

The Irish Myth

by JOHN GAVIN

ANY St. Patrick's Day orator who happens to be in robust health can discourse for hours on the Great Anglo-Saxon myth. He can prove to his own satisfaction that Anglo-Saxons overestimate their importance in these United States, and that their moral and intellectual snootiness is bad for them, and worse for the nation. He can be surprisingly logical, and he is likely to be more than half right.

The astounding thing about such fellows is that they are honestly and righteously indignant if one alludes to the existence here of the Irish myth, and remarks that it is just as harmful as the one they rave against. More harmful, I may say, to the exact extent that Celts are more easily flattered and dazzled and divorced from cruel fact than are people of the Teutonic stocks.

Forty years of peering at my own subdivision of the human race convince me that millions of gullible Irish-Americans, worked on from birth by the priests, pothouse philosophers, publicans, and frowsy politicians who are their cultural leaders, have absolutely no conception of the true position of their race group in America, and will die without acquiring one.

Where I was a boy, on a Vermont farm, surrounded by real Nordics, March 17 was just another dirty day in spring. I had to take what vicarious satisfaction I could in the patriotic hoopla of the Good-Old-Stock. The perfidy of Albion, the ancient glories of Inisfail, the glamorous yet godly qualities of the Celt were never expounded for the few Micks in our countryside by any patronizing permanent rector or hopeful Hibernian politician out trailing a nice, soft job. I was nearly eighteen years old when I saw my first copy of *The Irish World*, and so came in contact with that exuberant yet somehow sinister force called Irish propaganda.

I have seen all the Irish-American journals

since then. They become steadily worse. I have heard some of the doughtiest spielers ever summoned forth to rattle the crockery at Irish banquet tables. I have read many a Right Reverend's benign encomium upon God's own children — the Irish, of course. I have interviewed visiting Sinn Feiners and puissant nobles of the Association for Recognition of the Irish Republic and the Friends of Irish Freedom. And the picture I get from all these august agencies is the one I got from that first wild copy of the thunderous old *Irish World* — a picture so untrue as to be laughable.

It is the conventional picture used in the illustration of the Irish myth. It is the Irish myth. It is a representation of a fighting Irish tribe set down here to leaven the Saxon dough. A tribe of liberty-lovers, naturally. Who could think of the Irish without thinking of liberty? The word is seldom out of their mouths. A tribe of gallant martyrs, of course. Always right, but usually wronged. In a phrase, a clan of dashing, daring, impetuous O'Quixotes, humorous and generous, and religious, withal. It is, touched up and spiritualized a bit, the old eighteenth-century portrait of the rackety-packety Anglo-Irish gentleman of the Castle Rackrent Era. It is as true of the sons and grandsons of peasants who make up South Boston and the West Side of New York as a picture of a rollicking blade of the Old Dominion would be of one of Bishop Cannon's pious clodhoppers.

Of course, among those who know them well, this old view of the Irish has been destroyed by close contact. Keen critics realize they encounter precious few charming Olcott-ish gentlemen jogging along through life, and an apparently inexhaustible stream of Tammany heelers, sixteenth-century clerics, and laymen seeing the Evil One in each fresh manifestation of science. But that matters not at all to the God-loves-the-Irish pulpитеers and pamphlet-

eers. The Irish believe it, or enough of them do. That is what matters. The pretty story keeps them contented in their sectarian and fraternity loyalties, and helps to make them dependable material for ward leaders who understand the blessed uses of blarney.

THE SEED OF FAMINE

IRISH love of liberty was, until just before the Civil War, a well-advertised commodity in these United States. Some very learned Americans took it seriously and speculated ponderously on the value of this fiery quality as it went into the melting pot.

There were reasons for this. Life in the early days of the Republic was primitive and violent, and physical courage is fairly common among all orders of the Irishry, although not so common as we would like the world to believe. Barry, Moylan, the O'Briens, the Carrolls, the Sullivans, and the Burkes had rendered creditable service, and it was not forgotten. The pioneer settlers of Celtic stock included many merchants, lawyers, and well-born idealists who left their rainy island after the disastrous rising of 1798 and the fiasco of 1803. The first Irish priests were either men of good breeding or great-hearted peasants who shed their peasant ways in their new field. In 1845, the Irish in America not only led all non-Nordic breeds in prestige, but were favored over native sons in such widely separated boroughs as South Carolina, New Hampshire, Maryland, and Pennsylvania.

The event which changed all this was the Irish famine of 1847-1851, which starved millions off the land to which they had clung like limpets for countless centuries. No such catastrophe has afflicted any civilized people in modern times, and its rigor explains much in American slums, and in American municipal politics, that otherwise could not be explained at all.

Among most other nationalities, it was the poor but hardy and adventurous who came to America. It required planning and effort to get here. But riding the Irish wave that beat in from 1848 until 1875 were all classes of people, including many thousands who could not have met a single phase of a general desirability test. It required less effort to come than to stay. The great hunger literally blasted them from their little holdings and wafted them

aboard the waiting ships. Whole villages came. People came who lacked initiative to leave their own townships in a country where life was supportable. Their seed is here to-day, and strong. It is in the churches, the Tammany clubs, the A. O. H., and they, not the bonny lads of the Olcott plays, set the pace for the race in America.

Why anyone should even have expected such a constituency to waste much thought on liberty is hard to understand now. The first aspiration of most Irishmen on landing was to join a police force. Their highest ambition for a favorite son was — and remains — the taking of holy orders. The ideas of priests and police sergeants dominate vast sections of the race in the big cities, and neither class is noted for its devotion to anybody's liberty but its own.

Although few of them dare to recognize it, the Irish as a class have as little use for liberty as any element in the national life, including Bishop Cannon's parishioners. They distrust it and its advocates, whom they consider allies of the wicked Communists and foes of the noble cops.

Of course, the Irish have been keeping much to the fore during the row over prohibition, and it has been fashionable to speak of all those revolting against its obscenities as champions of personal liberty. But I have another idea. Most saloon keepers in the big cities were Irish. Often they were very devout and generous sons of Holy Mother Church. Most bootleggers are Italians — Catholics, too, but Latin Catholics, and notoriously poor providers for the monsignori. Naturally, the clergy liked the old way best. The hullabaloo raised by the Irish mobs in the cities over the loss of their beer is in no sense a sign that considerable numbers of them have been converted to the theory of liberty, even in its most elementary form.

Their true attitude is to be discerned when divorce reform or liberal statutes on birth control are under discussion. I do not see why they feel so keenly about these things. Nobody proposes that Tenth Avenue or L Street be compelled to accept divorce, or curtail the output of babies. Yet the very mention of such matters will make most Irish-Americans froth at the mouth. The fate of the last birth control bill brought up in the New York legislature was sad. The fate of future bills will be no happier. There is a big Irish vote in many cities of

the state. As for Massachusetts, Protestant as well as Catholic legislators have for years been taking precious good care to do nothing to offend the subjects of His Eminence, the Cardinal. It doesn't pay.

Freedom from censorship is another fighting cause that leaves the American Irish cold. With no official stage censorship in New York yet, the arch-diocesan authorities do the best they can with a little list of their own, telling the faithful what may be seen with safety to faith and morals. The activities of Irish-American clubwomen in the holy cause of putting flannels on the movies is well known. Considering their late start, they do quite as well as their Methodist and Baptist counterparts. Censorship of books arouses no indignation in the breasts of constitution-quoting O's and Mc's, who get homicidal when they contemplate the censorship of their drinks. The Boston Irishry are a tower of strength to the snoopers who have established an extensive blacklist of printed works in that ancient seat of culture. In Ireland itself, the world's classics are being embalmed in a catalogue of touch-nots.

No beef-eating English Tory has more contempt for oppressed nationalities than the Irish-American masses, unless the oppressed be their own. When De Valera and his mountebanks were trying to maneuver the shouters for Irish freedom into some sort of alliance with the Indian nationalists, more than one portly professional Mick wondered what the world was coming to. Tied up with "naygurs," no less. As for the American Negroes, if they ever got as much as a disinterestedly kind word from the Irish martyrs in the Board of Aldermen and City Councils of the great cities in the East, I never met a Negro who would say so.

The continuous uproar of the Jews, and their Communistic tommyrot, make the respectable West Sider furious. It all makes him want to put on a uniform and go out swinging a club. Irish-Americans, in their economic activities, exhibit that frightened brand of Toryism typical of people who have so little, achieved so painfully, that they would outfight Bourbons and Hapsburgs to conserve the existing order. Furthermore, they are intellectually sluggish. Getting their politics from a district leader, their spiritual solace from the Romanist holy men, and their cultural nourishment from

the Erin-go-bragh press, or the tabloids, they resent anything that makes them think. They feel the first duty of a well-disposed immigrant is to get right with the policeman on the block and the election captain. After that, leave matters of state to the ex-pugs and ex-publicans who seem to do the serious thinking for Tammany and the political gangs of Boston and Philadelphia. Any other course is un-American. There is much talk around the West Side about Americanism. Usually, it is by American Irish who have watched sullenly while newer breeds shot ahead of them in the chase for security and success.

It is well understood that the Irish-American masses regard themselves as the divinely appointed defenders of the faith in this country. Thousands of well-fed and drowsily contented rectors have assured them it is so. When there is a row between the bishops and the people, they can be trusted to denounce the rebels without stint. They did it when a few French-Canadians in Rhode Island had the temerity to criticize a lordly churchman a few years ago. No, the fighting Irish do not rebel against their shepherds and shearers. Legalistic curates deny them burial in consecrated ground. Stoutish celibates become Billy Sundayish denouncing what their women wear. Monkish men insist they propagate like rabbits or go celibate themselves. With the frightful patience of the disinherited, the Irish endure.

Labor leaders know the Irish well. They realize they form the backbone of the element that has slowed the progress of the unions. As conservative as archbishops, and as timorous as Back Bay spinsters with their savings in shaky securities, they want no real change. No "radicalism." They pride themselves on knowing their place. Most of the old-line Irish-American labor leaders have either degenerated into smug and sly racketeers, or gone up the ladder to bank jobs and political sinecures.

BLARNEY AND BOLONEY

IF THE Irish-American masses are consistently on the anti-liberty side, they seek to make up for it by doing more than their share to spread the cult of muckerism. They vote into power some of the most incompetent of administrators, and for some of the funniest of reasons. A burning speech on Irish wrongs, three days before election, will swing more

votes in an Irish ward than a record for competence, integrity, and common sense. A whisper of "prejudice" will swing the same ward on hinges, and defeat a candidate for anything from mayor to sewer inspector. In Boston and New York, the Irish-American voters have been sweeping clowns and scoundrels into office for years for the sole reason that they were "their own kind." In Chicago and Philadelphia, where the gang politicians are Republican, they actually crossed the party line in thousands to fight like Turks for Thompson and the Vare boys.

The tradition of Irish love of liberty, applied to the Tenth Avenue and Back-of-the-Yards constituencies, is no more grotesque than the convention that masses of Irish-Americans are dashing and humorous lads. Good-humored they may be. Their impetuosity simply does not exist.

Many men of Celtic blood who have escaped the peasant psychology may be impulsive, but when the Irish as a body move in any direction, they go timorously, as people whose ancestors lived in hourly fear of the landlord, the soldiery, the police, the famine. The tawdry wisdom of a ward heeler, not the daring of an Emmet or the courage of a Parnell, distinguishes the Irish in politics and in other fields. I do not think of a single politician of Celtic extraction noted for taking chances for the easement of his soul. Al Smith shows spunk at times, but it may be the German half of him. They will bellow about Britain, but they won't risk the loss of a couple of votes by authorizing a reasonable reform.

Even funnier than all this is the tradition that the Irish are a race of beauty lovers. It must have started back in the days when all Yankees who weren't merchants were inventors, and so materialists and apostles of utilitarianism. Probably Father Ryan, O'Hara, and a few other third-rate poets helped to foster the illusion. I suspect it is pretty well dissipated by this time, except among the hokum peddlers of the A. O. H.

The Irish have very little use for beauty. No more than Methodists, for instance. Peasant priests have been blasting away for centuries at such remnants of pagan beauty-worship as survived the teachings of the followers of St. Patrick. Even the most lyrical of Irish rhapsodists admits Ireland itself is no

æsthete's paradise. Nature made the island of grays and browns and greens, a place of somber charm. The people have covered it with shanty-like churches, horrible houses, hideous monuments. Whole towns roll by with never a flower in the garden. So far as serious art and literature are concerned over here, the Irish-American horde might as well not exist. Their taste in drama runs to Mr. Dowling's sentimentalities and things like *Abie's Irish Rose*.

Spirituality is probably the best-advertised virtue of the Irishry, thanks to generation after generation of priests and bishops of all nationalities. An Irish parish is a holy man's idea of heaven. They are notorious for their generosity to Holy Mother Church, and they don't resent even the most outrageous affronts. The legend of the "soggarth" survives. The Irishman's religion as it is manifested by many seems a very earthy thing, for all its supernatural base. As the humble Tenth Avenue dweller seeks a district leader when in trouble with the law, so he seeks a salvation-expert when in trouble with his conscience. The extreme formalism and ancient artificiality of the Church of Rome appeal to the Irish, themselves among the most formal and artificial people on earth.

When Irish poetry was written in Erse, for Celts, it acquired so many rules that it was beginning to lose character as poetry at the time that English took its place. It was more an intellectual exercise in literary legalities. The same thing applies to ancient Irish hospitality. For a visiting churl, a man did such a thing. For a visiting chief, or a bard, he killed so many cattle, opened so many casks. For a bishop. . . It was all iron-clad. The Irishman loved it. And the intricate and highly legalistic methods by which the good fathers tell him he is to be saved do not revolt him. He sees no obscenity in a man's topping off a life of villainy by yelling for a confessor as he lies wounded in the gutter, shot down on his way to commit a murder or two. It satisfies his liking for pseudo-subtleties to have His Reverence rule this sinner fit for holy ground, that one not, because a hurrying priest was held up in a traffic jam and arrived after the body was "cold."

Being a clan people, like the Jews, their God is a clan God. That is, not only do they belong to Him, but He belongs to them. It is amusing

to see some Hibernian settlement in the tene-ment belt trying to weigh and comprehend intellectuals who occasionally come over from heresy. The Irish mob boasts such proselytes, but never likes them. Subconsciously, they resent them. Who do they think they are? It isn't right, after one's own old ancestors suffered agonies for the Church, to see the descendants of Black Protestants getting in on salvation just before the bell.

VICTIMS OF THE MYTH

IF THE PICTURE I draw is not the usual sentimental one of Mother Machree and Danny Boy, it is not a malicious one. Not only are many Irish like that — in the nature of things they could be little else. Up to now. People whose gentry were slain wholesale always have extravagant pretensions to gentility, put forward by quite absurd persons. It doesn't take Freud to point that out. People who have lost as many wars as the Irish simply had to invent the legend of the Fighting Irishman, which legend has led many an amiable Hibernian to get his eyes blacked and his ears knocked down. With actuality as drab as it has been in Ireland for centuries, perhaps a retreat into the world of fairies and demi-gods and half demoniac enemies was inevitable. Even Irish humor is an escape from life. Its extravagance and whimsy have no relation to the world of men and women. Devout Romanists hoping for the rout of Tennessee Fundamentalists, and roaring rebels clamoring for police protection while shouting war to the knife on the British Empire, illustrate a weird lack of the sense of proportion that underlies rational humor.

The amount of harm done by all this Erin-go-bragh pother is hard to estimate. The injury done to imaginative and idealistic young Irish-Americans must be enormous. It is to be remembered that there is no respectable minority in an Irish community. It would be ganged. Either you swallow the Irish myth whole, or you are a traitor, exposing yourself to the shrewish malignity of some of the best name-callers in Christendom.

The cult of muckerism which grows out of this clan heritage is operating to drive many sensible and self-respecting men of Irish blood out of the various timorous Irish cultural move-

ments that get under way in this country, and I find much misunderstanding of the reason.

I cannot see how it could be otherwise. Many Irish "leaders" in church and lodge are howling neurasthenics with inferiority complexes, whose chief ambition is to recall that their grandfathers knew the grandfather of a Daly or O'Brien or Mackay when he "didn't have a patch for the seat of his pants." No wonder the Mackays and Ryans refrain from attempting leadership in Irish-American advancement, much as they might like it. In vituperative power, at least, the Irish-American of the fire-escape class is the equal of any minor poet in the land. And ingratitude is part of his race, as is its vanity. Nearly all intelligent benefactors of the tribe are betrayed and insulted before they die. On the West Side of New York are tens of thousands of Irish-Americans who have faith in the Irish myth. They have ordered their lives by it, and, in dismaying numbers, they are becoming the cockneys of New York. They already have the parochial prejudices, the poverty, and the accent. On matinée days, you may see them lining the theater streets in the West Forties — sly chauffeurs, strutting cops, knowing lads in white aprons peering through the iron grills. Servants all. A varlet class in the making. Most of the business of the West Side is out of their hands long since. Even the fighters are "wops" and "mockies" now.

To-day the average Irish-American does not know the simplest and most obvious things about himself and his people. He does not know, for instance, that most Irish-Americans are not even Celts, but as Iberian as Calabrians or Portuguese. It may be generations before the whole gaudy Celtic myth is cut down to the proportions of fact. Meanwhile, it debauches the thinking of thousands of decent young fellows whose clan loyalty makes them ready victims.

Of course, the exceptional laugh it off and escape. But there are so many of the unexceptional who should be saving themselves from exploitation by the oily gentlemen who direct their minds backward toward a glorious past that never existed, forward toward a glorious future that is distinctly problematical — anywhere but at life itself!

In an Early Issue We Will Publish a Reply in Kind to Mr. Gavin

Hungry



by **LAUREN W. GILFILLAN**

UPON graduating from Smith in 1931, Lauren W. Gilfillan went to New York to look for a job connected with writing. She found nothing, except this practical bit of advice: "There's a coal strike on in the Pittsburgh fields. Why don't you go there and live with the miners and see what it's all about? If you have writing in you, that ought to bring it out." Miss Gilfillan accepted the counsel and went to the Pittsburgh district where, because of her slight stature and immature appearance, she was able to pass as a miner's child. This article, the first of two, is the result of her experience. — *The Editor*

I

BURRING! rang the alarm. I opened my eyes with a start. At first I thought I was still dreaming — at the sight of the little room. An expanse of plaster ceiling, almost touching my nose, its unpainted surface melting away in the shadows; bare walls, bare floor; the single scratchy blanket covering me; the bare outline of the dressing table made from a packing box, with its squat water pitcher, startlingly white in the gloom; the little slit of a window, through which filtered the first pale gleams of dawn. I shivered, drew the blanket up to my chin, and a sharp lump in the mattress gouged my back. Then I remembered.

I was in a mining town about thirty-five miles from Pittsburgh. I was in the upstairs bedroom of the household of the Konnechecks, at whose door I had appeared only yesterday, asking, "May I stay here?"

"Sure, sure," old Grandma Konnecheck had

welcomed me, grinning a toothless grin, and wriggling her bare toes on the doorstep. "You stay. You sleep in Archie's bed. I make him sleep downstairs."

And so I had walked in, and here I was — in Archie's bed.

Burring! I leaped out of bed and shut off the noise whose shocking loudness desecrated the sleeping house and the dead stillness of the valley. Five o'clock. I looked out the window. Rolling mists enveloped the hilltops in clouds of greenish milkiness, drifted and shifted in the valley, filling it like a cup. Over there, the blurred black outline of the tippie of a mine. Below the window the narrow roadway of cinders, which leads down into the village. And everywhere the smell of coal.

"To-day," I said to myself, "I am to be a miner's child and go to Pittsburgh to beg for money to keep me from starving."

In the pallid light I set to work. I brushed my teeth — although I knew an authentic miner's child would not have done so — with the strange-tasting sooty rain water in the pitcher. Better that than the well water with its danger of typhoid. I neglected to wash my face, shook my hair, mussed from sleep into a shaggy thatch, took some eye shadow and drew blue circles around my lashes. Then I buckled my money belt about my waist. Now — clothes. A faded calico dress, ill-fitting, voluminous, with a tear in one sleeve. Too clean, this dress, but it would soon be grimy enough. No stockings, tennis shoes with holes in the toes. I took up a hand mirror and surveyed myself