of Business