

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers visit <http://www.djreprints.com>.

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052970204653604577249491873590280>

BOOKSHELF

A Hibernian Diaspora and Its Effects

By Robert K. Landers

March 3, 2012

The Irish Way

By James R. Barrett

The Penguin Press, 384 pages, \$29.95

"The Irish were America's first ethnic group," convinced that "cruel fate and brutish English colonizers" had driven them into exile and long "haunted" by the Great Famine of 1845-52, writes historian James R. Barrett in "The Irish Way." More than three million Irish came here during the 50 years after 1840; by the century's turn, more Irish lived in Manhattan and Brooklyn than in Dublin. When 18 million new immigrants, chiefly from eastern and southeastern Europe, showed up between 1890 and 1920, the entrenched Irish were there to greet them. Indeed, as a reformer in 1910 commented: "The newcomers, encountering Irish policemen, Irish politicians, Irish bureaucrats, Irish saloon keepers, Irish contractors, and Irish teachers could be excused for thinking that 'Irish' equaled 'American.' "

Because of the role that the Irish informally played in the "Americanization" of immigrant Italians, Poles, Jews and others in New York and elsewhere, Mr. Barrett contends, "the multiethnic American city of the early twentieth century assumed a peculiarly Hibernian cast." His richly detailed, often fascinating study focuses on the second- and third-generation Irish who were shaped more by life in America's largest cities than by rural life in the old country, and on later Irish immigrants, who arrived between the 1880s and 1920s. At the turn of the century, New York had the most Irish, followed by Philadelphia, Chicago and Boston. Mr. Barrett, who teaches at the University of Illinois, concentrates on New York and Chicago.

As native English speakers possessing a natural talent for politics, the Irish were well-positioned to exert influence over the later newcomers. Living in never-homogenous neighborhoods scattered all about the inner cities, and building on strong family and community ties, the Irish had developed elaborate social, political and cultural networks. The impoverished immigrants who followed often "had little choice but to respond to Irish power," Mr. Barrett says. "Saloon, pushcart, and store licenses, as well as patronage jobs, were at stake."

Political machines "helped integrate newer immigrants into urban society," Mr. Barrett says, "but unions, the Catholic Church, and voluntary organizations were also critical in strengthening political influence." Irish politicians, like Irish workers and labor unions, may have been initially hostile to the freshly arrived—just as the Irish had been met with loathing when they began to arrive in force—but the politicians eventually realized that "they had little choice but to integrate newcomers at some level if they were to maintain their power." Chicago's Irish political machine learned that lesson and survived; New York's Tammany Hall machine was more intransigent—and was replaced in the 1930s by Fiorello La Guardia's multiethnic alternative.

Despite their own experience with oppression, Mr. Barrett observes, many Irish-Americans long manifested a shameful animosity toward black Americans. But the animus, he notes, was hardly preordained. In the 1840s, amid the gangs, pigs and poverty in Five Points (the Irish neighborhood depicted in Martin Scorsese's 2002 film, "Gangs of New York") "a lively interracial culture" thrived in its saloons and dance halls. Inter-marriage was common—a fact that only "further stigmatized the despised Irish in the eyes of the Protestant middle class." But as they struggled for jobs and social acceptance, the Irish "soon distanced themselves from

African Americans, driving them from docks and other workplaces—and from neighborhoods like Five Points.”

The Irish “disseminated racism and ethnic prejudice against and among the newcomers,” Mr. Barrett writes, “but they also often helped them adapt to their new city homes through their religious institutions and political and labor organizations, if only to retain their grip on power and influence.” Even in the case of black Americans, hostility was not the whole story. After the great black migration northward during World War I and the 1920s, Irish-American nuns “played a vital role” in educating black youths. For some Irish-Americans, Catholicism meant striving for social justice and tolerance.



“Irish nuns were activists,”

In 2006, workers perform the annual dyeing of the Chicago River for the city’s St. Patrick’s Day celebration. REUTERS

according to Mr. Barrett. “From the mid-nineteenth century on, they worked in the everyday world, confronting poverty, unemployment, illness, and alcoholism, helping widows, deserted wives, and orphans.” Though Jane Addams and other middle-class Protestant reformers who sought to aid the immigrant poor “have captured the imagination of historians,” the author says, by the 1880s nuns were already caring for 80% of New York City’s dependent children—an extraordinary statistic.

Other surprises may be found in “The Irish Way.” I have long thought that my mother’s father, an unlettered letter carrier of Irish heritage in Fall River, Mass., in the early 20th century, was quite remarkable in strongly favoring a liberal education for his daughters; my mother, who excelled at her studies, went on to become a professor of mathematics at Hunter College in New York. But I learn from Mr. Barrett that Irish-American families of that era “placed a heavy emphasis” on education for their daughters, perhaps determined to help them avoid the domestic service in which so many young women in the first generation of Irish immigrants had found work.

Mr. Barrett does not neglect Irish-American cultural contributions. Some, alas, were malign, such as blackface minstrelsy, a racist form that the Irish made their own in the latter half of the 19th century. But others were magnificent, such as “Studs Lonigan” (1935) and other works by “Irish America’s greatest twentieth-century novelist,” James T. Farrell (1904-79). “At its best, as in Farrell’s unrelenting portrayal of his own community and culture, Irish culture could offer a trenchant, transcendent view of American society.”

Few, if any, books are completely free of errors, but as a Farrell biographer, I must note that Mr. Barrett errs in writing that Farrell “later admitted to belonging to a gang called the Merry Clouters, which engaged in attacks on blacks.” Neither of Mr. Barrett’s two cited sources (one being my biography) supports that allegation. I know of no evidence that Farrell as a youth belonged to the Merry Clouters or that he ever engaged in such despicable behavior. I regretted coming upon this authorial misstep in “The Irish Way,” but I found the book on the whole a very absorbing work of social history.

—Mr. Landers, a writer in Baltimore, is the author of “An Honest Writer: The Life and Times of James T. Farrell.”