

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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The Irish in the 19<sup>th</sup> century were persecuted not only by their British colonial rulers in Ireland but also by their fellow Americans in the New World. One form of persecution, until now not fully recognized, was the institutionalization of the Irish into insane asylums.

In the United States, many of the institutionalized Irish were not actually insane, but instead were being persecuted for their culture and for actions that differed from those of the middle-class Protestant majority of the United States. Social, political, religious, and economic persecution by native-born Americans had a dire effect on the lives of the Irish immigrants, and this persecution often took the form of false accusations of Irish insanity. With no one to protect or help them in America, and already suffering from the effects of the Famine, Irish immigrants became targets for the Nativists and other groups who feared the impact of the Irish on their society.

In mid-nineteenth-century Massachusetts, the case study for this thesis, the people controlled the immigrants by placing them into institutions. Such institutionalizations differed greatly from those of today and were not always medically or psychologically justified. Rather, they were based on the belief (in the eyes of "native" Americans) that desperate poverty, strange cultural beliefs, and Catholicism *caused* Irish insanity. The

Irish immigrants were condemned and treated as “insane” by those who were economically and politically stronger than they.

The way the institutions of Massachusetts dealt with the Irish was a reflection of the treatment of the Irish in American society at large. Institutionalization and an “undifferentiated welfare system” provided Americans with a means of protection from outsiders as well as a method to attempt to re-form and re-mold those who were different.

THE IRISH AND INSANITY:  
NATIVIST PREJUDICE AND THE INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF IMMIGRANTS  
1845-1865.

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A Thesis  
Presented to  
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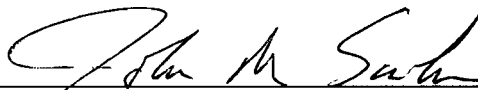
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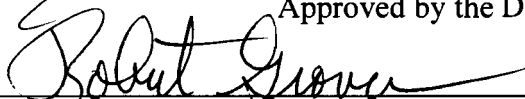
By  
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Approved by the Department Chair



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## Introduction

Research on the Irish, both in the United States and Ireland, is extensive. There is an abundant literature on the causes of Irish immigration and immigrant lives in America. Since this paper focuses on how Nativism and moral reform affected the perception of the Irish immigrant's mental health, it is important to look at the background of the Irish in both countries to understand the growth of stereotypes and prejudice against them that, ultimately, led to policies which recommended institutionalization for some. Irish immigrants in the United States were institutionalized in disproportionate numbers beginning in the mid to late 1840's.<sup>1</sup> The Protestant middle class majority did not have a good understanding of Irish family structures, superstitions and actions, religious beliefs, and clannishness. Protestants held negative stereotypes about the Irish which in turn led to prejudice against the Irish socially, economically, and politically. The Irish arrived in the United States with many disadvantages; their differences and the prejudices against them did nothing to help them get ahead in the new world.<sup>2</sup>

The Irish faced many social, economic, and political problems in the United States during the mid to late nineteenth century. Socially, the Irish were not accepted. Largely a rural peasantry, most Irish immigrants to the United States from 1845 to 1865 arrived poor, dirty, and uneducated. It is thought that as many as one-third of these immigrants did not speak English but were in fact Gaelic speakers; some spoke a smattering of English.<sup>3</sup> Most were escaping extreme poverty and famine in Ireland, where they had already been the victims of political persecution. Because of their dire

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<sup>1</sup> Gerald N. Grob, *Mental Institutions in America: Social Policy to 1875*, (New York: The Free Press, 1973), 231-233.

<sup>2</sup> Kerby A. Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 3-8. Grob, 221-243.

<sup>3</sup> Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 38.

straits, most Irish in the new world lived in poor housing and their basic needs were rarely met. The Irish had trouble adjusting and adapting to their new lives in the United States. Individuals and groups tended towards violence and rioting when they felt they were being persecuted or unfairly treated. All of this reinforced the prejudice and stereotypes already held against this group and led to further persecution by fearful Protestant middle-class Americans.<sup>4</sup>

Economically, the Irish faced hardships for several generations. Most of the immigrants arriving from Ireland, beginning in the 1830's and continuing through the rest of the nineteenth century, were unskilled laborers who had some farming background. Most Irish stayed in larger cities on the East Coast of the United States, causing a strain on the job market and reducing many Irish to transient laborers. The jobs often available to the Irish were low-paying, with men taking dangerous jobs working on the railroad, canal digging, and mining, and the women taking menial labor positions as domestic servants or factory workers. By the mid-1850's the Irish were trying to organize labor groups to keep jobs and demand higher pay, but the violence that accompanied these "unionizing" efforts again reinforced stereotypes of Irish violence and increased prejudice against Irish workers.<sup>5</sup>

Politically the Irish also faced problems in the United States. Once eligible to vote, the Irish tended to vote en masse, often bribed by one official or another in return for votes distributing jobs and support. Irishmen's votes were often cast illegally, as political bosses used these ignorant immigrants to sway politics in their favor.<sup>6</sup> Irish

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<sup>4</sup> Miller, 318-327.

<sup>5</sup> Miller, 317-320, 524; Ignatiev, 120-121. W. J. Rorabaugh, *The Alcoholic Republic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 143-144.

<sup>6</sup> Miller, 524-525; Ignatiev, 87.



immigrants were often fierce nationalists, supporting Irish Home Rule and agitation against their English conquerors. Such actions exacerbated fears that immigrants would lead the United States out of isolationism and into the troubles of Europe. The masses of Catholic Irish pouring into the United States also raised fears of a Papal takeover if these immigrants had a voting majority.<sup>7</sup> A political party, the Know Nothings, arose in the United States during the 1850's out of the hatred of immigrants and Catholic religion. Their platform included excluding foreigners and Catholics from political office and lengthening the naturalization period to keep them from voting. The Know Nothings helped to create and promote even more prejudice against the Irish immigrants.<sup>8</sup>

The problems of the Irish in the New World have been widely documented, and much research has been done on how the Irish became part of the American mainstream. This research has led to new understandings of the Irish experience in the United States, and how the immigrants adapted and adjusted. Books such as Marjorie R. Fallows' Irish Americans: Identity and Assimilation, or Hasia R. Diner's Erin's Daughters in America: Irish Immigrant Women in the Nineteenth Century, focus on the condition of the Irish in the United States and how they overcame challenges to become an acceptable part of American society. Other writings, including those of Christine Kinealy and Tom Hayden, focus on the loss of cultural identity and how assimilation has impacted Irish Americans. These books, and others, provide insight into the Irish experience in America

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<sup>7</sup> Ray Allen Billington, *The Protestant Crusade 1800-1860: A Study of the Origins of American Nativism* (New York: Rinehart and Company, Inc, 1938), 36-40.

<sup>8</sup> Micheal F. Holt, *Political Parties and American Political Development from the Age of Jackson to the Age of Lincoln* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), 77-79.

and provide discussion on the impact of immigration, both on the United States and the immigrants themselves.<sup>9</sup>

Research into Irish immigrant history is now beginning to reinterpret how immigrants became a part of American society. Noel Ignatiev's How the Irish Became White, focuses on the socio-political aspects of Irish American history as it relates to race. Ignatiev believes that the Irish were not considered "white" (a part of mainstream Anglo-Saxon culture), and that in order to join the mainstream the Irish had to change many things about their own culture, including their position on slavery. The Irish had a long history of not supporting slavery while in Ireland; by the mid 1830's Irish immigrants in the United States were joining the Democratic Party and, in turn, supporting slavery.<sup>10</sup> Ignatiev's book provides creative insight into the mindset of the Irish once they arrived in the United States, and shows how events may have shaped and changed their ethnic culture into one more acceptable to mainstream society.

Kirby Miller's epic work, Emigrants and Exiles, provides an exhaustive explanation of the situation in Ireland and the United States from the time of the first Irish immigrants to the New World through the early twentieth century. Miller explains the push and pull factors that brought immigrants to the United States, including the persecution that the Irish were facing, both at home and abroad during the Famine period of 1840-1850. This book argues that the Irish did not readily assimilate into American

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<sup>9</sup> Marjorie R. Fallows, *Irish Americans: Identity and Assimilation* (Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1979). Reginald Byron, *Irish America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). *Ireland's Great Hunger: Silence, Memory, and Commemoration*, eds. David A. Valone and Christine Kinealy, (New York: University Press of America, Inc.2002). *Irish Hunger: Personal Reflections on the Legacy of the Famine*, ed. Tom Hayden, (Roberts Rinehart Publishers, 1998). Hasia R. Dinor, *Erin's Daughters in America: Irish Immigrant Women in the Nineteenth Century*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983). Thomas Keneally, *The Great Shame and the Triumph of the Irish in the English-Speaking World* (New York: Doubleday, 1999).

<sup>10</sup>Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White*, (New York: Routledge, 1995), 7-14, 75-77.

culture but were instead searching for respectability and acceptance in a culture that did not understand them. Miller's work is critical to understanding the background factors that led to mass immigration, and he provides insight into the culture and history of the Irish.<sup>11</sup>

The growth of the mental hospital was a pivotal issue in the nineteenth century, and Irish immigrants to the United States played a role in the development of this institution. Gerald N. Grob has done extensive research in the area of mental health and the political, social and economic trends surrounding it. His work shows the growth of the fledgling psychiatric field and gives background into the minds of the doctors and politicians who influenced it. Grob focuses much of his early research on Massachusetts because of the wealth of information he discovered at Worcester State Lunatic Hospital during the early 1960's. His research into this hospital inspired Grob to write other scholarly works on mental institutions and the policies governing them in the United States.<sup>12</sup>

Grob was one of the first historians to study mental hospitals and is recognized as one of the first to place mental institutions into the context of local, state, and national policies. During his research into mental institutions in Massachusetts, Grob studied the place of Irish immigrants in the development of policies in the Worcester State Lunatic Asylum. Grob determined that Worcester's staff generally had a negative impact on the mental health of Irish immigrant patients and that the Irish immigrant patients, in turn,

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<sup>11</sup> Kerby A. Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America*, (Oxford University Press, 1985).

<sup>12</sup> Gerald N. Grob, *The Mad Among Us: A History of the Care of America's Mentally Ill*, (New York: Belknap Printers, 1995). Gerald N. Grob, *From Asylum to Community: Mental Health Policy in Modern America*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991). Gerald N. Grob, *Mental Institutions in America: Social Policy to 1875*, (New York: The Free Press, 1973). Gerald N. Grob, *The State and the Mentally Ill: A History of Worcester State Hospital in Massachusetts, 1830-1920*, (University of North Carolina Press, 1966).

furthered the prejudice and stereotypes held by the hospital administration and staff. The works Grob wrote about the Worcester facility focused on the institution's history within the framework of social, intellectual, and political circumstances in Massachusetts.<sup>13</sup>

What this work endeavors to do, then, is to use his framework to provide deeper insight into the experiences of one group of patients in the Worcester State Lunatic Asylum – the Irish.

While there has been research into the lives of the Irish and the Irish immigrant in America, few studies have focused on one important aspect of the Irish immigration experience. Irish immigrants to the United States were put into mental institutions in greater numbers than any other immigrant group of the period. It is estimated that in Massachusetts, in 1854, eighty-two percent of the foreign-born insane population was Irish.<sup>14</sup> While mental illness is mentioned in Miller's study and other writings on Irish immigration, and Grob explains the Nativism and hatred Irish insane immigrants inspired, no one has adequately explained how or why the Irish were institutionalized in such large numbers.

Historians of the Irish debate the impact that the Famine had on the mental health of Irish immigrants. Deborah Peck argues that the psychological toll of large-scale disasters, such as the Famine, can cause short-term post-traumatic stress symptoms as well as long-term characterological symptoms, including mental illness, in immediate survivors. She also claims that depression, schizophrenia, and affective disorders occur

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<sup>13</sup> Grob, *Mental Institutions in America*; Grob, *The State and the Mentally Ill*.

<sup>14</sup> John W. Fox, "Irish Immigrants, Pauperism, and Insanity in 1854 Massachusetts," *Social Science History*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (Autumn, 1991), 324.

more frequently in generations following a large-scale disaster, such as the Famine.<sup>15</sup> Studies by twentieth century psychologists also suggest that modern day Irish have high rates of male schizophrenia. Some historians, such as Tom Hayden, explain that the Famine still impacts the mental health of the descendents of these victims because of the ways in which Irish families interact and deal with events.<sup>16</sup> But no one has adequately explained why so many Irish immigrants, male and female, were placed into insane asylums during the mid-nineteenth century.

This paper, then, seeks to explore the reasons for these high rates of insanity, and, by turn, to argue that the Irish from the mid-nineteenth century through the early twentieth century were institutionalized in higher numbers than any other immigrant group because of the prejudice and stereotypes they faced. Irish immigrants were not disproportionately insane; instead, Protestant middle-class American culture persecuted the Irish by labeling them as such.

Mental illness, and in turn insanity, is a social construct.<sup>17</sup> What constitutes mental illness is determined by society, and doctors, mental health professionals, and in the nineteenth century, the courts. These groups control the diagnosis, labeling, and institutionalization of anyone who society deemed to fit into this category.<sup>18</sup> Concepts of mental illness are always evolving based on society's acceptance of certain behaviors: in the United States during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, masturbation and

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<sup>15</sup> Deborah Peck, "Silent Hunger: The Psychological Impact of the Great Hunger" in *Ireland's Great Hunger: Silence, Memory, and Commemoration*, (eds) David A. Valone and Christine Kinealy, (University Press of America, 2002), 156.

<sup>16</sup> Tom Hayden, "The Famine of Feeling" in *Irish Hunger: Personal Reflections on the Legacy of the Famine*, (ed) Tom Hayden, (Rinehart Publishing, 1998), 263-267.

<sup>17</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 141-146. Ronald G. Walters, *American Reformers 1815-1860*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), 205-206.

<sup>18</sup> Anne Digby, *Madness, Morality and Medicine: A Study of the York Retreat, 1796-1914*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 1-6. Foucault, 141-146.

homosexuality were considered mental illnesses.<sup>19</sup> Neither of these practices is currently considered mental illness, although they may still be considered ‘deviant’ behavior. Many European and American anthropologists and psychologists have argued that shamanism, a religious practice in many countries, is a form of mental illness because the trances of the practitioner are reminiscent of epileptic seizures; in countries where this religious belief is practiced, the Shaman is a sacred being who has direct contact with the spirits.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, society constructs the boundaries of behavior, and defines that behavior as deviant or acceptable.

The definition of insanity has changed over time to fit into each era’s standards. According to a medical dictionary of 1860, “this term [insanity] includes all the varieties of unsound mind – Mania, melancholia, moral insanity, dementia, and idiocy.”<sup>21</sup> By 1926, the definition had changed to be more inclusive: “A more or less permanent unsoundness of mind, mental disease; a condition marked by abnormality of the reasoning faculty, delusions, illusions, or hallucinations, with irresponsibility and a lack of understanding of the nature of one’s speech and actions; lunacy, craziness. It is an acquired condition and so distinguished from idiocy or imbecility, and is chronic, thus distinguished from the delirium of fever or shock.”<sup>22</sup> By the year 2000, the definition of insanity was “an outmoded term referring to severe mental illness or psychosis.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Raymond Cochrane, *The Social Creation of Mental Illness*, (New York: Longman, 1983), 1-15.

<sup>20</sup> Gary Seaman, *Ancient Traditions: Shamanism in Central Asia and the Americas*, (University Press of Colorado, 1994), 8-10. Carol Laderman, *Taming the Winds of Desire: Psychology, Medicine, and Aesthetics in Malay Shamanistic Performance*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 6-14.

<sup>21</sup> Robley Dunglison, *A Dictionary of Medical Science*, (Philadelphia: Blanchard and Lea, 1860).

<sup>22</sup> Thomas Lathrop Stedman, *A Practical Medical Dictionary*, (Ninth Revised Edition, New York: William Wood and Company, 1926).

<sup>23</sup> *Stedman’s Medical Dictionary, 27<sup>th</sup> Edition*, (Baltimore, Maryland: Lippincott, Williams and Wilkins, 2000).

Society, and the medical profession, therefore, have constructed and reconstructed the definition of insanity.

During the nineteenth century, there was no set measure for diagnosis of mental illness. Theories with little scientific backing existed for how to treat insanity. Most of these books and theories were based on the prevalent ideas of “moral insanity,” the belief that people who deviated from the norms of society were insane; “physiognomy,” a belief that personality was revealed in a person’s facial features, and the “science” of “phrenology”, the belief that anatomical and physiological characteristics had a direct influence upon mental behavior.<sup>24</sup> In a manual from the mid-nineteenth century, faces of mental patients decorate the cover of the book to give readers an example of the author’s diagnostic categories based on physical features.<sup>25</sup> Diagnosis of mental disease was based mostly on the perceptions of the person in charge of diagnosis; therefore, each situation was open to interpretation and the diagnosis was directly affected by the experiences and prejudices of the person in charge.

The people in charge of diagnosis of mental illness during the nineteenth century were doctors, court judges, policemen, and members of a brand new field, psychiatrists.<sup>26</sup> Most of these people were members of the Protestant middle-class in the United States, a class which included the educated stratum of businessmen, small merchants, lawyers, doctors, teachers, and other professionals. This group held powerful positions within society, and they feared the impact of the large influx of Irish immigrants on their

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<sup>24</sup> John B. Davies, *Phrenology: Fad and Science*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955).

<sup>25</sup> John Charles Bucknill, and Daniel H Tuke, *A Manual of Psychological Medicine*, (London, 1858).

<sup>26</sup> Edward Jarvis, *Insanity and Idiocy in Massachusetts: Report of the Commission on Lunacy, 1855*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1961), 158-159. Gerald N. Grob, *Mental Institutions in America: Social Policy to 1875*, (New York: The Free Press, 1973), 185-195.

hegemony.<sup>27</sup> The Protestant middle-class was dominant during the nineteenth century, and their morals and values affected everyone who immigrated to the United States. Victorian society had strict ideas based on Protestant religious morality and used these values to determine acceptable behavior and actions within society and to enforce their standards. Americans felt that large groups of immigrants threatened their voting power and seemingly, isolationist policies.<sup>28</sup> Americans also feared that the influx of cheap labor would ruin their economic base and job security.<sup>29</sup>

The concept of “moral insanity,” developed in the early 1830’s, provided opportunities for labeling insane those who did not fit into Protestant middle-class society. Poor Catholic Irish immigrants had no one to help them rise up from poverty, lived in slums in unhygienic situations, were often separated from loved ones because of labor requirements or death, and women with children were forced to work. These situations kept the Irish from fitting into society. Physiognomy, the study of facial features, and phrenology, the study of skull shape, provided “scientific” backing for the “discovery” of high rates of mental illness in Irish immigrants and promoted prejudice and stereotypes of Irish immigrants.<sup>30</sup> Police officers and court officials used these stereotypes as evidence when determining whether or not the person in question was insane.

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<sup>27</sup> Michael F. Holt, *Political Parties and American Political Development from the Age of Jackson to the Age of Lincoln*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), 76-78. Reginald Byron, *Irish America*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 54-58.

<sup>28</sup> Ray Allen Billington, *The Protestant Crusade 1800-1860: A Study of the Origins of American Nativism*, (New York: Rinehart and Company, Inc, 1938), 36-40.

<sup>29</sup> Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 390-391.

<sup>30</sup> Lewis Perry Curtis, Jr, *Apes and Angels: The Irishman in Victorian Caricature*, (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1971), 9-15. Oonagh Walsh, “‘The Designs of Providence’: Race, Religion, and Irish Insanity,” in *Insanity, Institutions and Society, 1800-1914: A Social History of Madness in Comparative Perspective*, (eds. Joseph Melling and Bill Forsythe, Routledge, 1999), 236-237.



Psychiatry, as a new field of medicine in the nineteenth century, provided little formal training or proven methods for psychiatrists, doctors, or superintendents of mental institutions to follow. Therefore, American physicians and superintendents of mental institutions used their own theories and beliefs when diagnosing and treating insanity. For example, in the Worcester State Lunatic Asylum, both Dr. George Chandler and Dr. Samuel Woodward believed that the moon might have an impact on the mental health of their patients, and to this end both kept extensive records of the lunar month. Both also believed, like many other doctors and superintendents of the time, that the Irish were inferior beings who were unlikely to be cured of their mental illness.<sup>31</sup> Doctors, superintendents, and other professionals held prejudices about the Irish that helped to promulgate stereotypes of the Irish as inferior and label them as insane.

Worcester State Hospital in Worcester, Massachusetts, was a leading mental hospital during the nineteenth century. The hospital was used by the state to treat paupers and the violent insane, and as such it provided housing for many Irish immigrant patients. My research in the hospital records has provided a glimpse into the lives of Irish patients and the doctors who treated them. The hospital casebooks and annual reports were written during the time when many Irish famine victims were immigrating to the United States. The hospital's records trace the changing perceptions of the Irish patients, and their treatment in the hospital reflects their experiences outside of the institution as well. The institutionalization of Irish immigrants adds another angle to the study of the prejudice and Nativist practices that affected the Irish in America.

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<sup>31</sup> Grob, 236-237.

## The Irish in Ireland and the United States

Ireland during the nineteenth century was a country in turmoil. The Irish were constantly battling for power in a country ruled by the English. The Irish struggle for control of their homeland was rarely successful, and it shows the continuing desire of the Irish for something better, for control of themselves and a voice in their own social, political, and economic lives. Their lack of success played a large part in their emigration to the New World, and this in turn had an effect on the Nativism experienced by many Irish immigrants.<sup>1</sup>

Colonization made the Irish dependent on social assistance, especially during the Famine. Reliance on public assistance, including soup kitchens, almshouses, workhouses and religious charity, followed them to the United States and had a negative impact on the perceptions of Irish immigrants.<sup>2</sup> The Irish were accustomed to being pushed around by the English, and even though they often rebelled against their oppressors, the Irish were used to following the directions of their leaders. This familiarity with social assistance and social controls marked the Irish immigrant persona in the United States and ultimately helped the Nativists and the Protestant middle-class to have power over the Irish.<sup>3</sup>

The English took control of Ireland in the seventeenth century, making it an English colony. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, laws to control the Irish within their own country became increasingly harsh as the Irish continued to rebel against their oppressors. The Penal Codes imposed by the English barred Irish Catholics from

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<sup>1</sup> Kerby A. Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 103-104.

<sup>2</sup> James S. Donnelly, Jr., *The Great Irish Potato Famine*, (United Kingdom: Sutton Publishing, 2001), 92-108.

<sup>3</sup> Miller, 282-284; 507-511.

servicing as officers in the army or navy, from practicing as lawyers, or holding civic posts or office. Upon the death of a Catholic landowner, his land was divided among all his sons unless the eldest became a Protestant, in which case he could inherit the entire landholding. A Catholic could not own a horse worth more than five pounds, was prohibited from living within five miles of an incorporated town, and was not allowed to attend school. The Catholic Church was also pushed into the background, with the Protestant Church of Ireland taking control of most of the Catholic Church properties and the priesthood itself being outlawed until 1782. While the Act of Union (1800) and the Catholic Emancipation Act (1829) repealed some of this legislation, the memory of such persecution continued, adding to their involvement in politics and the building of Irish social groups in the New World.<sup>4</sup>

The effects of Penal Codes and laws, especially in the area of education, were still being felt generations after their repeal. Most of the immigrants to North America during the mid-nineteenth century had little formal education, making them illiterate and unable to move beyond their low-wage, menial labor employment. The inability to speak English further hampered their ability to move beyond menial employment or low social status since as many as one-fourth to one-third of these Irish immigrants were also Irish (Gaelic) speakers. This lack of education heightened stereotypes of the Irish immigrant as stupid or ignorant.<sup>5</sup>

The Poor Law also had an impact on Catholic Irish peasants. Enacted by the English and applied to the Irish in 1838, the laws taxed leaseholders as well as landlords to support Irish paupers. This tax was assessed on a per-acre basis and failed to reflect

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<sup>4</sup> Thomas Keneally, *The Great Shame and the Triumph of the Irish in the English-Speaking World*, (United Kingdom: Serpentine Publishing Co. Ltd., 1998), 16. Miller, 60-68.

<sup>5</sup> Miller, 297; 322-329.

declining crop values, forcing an ever-increasing burden on the lower classes of Ireland.<sup>6</sup> With food prices increasing, wages decreasing, and less demand for Irish exports to England, Ireland faced a crisis that was made worse by the sporadic famines in the country. The English Poor Laws inadvertently spawned migration to America during the early Famine years; by 1847 and 1849 Parliament had amended the Poor Laws to allow workhouse guardians – themselves local rate payers - to finance emigration of Irish pauper inmates overseas.<sup>7</sup> The forced emigration to America of many Irish paupers provoked fierce hatred and prejudice against the Ireland. Many Nativists argued that foreign countries were sending their lunatics and other impaired people to America, and this stereotype enhanced the belief that the Irish were insane. According to an annual report of the Worcester State Lunatic Hospital, “Gross impositions are undoubtedly practiced by foreign states, upon the public charities provisions of this Commonwealth...Imbeciles, and chronic, incurable cases of insanity have been driven from other countries to our hospitable shores, are presented for admission, and represented as recent and curable cases.”<sup>8</sup>

One section of the English Poor Laws that had a direct impact on Irish mental health was the ‘Dangerous Lunatics’ Act of 1838. This act established a link between insanity and criminality. The Act placed an extraordinary degree of power in the hands not only of medical, judicial, and security figures, but also of ordinary citizens. Under its terms, an uncorroborated sworn statement, made before two justices of the peace, was enough to secure arrest and admission to jail of an alleged lunatic, and then push him

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 90.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 296.

<sup>8</sup> Worcester State Hospital, *Twentieth Annual Report* (December, 1852), 6-7. Hereafter the Worcester State Hospital will be abbreviated WSH.

onward to a district asylum. However, many alleged lunatics actually spent up to a year in prison before being transferred to the asylum, and they frequently arrived with little or no information as to relatives, home life, or basic details regarding age and marital status. These patients formed a core of life-long asylum inmates and were a permanent drain on institutional resources. Moreover, the intervening period in jail frequently served to weaken family ties, associated the lunatic with the degradation of prison, and made eventual reintegration into society more difficult. This law indirectly made insanity a crime in the minds of many officials, and many of these insane people may have inadvertently been sent to America.<sup>9</sup>

The Irish hatred of English Colonial rule made violent clashes and rebellions a regular part of Irish life. Secret societies, including the Ribbonmen and the Whiteboys, existed to bring Catholic Irish disenfranchisement and lack of home control to the forefront of the public eye. Sectarian violence became a permanent part of life in Ireland, with Protestants and Catholics commonly fighting battles at fairs and markets.<sup>10</sup> Secret groups also existed as an informal network to protect members from landlord abuse and eviction. Any unfair treatment by a landlord was subject to threats of violence and possible destruction of property if not quickly remedied.<sup>11</sup> The Irish often used violence to settle disputes with authorities. The Irish were also prone to violence in their daily lives, especially in the period leading up to the Famine. The most common type of violence was “faction fights” with groups of men upwards of a few hundred gathering in public places for highly ritualized fights. Many of these fights grew out of feuds between

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<sup>9</sup> Oonagh Walsh, ‘The Designs of Providence’: Race, religion, and Irish insanity,” from *Insanity, Institutions and Society, 1800-1914: A Social History of Madness in Comparative Perspective*, (ed. Joseph Melling and Bill Forsythe, Routledge, 1999), 225.

<sup>10</sup> Miller, 64-69.

<sup>11</sup> Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White*, (New York: Routledge, 1995), 92-92; Keneally, 12-13.

families or disputes over territory; for example, in north Tipperary, a faction fight developed over land between local families and Catholic newcomers who moved from Ulster. According to one historian, the fights were “ancestral, their origins lost to memory, but preserved from a sense of family honor, ‘a mere love of combat,’ and a desire to wreak vengeance upon the victors of the last encounter.” This love of fighting and use of violence to settle disputes followed the Irish to America, and since violence was not an accepted form of expression, the Irish were considered a dangerous, subversive group who were hazardous to the ideals of civilization.<sup>12</sup>

Within Ireland, tensions between Catholics and Protestants were also strong. The Anglicans in Ireland, because of the Penal Laws and other types of legislation, possessed social, political, and economic hegemony. Anglican Protestants were allowed to own land, participate in government, and pay different taxes than those required of the Catholic Irish peasantry. Irish Catholics were required to pay a tax to the Anglican Church of Ireland for its upkeep even though they were not members of that church. Taxes on property and crops were also a part of everyday life for the peasantry, further adding to their financial burdens.<sup>13</sup> Protestants could be educated both in Ireland and abroad; this allowed them opportunities to attain high-ranking positions of power throughout Ireland.<sup>14</sup> Religious belief also played a large role in the education of the Irish; while Protestants were allowed education, Catholics were not allowed education throughout the early part of the nineteenth century. This forced Catholic priests to provide schooling in so-called “hedge schools,” where students were given a rudimentary

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<sup>12</sup> Miller, 60-61.

<sup>13</sup> Keneally, *Great Shame*, 14.

<sup>14</sup> Miller, 41-42.

education while hiding in fields, barns or wood lots.<sup>15</sup> Catholic Irish children were able to receive an education after 1820, but most people possessed little more than a simple education. This lack of education kept most Catholic Irish out of positions of power and influence in Ireland throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>16</sup>

The division of Ireland between Catholics and Protestants also affected the economy. Irish Catholics were generally not allowed to own large amounts of land; large landholdings were predominantly held by the descendants of English Protestants. These landlords did not want to live in Ireland because of the negative connotation associated with being “Irish” – therefore, many were absentee landlords who left their lands to be managed by bailiffs or other lackeys. As scientific progress made grazing more profitable, many landlords consolidated their fields and moved the peasants off of their lands, leaving many Irish peasants homeless with nowhere to go. Most landlords also preferred to make few improvements on their land; instead they increased rents.<sup>17</sup> These developments made life even harder for the average peasant farmer who already struggled to make ends meet and added to the dependency of Irish peasants on the potato as a staple for survival. When the potato crops began to fail in the mid-nineteenth century, the Irish felt the true effects of their precarious economic situation.

Family was the most important unit within Ireland. Socially, most Irish called relatives their “friends,” while neighbors and other people outside the extended family, regardless of how long they had known them, were called “acquaintances.” Family members were very protective of their own and would, despite intra-familial strife, present a united front to the world. The importance of the family as a social and

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<sup>15</sup> John O’Beirne Ranelagh, *A Short History of Ireland*, (Cambridge: University Press, 1999), 58, 88.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 42-44.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 44-46.

economic unit can be seen in the landholding and land-dividing system of the Irish farmer. Farmers in early nineteenth century Ireland divided their holdings among all their sons upon marriage so that each son stayed near the family. In this way, the family was kept fairly intact, the land was held within the family, and the family continued as an economic unit.<sup>18</sup> Daughters, while not usually given land, were given a dowry by their fathers, and parents had the final say in marriage matches. This promoted the strength of the family as a social and economic unit. According to Kerby Miller,

Interdependence was the cherished norm between generations in single families and among households in any neighborhood. Within families ties of affection and obligation were underlain by an often explicit economic bargain: in return for a portion of the family holding, a dowry, training in a marketable skill, or at least a share of their brother's marriage portion, children would dutifully assist parents in farm work or in cottage industry, and later fulfill their "sacred duty" to maintain them when they grew too old to support themselves. Similar obligations extended beyond the nuclear family: visitors often remarked that the Irish were "most exemplary in the care which they take of destitute relatives, and in the sacrifices which they willingly make for them"; "shame and fear of degradation prevents their being allowed to beg."<sup>19</sup>

Even with parental control over marriage, marriage patterns in Ireland were changing to match the economic situation. Up until the early nineteenth century, it was common for Irish men and women to marry young (typically in their early twenties) and for love. But by 1835, more and more Irish were postponing marriage until their late twenties, if they married at all. These patterns changed as economic security on the farm changed. Many fathers were holding onto their lands until late in their lives in order to support themselves. Sons, unsure of the amount of land they would inherit, often waited to marry until they were sure they would be able to support wives and families. Thus a strain was placed on families as tensions among older children and between generations

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 54-60.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 55.



grew. Making a good match also became extremely important to families who were looking to increase their holdings. Marriages often became economic matches rather than love matches, and these loveless marriages often created more strife among siblings and parents as each sought enough land to remain solvent. Mothers and sons became very close in Irish families, which increased jealousy between mothers and their sons' brides. Irish children, instead of rebelling against their parents, were instilled with a deep sense of inferiority and submissiveness and everything possible was done to avoid publicly disgracing the family name in order to promote good marriage opportunities.<sup>20</sup>

All members of the family worked. On farms, women and men both worked in the fields, with women also having household work and childrearing responsibilities. Both were involved in the selling of goods: men predominantly controlled and sold the products of the fields, while women, both married and unmarried, sold butter and eggs, and worked outside of the home for money.<sup>21</sup> Unmarried women often worked as domestic servants in order to increase their dowry, and married women often sold homemade goods such as lace, knitting, and sewing to increase the family's income. In these ways women not only supported their families but also asserted their own self-worth and increased their power within the family unit. Women also had control over expenditures of the family and were often consulted in important financial matters.<sup>22</sup>

Irish families held onto many customs and traditions in order to promote social cohesion. These customs differed from those of their English overlords and were seen as barbaric by many outsiders. Irish wakes were generally a noisy affair, less a religious

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 54-60. Hasia R. Diner, *Erin's Daughters in America: Irish Immigrant Women in the Nineteenth Century*, (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), 14-19.

<sup>21</sup> Diner, 19-21, 26.

<sup>22</sup> Diner, 3.

ceremony than an opportunity for communities to gather. Irish wakes during the nineteenth century included “riotous mourning, song, licensed drunkenness, sexual playfulness and renewal.”<sup>23</sup> Families hired professional mourners to keen for the dead, a process which included several nights’ vigil over the dead body with loud, piercing shrieks and wails. Then the community would gather to honor the dead, with dancing, drinking, and other such entertainments.<sup>24</sup>

The Irish also held onto their tradition of storytelling, and with most of the population uneducated, this became the education for many children. Stories of fairies and mythic hero legends abounded, and a strong belief in these and other superstitions made up a large part of the Irish consciousness and impacted their daily lives.<sup>25</sup>

Drinking was also a large part of Irish custom and tradition. Alcoholic consumption was a part of Irish men’s daily lives, with meetings at the pub a near daily occurrence. Men met to talk with others and arrange business transactions, to discuss politics, and to keep up social ties. Drinking was also part of the Irish wake and was often a part of the weekend dances held at the crossroads of many Irish country towns. Drinking alcohol was socially acceptable, and expected, behavior for both men and women in Ireland.<sup>26</sup> It has been argued that drinking for the Irish was also an act of rebellion against English rule. Self-destruction through drinking may have been the answer of many Irish men to the constant battle of fighting for the preservation of land and family. Many Irishmen were forced to deal with the English by perpetuating the

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<sup>23</sup> Miller, 72-73.

<sup>24</sup> Miller, 72-73.

<sup>25</sup> Miller, 72-73. Ranelagh, 58. Marjorie R. Fallows, *Irish Americans: Identity and Assimilation*, (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1979), 97-98.

<sup>26</sup> Fallows, 50-51. Richard Stivers, *A Hair of the Dog: Irish Drinking and American Stereotype*, (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1976), 89-90.

stereotype of Paddy – a fool, a humorous character who was lazy and prone to drink. Therefore, while playing the part of Paddy, the Irish drinker was also rebelling against the English by promoting self-destruction and maintaining his integrity by not showing his true self to his oppressors.<sup>27</sup>

The series of potato famines in the late 1840's and mid 1850's dramatically altered Ireland's population. Ireland's population had grown astronomically during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, with an overall population increase of 325 percent between 1750 and 1845. Population growth had a large impact on land division practices, and in order for the large population to survive on smaller plots of land, the potato, with its compact shape and high yield, became the main dietary staple.<sup>28</sup> When blight attacked the potato crops starting in 1845, disaster struck many families who were wholly dependent on the potato for their lives. As the blight continued, more and more cottiers and small farmers succumbed to starvation and abject poverty.<sup>29</sup>

Increased rent rates and a lack of English intervention because of *laissez faire* economic policies promoted further destitution and death among much of the Irish population. The English, seemingly unconcerned about the famine-stricken Irish, continued to export grain from Ireland.<sup>30</sup> Mass evictions of peasants who could no longer pay their rents continued to push Irish peasants off the land and into workhouses or the crowded urban centers, furthering the spread of disease.<sup>31</sup> Typhus and other fevers were rampant during the Famine years, contributing greatly to the death toll. The population of Ireland in 1845 totaled 8.5 million. It is estimated that over one million people died as

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<sup>27</sup> Stivers, 98-100.

<sup>28</sup> Donnelly, 42. Please note that potatoes, with milk, are a nutritionally complete food.

<sup>29</sup> Fallows, 18-19.

<sup>30</sup> Donnelly, 53-55, 171.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, 144, 172.

a result of the Famine, and more deaths resulted from disease than from actual starvation.<sup>32</sup>

The amended Poor Laws of the late 1840's increased the number of workhouses available in each Irish province. The Irish were notoriously afraid of the workhouses because of the harsh discipline, overcrowded conditions, and the dread of contracting a fatal disease. But as conditions in Ireland deteriorated, this place of last resort overflowed with indigent Irish.<sup>33</sup> The lack of adequate facilities to care for the poor, the sick, and the aged, contributed to the overall death rate in Ireland. The Gregory Clause, added to the English Poor Laws in June 1847, further added to the total degradation of the Irish by withholding public relief from anyone who held more than a quarter-acre of land. With most Irish holding at least a small portion of land, the lack of provision for these farmers further devastated the poor and led to permanent poverty.<sup>34</sup>

### **The Irish in America**

Emigration offered many Irish the chance of escape from famine and persecution. Between one and 1.5 million Irish sailed to the United States between 1845 and 1855.<sup>35</sup> Estimates suggest that a significant portion of these people would have left Ireland even if there was no famine, since many of these people were seeking economic and political opportunity, but famine greatly increased the numbers of those who willingly, or unwillingly, emigrated to the United States.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 3; 171. Ranelagh, 110-112.

<sup>33</sup> Donnelly, 106-107. Ranelagh, 112-113.

<sup>34</sup> Donnelly, 110-116.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 178-186. Fallows, 23.

<sup>36</sup> Thomas Gallagher, *Paddy's Lament: Ireland 1846-1847, Prelude to Hatred*, (San Diego: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1982), 143-148.

Life in America, for many of these immigrants, was not what they expected. The passage itself was terrible, with dangerous conditions and small, cramped quarters. Most Irish immigrants lacked the money to move beyond the American port cities where they landed.<sup>37</sup> The 1860 census shows that the majority of the 1,611,000 Irish in America remained in New England, New Jersey, New York, and Pennsylvania, and nearly two-thirds of these people worked unskilled jobs.<sup>38</sup> Many of these Irish had been subsistence farmers in western Ireland which meant that they were Catholic, Irish speakers, and generally unskilled workers. Finding jobs was difficult, although more so for men than for women. Irish women had more opportunities for employment since there was less competition for women wanting to work as domestic servants or other menial labor jobs.<sup>39</sup> Most Irish men held dangerous, menial jobs such as coal mining, digging canals, and building railroads. These jobs were generally low paying and often the workers had to look for work on a day-to-day basis.<sup>40</sup> Married Irish women often became widows because of the high rates of male accidental death, leaving them with many children and no outside financial support. Forced separation or desertion became a problem for the Irish in America that they had never faced in Ireland.<sup>41</sup>

Often families were separated because of the distances Irish men would go to work. The husband might be gone on a job for several years at a time, and often the wife might not hear from him again. If the husband could not find work, he might disappear rather than return home to be embarrassed or berated by his wife or feel desperately

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<sup>37</sup> Kevin Kenny, *The American Irish: A History*, (Pearson Education Limited 2000), 145-147.

<sup>38</sup> Maldwyn Allen Jones, *American Immigration*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 118.

<sup>39</sup> Jones, 29. Diner 71-72.

<sup>40</sup> Fallows, 28.

<sup>41</sup> Diner, 58-59.

unable to care for his own children. One historian described a typical Irish family in Boston:

...huddled on the dirt floor would likely be a mother and her children, poor and desperate. The male "breadwinner" probably had died, a victim of an accident, or perhaps he has deserted his family, ashamed of his inability to find a job and incensed at his lack of authority within the domestic circle. Three or four decades later, the father still might not have returned as a constant family member, and the household might include a boarder or two, as the family eagerly seeks any extra sources of income to ensure upward movement for at least one of its large brood.<sup>42</sup>

Irish women, if single, often worked in domestic service. Many American families were looking for servants to help with the housework, and the influx of single, young Irish women fueled this demand. These jobs helped them improve their social position and earn money to send home to bring other family members to America. Domestic service also provided an introduction to American culture and helped the Irish to adapt to American society because these servants learned American social norms and saw how Americans lived.<sup>43</sup> Stereotypes of the Irish domestic servant as stupid and lazy permeated popular literature of the nineteenth century, and while the women may have been moving up in society, they were not accepted in it. So while it has been argued that this situation helped the Irish to acclimate to the middle-class American culture, it seems to have taken several generations before the Irish were accepted into, and became a part of, such an American culture.<sup>44</sup>

In America, once an Irish woman married, she rarely worked outside of the house if she had a husband to care for her. Unfortunately, however, in America the Irish female-headed household became a common sight. Irish men generally experienced a

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 43.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 93-94.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 94-95.

decline in status and power within their families as a result of the separation of families, pushing women – wives and mothers – into authoritative roles far greater than they had experienced in Ireland. Irish women were also often forced to work outside of the home to provide for their families if their husbands were absent or dead.<sup>45</sup> According to Protestant middle-class ideals and the prevailing “Cult of Domesticity,” female-headed households were to be deplored. Nor was it acceptable for a middle-class woman to work outside of the home, something that widowed or abandoned Irish women often could not avoid. They became the victims of moral reformers who assumed they were unfit parents and refused to provide charity unless the women were willing to give up their children to orphanages or other charities.<sup>46</sup> This led to the forced separation of many families and forced many people to face further depredations rather than see their families separated by moral reformers.<sup>47</sup>

As the Irish tried to make their way in the United States, they tried to use their clannishness to their advantage and formed labor organizations to fight for job security. As early as 1860, Irish women were helping to organize trade unions to protect themselves from the oppression of their bosses.<sup>48</sup> Many bosses believed the stereotype about Irish lacking punctuality and industry, something that was very important to the Protestant work ethic. The Irish were often dismissed from jobs for laziness, gambling, drinking, levity, and impudence. Protestant society and moral reformers of the 1840’s

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 46.

<sup>46</sup> Christine Stansell, “Women, Children, and the Uses of the Streets: Class and Gender Conflict in New York City, 1850-1860,” in *Unequal Sisters: A Multi-Cultural Reader in U.S. Women’s History*, ed. Vicki L. Ruiz and Ellen Carol DuBois, (New York: Routledge, 1994), 111-112.

<sup>47</sup> Kenny, 146-147. Stansell, 121-125.

<sup>48</sup> Diner, 100-105.

and 1850's felt that the Irish immigrants' poor work habits and moral depravity caused their poverty.<sup>49</sup>

The Irish generally faced dismal living conditions in the United States. Since many were indigent, they lived in what would become the first slums of the United States, many taking up residence in tenement houses with multiple families sharing one or two rooms. Since many Irish could not afford to move out of these areas, the slums became Irish enclaves for several decades following the Famine. These areas were often dangerous, with violent gang clashes and rampant disease, giving the Nativists and moral reformers the proof that the Irish were an inferior, degraded people who needed to be reformed or kept out of the country because their "violent and filthy ways" were detrimental to the American way of life.<sup>50</sup>

It is estimated that at least one million Irish immigrated to the United States from 1847-1855. Nearly all of these people were famine refugees.<sup>51</sup> Of these people, many were permanently incapacitated by physical or mental disabilities, which often stemmed from malnutrition and associated diseases resulting from the potato blights. While many potential United States residents had died on the ocean voyage or soon after arriving in the United States, others were unable to provide for themselves; this led to dependency on charities for assistance.<sup>52</sup> Dependency on charities was seen by many Protestant middle-class Americans as a sign of weakness – "Americans" would not ask for charity because they were a stronger, more intelligent people. A doctor of the Worcester State Lunatic Asylum, discussing the institution, echoed the opinion of many Nativists that,

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<sup>49</sup> Kenny, 146-147. Ronald G. Walters, *American Reformers 1815-1860*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), 174-177. Miller, 322-323.

<sup>50</sup> Fallows, 36-37. Walters, 176-177.

<sup>51</sup> Fallows, 23.

<sup>52</sup> Miller, 295-298.



“Its doors are becoming practically closed against that class of persons who for many years enjoyed its advantages; to wit, the middling class of native population, - the intelligent yeomanry of Massachusetts who can afford to pay the cost of their board, and will not ask for charity.”<sup>53</sup> The Irish were already used to asking for public charity. Ireland already had a system of medical care through dispensaries and hospitals, with workhouses as a final resort, set up under the Poor Law System and the Poor Relief Act of 1838. People were already used to going to “charitable state-run” institutions in order to have their medical needs met. This did not change when the Irish immigrated to America, and the Irish did not see it as weakness, but rather as necessity.<sup>54</sup>

Illiteracy and the language barrier also hampered Irish efforts to get ahead. While many historians agree that most Irish spoke English and therefore found assimilation easy, speaking the language did not always facilitate acceptance, and illiteracy hampered social mobility.<sup>55</sup> Because of the Penal Laws of the early nineteenth century, older Irish did not have the opportunity for education, and this meant that younger generations were also less educated since teachers did not exist. Therefore, most Irish in America were condemned trying to get ahead through work-related skills, hoping that one member of the family would someday be educated, elevating the entire family.<sup>56</sup>

Other barriers kept the Irish from being accepted into American society. Domestic violence was a major problem in many immigrant Irish families. Female-male relationships within Irish families were often characterized by intense animosity, and charity reports from the 1850’s suggest Irish women often wanted to leave their husbands

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<sup>53</sup> WSH, *Twenty-Second Annual Report* (December, 1854), 10.

<sup>54</sup> Walsh, 224. Donnelly, 106-110.

<sup>55</sup> Fallow, 7-8; Miller, 90.

<sup>56</sup> Byron, 52-53.

but were unable to do so because of their religious beliefs and economic situation.<sup>57</sup>

Incidences of domestic violence and heated fighting in the home, usually in the form of wife-beating, occurred frequently. Police accounts contain records of many Irish men imprisoned for beating their wives. Sources also show that Irish women, when they could, struck back and rarely took the blows passively or submissively. Accounts of this kind emphasize the conflict and stress felt among the poor Irish immigrants living in the United States and proves that violence was not unusual in Irish-American society or families.<sup>58</sup> This violent behavior, however, was seen as dangerous and subversive – Nativists and moral reformers were afraid that the violence in many Irish immigrant households would contaminate their own society. Such behavior was labeled as “barbarian,” thereby relegating its participants to the lower classes and adding to the stereotype of the Irish as inferior. Small acts of violence were also seen as measures that only “insane” people would use.<sup>59</sup>

Alcoholism and heavy drinking were a part of Irish immigrant society. Drinking customs in Ireland were different from those adopted by the Irish in America. Historian Kevin Kenny suggests that a possible reason the Irish became heavy drinkers in the New World was the need for an ethnic identity. Heavy drinking outside of the home was already common in Ireland and became more so in the United States. Public drinking, especially among males, was the standard of being Irish-American; the more one drank, and was seen to drink, the more Irish one became. Irish-American manhood, therefore, was associated with heavy drinking, and a man who could hold his liquor was a true man

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<sup>57</sup> Diner, 57-59.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, 55-58.

<sup>59</sup> WSH, *Thirtieth Annual Report* (October, 1862), 16.

and truly Irish. In this way, Irish immigrants held on to their heritage by conforming to this stereotype and adopting the ethnic identity of Irish drinker.<sup>60</sup>

Irish immigrants had to decide whether to become “American” or to keep their cultural identity. Immigrants were pressured to take on characteristics of the Protestant middle-class.<sup>61</sup> Nativists promoted their position on assimilation in publications throughout the nineteenth century. John Quincy Adams, a former American president, stated the opinion of many Americans when he wrote,

“[The Irish] come to...a life of labor - and, if they cannot accommodate themselves to the character, moral, political and physical, of this country...the Atlantic is always open to them to return to the land of their fathers...They must cast off their European [Catholic] skin never to resume it. They must look forward to their posterity rather than backwards to their ancestors; they must be sure that whatever their own feelings may be, those of their children will cling to the prejudices of this country.”<sup>62</sup>

Political turmoil for the Irish did not end when they left Ireland. In America, the Irish created a vocal and active voting bloc. The Irish were convinced that the only way they could achieve status and respect was through political power. Irish Catholics predominantly joined the Democratic Party during the mid-nineteenth century, and Irish politicians used their clout to win concessions and other rewards for the Irish; in return, the Irish voted en masse to keep their politicians in power. This gave the Irish a chance to have a voice and gain influence in urban areas by gaining “jobs, providing opportunities for upward mobility in party ranks, protection against discriminatory legislation and law enforcement, symbolic recognition of Irish culture and nationalism,

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<sup>60</sup> Kenny, 201.

<sup>61</sup> Diner, 81-82; Fallows, 45-46.

<sup>62</sup> Ronald Takaki, *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America*, (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1992), 163-164.

and a sense of belonging to a powerful, *American* institution.”<sup>63</sup> On the other hand, this clannish method of voting gave rise to the charge that the Irish cast their ballots as they were told to, and people generally believed that Catholic priests were bartering votes for political favors.<sup>64</sup> Problems arose because the Irish were often voting illegally, sometimes before they had become American citizens. Nativists believed that faulty naturalization laws were to blame for most of the immigrants’ political activity, and they believed that the ten-year probationary period preliminary to naturalization in Massachusetts and other New England states was too short. In order to curb such illegal practices, as well as political clout, Nativist groups fought political battles to keep the Irish and other immigrants from gaining naturalization.<sup>65</sup>

In joining the Democratic Party, the Irish also became a pivotal voting group because of Democratic support for slavery. This issue was a divisive force in mid-nineteenth century America, and the Irish were caught in the middle of the battle. In Ireland, as late as the 1820’s, the Irish supported abolition in America, but by the time they moved to America before and during the Famine, and joined the Democratic Party, many supported slavery as a way to gain hegemony in their economic situation since they typically fought blacks for low-paying jobs. In the eyes of many Americans, the Democratic Party became the party of immigrants and slaveholders. The United States, already embroiled in a prolonged battle over the issue of slavery, faced further divisions based on the influx of foreigners and a society that was developing at a faster pace than legislation could be produced. American politics and policy, then, became more reaction

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<sup>63</sup> Fallows, Ignatiev, 162-163.

<sup>64</sup> Ray Allen Billington, *The Protestant Crusade 1800-1860: A Study of the Origins of American Nativism*, (Rinehart and Company, Inc. 1952), 193-194. Ignatiev, 162-163.

<sup>65</sup> Edward Everett Hale, *Letters on Irish Emigration*, (Boston: Phillips and Sampson, 1852), 43.

than pro-action with factions arguing not only about slavery but also important local issues, such as how to deal with the influx of immigrants. In the 1850's, local and state governments had more power over important issues like these than the federal government which made the battle for political positions extremely competitive.<sup>66</sup> Political groups such as the American Party, the so-called "Know-Nothings" took over state legislatures and created laws that had a negative effect on immigrants; their reactionary legislation was often based on popular perception of the immigrants. Unfortunately, this perception was filled with prejudice and hatred, causing immigrant and native relations to sour throughout the second half of the nineteenth century.<sup>67</sup>

Irish violence, especially in regards to politics, had a large impact on the minds of the American population. Widespread assumptions about corruption at the polls gave the Irish a bad reputation for untrustworthiness, and violence at the polls before and after elections added to the Irish reputation for violence.<sup>68</sup> The Irish were often described as a turbulent people, and their actions often did little to change that perception. Riots were common-place in early Irish-American society, both Irish against Irish and Irish against anyone else.<sup>69</sup> In 1834, New York Irishmen armed with stones and cudgels put the mayor, sheriff and a posse to flight and terrorized the city. A year later police who tried to quell Irish fighting in the Five Points area were driven back and the turmoil did not end until a man had been killed. In Detroit, July 4, 1835, drunken Irishmen attacked citizens on the principal street of the city until they were disbanded by mobs of natives.

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<sup>66</sup> Ignatiev, 75-76. Michael F. Holt, *Political Parties and American Political Development from the Age of Jackson to the Age of Lincoln*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), 252-255.

<sup>67</sup> Ignatiev, 69-70.

<sup>68</sup> Miller, 329 - 330.

<sup>69</sup> Billington, 193-198. See also: Fallows, 27-28. Ignatiev, 124-132, 134-139, 155-156. Miller, 322-323, 326-328, 338-344. Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution in Jacksonian America, 1815-1846*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 389-391.

In upper New York State in 1837, a group of Irish stopped citizens on the street, asked them if they were Catholics or Protestants, and then beat the citizens if they were Protestants. And finally, the spring elections of 1842 brought a pitched street battle in New York between Catholic Irish and Orangemen aided by Americans.<sup>70</sup>

Rioting and disorder alarmed many Americans. It seemed that mob rule was replacing law whenever the Irish were involved. In many of the situations, when civil authorities were unable to stop the fighting, priests could accomplish the task easily. According to the accounts of observers this was evidence of the marshaling of immigrants under the priest's control so that they would be ready to strike when the time came to overthrow the [Protestant] government.<sup>71</sup>

Massachusetts had problems with rioting and violence between Protestant and Catholic inhabitants. Tensions between Americans and Irish Catholics were growing high by the early 1830's. In 1829 a group of Americans attacked the homes of Irish Catholics in Boston and stoned them over the course of three days; four years later drunken Irishmen beat a native-born American to death on the streets of Charlestown. The next night five hundred Americans marched on the Irish section and troops stood by helplessly by while a number of houses were torn down and burned. Boston's Broad Street riot in 1837, which grew from a clash between an Irish funeral procession and a native fire company, accompanied days of rioting and mob rule.<sup>72</sup>

Anti-Catholic tendencies were aggravated by many sources. The Irish were particularly suspected of encouraging the end of isolationism. Americans feared this would plunge the United States into European wars. As far back as the 1790's, Irish

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<sup>70</sup> Billington, 196-198.

<sup>71</sup> Billington, 198-199. Sellers, 390.

<sup>72</sup> Billington, 196-198. Ignatiev, 65-66.

immigrants formed the American Society of United Irishmen to aid their countrymen during the insurrections in Ireland that culminated in the Rebellion on 1798. This activity alarmed the English government and incurred a direct protest from the British minister. The notorious Alien and Sedition acts, adopted by the Federalists in the same year that the Irish insurrections broke forth, were aimed at this phase of alien activity as well as at a possible French menace. Anti-Catholic fears continued into the next century.<sup>73</sup>

Fears of Catholics and their designs on the United States were heightened when the first Provincial Council of Catholicity in America met in Baltimore in October 1829. The council convened to assuage Protestant fears of Catholics but it actually increased them. The first part of the report was written to explain Catholicism and stated that Catholics did not intend to take over the United States. The second half of the report, however, was a listing of decrees and other important issues within the Church. This half of the report received publicity in the Protestant press because it seemed to be directly aimed at Protestant activities. The council's thirty-eight decrees warned Catholics against "corrupt translations of the Bible [the Protestant version]," urged parishes to build parochial schools to save children from "perversion" and approved the baptism of non-Catholic children when there was a prospect of their being brought up in the Catholic faith.<sup>74</sup>

Protestants saw these decrees as a direct threat to American society. American Protestants who knew nothing of the organization of the Catholic Church and feared a Papal takeover were outraged by this council's decrees. Many American Protestants further believed that the Catholic Church, because of its hierarchical design, was out of

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<sup>73</sup> Billington, 23-25. Dorothy Dohen, *Nationalism and American Catholicism*, (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1967), 64-68.

<sup>74</sup> Peter Guilday, *A History of the Councils of Baltimore 1791-1884*, (New York, 1932), 89-95.

line with the country's republican traditions and ideals and that Catholics were the sworn enemy of democratic institutions. This made Catholics, in the eyes of American Protestants, a dangerous influence in the United States.<sup>75</sup>

A Protestant religious revival in the early 1820's led to the founding of a number of societies and publications that aided the anti-Catholic movement of later decades.<sup>76</sup> The founding and continued success of religious newspapers during these years created a powerful force constantly antagonistic toward Catholicism and extremely influential in shaping public opinion along these lines.<sup>77</sup> In rebuttal, the Catholics also formed their own papers, which, while trying to resist the Protestants attacks, fueled the fire. The very existence of these papers was an indication of the growing power and influence of Catholicism in America, something feared by many Nativists and Protestants.<sup>78</sup>

A book of the period that burned its way into the hearts and minds of many Protestant Americans was the famed *Six Months in a Convent*. Written in 1835 by a young woman named Rebecca Reed, this book sparked controversy and helped spread anti-Catholic feelings. The book was a fictional account of Reed's life, her experiences in a convent, and her escape from the convent. While nothing in the story was terribly inflammatory, it promoted rumors of immorality and abuse within convents and provided propaganda for Nativist groups.<sup>79</sup>

Another story that burst onto the American literary scene was *The Awful Disclosures of Maria Monk*, published in 1836. The book promised to be an expose` of the Catholic convent system, and was supposedly written by a former nun, Maria Monk.

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<sup>75</sup> Billington, 36-43. Dohen, 68-69.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid, 41-42.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid, 32-48.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid, 32-48.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid, 90-93.



Monk claimed that, though she was raised a Protestant, she decided to become a nun after being educated in a convent. After taking her vows she found out that the convent was little more than a harem for the local priests. Monk made her escape after discovering she was pregnant and told her story to a minister in a charity hospital. The story, while completely fictionalized, became a bestseller and was reprinted many times throughout the rest of the nineteenth century. Protestants and Nativists alike used the story as an example of the iniquity found in the Catholic Church.<sup>80</sup>

Both Catholic and Protestant papers carried the story of the 1834 burning of the Ursuline Convent in Charlestown, Massachusetts. This story showed the hatred of Protestants for Catholics, as well as class divisions between the rich and poor Protestants. Many wealthy Protestants in Massachusetts had been sending their daughters to the Ursuline Convent for education. The school was successful in drawing Protestant girls away from other Protestant run schools, and since many of the girls were Unitarians, many Protestants [in this case Congregationalists] believed the two groups, Catholics and Unitarians, were combining to fight against the Congregationalists. Ministers began preaching against this convent, claiming that the girls were being duped and that the leading citizens of Massachusetts would soon all be Catholic unless something was done to stop it. Eventually the Convent was attacked and burned by the lower classes of Charlestown; the children and nuns were forced to hide in a nearby town.<sup>81</sup>

Despite conciliatory remarks in Protestant newspapers, sentiment against the Ursulines continued, and the Massachusetts State legislature became involved when the Catholic Church petitioned for funds to rebuild the convent. The members of the

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<sup>80</sup> Billington, 99-108. Dohen, 66-67.

<sup>81</sup> Billington, 68-75.

legislature, while willing to enact more drastic riot laws, denied the church rebuilding funds.<sup>82</sup> The *American Protestant Vindicator*, newspaper that had made conciliatory remarks after the burning of the convent, changed its mind and reported that, “Any man who proposes, or who would vote for the measure, which would rob the treasury of the descendents of the Puritans to build Ursuline Nunneries, after the model of the Ursuline Nunnery at Quebec, and as the headquarters of the Jesuit Fenwick and his 20,000 vilest Irishmen must be a raving lunatic.” This statement, and the denial of funding to rebuild the convent, not only shows the hatred of Catholics in this period but also resistance to using public funds to support Catholics and the Irish.<sup>83</sup>

The lack of commitment to using public funds to support Irish Catholics did not stop at the refusal to rebuild the Convent. Since the Irish were regarded as lazy, usually drunken and indigent through their own fault, they were included in the “non-deserving poor” category of the period. The Protestant-dominated society wanted to give charity only to the “deserving poor” or to people whose poverty reformers deemed was a result of bad luck, not moral deficiency. Therefore, the Irish were often left to their own devices, and many ended up in the institutions of the day: the workhouse, the poorhouse, the jail, and the mental institution.<sup>84</sup>

The grim circumstances of Irish immigrants led to the development of stereotypes and hatred for them. They had come from a life of hardship and faced further deprivation in a foreign country. While they had no inherent weakness, as many Anglo-Saxon or Nativists claimed, their shortcomings were aggravated and exaggerated by those who

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<sup>82</sup> Commonwealth of Massachusetts, *Legislative Documents*, No. 37 (1835), 1-5. “Report on the Convent of Mount Benedict,” Commonwealth of Massachusetts, *Legislative Documents*, (1835), 1-24.

<sup>83</sup> Billington, 89.

<sup>84</sup> Kenny, 146-147.

hated them. Racial thinking in Britain and America taught that these troublesome people were a flawed, intellectually deficient race. Further defining the Irish as racially inferior, a traveler through Ireland remarked that, "I am haunted by the human chimpanzees I saw along the hundred miles of horrible country...to see white chimpanzees is dreadful; if they were black one would not feel so much..."<sup>85</sup> The Irish, then, found themselves in a hostile environment where they were fully expected to exhibit certain deficiencies of character. Insanity would be the label applied to their "strange" behavior and character. While the Irish may have been more vulnerable than other cultures to the label of insanity, the statistics cannot be seen as confirmation of this mental illness; rather, they are a confirmation of the problems the Irish immigrants faced and the backlash against Irish immigration.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Joseph Robins, *Fools and Mad: A History of the Insane in Ireland*, (Dublin: Institute of Public Administration, 1986), 125-126.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid*, 126-127.

## Anti-Irish Prejudice and Nativism in New England

### History of Massachusetts

Massachusetts was a leader in the burgeoning American society. The state was home to many social reform movements including abolition, educational reform, the Massachusetts Peace Society, and temperance. Massachusetts also became a leader in the mental health field throughout the nineteenth century, and her reforms in this area influenced the rest of the United States.<sup>1</sup>

Massachusetts began its history as a Puritan colony. By the nineteenth century, the state had shed many of its Puritanical ways, but religion was still very influential in all aspects of daily life. During the early nineteenth century, Lyman Beecher, a prominent minister in New England, helped lead and transform American religious society. Beecher and other Protestant reformers and evangelicals worked to bring a revitalized Protestant religious belief to the nation and the world. Beecher's efforts at moral reform had a huge impact on many people of the time but antagonized many immigrant groups, since they were often direct targets of reform.<sup>2</sup>

Beecher and other Christian reformers linked Protestant moral values with economic, social, and political gain.<sup>3</sup> Under moral reform, workers as well as economic leaders were expected to embody the Protestant values of hard work, punctuality, self-control, and sobriety. Politically, the evangelical emphasis on free will helped foster belief in individualism while reinforcing belief in democracy and equality. Evangelicals emphasized the potential of everyone to be saved. They also preached to large groups of

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<sup>1</sup> Ronald G. Walters, *American Reformers, 1815-1860*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), 230.  
Gerald N. Grob, *The State and the Mentally Ill: A History of Worcester State Hospital in Massachusetts, 1830-1920*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1966), 369-370.

<sup>2</sup> Walters, 22-23; 125-127.

<sup>3</sup> Walters, 22-23; 125-127.

all classes, emphasizing the idea that everyone was equal. Members of the church were also voting participants in the governing of the church, which thus promoted the ideals of democracy.<sup>4</sup>

Whole families were influenced by moral reform. As men worked outside of the home, emphasis on wives staying home and raising the children became paramount. In this “cult of domesticity,” women were seen as the guardians of morality and religiosity in the home, and a “well-ordered” home became the woman’s world. In the words of Catherine Beecher, who worked to educate women on their household duties and place in society, “There is no one thing more necessary to a housekeeper in performing her varied duties, than a *habit of system and order*. For all the time afforded us, we must give account to God.”<sup>5</sup> Women were also expected, in this new role, to be passive and submissive to their husbands since their husbands were the breadwinners of the family. Many women joined religious and moral reform groups in order to have a role and position of authority outside of the family.<sup>6</sup>

In the early to mid-nineteenth century, social reform movements developed in other areas of life. Massachusetts was one of the first states to establish a lasting system of public education.<sup>7</sup> The state was also a leader in Utopianism, a radical idea that said the world could be reformed by withdrawing from it. Several revolutionary Utopian

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 26-29.

<sup>5</sup> Catherine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The American Women’s Home, or Principles of Domestic Science*, (New York: J.B. Ford and Co., 1869), 167.

<sup>6</sup> Christine Stansell, “Women, Children, and the Uses of the Streets: Class and Gender Conflict in New York City, 1850-1860” in *Unequal Sisters: A Multi-cultural Reader in U.S. Women’s History*, (eds. Vicki L. Ruiz and Ellen Carol DuBois, London: Routledge, 1994), 112. Carolyn J. Lawes, *Women and Reform in a New England Community, 1815-1860*, (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2000), 12-29, 83-85, 113-122. Cynthia Eagle Russett, *Sexual Science: The Victorian Construction of Womanhood*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 116-129.

<sup>7</sup> Alden Bradford, *History of Massachusetts, from the Year 1790-1820*, (Boston: J.H. Eastburn, 1829), 47-48.

groups, including Brook Farm and the Fruitlands, were formed in Massachusetts during this period of change.<sup>8</sup> Social reform movements also had a lasting impact on the political situation in Massachusetts as well as the United States. Women's rights became an issue during this period, and women agitated for the right to vote and to have a voice in government. Reformers also began to devote time and energy to the anti-slavery crusade. Famous Massachusetts reformers, including William Lloyd Garrison, became outspoken critics for reform of the "peculiar institution," and Massachusetts became a key battle ground state for the abolition of slavery.<sup>9</sup>

The temperance movement born in this era of reform had a huge impact on the United States. By 1830, the average American drank four gallons of alcohol every year, the highest level in American history. Reformers at first focused on drunkenness, but by the time the American Temperance Society's was founded in 1826, voluntary abstinence became the ultimate goal. This reform was popular and especially appealed to those who wanted to be upwardly mobile because temperance was a part of the values of the Protestant middle-class. Temperance advocates also stressed that drinking by male breadwinners had a dire effect on women and children, which made their cause appealing to women involved in the cult of domesticity.<sup>10</sup>

By the 1850's, these movements had a direct impact on immigrants. Many Republicans despised the Irish because they did not support the abolitionist movement. The Irish fought for government funding for separate Catholic schools, a movement

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<sup>8</sup> Robert S. Fogarty, *All Things New: American Communes and Utopian Movements, 1860-1914*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), 13, 222-223.

<sup>9</sup> John McWilliams, *New England's Crises and Cultural Memory: Literature, Politics, History, Religion, 1620-1860*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 258-291. Russel B. Nye, *William Lloyd Garrison and the Humanitarian Reformers*, ed. Oscar Handlin, (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1955), 36-39, 106-107.

<sup>10</sup> W.J. Rorabaugh, *The Alcoholic Republic: An American Tradition*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 189-222.

unpopular with many Protestant taxpayers. Irish women generally did not observe the canons of the cult of domesticity since they needed to work outside the house in order for their families to survive. And the Irish had a long culture of drinking, which made temperance something they did not support.<sup>11</sup>

Massachusetts, like much of New England, was facing an economic revolution. As agriculture moved farther and farther west, the eastern seaboard increasingly became a place of industry. Textile manufacturing became one of the bigger industries in Massachusetts during the nineteenth century, and as technology improved, the state became a center of manufacturing.<sup>12</sup> By the mid-nineteenth century, as industry increased, workers were needed in the factories. The developing economy, changes in the banking system, and economic recessions kept Americans uncertain about their monetary security and sent politicians scrambling to come up with a new economic order. Some Americans feared that the Irish were taking jobs away from American laborers. The economic uncertainty of the mid-nineteenth century fostered a hatred of Irish immigrants whom the Protestant middle-class Americans blamed for these growing problems.<sup>13</sup>

American cities grew at an astronomical rate during the nineteenth century. Improved transportation, the declining productivity of farms on the eastern seaboard, industrialization, and immigration all contributed to the amazing growth. Cities were constantly growing and needed to change to meet the needs of an ever-diversifying

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<sup>11</sup> Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White*, (New York: Routledge, 1995), 165-166. Hasia R. Diner, *Erin's Daughters in America: Irish Immigrant Women in the Nineteenth Century*, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), 70-105, 132-133. Rorabaugh, 143-144.

<sup>12</sup> Jonathan Prude, *The Coming Industrial Order: Town and Factory Life in Rural Massachusetts, 1810-1860*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 100-132.

<sup>13</sup> Ignatiev, 389-395. Kerby A. Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 322-323.

population.<sup>14</sup> Many reformers in Massachusetts became convinced that the government had a responsibility to relieve distress and promote prosperity. This led to an increased political awareness, and Massachusetts became one of the first states to abolish all property qualifications for voting, to provide for the incorporation of cities, and to remove religious tests for officeholders.<sup>15</sup> Massachusetts increasingly became divided, however, on whether the state or local municipalities had jurisdiction over public assistance, especially in regards to the growing immigrant population. This divisiveness can be seen throughout the nineteenth century in the battles over almshouses, prisons, and mental institutions, and in the treatment of pauper immigrants.<sup>16</sup>

Immigration to Massachusetts increased dramatically during the nineteenth century, and Massachusetts was flooded by Irish, especially during the years of and directly following the Famine (1848-1859). This influx of immigrants, many of them impoverished and in urgent need of assistance, shocked the public. Irish Famine immigrants brought pestilence and disease, and they needed help that the Americans could not, or would not, provide. Many Irish immigrants were already impoverished and suffered from malnutrition and poor health. In Boston, immigrants who had escaped the medical exam upon arrival in America were sometimes seen crawling through the streets, begging shelter from frightened inhabitants.<sup>17</sup> They desperately needed charitable groups to help them with food, shelter, and work. Often, according to one historian, the Irish “were so demoralized, deranged, or physically weakened by their experiences that they sank into permanent poverty or threw themselves ‘listlessly upon the daily dole of

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<sup>14</sup> Prude, 24-26.

<sup>15</sup> Ronald P. Formisano, *The Transformation of Political Culture: Massachusetts Parties, 1790's-1840's*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 41-45, 140-141.

<sup>16</sup> Grob, 144-197.

<sup>17</sup> Miller, 316.



government.”<sup>18</sup> According to Samuel Busey, a contemporary observer, “[in] Boston...much of the largest portion of the patients are *foreigners*, many of whom are transferred directly from the immigrant ships to the hospitals.”<sup>19</sup> Busey then went on to explain how the immigrants, the Irish in particular, were a danger to society because of their desperate situation, which he blamed on their moral and physical deficiencies. Busey also stated that the United States government had no obligation to help these immigrants and believed that stricter laws should be enacted to keep them out of the country. Busey was not alone in his critique of the Irish, and the flood of impoverished Irish immigrants fueled the prejudice and augmented the stereotypes to which the Irish were already subject. Massachusetts, then, became a battleground of immigrants versus Americans, and the state’s struggle to develop a coherent plan for dealing with immigrants is a study in the changes of the nineteenth century.

### **Stereotypes and Prejudices**

Much of the prejudice against the Irish in the United States came from the antipathy already felt by the Anglo-Saxons living in New England, as well as the ideas that were passed across the ocean. By the mid-nineteenth century, many New Englanders, having some distance from the Revolution, felt an affinity for English culture, and Anglo-Saxonism was a popular ideology of the time. Anglo-Saxonism, in its earliest form, was the idea that those of Anglo-Saxon descent, mainly the English, were the fittest humans in the world, and anyone who was not of that origin did not have the same inherent ability. Therefore, the Irish, who were Celtic and conquered by the English Anglo-Saxons, were inferior. Anglo-Saxons took this idea very seriously and

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 316.

<sup>19</sup> Samuel Busey (Samuel Clagett), *Immigration, Its Evils and Consequences*, (New York: De Witt and Davenport, 1856), 125.

believed that the glory of English civilization both in the British Isles and abroad proved that they had unique skills and talents and were destined for dominance.<sup>20</sup>

The English drew their proof from many different sources: their success in ordering their own affairs, their achievements in literature, the arts and sciences; their power in seafare and warfare. The English felt that their constitution, which had existed for centuries, provided for the stability of their society and country and gave them a heritage unmatched by any others. They believed that all of these things proved that they had innate wisdom and skills, which they saw as *racial* attributes. The English were sure that anyone who tried to match these achievements would fail because they lacked these racial traits and features.<sup>21</sup>

The Irish, who were conquered many times by the English starting with the early Norman invasions in the 1100's, demonstrated that – as far as the English were concerned - they were not worthy opponents of the English and were both culturally and racially inferior. Anglo-Saxons shared common ties of blood, language, geographical origin, and culture traceable to the Jutes, Angles, and Saxons, while the Irish were of Celtic blood. The English of the time believed that their physical makeup equipped them with reason, restraint, self-control, love of freedom and hatred of anarchy, a respect for law and a distrust of enthusiasm. The “science” of phrenology further backed these ideas, and it was believed that these traits were passed from generation to generation, further proving that the English race was the strongest race of all of Europe (and possibly the world). Phrenology and Anglo-Saxonism helped perpetuate another idea that fostered much of the hatred of the Irish on both sides of the ocean – threats to the superiority of

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<sup>20</sup> L. P. Curtis, Jr., *Anglo-Saxons and Celts: A Study of Anti-Irish Prejudice in Victorian England*, (Bridgeport: University of Bridgeport, 1968), 8-11.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, p. 8-9

the Anglo-Saxon came not only from competition economically, but also from physiological and biological forces inside the nation or race. “Racial deterioration” was perceived as a threat by the English and Americans and was perpetuated by the ideas of Anglo-Saxonism and the prejudices felt at the time.<sup>22</sup>

Americans followed English journals and newspapers closely, and many of these Anglo-Saxon ideas and beliefs were passed on. Many English publications, including the *Quarterly Review*, made their way into the United States where readers could absorb the prejudices and hatreds of the English public.<sup>23</sup> Several American papers, such as *The New York Observer* and *The Boston Recorder*, also devoted sections of their newspapers to promoting these ideas.<sup>24</sup> In the United States, the concept of racial deterioration could be seen in the ideas of political movements, such as the American or “Know-Nothing” Party. This party was concerned that race suicide was occurring in white Protestant middle class families. During the nineteenth century, the family size of the Protestant middle class was dropping due to urbanization and the desire for financial security. Many people realized that having fewer children reduced the family’s financial burden, and this increased wealth might elevate the family’s social status. This reduced family size, however, created a fear in many Nativists that other groups, such as the Irish, who had large families, might take over their institutions simply because the Irish population had become larger than the Protestant middle class. Another concern of the Nativists was the mixing of Anglo-Saxon with “foreign” blood, especially that of the Irish, Jews, and

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 12-15. Dale T. Knobel, *Paddy and the Republic: Ethnicity and Nationality in Antebellum America*, (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1986), 69-103.

<sup>23</sup> Curtis, 33-35.

<sup>24</sup> Ray Allen Billington, *The Origins of Nativism in the United States, 1800-1840*, (New York: Arno Press, 1974), 74-85.

Italians. Nativists were concerned that mixing with these “foreigners” would dilute the racial purity of the white Anglo-Saxon, therefore creating “inferior” offspring.<sup>25</sup>

The Irish were seen to be the opposite of the English in every way and were a threat to the English in their very existence. The English saw the Potato Famine, among other disasters, as the workings of Providence and a divine retribution for the problems the Irish caused. The ideas of Thomas Malthus were popular in England during the early to mid-nineteenth century. Malthusian thinking stated that an area of land could only support a certain number of people, and once the land had reached this limit, disease, famine, or other disasters would naturally wipe out the excess population until it reached supportable levels again. The English, then, did not help the Irish during the Famine in part because they believed that natural forces were at work. This lack of assistance helped fuel a disaster that drastically cut the Irish population in half through starvation and mass emigration.<sup>26</sup>

The prejudice against the Irish came from centuries of English oppression and therefore was accepted without question by both the English and American populations. Recurring battles between the Irish and the English regarding Irish Home Rule fostered stereotypes, reinforcing the idea that the Irish were “treacherous...[and have] a love of war and disorder.”<sup>27</sup> Irish actions, especially those of rural secret societies, and later Land League agitators, reinforced the stereotypes of Irish violence and Irish inability to

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 12-15. Knobel, 116-128.

<sup>26</sup> James S. Donnelly, *The Great Irish Potato Famine*, (England: Sutton Publishing, 2001), 41- 68. Wood to Russell, 22 November 1848, quoted in G.P. Gooch (ed.), *The Later Correspondence of Lord John Russell, 1840-1878* (2 vols, London, 1925). Sir Charles Wood, Chancellor of the Exchequer stated that, “I am not at all appalled by your tenantry going. That seems to me a necessary part of the process... We must not complain of what we are really want to obtain.”

<sup>27</sup> Curtis, 70-74.

rule themselves.<sup>28</sup> The idea was that if the ‘superior’ English were not capable of ruling the Irish, then the Irish were definitely not fit to rule themselves. The Irish were not smart enough, lacked the biological superiority of the English, and were violent and turbulent. Therefore the Irish “problem” could not be fixed without some type of special intervention from God.<sup>29</sup> The Potato Famine, with its deathly results, was seen as special intervention from God. Many people believed that only through generations of intermarriage with another race could the Irish be changed or improved (a puzzling fact since most Nativists were against “inbreeding” of Anglo-Saxon and “foreign” blood).<sup>30</sup>

Anti-Irish prejudice, or Nativism, came from many different sources. The Potato Famine provided Anglo-Saxons and Nativists with the “divine” proof they needed to demonstrate their superiority. The Irish, who were victims of famine, who were forced from their land by an enclosure movement and increased animal husbandry, and who had lived in poor conditions since the time of their first conquest, became the perfect example of what happens to “inferior” cultures. Further, their appalling poverty in the United States proved to the Protestant middle-class and Nativists that the Irish immigrants were inferior and to blame for their own problems.<sup>31</sup>

Another source of anti-Irish prejudice was the Protestants’ hatred and suspicion of Catholicism. English and American Protestants saw Catholicism as a mix of anathema, superstition, and papal despotism. This made Irish Catholics a danger to the Protestant minority in Ireland, as well as a threat to the British Commonwealth and to America as a whole. If the Irish were going to follow the Pope, they were not going to

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 33-35.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 4-5.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 93-94. Knobel, 108-110.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 4-5. Marjorie R. Fallows, *Irish Americans: Identity and Assimilation*, (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1979), 36-37. Walters, 176-177.

listen to the leaders of the United States, and serious divisions would occur. If the people practiced Catholicism, then they were following a religion that was full of superstition. To the English and Americans, this proved that the Irish could not think for themselves, and that a belief system that included dangerous “superstitions” was the antithesis of a rational mind.<sup>32</sup>

Stereotypical descriptions of the Irish during the mid-nineteenth included almost every negative impression the English and Americans of the time period could find. These stereotypes show that the Irish did not fit the accepted norms of society. The Irish were described as unreliable and emotionally unstable people who often faced mental disequilibria and had a dualistic temperament. They were, in other words, a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde archetype who oscillated between extremes of behavior and mood. They were also seen as untrustworthy and dishonest.<sup>33</sup>

These stereotypes can be easily sorted out if one looks at the bigger picture. The Irish were a people who were living in their own land with their conquerors ruling them and directly controlling their lives. These people would have put on a ‘mask’ much like the slaves of the United States. Paul Lawrence Dunbar, an African-American poet in the late nineteenth century, wrote a poem titled, “We Wear the Mask,” which explains the trials of those who are oppressed and how they survive that oppression.

We wear the mask that grins lies,  
 It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes—  
 This debt we pay to human guile; with torn and bleeding hearts we smile  
 And mouth with myriad subtleties.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Knobel, 56-58. Billington, 60-64, 70-77.

<sup>33</sup> Curtis, 51-52. Donnelly 59-64. Knobel, 86-89.

<sup>34</sup> Paul Lawrence Dunbar, “We Wear the Mask” from *The Complete Poems of Paul Lawrence Dunbar*, (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Co, 1913), 27.

Protection from the “master” came from acting the way the master expected. Therefore, the Irish put on a ‘mask’ to deal with the English landlords to keep their own identities and feelings hidden.<sup>35</sup> Behaving deferentially for the English in order to stay out of trouble would have been a smart action for the Irish peasant living on tenant land. If the line was crossed, however, and the Irish could no longer accept or tolerate their subordinate position or the treatment they were given at the hands of their landlords, then they most likely would have expressed their anger and frustration in more violent or less desirable ways (from the English landlord’s viewpoint).<sup>36</sup> Protection from the ‘mask’ can also be seen in the insane asylums of the period. Doctors often commented that the Irish would not speak to them and even suggested that the Irish did not trust them. The ‘mask,’ then, protected the Irish insane patient from the person who had power, or control, over him.<sup>37</sup>

The so-called irrational impulses and rapid change of moods of the Irish can be explained in the harshness of the Irish peasants’ lives. These people were barely able to survive during the nineteenth century because of the series of famines and disease that passed through the land. These natural occurrences had a direct impact on the lives of everyone and caused many to feel despair and utter hopelessness at some point.<sup>38</sup> The psychological toll on the people who had seen friends and family destroyed by hunger or disease could make them feel depressed and lead to irrational actions. At the same time these people may have also felt guilt at having fun or feeling joy, which could also lead to

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<sup>35</sup> Miller, 42-48.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 60-65.

<sup>37</sup> WSH, *Fifteenth Annual Report* (December, 1847), 33.

<sup>38</sup> Miller, 506-510.

a perception that the Irish were irrational and moody.<sup>39</sup> This description also suggests that describing the Irish in terms of irrationality and moodiness made the Irish seem, in the minds of their English and American oppressors, like adolescents, boys who were young, rowdy, and testing their manhood. If the Irish are “adolescents,” then it is acceptable for them to continue under English rule (since they were not capable of self-government). Furthermore the ascription of “adolescent” also makes the Irish seem to be lesser beings, people who need protection and a father’s guiding hand. For example, an Irishman was often described as “a feckless, devil-may-care, rollicking, hard-drinking and hard fighting peasant.” This would make the Irish as a nation seem to be a group of people who were not serious, who needed a guiding hand, who acted like teenage boys who could not help but be unruly. The Irish were adolescents waiting to come to maturity, so these terms, which acknowledging their fisticuff abilities show a grudging respect while still downgrading Irish manliness to the level of juveniles.<sup>40</sup>

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, the Irish stereotype was modified, and the Irish were further downgraded to dimwitted children. The Irish were commonly described as childish, emotionally unstable, ignorant, indolent, superstitious, primitive or semi-civilized, dirty, vengeful, and violent. These terms give the Irish a truly inferior position and mark the Irish as child-like in nature. This language encourages and supports the stereotype of “Paddy,” the foolish Irish drunk who was a popular stage and cartoon character in America during the mid to late nineteenth century.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Deborah Peck, “Silent Hunger: The Psychological Impact of the Great Hunger,” in *Ireland’s Great Hunger: Silence, Memory and Commemoration*, (eds. David A. Valone and Christine Kinealy, New York: University Press of America, 2002), 140-159.

<sup>40</sup> Curtis, 50-55. Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 25-31. Knobel, 53-56.

<sup>41</sup> Curtis, 52.



Many Irish social customs also led to prejudices against them. The Irish wake custom of keening, with its loud wails and shrieks, was not understood by outsiders in England or America. The customs of dancing and drinking during a wake seemed irrational to most middle-class Protestants whose funeral ideal was a year of mourning with a stiff upper lip. The Irish custom of dancing and meeting for dances was condemned by most Protestants who frowned on dancing since it went against their religious ideals. Drinking, another custom kept by the Irish, was also frowned upon because of Protestant ideals of sobriety in all actions. “Rational” English and American citizens condemned Irish belief in fairies and other superstitions. These superstitions made the Irish even more misunderstood by those who did not share their Celtic identity.<sup>42</sup>

America became, in many people’s minds, the ‘battleground’ of the Anglo-Saxon versus the ‘foreigner’. In the *Edinburgh Review* of April, 1868, the “dearer” (Anglo-Saxon) and “Cheaper” (Irish) in America were waging a war for supremacy.<sup>43</sup> The war was being fought not for material wealth, as might be expected, but for the survival of Anglo-Saxon civilization: the Irish were a flood that threatened to blot out Anglo-Saxon hegemony.<sup>44</sup>

### **Scientific Thought**

The new field of mental health provided ways to control those who society deemed deviant. Physiognomy and phrenology were “sciences” popular in the early part of the nineteenth century that later influenced eugenics in the later part of that same century. Physiognomy was based upon the belief that a person’s outer appearance,

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<sup>42</sup> Miller, 325-327.

<sup>43</sup> Charles Dilke, *Greater Britain*, *Edinburgh Review* (April 1868) Vol. 127, no. 260; 503

<sup>44</sup> Curtis, 45-46. Knobel, 108-111.

primarily the face, revealed the contents of their personality. Physiognomists also believed that the shape and size of the head gave direct indications of mental capacity and attributes. In this way, physical features directly exposed the capacity and character of the mind and the individual. Phrenology, on the other hand, studied the bumps of the head to read a person's personality. The practical application of physiognomy and phrenology was popular during the mid-nineteenth century in many medical arenas, including insane asylums, as people tried to classify different features to gain insight into the human mind. In reality, however, this "science" was used as justification for the prejudices, stereotypes, and actions made against those who were not of the Anglo-Saxon race.<sup>45</sup>

Researchers in this particular field felt that racial attributes determined human behavior. Membership in any race could, therefore, be determined by examining the skull or head shape, the color of hair and eyes, the pigmentation, the degree of prognathism or orthognathism (how far the forehead or jaw protruded in relationship to one another), and the stature and carriage of the person. Scientists tried to explain the origins of British people by identifying the common characteristics of their physical and mental attributes, hoping that, through this research, they could prove why the English and Irish seemed to behave in such different ways. Protestant middle and upper class Americans, who carried the attributes of the English, also supported these ideas and tried to prove that they were linked to the English, not the inferior Irish.<sup>46</sup>

In the physical arena, the Irish were described almost like Neanderthals, with sunken eyes, protruding brows, long arms, large jaws, and other characteristics. But

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<sup>45</sup> John D. Davies, *Phrenology, Fad and Science: A Nineteenth Century American Crusade*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955), 3-7, 67-71.

<sup>46</sup> Knobel, 111-128.

physical characteristics were never enough. Scientists in the nineteenth century were really hoping to prove that mental and emotional characteristics were what really defined a person, and that each race had qualities that belonged specifically to them. One scientist, D. Mackintosh, described the Irish in terms of their mental and emotional characteristics: “Quick in perception, but deficient in depth of reasoning power; headstrong and excitable; tendency to oppose; strong in love and hate; at one time lively, soon after sad, vivid in imagination; extremely social, with a propensity for crowding together; forward and self-confident; deficient in application to deep study, but possessed of great concentration in monotonous or purely mechanical occupations, such as hop-picking, reaping weaving, etc; wants of prudence and foresight; antipathy to sea-faring pursuits...veneration for [Church] authority.” Some of these ideas contradict the descriptions of the Irish by other researchers, and some, such as “self-confident” or “vivid imagination” would often be a positive comment on a person today.<sup>47</sup>

Anglo-Saxon attributes, on the other hand, were described physically and mentally in more positive terms. The Anglo-Saxon had “features (which) were extremely regular: mouth well formed, chin neither prominent nor receding, nose straight, eyes prominent, ears flat, hair light brown, chest and shoulders of moderate breadth.” In mental terms, the Anglo-Saxon was “simple, truthful, straightforward, and honest...determined, but not self-willed; self-reliant yet humble; peaceable, orderly, unexcitable, un-ambitious, and free from extravagance.” These ideas express the middle-class Protestant ideal in both England and America.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 111-128

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 111-128.

Scientific articles of the mid-nineteenth century often promulgated the stereotypes of the Irish. Robert Knox, a famous English anatomist, insisted that nature so abhorred hybrid races that they could not survive for any length of time. The mixture of Celt and Anglo-Saxon produced a people of “uncertain character” who soon died out or returned to the purer races.<sup>49</sup> In discussing the natures of the Celt versus Anglo-Saxon, Knox described the Saxon as a “thoughtful, plodding, industrious” fellow who loved order, punctuality, good business methods, and cleanliness. He did not object to working for profit, and no race surpassed him in self-confidence or in the desire to accumulate wealth. On the other hand, Knox described the Celtic character as possessing, “furious fanaticism; a love of war and disorder; a hatred for order and patient industry; no accumulative habits; restless, treacherous, uncertain: look at Ireland...As a Saxon, I abhor all dynasties, monarchies and bayonet governments, but this latter seems to be the only one suitable for the Celtic man.”<sup>50</sup>

The movement to “scientifically” characterize the Irish as lesser beings was taken to another level in the 1850’s by an anonymous physician in Ballinasloe, Ireland. This physician was trying to characterize lunatics physically, using phrenology to do so. The doctor believed that “the face was an outward sign of the inner soul...the bony head an outward reflection of the structure of the different organs of the brain.” Like others in this time, the physician was suggesting that mental illness could be read in the face of the sufferer. The patients he studied were listed as having peculiar deformities of the body, including a ‘stooping gait’ and ‘very large feet,’ or ‘a quiet, downcast sullen face and restless staring eyes.’ All of these were listed as having some type of psychiatric

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<sup>49</sup> Curtis, 69-71.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, 70. Knobel, 109-111.

disturbance. The doctor made paper cutouts of the head of each of his patients and included them in the casebooks so they could someday be used to categorize different types of insanity. In this way, he was simply linking physical terms with mental disturbance, something that was popular at the time but had very little scientific merit. Negative connotations of the mental illness of the Irish represent how physiognomy and phrenology influenced the beliefs held by scientists and the public. The Irish were “insane,” and their biology could be used to prove that they were mentally and physically inferior.<sup>51</sup>

At the same time as the ideas of phrenology and physiognomy were used to explain racial inferiority, the idea of “civilization” was also developed. This idea was a racial concept that delineated levels of human existence. Humans were divided into two classes: barbarians and the civilized. Only Anglo-Saxons were “civilized;” everyone else was a barbarian. “Human races were assumed to evolve from simple savagery, through violent barbarism, to advanced and valuable civilization... In fact, people sometimes spoke of civilization as if it were itself a racial trait, inherited by all Anglo-Saxons and other ‘advanced’ white races.”<sup>52</sup> The Irish, during the mid-nineteenth century, were not considered “white,” which at this point would have been Anglo-Saxon. The Irish were a part of the barbarians, groups considered lesser beings and the opposite of their civilized counterparts. Civilized women were delicate, spiritual, and dedicated to their homes. Civilized men were firm of character, self-controlled protectors of women and children. Barbarian women, on the other hand, were aggressive, did a lot of manual labor and

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<sup>51</sup> Oonagh Walsh, “‘The Designs of Providence’: Race, Religion, and Irish Insanity,” from *Insanity, Institutions and Society, 1800-1914: A Social History of Madness in Comparative Perspective*, (ed. Joseph Melling and Bill Forsythe, Routledge, 1999), 236-237.

<sup>52</sup> Bederman, 25.

worked outside of the home. Barbarian men were emotional and unable to restrain their passion, abused women, and abandoned their children instead of providing for them.<sup>53</sup>

Class tastes were also believed to be inherited, part of the traits passed on from one 'civilized' generation to the next. The Irish male "inherited" his taste for loud, late-night drinking and brawling, while the Protestant middle class male "inherited" his love of quiet nights of civilized conversation by the firelight. By insisting that these traits were inherited, the Nativists and others who believed in "civilization" justified their treatment of others by downplaying the importance of culture. Evolution had made middle-class Protestant women delicate and perfect caretakers of the home. Evolution had given Anglo-Saxon men the ability to be self-made men. In this instance, it was obviously impossible for the Irish immigrant to become a part of civilization, and because Irish culture was so different from Anglo-Saxon culture, it further increased the likelihood that the Irish were savage, barbarous beings who would never become part of Civilization.<sup>54</sup> If racial traits were passed from one generation to the next, it was also likely that insanity could be passed on as well, adding yet another building block to the idea that the Irish were insane.

"Moral Insanity" was another theory important to the medical field of the mid-nineteenth century. Dr. James Cowles Prichard introduced the concept of "moral insanity" in 1835, defining it as "a morbid perversion of the natural feelings, affections, inclinations, temper, habits, moral dispositions, and natural impulses, without any remarkable disorder or defect of the intellect, of knowing and reasoning faculties, and particularly without an insane illusion or hallucination." Moral insanity redefined

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid, 25-28.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 29-31.

madness, not as a loss of reason, but as deviance from socially accepted behavior, a failure to cope with poverty, the temptations of drink, domestic crises, disappointments in love, cruelty, misapplied religiosity, or, in the case of puerperal insanity, the strains of childbearing. This theory opened the door to all sorts of diagnoses of mental disturbance that had no scientific basis for disease, and gave officials license to declare anyone insane who lived outside of the “norms” of Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, middle-class America.<sup>55</sup>

Examples of the influence of “moral insanity” on patient diagnoses and treatment can be found in the casebooks and annual reports of the Worcester State Lunatic Asylum, in Worcester, Massachusetts. Cases were listed in a table each year explaining the causes of insanity so that a systematic study of the cases might be made. Unfortunately for medical historians, as well as for the patients of the time, the diagnosis of sanity and insanity in the mid-nineteenth century was a highly subjective and speculative affair. Broad classifications of disease and behavior were available, and each patient was categorized as suffering from something, usually mania or monomania. However, beyond these vague categories, there was a distinct lack of sophisticated vocabulary with which to encompass and delineate degrees of madness; therefore usually some form of moral insanity was listed as the cause. The following chart, specifically detailing causes of insanity for those patients who were identified as Irish in the years 1849-1850, appears below. The chart only includes those who were identified as Irish immigrants in order to show what problems the Irish were perceived to exhibit. Some of the causes provide no obvious link to insanity. The chart also shows who declared these people insane. The courts had definite power when diagnosing insanity and sending people to the asylum.

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<sup>55</sup> Hilary Marland, “‘Destined to a Perfect Recovery’: The Confinement of Puerperal Insanity in the Nineteenth Century,” *Insanity, Institutions and Society, 1800-1914: A Social History of Madness in Comparative Perspective*, eds. Joseph Melling and Bill Forsythe, (Routledge, 1999), 143.

While this chart is in no way definitive, it proves that the theory of moral insanity had an influence on Irish immigrants who were declared insane.<sup>56</sup>

<b>Cause of Insanity in Irish Patients, 1849-1850</b>	
Intemperance	5
Insanity following a fever	2
Masturbation	1
Puerperal	2
Hard labor/exposure	2
Family Trouble	2
Religious	1
Drying of an ulcer	1
Jealousy	1
Epilepsy	1
Domestic Affliction	2
Fright	1
Witness on a criminal case	1
Sunstruck	1
Ill health	1
Reasons unknown	44
<b>Total Admitted for the Year</b>	<b>70</b>
<b>Who committed these patients as insane</b>	
The Courts	69
The Overseers	1

It is interesting to note that while the Irish were considered intemperate and intemperance was strongly linked to insanity, only seven percent of the Irish listed in the year 1849-1850 were diagnosed as insane by drinking. When comparing this statistic to the general population of the hospital for the same year (not included on the chart), the overall occurrence of insanity by intemperance is four percent. Therefore, while it does not seem like a large portion of the Irish were committed for drinking, when compared with the total, they were perceived as alcoholics. Other causes of moral insanity, while not having correspondingly high occurrences, are still obviously morally- based causes; domestic affliction, masturbation, religion, and family trouble are all examples of

<sup>56</sup> WSH, *Seventeenth Annual Report* (December, 1850), 20-39.



immorality causing insanity. Several of these, including “family trouble,” “domestic affliction,” and “religion”, were directly related to Irish behavior and belief. Catholicism was not acceptable, and often doctors stated that “false belief” proved a person was insane. Family trouble and domestic affliction were often associated with the Irish since many of them had violent domestic disputes and lived in complete squalor. Since poverty was linked with insanity, this could have also been a part of the domestic affliction section, or might have been a part of the “unknown” causes. “Unknown” causes of insanity constitute a large percentage of those institutionalized. This suggests that diagnosing insanity during the mid-nineteenth century was not an exact science, and that many people may have been institutionalized for reasons other than insanity. In any case, moral insanity was a vital and important part of the diagnosis when dealing with insanity.<sup>57</sup>

Poverty, Catholicism, intemperance, and domestic violence were a part of many Irish immigrants’ lives. Some of these aspects of life were cultural; some of them, such as the poverty, were not chosen, but through circumstance became a part of daily life. Many Americans were disturbed by the poverty and squalor that they saw, and many saw the problems of domestic violence and intemperance as moral weaknesses that could be changed by reform. Insanity, a disturbance that was not generally well understood or defined by society, became connected with moral insanity, a catch-all diagnosis for many who did not exhibit the traits that middle-class society expected. Many Irish immigrants, therefore, may have become patients in mental asylums simply because they did not fit into middle-class American society.

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<sup>57</sup> No explanation of the various causes is given in any of the casebooks. Some of the medical terms can be found in dictionaries of the time period, but the moral causes are not defined, proving that society constructs the definition of insanity and that this definition can change over time.

## **The Rise of Mental Institutions and Systems of Charity in Massachusetts**

Massachusetts had a system of state-run charitable institutions to house its paupers, its criminals, and its insane. This system consisted of prisons, almshouses, workhouses, hospitals, and asylums. All of these institutions, while serving individualized roles within the charitable system, also served to house those from outside of the state. What was the purpose of these institutions, and how does this differ from our view of such institutions today?

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, towns in the United States with large populations found that nonresident and transient individuals who could not support themselves because of disease and age often were placed in almshouses or workhouses to fulfill the town's humanitarian and moral obligations while also helping the economy. No standard admission policies existed, and some accepted the very young, the elderly, the infirm and the mentally ill.<sup>1</sup>

Prisons in Massachusetts and other states were built to house those accused of, and convicted of, a crime, as well as housing the violently insane.<sup>2</sup> Almshouses, or poorhouses, were developed for poor who had no one to care for them and no outside source of funds. Such individuals might have needed temporary assistance for lack of money, but most people who entered the almshouse stayed for long periods of time. Often those who ended up in the almshouses were people no one was willing to care for: the elderly with no family, the mentally retarded, the ill, women and their children (whose husbands had died or deserted them), beggars, the physically impaired, and orphans. The insane were also often added to this mix, especially in areas with no

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<sup>1</sup> Gerald N. Grob, *Mental Institutions in America: Social Policy to 1875*, (New York: The Free Press, 1973), 13-14.

<sup>2</sup> Grob, 97. Walters, 195-196.

asylums. The insane were not kept separated from the general population of the almshouse.<sup>3</sup>

Workhouses, while similar in the population they served, functioned as receptacles for those who were seen as healthy enough to work. People helped to earn their keep as well as to learn work-related skills. Workhouses were seen as a last resort for most poor people because they were considered places of harsh discipline and because of fears of contracting disease. They were purposely designed to discourage people from residing there.<sup>4</sup>

Hospitals served the needs of the physically ill and housed those who needed temporary or long term care, generally for physical illnesses. In contrast, asylums were built for those diagnosed with mental illnesses. They were rarely meant to house people for long. Hospitals and asylums were originally built with a paying population in mind. These were not considered charitable institutions, unless specifically built for that purpose. Most of the poor or destitute mentally or physically ill would have gone to the poorhouse or possibly the workhouse for their convalescence, and probably would have first been served by a public dispensary which would have diagnosed their illness and told them where to get it taken care of.<sup>5</sup>

Each institution was built to house a specific population. In this way the prisons should have housed only those who were criminals, poor houses should have been receptacles for the infirm poor, workhouses were places for the physically able poor, and

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<sup>3</sup> Grob, 14-15.

<sup>4</sup> James S. Donnelly Jr., *The Great Irish Potato Famine*, (United Kingdom: Sutton Publishing, 2001), 106. Ronald G. Walters, *American Reformers, 1815-1860*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), 195-196.

<sup>5</sup> Edward Jarvis, *Insanity and Idiocy in Massachusetts: Report of the Commission on Lunacy, 1855*, with a critical introduction by Gerald N. Grob. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), intro. 65. From this point forward, this will be cited as the Jarvis Report.

charitable hospitals and asylums receptacles for the physically or mentally ill. But these definitions were not precisely held to, and since each was seen as a charitable institution, the populations were often moved from one institution to another based on the number of beds available and the budgetary issues in the state. Many states may not have had all four types of institutions, either, so sometimes people were placed wherever there was room. For example, prisons in this period often housed the violent insane, and prisoners from overcrowded prisons were sometimes used as orderlies in insane asylums.<sup>6</sup>

If the insane asylums were full, mental patients were also occasionally housed in the workhouses or poor houses until there were openings. Many of those who showed signs of mental illness never made it into the asylums, and the mixing of the sane and insane in the poorhouses, workhouses, and prisons most likely had a negative effect on all of the inmates. In the words of one historian, mental hospitals, and the institutions of the jail, workhouse, and poorhouse, “protected the community against individuals who ostensibly threatened its security and well-being.” This led to an “undifferentiated welfare institution,” where people were placed in whatever charitable institution had space or was willing to provide for the person’s needs.<sup>7</sup>

Massachusetts was a forerunner in the development of charitable systems, and many states looked to Massachusetts as a model for their own systems. Yet, the state still encountered many problems that had to be solved throughout the nineteenth century. While people in Massachusetts may have been receiving some type of charity in the form of institutionalization, many may not have been receiving the help they really needed.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 25 intro.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 16 intro.

An insane person could have been in prison instead of an insane asylum while a pauper could be in an insane asylum awaiting a bed somewhere else.<sup>8</sup>

Insane asylums during the early nineteenth century were created to give all patients identical care and treatment, but this often could not be controlled. Costs of hospitalization were to be paid by the family or local community, depending on the wealth of the patient and their family. This led to differential treatment of patients based on their socioeconomic background. For example, Isaac Ray, a famous psychiatrist of the time, pointed out that patients from the “poor and laboring” class required less attention than those from “educated and affluent” backgrounds. He felt that the poor and laboring classes were used to working and were content with simple pleasures such as a walk in the country or performing small tasks, while the rich needed more sessions with physicians and discussion.<sup>9</sup> This type of commentary on the practices of institutions shows the class attitudes prevalent in American society of the nineteenth century. Internal practices and staff attitudes also influenced the treatment of the patients since staff opinions regarding class, ethnicity, and racial composition often had an impact on treatment. For example, in many institutions it was suggested that patients of different classes be segregated so as to not overly excite or bother each other.<sup>10</sup> Since the profession of psychiatry developed after the birth of mental institutions, early doctors were very much influenced by the pressures and culture of their society.<sup>11</sup>

During the 1840's, reformers Dorothea Dix and Horace Mann publicly began the crusade to improve the conditions of people in mental institutions. Conditions in many of

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 17-18 intro. Grob, 94-100.

<sup>9</sup> Isaac Ray, “Observations on the Principal Hospitals for the Insane in Great Britain, France, and Germany,” *American Journal of the Insane*, II (April 1846), 387-388.

<sup>10</sup> Jarvis Report, 145-147.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 10-11 intro.

these places were not conducive to improving the health of the patients, and in some institutions the patients were treated no better than animals.<sup>12</sup> Massachusetts, whose people saw their state as a leader in charitable institutions and healthcare, set up a commission to determine the nature, condition, and number of insane in their state. Edward Jarvis, a physician-psychiatrist, put together the survey that was conducted under the Commission on Lunacy and presented to the Massachusetts Legislature in 1854. His mission was to “ascertain the number and condition of idiots and insane belonging to the Commonwealth, to examine hospital conditions, to determine future needs for accommodations, and to generally report on plans for the future management of the insane.”<sup>13</sup> Jarvis mailed his questionnaire out to doctors in every area of Massachusetts, and used reputable people such as local clergy if there was no doctor, to make his report as accurate as possible. The compilation took several years and is seen as one of the definitive surveys of the nineteenth century since it probably predicted actual rates of mental illness better than all other studies done during the period.<sup>14</sup>

The survey introduced guidelines for measuring the information. Insane people were defined as persons “who cannot take care of themselves but must be taken care of by their friends or the public authorities.”<sup>15</sup> The report asked several qualitative questions in order to best determine the needs of the Commonwealth: name, sex, color, country of birth, marital status, whether lunatic or idiot, residence, and whether a state or

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<sup>12</sup> Walters, 200-201. *Dix Memorial Presented to Congress*, (The Congressional Globe, June 25, 1850).

<sup>13</sup> John M. Hunter, “Need and Demand for Mental Health Care: Massachusetts 1854,” *Geographical Review*, Vol. 77, No. 2 (April 1987), 139-140.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 140. Jarvis Report, 14-15.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 2. Jarvis also makes the distinction clear between demented and idiots: “An idiot is one who was originally destitute of mind, or in whom the mental faculties have not been developed. Those who have once had the use of their mental faculties, but have lost them through the process of disease, are not idiots, but demented, deprived of mind, which has once been enjoyed. This is a very common result of insanity.” Jarvis Report, 79.

town pauper or independent. Descriptors of the person's mental conditions included terms like mild-manageable, troublesome-excitabile, or furious-dangerous.<sup>16</sup> After the reports were returned and the statistics compiled, what is possibly the closest measure of the true prevalence of mental illness for the time period was produced.<sup>17</sup>

According to the Jarvis Report, there were 2,632 lunatics in Massachusetts. With a state population of 1,124,676, there were 23.4 insane people per 10,000 people. Forty-eight percent of these people were men, and fifty-two percent were women. Eighteen percent of the lunatics were described as curable, while eighty-two percent of them were considered incurable. Housing for lunatics broke down into interesting categories: forty-three percent were in mental hospitals, eight percent were lodged in charitable institutions such as receptacles for the insane (the definition for this cannot be found), houses of correction, jails, and state almshouses, and forty-nine percent lived at home or in town poorhouses (this was not broken down into more detail).<sup>18</sup>

<b>Total Number of Lunatics in Massachusetts, 1854</b>	2632	Percentage
Men	1263	48%
Women	1368	52%
Curable	435	18%
Incurable	2018	82%
Native-born Lunatics	2007	76%
Foreign-born Lunatics	625	24%
Lunatic Paupers	1522	57%
<b>Housing Arrangements</b>		
Mental Hospitals	1141	43%
Charitable Institutions = houses of correction, jails, state almshouses	207	8%
Home or town Poorhouse	1284	49%
Foreign-born Lunatics in Hospital	568	91%
Native-born Lunatics in Hospital	782	39%

<sup>16</sup> Jarvis Report, 17.

<sup>17</sup> Hunter, 143.

<sup>18</sup> Jarvis Report, 17-18.

Much of the Jarvis report discusses the increasing numbers of “foreign” lunatics in asylums. Immigrants in Massachusetts accounted for sixteen percent of the total population in 1850.<sup>19</sup> Immigrants were institutionalized in numbers much higher than their population should provide, since twenty-four percent of the total lunatic population was foreign. The Irish population in Jarvis’ study had the highest insanity rates of all the immigrant groups.<sup>20</sup> The Irish accounted for seventy-six percent of the foreign-born pauper insane and eighty-one percent of the total foreign-born insane population of Massachusetts.

<b>Foreign Lunatics in Massachusetts</b>	625	24%
Pauper Foreign Lunatics	581	92%
Independent Foreign Lunatics	44	7%
Pauper Irish Lunatics	481	76%
Independent Irish Lunatics	31	4%
Total Irish Insane	512	81%

The Irish were the largest immigrant group in Massachusetts and therefore they would be the largest immigrant group to be found in the institutions as well. The commission stated that “in the eastern part of the State, most of the day laborers are Irish...struggling with poverty...being in a strange land...their lives are filled with doubt...harrowing anxiety...mental and...physical suffering.”<sup>21</sup> The stresses of adaptation to a foreign land make it unsurprising that there was more insanity among the foreign-born population, and again, if the Irish were the largest foreign population they would have large numbers of admissions to insane asylums. As stated above, the Irish would also have inflated numbers of insane cases since, though their treatment might

<sup>19</sup> Campbell Gibson and Emily Lennon, *Historical Census Statistics on the Foreign-Born Population of the United States: 1850-1990*, (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Bureau of the Census, February, 1999), 54.

<sup>20</sup> Jarvis listed the population as “native” and “foreign.” The Irish were the only group singled out within the information.

<sup>21</sup> Jarvis Report, 61-62.



have been short-term, many of these people were not released back into society. If this was an “undifferentiated welfare system” as Grob states, then many of the Irish might not have even been insane, but may have been placed in the wrong institution or moved from one place to another based on the economic situation of the state.<sup>22</sup>

John M. Hunter’s research into the Jarvis Report shows that, when prevalence rates for insanity are calculated by gender, the risk for insanity among foreign-born and native-born populations becomes negligible. Therefore, immigrants were not at a higher risk for lunacy than the native-born but were still institutionalized at higher rates than the native population. This suggests that prejudices against the Irish and other immigrants impacted the rate of their institutionalization.<sup>23</sup>

The Jarvis Report not only shows concern about the growing immigrant population but also the concerns and stereotypes regarding this population. In a study of the Jarvis Report, Hunter also points out that the admission rates show that ninety-one percent of the foreign-born lunatics were hospitalized while only thirty-nine percent of the native born population were actually hospitalized.<sup>24</sup> Many people in Massachusetts were concerned that the Irish were getting more care from the state than the native population, which led to anger against the Irish for using this system. But the statistics show that seventy-six percent of the lunatics in Massachusetts were native born, and forty-two percent of the insane people were supported independently. Native-born insane had family, friends, or other networks of support to keep them out of the hospitals,

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<sup>22</sup> Grob, 14-15.

<sup>23</sup> Hunter, 147-149.

<sup>24</sup> Hunter, 147-148.

making their admission unnecessary, and many families were unwilling to send their mentally disturbed relatives to an asylum.<sup>25</sup>

The Irish, on the other hand, often immigrated to the United States without an extended family network. The Irish-born insane might not have had any family or friends to provide for their care, and even if they did have families, the economic strain of caring for such a person would probably have been out of the range of most immigrant families, many of whom were already destitute. “The friends of the foreigner find a relief of the burden and a diminution of expense by adopting this measure [institutionalization] and sending their patients to be cured,” said Jarvis.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, it only makes sense that there would have been a higher rate of Irish insane inside the institutions.

The Irish also had large numbers of people in long-term care, but once these pauper Irish were “cured” they may not have been released from care. Jarvis stated in his report that, “...the alien has no such home to fall back upon. His relations cannot receive him. Or if he be a pauper, he is not subject to the charge of the town, but to that of the State. He has, therefore, no poorhouse to return to, and must remain in the only places which the Commonwealth has provided for its wards – that is, the State hospitals, receptacles, etc.”<sup>27</sup> This statement from the Jarvis Report indicates that the number of Irish insane was not necessarily extraordinarily high, but since these people, once treated, had nowhere to go, they stayed in the institutions. This would affect the statistics of Irish immigrant insane, inflating their numbers versus the native population.

John W. Fox’s research into the Jarvis Report provides a glimpse into the mindset of Jarvis and other scientists of his time. While Jarvis believed that the Irish were more

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<sup>25</sup> Jarvis Report, 66.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 67

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 67.

likely to be insane because of their ethnicity and their poverty, Fox's statistical findings based on the Jarvis Report show that higher rates of insanity among the Irish were a result of their pauperism and not their ethnicity. Jarvis, and other scientists of the time, believed Jarvis's findings correlating ethnicity and poverty to be accurate, and their stereotypes of the Irish as an insane ethnic group influenced scientific theory on mental illness for the rest of the century.<sup>28</sup>

The Jarvis Report, even though it understood the stress of immigrants, was unsympathetic to the Irish, and its prejudice against the Irish and their mental faculties is shown in the way the findings were written. The Report found that,

The Irish laborers have less sensibility and fewer wants to be gratified than the Americans, and yet they more commonly fail to supply them. They have also a greater irritability; they are more readily disturbed when they find themselves at variance with the circumstances about them, and less easily reconciled to difficulties they cannot overcome. Unquestionably much of their insanity is due to their intemperance, to which the Irish seem to be peculiarly prone...<sup>29</sup>

Edwin Chadwick, the Secretary of the Poor Law Commission and the Sanitary Commission of England, provided another view of the causes of Irish insanity. Chadwick was considered an expert on the Irish and their habits since he was in charge of workhouses and institutions found throughout Ireland and England. In a letter to the Massachusetts Commission on Lunacy in December of 1850, transcribed in the Jarvis Report, Chadwick compared the Irish in England to the Irish in the United States. Chadwick explained the apparent excess of lunacy among the Irish in the United States by attributing it to

the sudden prosperity and means of indulgence which they [Irish] find here [England] beyond that which they left at home." Chadwick continued, "If we

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<sup>28</sup> John W. Fox, "Irish Immigrants, Pauperism, and Insanity in 1854 Massachusetts," *Social Science History*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (Autumn, 1991), 318-320.

<sup>29</sup> Jarvis Report, 62.

were to take the poorest and the worst paid and the worst educated English, bred up in single-roomed hovels, with the pig for a companion, and suddenly give them three or four times the wages they had ever seen or dreamed of getting, and at the same time reduce the price of gin or whiskey and all stimulants to one-third the price which had formerly kept such physical excitements out of their reach, I should be very confident of finding a disproportionately large class of cases of lunacy amongst them.<sup>30</sup>

Chadwick believed that higher wages and ability to purchase cheap alcohol and other stimulants in America led to the insanity of Irish immigrants. Drinking and spending money does not make people lunatics, yet here a person's actions seen as different from those of the majority, seem to have significance in their "diagnosis." This quote vividly describes the viewpoint of the middle-class Protestant towards the poor in general, and the Irish in particular: the Irish, and the poor, it is suggested, are no better than pigs. They did not know how to act, they had no manners, and to give them anything beyond what their poor and destitute minds were used to brought out these unacceptable tendencies, or "insanity." The Irish did not live up to the middle-class Protestant standards or ideals that Chadwick, Jarvis, and other psychiatrists of the time period would have considered "normal", and living outside of these parameters defined a person as "insane."<sup>31</sup>

Many people, especially those who could not live up to the behavioral ideals, may have been committed to insane asylums without positive proof of insanity.<sup>32</sup> Jarvis explains in his report that law enforcement officers and other people within the public assistance system did not always know how to define insanity:

...these officers judge by the facts presented to them. They find the patient before them mild, and not "furiously mad," and they inquire no further. In many cases they have no means of knowing what the condition

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 62.

<sup>31</sup> Fox, 325. Hunter, 150.

<sup>32</sup> Fox, 325.

of the patient has been; and a single examination is insufficient to enable them to determine whether he is constantly mild or periodically excitable. This is a difficult matter for even the practiced manager of the insane to do without knowing the history of the case in question. And several of these lunatics are strollers [homeless], whose previous lives are unknown to the officers or people where they are found.<sup>33</sup>

The Irish, who were often homeless, who were foreigners and behaved differently than the Protestant, middle-class, were also labeled as “insane” simply because their culture was not understood.<sup>34</sup> The Irish were considered heavy drinkers, a title they deserved, but one which did not make them terribly different from other poor immigrants of the time. Kevin Kenny believes the Irish seem to have taken on heavy drinking as a form of identity in the United States. Irish males and females, immigrant and native born, had the highest rates of alcoholism and alcohol-related deaths and insanities among all the ethnic groups of the United States during the nineteenth century.<sup>35</sup> The Irish, unlike many other immigrant groups, generally drank without eating and tended to drink in public rather than private areas, making their drinking more obvious to the average citizen. It was also acceptable for both men and women to drink, although the women tended to drink in private rather than public.<sup>36</sup>

The Irish immigrated to the United States at a time when many Protestant groups were forming temperance movements. Drinking and alcoholism, therefore, became a stigma attached to the poor, dirty masses, while the wealthy Protestant masses stridently pursued a teetotaler existence that extolled the benefits of clean living: this made the Protestant middle-class native American different or “better” than the ordinary working immigrant or pauper. Only the dirty poor immigrants would drink on a regular basis, and

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<sup>33</sup> Jarvis Report, 158.

<sup>34</sup> Fox, 318-323.

<sup>35</sup> Kevin Kenny, *The American Irish: A History*, (Pearson Education Limited, 2000), 145.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, 201-203..

only the “insane” would drink to oblivion.<sup>37</sup> Those who imbibed alcohol were also likely to be associated with insanity. According to the Jarvis Report, “Hence, too, follow disorder of the nervous system and insanity, which, according to hospital records, find their most common origin in the exciting and exhausting effects of alcohol, especially among the poor.”<sup>38</sup>

The state poor were automatically linked with insanity in the Jarvis Report. According to Jarvis’s calculations, “Insanity is, then, a part and parcel of poverty; and wherever that involves any considerable number of persons, this disease is manifested.”<sup>39</sup> In this way, then, Jarvis is directly blaming insanity on poverty. Anyone of the pauper class is more likely to become insane, and the biggest foreign group of state paupers in Massachusetts at the time was the Irish.

The greater liability of the poor and the struggling classes to become insane seems to be especially manifested among these strangers dwelling with us; and as a larger proportion of them are poor, they must, therefore, have a larger proportion of lunatics to their whole numbers than the Americans. Besides these principles...there is good ground for supposing that the habits and condition and character of the Irish poor in this country operate more unfavorably upon their mental health, and hence produce a larger number of the insane in relation of their numbers than is found among the native poor.<sup>40</sup>

Therefore the Irish faced a double-whammy when it came to insanity: according to the thinking of the time, they were more likely to be insane because they were paupers, and they were also more likely to be insane because of their “habits and condition and character.” The Irish were automatically assumed to be a danger to themselves and

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 201-203. W. J. Rorabaugh, *The Alcoholic Republic: An American Tradition*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 200-204.

<sup>38</sup> Jarvis Report, 55.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 53.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 61.

others because of their association with insanity, and this association most likely led to their increased numbers in institutions.<sup>41</sup>

By the mid-nineteenth century it was assumed by many scientists that both genetics and social-cultural characteristics were inherited. Therefore, allowing “inferior foreign stock” into the country might prove detrimental to the health of the community and could ultimately negatively affect social achievement.<sup>42</sup> Jarvis’ report basically suggests that foreign-born, predominantly Irish Catholic, immigrants were constitutionally unfit to cope with the stress of living in America. This interpretation not only implicitly maintains the cultural advantage of existing Protestant middle-class values in Massachusetts but also places the blame for the cause of insanity on the group differences of “inferior foreign stock.”<sup>43</sup> Most of the Jarvis Report concurs with Nativist sentiment at the time. The Report stresses that most cases of insanity, especially among the foreign born, are incurable, and therefore hospitals should move from curative to custodial care. This means that instead of focusing on treatment, more emphasis was placed on controlling disruptive individuals and socializing others into the norms of nineteenth century Protestant middle-class America.<sup>44</sup>

The higher rates of “insanity” among the foreign-born, then, most likely did not reflect actual rates of insanity but were instead a reflection of the changing role of the asylum. The movement of people from poorhouse to jail to asylum and back again shows that the insane asylum, like the poorhouse and jail, were viewed as a general charitable institution, rather than a receptacle for only one specific population. Mental institutions

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<sup>41</sup> Fox, 321.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 321, 332-333. Grob, 55-56.

<sup>43</sup> Fox, 332-333.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 332-333.

were increasingly becoming places for social control and social assistance instead of places for the treatment of the insane. In this way, many Irish who were in need of some type of services were incorrectly placed in asylums because their behavior deviated from the American “norm.”<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 332-333.



## **Worcester State Lunatic Asylum and the Institutionalization of Hate**

Worcester State Lunatic Asylum, in Worcester, Massachusetts, was one of the leading hospitals in Massachusetts, and in the United States, for a large part of the nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup> Social reformer Horace Mann was instrumental in convincing the state that there was a need for a separate asylum for the insane and wrote the proposal that was put before the Massachusetts State Legislature. Because of his and other reformers efforts, the Massachusetts State Legislature in 1830 voted for the erection of a lunatic hospital at Worcester. The purpose of the hospital was to provide “some suitable place for the accommodation of lunatics and persons furiously mad.”<sup>2</sup>

Because of the nature of the patients who would be housed in the hospital, special considerations were made to make it a place different from other charitable institutions. Special pains were taken to make sure that the building was light and airy and that the grounds were well tended so that “they may be made not only an object of tasteful regard to the citizens of the town and to visitors, but of refreshment and gratifying interest to the convalescent patients and inmates of the establishment.”<sup>3</sup> The sometimes-violent nature of the patients also had to be taken into consideration, and the hospital, because of building innovations, became the model for many insane hospitals throughout the nineteenth century.<sup>4</sup>

Many throughout the United States considered Worcester as a stellar example of modern patient care and treatment as soon as it opened its doors. The hospital was first

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<sup>1</sup> Gerald N. Grob, *Mental Institutions in America: Social Policy to 1875*, (New York: The Free Press, 1973), 101, 103.

<sup>2</sup> *Reports and Other Documents Relating to the State Lunatic Hospital at Worcester, Massachusetts*, (Boston: Dutton and Wentworth, 1837), 1-2.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 4.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 2-5.

run by a Superintendent, Samuel B. Woodward, who was well known throughout New England as an authority on mental illness. Later his successor, George Chandler, was also able to keep Worcester in the public eye and make it a model for other American hospital practices and treatment.<sup>5</sup> The doctors and staff modeled their treatment on the York Retreat in England, a well-known Quaker mental institution that emphasized treatment based on the following principles: Self-control – patients were rewarded if successful in controlling themselves; re-socialization, which included patients meeting with the directors for tea and attending religious services; a harmonious environment, with a building that would “lift the spirits and surround the patients with natural beauty;” a useful occupation – all patients who were able were involved in some type of work; and the staff as role models – the staff lived at the hospital and were expected to uphold and display the values of the Protestant middle-class.<sup>6</sup>

The Worcester State Lunatic Hospital’s treatment of Irish immigrant patients reflects many of the problems associated with Irish migration to the United States, and the doctors and trustees exhibit many of the hatreds, prejudices, and stereotypes of the time period. The hospital was influenced by Nativist and Anglo-Saxon theories as well as the ideas of early moral reformers. This makes the hospital an interesting study for understanding the conflicts occurring between Irish immigrants and American citizens in Massachusetts and the United States during the nineteenth century, and shows how outside influences directly impacted the hospital and those within its halls.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Gerald N. Grob, *The State and the Mentally Ill: A History of Worcester State Hospital in Massachusetts, 1830-1920*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1966), 71.

<sup>6</sup> Anne Digby, *Madness, Morality and Medicine: A Study of the York Retreat, 1796-1914*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 15-32.

<sup>7</sup> Grob, *The State and the Mentally Ill*, 138.

Dr. Samuel B. Woodward was a leader in the field of mental health. He was one of the founders and the first president of what would eventually become the American Psychiatric Association.<sup>8</sup> Woodward came from a wealthy New England family, and as a young man was influenced by the Second Great Awakening. He studied to be a doctor and became interested in the conditions and treatment of the mentally ill after serving several mental patients in his private practice. Woodward believed in moral reform and was greatly interested in the York Retreat in England. The retreat's emphasis on moral treatment appealed to him, and he felt that this method was the best way to treat insanity.<sup>9</sup>

Woodward believed that insanity could be divided into voluntary and involuntary cases. Voluntary causes were those that a person knowingly chose and could have an ill effect on the body, such as intemperance and "secret vice." Involuntary causes were those such as epilepsy and old age that were not the fault of the person afflicted. Woodward, as a moral reformer, was more concerned with voluntary causes of insanity, since he felt that these could be treated through moral treatment. Woodward wrote that immoral choices "so fully stain the character with guilt, [that] even the occurrence of hapless disease can hardly wipe [it] away." Woodward further stated that those who indulged in immoral living "live often a long life [as] a degraded sufferer, without a manly thought or a moral feeling worthy of his nature or his destiny, and finally leaves the world without the regret of his friends, a useless, burdensome, loathsome object of abhorrence and disgust." Woodward claimed that while this type of insanity could be cured, it often reoccurred because it was easy to fall back into old habits.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Grob, *Mental Institutions in America*, 135.

<sup>9</sup> Grob, *The State and the Mentally Ill*, 76.

<sup>10</sup> *Worcester State Lunatic Hospital, Thirteenth Annual Report*, (December, 1845), 67.

Moral reform and the temperance movement greatly influenced Woodward's work in the hospital. In his annual reports, he devotes many pages to the relationship between insanity and intemperance:

Intemperance continues to be one of the most prominent causes of insanity... Those persons who are not reached and influenced by the many appliances now bearing upon their habits have strong appetites or weak principles and are likely to use this poison so imprudently, as finally to feel its influence on physical health, and especially on the brain and nervous system in the production of palsy, epilepsy, apoplexy, insanity, and other kindred diseases. It is not surprising that a brain that has been almost daily pressed with blood till it produced vertigo and stupor, should be so disturbed in its functions as to exhibit alarming disease and finally organic changes, which produce incurable chronic maladies that make life miserable and death prematurely certain.

The condition of the brain is rendered such by the intemperate use of alcoholic drinks, that even suspension of their use will not always prevent the occurrence of insanity. With great opportunities for observation, I do not now recollect a single case of delirium tremors arising from the abandonment of intoxicating drinks...<sup>11</sup>

Woodward believed that religious services should be a regular part of the therapy of mental patients, and to this end a chapel was added to the hospital. Woodward felt that religion had a soothing effect on patients and helped them relearn how to socialize in a "normal" setting. He felt so strongly about practicing religion as a part of treatment that he stated, "Without the Bible or its influence in education, man, even in this day, is a semi-barbarian... The insane man who reverences religion and consults his Bible, has more self-respect, more control over his feelings, more love of order and truth, and is a better patient than he who is ignorant of the law of love given in those sacred pages, or who has been educated to disregard the institutions and duties of religion."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid, 61.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 89.

From the very start of his practice at Worcester, however, Woodward felt that there was a growing problem with the hospital. That problem was Irish immigrants. In his first annual report to the legislature, Woodward set a precedent of writing about the difficulties of dealing with foreign insane patients that became the standard for Superintendents of the hospital to follow for the next several decades. In his first report, the problem is the cost of treatment of the native population compared to the Irish.

The whole number of patients admitted to the Hospital, as before stated, is one hundred and sixty-four. Of this number, according to the best information of the Trustees have been able to obtain, *thirty-three* were foreigners, that is, persons having no legal settlement in this Commonwealth... Thus our own citizens, whose insanity is more aggravated, and who consequently suffer more, are postponed to foreigners who suffer less, because the authorities of some of our municipal corporations believe that by removing the foreign pauper to the Hospital, they shall be exonerated from the burden of his support.<sup>13</sup>

Woodward's perception of the burden of payment for foreign paupers was accurate.

From the years 1841-1851 nearly 2,500 out of a total 3,722 insane state paupers were Irish insane paupers, constituting the largest single group supported by the state. Since most of the Irish insane were paupers, this group was a large burden for the state.<sup>14</sup>

Massachusetts, over the next several decades, waged a battle over who was to pay for the upkeep of those in charitable institutions – the State or the municipality. Reports from the trustees and other superintendents of the Worcester Hospital are filled with pages of information stating that foreign insane paupers were a menace to the charity system because they were living in the insane asylum without paying for their treatment.

Foreign-born insane paupers were considered state paupers and therefore were supported by the state. Municipalities were required to pay room and board costs for their own

<sup>13</sup> WSH, *First Annual Report*, (December, 1833), 4.

<sup>14</sup> *Massachusetts House Document*, No. 48, (March 25, 1852), 2.

insane paupers. Since municipalities often refused to grant citizenship to foreigners, even those who had lived in their towns for more than twenty years, the state was required to pay for their upkeep. The municipalities' refusal to grant residency rights increased the numbers of those who were considered "foreign;" if the town in which a person resided refused to admit the person as a resident of the town, the person was labeled as foreign, despite how long he or she had been in the country.<sup>15</sup>

This battle shows the ambiguity that many people felt towards the Irish immigrant insane. On the one hand, Americans wanted protection from the insane and therefore believed that hospitalization was necessary. On the other hand, people did not like to pay the taxes necessary to support this population, especially since they believed that their money was supporting foreigners and not the native-born. As the century wore on, more and more debate concerning who would pay for the support of the pauper insane.<sup>16</sup>

Woodward retired from the Worcester State Lunatic Asylum in 1846, and was succeeded by Dr. George Chandler. Chandler was also from a Protestant, upper middle-class background and was trained by his mentor, Dr. Woodward, in the treatment of the insane. Chandler continued many of Woodward's practices in the hospital, but his view on insanity differed somewhat from that of his predecessor. Chandler was deeply influenced by phrenology and was very insistent that proper living habits be instilled early in life so that the brain could develop properly. In order to prevent insanity Chandler believed that, "each individual must obey the laws of health, which include those that regulate the passions and emotions of the mind as well as those that govern the

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<sup>15</sup> Grob, *The State and the Mentally Ill.*, 143-145.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 137-143.

physical system.”<sup>17</sup> The laws of health to which Chandler subscribed were very close to those of other moral reformers of the time and show the direct influence of their thinking on his medical practice. Chandler believed that people should avoid several patterns of behavior, including drinking, sloth, sexual licentiousness, poverty, and religious fervor that he believed made hereditary predispositions towards insanity operative. Everyone, therefore, should follow a regimen and lifestyle that was balanced between physical and mental labor.<sup>18</sup> An individual, according to Chandler, should be neither poor nor rich, should not overvalue physical or mental labor, should know his or her place in life and not overstep its boundaries, and should avoid excesses in either drinking or religion; in other words, everyone should live as an individual who came from a middle-class, Protestant background. Chandler’s etiology of insanity was derived from his own moral, ethical, religious, and philosophical ideas.<sup>19</sup>

Chandler divided the causes of insanity into moral and physical causes, and believed that these causes were more complicated and more intertwined with other problems than Woodward. “Both a physical and a moral cause are combined to produce the result. In most cases, the general health had been suffering, and the system had become susceptible to slight impressions, and then some moral cause, as some severe domestic calamity, would easily disturb and derange the reasoning powers.” In this way, Chandler linked his perception of immorality with the causes of insanity.<sup>20</sup> Chandler also linked the education of an individual with insanity, believing that a person was from birth prone to insanity and the education he or she received ultimately led to that person

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 128.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 128.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 129.

<sup>20</sup> WSH, *Sixteenth Annual Report* (December, 1848), 45.

avoiding, or succumbing, to insanity. “Defective education, - or the want of proper moral, intellectual, and physical training, - seems to be the broad function from which arise most of the causes of insanity.” Therefore, Chandler believed that insanity was as much a hereditary disease as it was a moral disease, and free will gave the individual the choice of which path he or she would choose: morality led to sanity, while immorality led to insanity.<sup>21</sup>

Chandler believed that intemperance caused a large percent of the cases of insanity, and like other moral reformers of the time, he directly linked insanity, intemperance, and the effect both had on the welfare of the family:

The continued use of alcoholic drinks produces functional and soon organic disease of the brain itself, which is almost certainly incurable. The symptoms of this form of insanity are somewhat peculiar, - a confused mind, a horrid apprehension of pending evil, timidity and rashness, and often a homicidal propensity. The term *horrors*, is peculiarly descriptive of these poor sufferers’ state of feeling. The indirect causes of insanity, produced by intemperance, are numerous. Much of the domestic affliction that overwhelms so many families is attributable to this cause. While the head of the family is sinking himself by the indulgence of his besotted appetite to a level with the lowest of his race, hard work, poverty, disgrace, and disappointed ambition become the companions of the wife and children. It would be strange if their reason should not occasionally be crushed under such a great calamity.<sup>22</sup>

The hospital’s population during Chandler’s administration was growing at an alarming rate, and with this, the foreign insane population was also increasing. Chandler was opposed to these changes and blamed many of the hospital’s problems on its Irish patients. Worcester was originally built to house 120 patients. Within several years the population of the hospital had doubled and tripled, and even after additions were made and new hospitals built in Massachusetts, Worcester still faced overcrowding on a regular

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<sup>21</sup> WSH, *Fifteenth Annual Report* (December, 1847), 41.

<sup>22</sup> WSH, *Sixteenth Annual Report* (December, 1848), 45.



basis. The overcrowding was due, in part, to Worcester Hospital's change in status. By the early 1840's, more and more of the patients being sent to the hospital were state paupers, and laws were specifically created to send violent insane pauper patients to Worcester. This created many different problems for the hospital – issues stemming from the types of treatment, questions about who was curable, whether or not patients should be separated based on economic status or land of birth, whether or not those who were incurable but not violent should be sent to live in almshouses, and many other issues. All of these issues were, ultimately, related to the influx of Irish immigrants and their appearance in mental institutions.<sup>23</sup>

Worcester began under as an institution focused on moral treatment. Moral treatment relied on a close and trusting relationship between the doctor and patient. By the time Chandler took over the hospital, the growing hospital population made it difficult for the doctor to make more than perfunctory checks on the patients, and treatment became more custodial than curative. Chandler's case books during his period as superintendent show the breakdown of curative treatment. These volumes contain very cursory explanations of the case and the patient's behavior; the monthly journal entries often only consist of two to three sentences remarking on the physical and mental health of the patient, possibly with an anecdote of something the patient had done if it was exciting, unusual, or contributed examples to Chandler's etiology of insanity.<sup>24</sup> Chandler admits in an annual report that often all the hospital could do was the "removing of all causes of excitement and enforcing only hygienic rules."<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Grob, *The State and the Mentally Ill*, 110-143.

<sup>24</sup> For an example, see Worcester State Lunatic Hospital Case Records, Vol. 17 (Male), 1845-1847.

<sup>25</sup> WSH, *Twenty-Sixth Annual Report* (October, 1858), 68.

Chandler particularly disliked his Irish patients and demonstrated his hatred and disgust of these patients in nearly every casebook entry on his Irish patients. Irish patients were generally described as “noisy, troublesome, and quarrelsome,” with the men usually having the added descriptor of “mischievous” and the women receiving the descriptor of “crass”. Many of the Irish women and some of the Irish men were also described as “stupid,” something that was rarely seen in the non-Irish patients’ records.<sup>26</sup> Chandler felt that the Irish were less disposed to being cured in the hospital which probably influenced their treatment and care within the facility:

We are not so successful in our treatment of them [the Irish] as with the native populations of New England. It is difficult to obtain their confidences, for they seem to be jealous of our motives; and the embarrassment they are under, from not clearly comprehending our language is another obstacle in the way of their recovery.<sup>27</sup>

The hospital as well as the state became interested in deciding whether or not patients could be cured since the cost of keeping incurable patients in the hospitals was great. By 1853, Chandler and the Worcester State Hospital Trustees were suggesting that “incurables and harmless State paupers [Irish] may be sent to the State Almshouses.”<sup>28</sup> Living expenses were being paid by the state, and the cost of keeping patients in the almshouses was considerably less. Prejudice against the Irish continued in the next report, where the lifestyles of patients in the hospital were called into question. “Many, if not most, of our patients, are regaled daily at table with what would have been rare, and perhaps unknown luxuries in their former homes.” It was believed that Irish patients did not need to be fed or kept in the same fashion that the other patients were kept, as they

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<sup>26</sup> Worcester State Hospital Case Records, Vol. 17, 1845-1847 (men), case numbers 2060,2167,2179,2273; Vol.22, 1849-1852 (women), 2931, 2945,2980,3007.

<sup>27</sup> WSH, *Fifteenth Annual Report* (December, 1847), 33.

<sup>28</sup> WSH, *Twenty-First Annual Report* (December, 1853), 4.

were not used to such “luxuries.” Other comparisons were made between Irish patients and American patients. It was argued that American patients within the hospital could work as part of their therapy if they were interested, but the Irish should be expected to work, as this would be a part of their daily lives whether they were in the asylum or not, and they were used to such activity. Coincidentally, this activity also provided some income for the hospital.<sup>29</sup>

The trustees, as well as Superintendent Chandler, worried that the hospital was becoming a “hospital for foreigners” which provided treatment for the Irish but turned away the native population. The Irish were obviously considered the biggest source of overcrowding in the asylum, and they were detrimental to the hospital and those around them.

The law opens widely the doors of the Hospital to all persons who may be sent by the Courts, or by the Overseers of the Poor, as being, “furiously mad and dangerous to be at large.” Under this provision, unfortunate beings, fatally diseased, whose mental disorder was the least evil of their miserable lot, have been, in many instances, consigned to this place, to enjoy that comfort which the same laborious nursing elsewhere might perhaps have increased; and, as humanity forbade their removal, they have been retained here to injure the institution, by drawing off attention from hopeful and more appropriate objects, until the release of the sufferer added to the record of mortality and diminished the apparent numerical success of the Hospital. There will be continual attempts to introduce these troublesome imbeciles into the Hospital while the price of their board is less than the expense of keeping them in private families and almshouses.<sup>30</sup>

This quote also brings into focus the continuing battle over the costs of administration and help of the Irish insane poor. As “troublesome imbeciles” the Irish were causing an economic crisis within the asylum, and their continued presence until death further hampered efforts to cure the native population. The

<sup>29</sup> WSH, *Twenty-Second Annual Report* (December, 1854), 17-18.

<sup>30</sup> WSH, *Seventeenth Annual Report* (December, 1849), 3.

Irish did not often leave the hospital, even after they were “cured” since they did not have anywhere to go or anyone to take care of them.<sup>31</sup> Since the Irish were considered by many to be “incurable,” putting them in almshouses seemed to be an adequate solution. The Special Committee Report to the Massachusetts State Legislature in 1859 suggested that moving harmless lunatic paupers to state almshouses would make them “more comfortable” and that they could then “be made useful in employments suited to their capabilities.” This would have been a direct return to the state’s policies before the 1830’s, which suggests that moral reformers were having less effect on the government and that Nativism and economics were more influential on policies made during the late 1850’s.<sup>32</sup>

Another solution that was suggested by Chandler, Edward Jarvis, and many other experts on mental health was that the Irish should be separated from the native population. Worcester Asylum divided its patients into separate wards for the native and foreign populations for a short period, stating that native insane patients “do not lose their sensibilities by becoming insane, and they ought not to have them wounded by being herded together in the same apartment with persons whose language, whose habits, and whose manners, offend and shock them.”<sup>33</sup> Edward Jarvis and other reformers specifically argued that separate facilities should be built to house the Irish since they believed the Irish were less curable, and as the Irish were used to more plain living conditions, it would be less

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<sup>31</sup> Edward Jarvis, *Insanity and Idiocy in Massachusetts: Report of the Commission on Lunacy, 1855*, 67. It is interesting to note that while the Irish were considered “incurable,” the Massachusetts Board of State Charities’ Annual Report of 1865 stated that, “We should not retain the inmates any longer than is manifestly for their good, irrespective of their usefulness in the institution.” This would suggest that while the Irish had nowhere to go, charities were holding them to work and earn money for the institution.

<sup>32</sup>Grob, *The State and the Mentally Ill.*, 184.

<sup>33</sup> WSH, *Twenty-Second Annual Report* (October, 1854), 2.

expensive to house them separately from native patients. Irish doctors and staff could then work with these patients since they might be able to better help them.<sup>34</sup> This motion was never put into effect, but the suggestion continued to appear in reports to the Massachusetts State Legislature for the rest of the nineteenth century.<sup>35</sup>

The appearance of large numbers of Irish insane patients in the mental health facilities of Massachusetts closely coincides with the mid-nineteenth century Potato Famines of Ireland. With the influx of poor, malnourished Irish, many Irish who immigrated to the United States were placed in almshouses, and the state charities of many states, including Massachusetts, were overwhelmed. While there were no separate facilities for Irish insane patients, laws were put into place that specifically gave the charities of Massachusetts opportunity to move their inmates from one place to another based on the needs of the institution. “The Board of State Charities shall have full power to transfer pauper inmates from one charitable institution or lunatic hospital to another, and for this purpose to grant admittances and discharge such pauper inmates...”<sup>36</sup> This law gave the state full power over the movement of Irish immigrants in charitable institutions. Another law enacted earlier gave state charities the right to move their “most undesirable and troublesome inmates” to the insane asylum.<sup>37</sup> Several Irish patients at Worcester were listed as being transferred from the almshouse or

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<sup>34</sup> *Report of the Committee on Public Charitable Institutions, Massachusetts House Document No. 269* (April 11, 1862), 2-6; Edward Jarvis, *Insanity and Idiocy in Massachusetts: Report of the Commission on Lunacy, 1855*, 149.

<sup>35</sup> Grob, *The State and the Mentally Ill.*, 184-187.

<sup>36</sup> *Acts of 1863, Chapter 240: An Act in relation to State Charitable and correctional institutions, Section 4: 32<sup>nd</sup> Annual Report*, (October, 1862), 99.

<sup>37</sup> WSH, *Thirtieth Annual Report* (October, 1862), 4.

prison because they were violent, such as one woman who broke glass.<sup>38</sup> People were transferred back and forth as necessary to the institutions in which they resided:

It has not unfrequently happened that patients of this class [state paupers] deemed incurable but harmless, have been discharged, and taken to the State Almshouse. After a short residence there they are discharged, and on being at large they again become violent and dangerous, and are again committed to the hospital by order of the courts in a condition to make them the most troublesome and expensive patients in the institution. It may therefore be doubted whether in the matter of economy alone it is wise to discharge patients from the Hospital who cannot take care of themselves, with a view of supporting them at the State Almshouses.<sup>39</sup>

The law also determined who was placed in mental institutions. According to Section Three of the Acts of 1862, “Any of the judges of the supreme judicial, superior, and probate courts, and, in the city of Boston, of the police court, may commit to either of the state lunatic hospitals, any insane person who, in their opinion, is a proper subject for its treatment or custody. But in all cases, the evidence of at least two respectable physicians, shall be required to establish the fact of insanity.” Those who were recommended by the court for admission were not allowed to plead their case, and the lunatic asylums were required by law to admit these people.<sup>40</sup> This meant that judges, members of the Protestant middle-class, who had no training in diagnosing mental illness, were in charge of declaring people insane. This could lead to sane people being declared insane and then institutionalized. The insane asylums recognized this problem, stating that, “Foreigners are generally brought to us by officials who have never seen the patient

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<sup>38</sup> WSH Case Histories Vol. 22, 1849-1852 (Female): Case no. 3007, Case no. 2931; Vol. 17, 1845-1847 (Male): Case no. 2273, Case no. 2179, Case no. 2167, Case no. 2060.

<sup>39</sup> WSH, *Twenty-Fifth Annual Report* (December, 1857), 10.

<sup>40</sup> WSH, *Thirty-Second Annual Report* (October, 1864), 95.

previous to having the commitment placed in his hands.”<sup>41</sup> Those trained to recognize insanity also misdiagnosed people, and even one of the founders of Worcester remarked that “it is not uncommon that the friends or the physician, mistake other diseases for insanity...”<sup>42</sup> If this is the case, then it is likely that people were placed in the asylum who did not belong there, either because they were victims of society’s perceptions or had become part of an undifferentiated welfare system.

The Board of State Charities put the problem of the Irish immigrant into stark clarity with their explanation of the relationship between poverty and mental illness. The board’s explanation, as well as the laws mentioned above, provides insight into the Protestant middle-class mindset of those in charge of Massachusetts’ charities:

Foremost among the measures for social reform must be those which improve the material condition and the daily habits of persons who, while still above a criminal class, are, by reasons of poverty, squalor, intemperance and vicious habits, tending downwards towards such a class...[There must be] improvement of dwellings; encouragement to ownership of homesteads; increased facility for buying clothing and wholesome food; decreased facility for buying rum and unwholesome food; restriction of exhausting labor; cleanliness in every street, lane and yard which the public arm can reach; these and many other like measures will be approved by the public sense, if it is properly addressed.<sup>43</sup>

The real problem in Massachusetts, then, was the fear and hatred of Irish immigrants. Governmental bodies such as the legislature and the Board of State Charities, as well as institutions supported by the government, such as insane asylums, became the battleground for moral reformers and Nativists who forced their Protestant middle-class ideology on those they considered lesser beings. Institutions provided these

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<sup>41</sup> WSH, *Twenty-Fourth Annual Report* (December, 1856), 21.

<sup>42</sup> WSH, *Thirteenth Annual Report* (December, 1845), 70.

<sup>43</sup> Massachusetts Board of State Charities, *Annual Report*, II, (1865), 36-37.

reformers a safety zone, giving them a means to control these immigrants and provide a place to keep them away from the native population where their corruption might influence others. Policies implemented during the mid-nineteenth century provided support for the fear and hatred that the Protestant middle-class felt against the immigrant and gave the native population “proof” that mental disease and poverty were the fault of the individual. Mental illness and poverty were a result of immoral behavior, and only by changing behavior could people be cured. Therefore the Irish, who were impoverished and culturally different from the Protestant middle-class, were immediately marked as dangerous and insane. The only way to change and control them was to institutionalize them. This reasoning gave moral reformers and Nativists the fuel they needed to promulgate policies and hatreds that would have a negative impact on the Irish immigrant for the rest of the nineteenth century.



## Conclusion

Insanity is a social construct and diagnoses of mental disorder reflect the ideas and values of a particular time in a particular society. The prevailing notions of sanity are in sharp contrast to those of insanity, providing society with rules and structures that help to delineate acceptable and unacceptable behavior. As the views of humanity change so the structures of sanity and insanity change, and these beliefs in turn influence the treatment of those who are labeled as insane.

Irish immigrants to the United States in the nineteenth century were considered to be members of a lesser order of beings, and their poverty, behavior, religion and culture made Protestant middle-class Americans believe that many Irish immigrants were “morally insane.” The Irish, who were flooding American poorhouses and other charitable institutions during the mid-nineteenth century, were an impoverished, illiterate, needy group of people who had experienced the horrors of the Irish potato famine. The American medical authorities, as well as laymen of the nineteenth century, believed that poverty, as well as other social conditions, caused insanity. This link in turn influenced the hatred and fear felt by Protestant middle-class Americans towards the masses of impoverished Irish immigrants. The Irish, who were already fighting for political, economic, and social equality in the United States, were also fighting against the stereotypes and prejudices that labeled them insane.

Protestant middle-class Americans worried about the future of America and tried to decide how to deal with the ever-growing problem of Irish immigrants. Their battle to socialize and assimilate the Irish in mental institutions, such as the Worcester State

Lunatic Asylum, show the effects of Nativist beliefs on treatment and therapy of Irish patients in mental institutions.

Medical science provided backing for the prejudiced ideas of Nativists and moral reformers. Scientists of the nineteenth century used the “sciences” of phrenology and physiognomy as means to study and classify groups of people. These practices were racial in conception and promoted the ideas of Anglo-Saxon supremacy. Protestant middle-class Americans adopted and adapted these “scientific” ideas to back their own belief in the supremacy of their race and culture. Since the Protestant middle-class was in charge of many of the charitable institutions, medical treatment, therapy, and charity were all subject to the beliefs and ideals of the Protestant middle-class.

The Irish, who lived in squalid conditions, attended Catholic mass, and drank, led different lives from the Protestant middle-class. The Protestant middle-class believed that the Irish were totally at fault for their insanity because of their culture and physical traits. Insane asylums promoted these ideas; the Irish were believed to be incurable because of their lack of intelligence and immoral behavior, and casebooks described patients in derogatory, stereotypical language, showing the impact of prejudice and stereotyping in the treatment of Irish patients. Superintendents and Trustees of the medical institutions believed that the Irish were the source of many of the institution’s problems, and that the institution’s resources could be better used in someone who could benefit from such treatment – a member of the Protestant middle-class. In reality, the problems that the institutions were facing was a part of a larger problem in America – how to deal with an influx of people who were culturally different from the majority.

The way the institutions of Massachusetts dealt with the Irish was a reflection of the treatment of the Irish in society at large. They were treated as inferiors: they were provided with substandard treatment and therapy, not expected to improve, and were moved from one charitable institution to another without much regard for their mental health. Laws written for institutions provided ways to keep the Irish out of mainstream society by moving the Irish to mental asylums because of their strange actions and beliefs, not mental instability. The need to control the Irish, to keep them somewhere out of sight, and out of mind, became the implicit goal for the mental institution.

The prejudices and stereotypes of those who were in positions of power greatly impacted the institutionalization of the Irish. Judges and the police were in charge of declaring the Irish insane, and the law provided no recourse for those who were incorrectly labeled. The trustees and superintendents of insane asylums publicly stated their own prejudices, hatreds, and stereotypes of the Irish, further promoting the link between the Irish and insanity.

Massachusetts is a prime example of the dilemma the rest of the United States was facing. Immigrants from other countries were pouring into the United States during the nineteenth century, and the American people had to decide how to deal with them. During the mid-nineteenth century, institutionalization provided Americans a means of protection from outsiders as well as a method to attempt to re-form and re-mold those who were different. The Irish, living on the margins of society and used to being controlled by a powerful minority, were forced into institutions, fulfilling the role society provided for them as "lesser beings." High rates of Irish institutionalization continued throughout the nineteenth century in America, which suggests that the Irish continued to

be the victims of the diagnosis of “moral insanity” and an undifferentiated welfare system that promoted the stereotypes and prejudices of the time.

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