



Thomas H. O'Connor. *The Boston Irish: A Political History.* Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1995. xix + 363 pp. \$21.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-316-62661-3; \$30.00 (library), ISBN 978-1-55553-220-8.



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Explaining Boston's Irish and Their Politics

Thomas O'Connor's study seeks to describe and explain the development of Boston Irish Catholic politics from its origins to the present day. His central thesis is that the Boston experience was unique, quite different from what happened in Irish-American politics in other cities, and that this was due, essentially, to the interplay of Yankee Protestant and Irish Catholic culture and ambitions. While not entirely persuasive, O'Connor does make a good argument for his thesis, and in the process provides a valuable addition to our understanding of Irish politics in American cities generally.

The book differs from earlier studies (such as William Shannon's *The American Irish* and Edward Levine's *The Irish and Irish Politicians*) in its effort to fully develop the effects of culture on political life: one-third of the book focuses on the development of Boston Irish culture and mores before the group actually became politically active. This is one of the most informative sections of the book and establishes the peculiar Yankee-Irish relationship that O'Connor sees as central to the development of Boston Irish politics.

O'Connor starts with colonial Irish immigration, not-

ing that, even though the immigrants were overwhelmingly Protestant, they encountered strong animosity from the Yankee leadership of New England. Over time, the Irish Protestants did assimilate into colonial society, but the small minority of Irish Roman Catholics never had that option. Anti-Catholic measures were common in the colonies, although this was somewhat meliorated by common cause in the revolutionary and constitutional periods. The very small number of Irish Catholics made the problem less grave than might otherwise have been the case (here, as elsewhere, the book suffers from vagueness: rarely are actual numbers given).

The Irish Catholics at the start of the nineteenth century were in many ways ill-prepared to deal with a Yankee aristocracy, or to participate successfully in politics, according to O'Connor. But the very forces that limited their power—provinciality, strong ethnic identity, an oral rather than written tradition, religiosity, and reluctance to change—also contributed to group cohesion, which would later be important in politics.

By the 1830s, there were perhaps seven thousand Irish Catholics in Boston, who were still not very

political, although those who were were Jacksonian Democrats. This separated them even further from the Yankee Brahmin rulers of Boston, made them yet more loathed and feared, and contributed to the rising nativism of the 1830s. The 1840s and 1850s, of course, changed this dramatically, as the number of Irish Catholics exploded in the city and the Irish began to involve themselves in its political life. Still, as O'Connor, echoing William Shannon, puts it, the "Yankee past" dominated the city's political culture, and the Irish developed a "massive inferiority complex" vis-a-vis the Brahmin aristocrats (p. 61). Moreover, the Irish threat resulted in older and newer Yankee families coming together to form a "modern caste system" (p. 62). This is the crux of his argument about the uniqueness of Boston and its urban politics.

Nativism continued well into the 1850s; the Know-Nothings took almost complete control of state government in the middle of the decade. The rise of Civil War-related issues and then the war itself diminished the strength of nativism and provided some easing of anti-Irish laws and actions. But separation of the two groups did not diminish; indeed, the Democratic loyalty of the Irish, and their fears of the results of emancipation along with their increased numbers and political activity, further politicized the Yankee-Irish animosity.

The postwar era saw the rise of a first generation of Irish political leaders. As with other groups in other cities, these were ethnic leaders, the Fenian movement being a key activity, but they also tended to be well educated and solidly middle class. As a result, these early Irish political leaders were able to both create ethnic ward organizations and, at the same time, not create too great a fear among the Yankees. There was a division of power, the Yankees continuing to control the city at large, while the Irish were free to control politics at the ward level.

The first Irish mayor, Hugh O'Brien, was elected in 1884, served three terms and then was succeeded by John Boyle O'Reilly. Both men were Ireland-born and solidly middle class, and they provided stable, conservative government while getting along well with the Yankee rulers of the city. Interestingly, the foreign-born Irish mayors turned out to be less ethnically assertive in office than their American-born heirs. At the ward level, new leaders like Martin Lomasney, John F. Fitzgerald (father of Rose) and Patrick J. Kennedy (father of Joseph) developed their own organizations.

What emerged by the late nineteenth century, according to O'Connor, were three distinct groups in Boston politics: the traditional Yankee Protestant leader-

ship of the city; Democratic City Committee Irish leaders who operated at the city level and were rather conservative and unthreatening; and the ward Democrats whose practices were more consistent with the traditional picture of the machine politician. This bifurcation of the Irish leadership lasted for a long time and does seem different from Irish organization in other cities, such as Charley Murphy's New York. Unfortunately, while O'Connor makes passing mention of the new tide of eastern European immigrants at this time, he fails to develop their role in the city's politics until the mid-twentieth century.

The newer Irish pols, such as Fitzgerald, did begin to look beyond their ward base to city-wide control, with the goal of eliminating the more accepted "city" Irish. Fitzgerald's winning the mayoralty in 1906, as the first Boston-born Irish mayor, symbolized this significant shift. This is an important point to O'Connor, since it meant the Irish would control the whole city rather than just the neighborhoods. It was also the first real machine mayoralty in Boston, with a political organization controlling the city through the methods common to machines elsewhere—patronage, evasion of civil service, attention to local and group concerns, etc. The response of the Yankees was "reform" in a quest to halt the decline of their power in the city. In this, O'Connor sees a pattern of politics quite consistent with that of the "revisionist" history of Samuel P. Hays and others in the 1960s.

O'Connor is somewhat too concerned with personalities in his study of the twentieth century, particularly the colorful James Michael Curley. But it is certainly true that Curley symbolized the Irish's final overwhelming of the Yankees politically (not economically), and their enjoyment of their ability to revile those who had for so long reviled them.

But during the latter stages of Curley's career, the machine did begin to suffer. O'Connor's argument here is also an old one, not necessarily incorrect, reflecting the ideas of Edwin O'Connor's *The Last Hurrah*. Additionally, however, there was by mid-century the beginning of industrial decline, the start of middle class Irish suburbanization, and, most importantly, the rise of additional groups in Boston, particularly the Italians and the African-Americans (once again, the lack of any tables or charts is a serious impediment to O'Connor's argument and the reader's ability to evaluate it).

John Hynes' mayoral victory over Curley in 1949 reflected these changes. Hynes and John Powers in the 1950s, and Kevin White in the 1960s and 1970s, repre-

sented the rise of the new middle-class, non-machine Irish. They succeeded with middle class support and with an ability to deal with a multi-ethnic city, something their predecessors neither wanted nor had to do, at least as O'Connor sees it. The book concludes with the victory of Thomas M. Menino as Boston's first Italian-American mayor (and the first non-Irish one in over a hundred years), a symbol of major ethnic change directly affecting the city's politics.

This is a generally successful book. Primarily, it is a narrative of Irish political development in Boston. Within that narrative, O'Connor does a good job of explaining Irish political culture and the role of Irish-Yankee conflict in determining the development of Boston city politics over almost two hundred years. His thesis of Boston's uniqueness is persuasive, but only to the extent that one looks only at the Irish and the Yankees. And one can do that for quite a while; eventually, however, other groups moved in and Boston politics became less unusual. But I think this took place considerably earlier in time than O'Connor's book suggests. Certainly it is true that the relative size and fairly long-term independent power of the Irish in Boston is different from other cities, and worthy of study.

O'Connor's book is well-researched in the available

primary and secondary sources, and well-documented. Like the rest of us who investigate machine politics, he does suffer from the lack of written records left behind by the major wheeler-dealers. You can't find what was burned at the end of the business day or never written down in the first place.

The lack of any hard data is less excusable; fancy statistics were not necessary, but simple tables of demographic and voting data would have made the narrative much clearer and the argument more persuasive. The reader looks in vain to discover what percentage of the city's population was Irish at various times. Nor is there voting data to help understand the level of Irish turnout and unanimity of political loyalty. Nor is there any data at all on the rise of other groups in the city's population. The book would have been much stronger had such information been provided and interpreted.

Students of urban and ethnic history, political and otherwise, will find the book a useful addition to the literature.

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