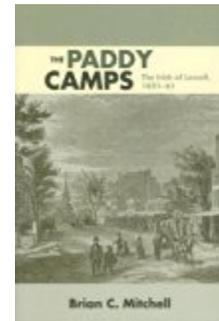


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Brian C. Mitchell. *The Paddy Camps: The Irish of Lowell, 1821-1861*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006. xviii + 247 pp. \$25.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-252-07338-0.

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Still Good

In this well-written case study, Brian Mitchell argues that the transformation of pre-Civil War Lowell from a paternalistic, planned mill village into a starkly capitalist industrial city and the emergence of an entrenched Irish ethnic community were complementary processes. In the short new preface to this paperback reprint of his 1988 study, Mitchell asserts that his book remains relevant because it can enhance our understanding of social dynamics within contemporary U.S. society. While the preface projects a fairly optimistic tone, the study itself suggests a gloomier scenario.

Mitchell traces the establishment of Lowell's Irish community back to the arrival of Hugh Cumiskey, a labor foreman, and thirty of his charges who had walked from Charlestown to find work on a canal project which was designed to provide water power for the projected mill complex. Lowell's construction work attracted Yankee and Irish laborers throughout the 1820s. At first, Lowell's Yankee planners and officials did not perceive the small and highly transient Irish population as a permanent fixture within their enlightened enterprise. The Irish laborers threw up clusters of shanties for housing (paddy camps). Eventually, the number of women and children increased and a more established neighborhood, the "Acre," emerged. Living conditions were wretched but the authorities did not interfere with Irish folkways. Mitchell offers evidence that indicates that homeland regional loyalties remained strong among the laboring population, as did the use of the Gaelic language. While Mitchell's tenor is sanguine, the situation he describes is stark. The Irish were physically segregated, they were

virtually excluded from millwork and, as the term "paddy camps" suggests, anti-Irish prejudice was endemic. However, Mitchell presents the 1820s to the early 1840s as an era of accommodation between the Yankee and Irish middle classes. For the Irish, middle class is a relative term indeed considering the modest resources commanded by that segment. The accommodation Mitchell perceives relates to a level of Yankee support and approval for Irish self-improvement projects such as temperance, for peaceful agitation for Repeal of the Union between Ireland and Britain and, most significantly, because of a compromise which ensured that Catholics would teach in the public schools set aside for Irish children.

The overall *modus vivendi* between groups broke down during the 1840s and 1850s. Mitchell embeds a consideration of social power relations in his description of the emergence of an embattled ethnic group consciousness among Lowell's Irish. While Mitchell does discuss internal group dynamics, he stresses outside pressures as the precipitants of the ethnicization of Irish immigrants and their children. Ultimate power in Lowell rested in the hands of the Boston Associates, the absentee mill owners, who created Lowell in the first place. Originally, Yankee farm girls were envisioned as the core labor force in a mill complex that was to generate profits without resorting to practices that created the dismal conditions associated with industrialization in Britain. However, within a generation Yankee workers had proved themselves intractable and the mill owners' concerns had narrowed to a sharp focus on profits. During the 1840s, new mill construction projects provided work for Irishmen and gradu-

ally Irish women and men were admitted to a broad range of mill occupations. The mill owners had opted for a labor force that they expected would be cheap and pliant. That decision provided a firm economic base for a permanent Irish settlement in Lowell. The basic decision on hiring policy, entailing a train of consequences, was made by outsiders. Locals, Yankees and Irish alike, had to grapple with the fallout.

Mitchell describes a dialectical process in which a small, disorganized, and marginalized population was at first generally left to its own devices. He is at his best in depicting the halting institutional development of Catholicism, with a cast of characters including authoritarian bishops, headstrong priests, and feuding members of the middle class. During the 1840s and early 1850s, refugees from Ireland's famine flooded into Lowell. They sought work and succor and each goal challenged local Yankees' adaptability. Mitchell documents the health crises as well as the tax burden attendant on the Irish influx. While the Know-Nothing movement of the 1850s had multiple causes, its ascendancy in Lowell clearly reflected local Yankees' sense of anger at the betrayal of their vision for Lowell. Mitchell argues that, largely in response to Yankee antipathy, the Irish had created by the outbreak of the Civil War a self-consciously Catholic ethnic identity in which they fell in line behind a chieftain-like priest and settled into an enclave mentality.

Mitchell's study rests on a firm foundation of research in a wide array of government, business, and church records as well as contemporary publications. His richest sources were generated by Catholic institutions and, not surprisingly, his discussion of controversies and crises involving priests and nuns is particularly insightful. Still, Mitchell's presentation may overemphasize Catholicism and underplay the complexity of the process of ethnicization. First, Mitchell simply assumes that Catholic cultural background was a prerequisite for Irishness. For example, he estimates the size of Lowell's Irish population in 1830 from information on membership in St. Patrick's parish. His own assiduous research however, indicates that a considerable proportion of Lowell's early Irish residents hailed from heavily Protestant northern Ireland. Clearly, many were Catholic, but were all of them? While he never discusses the issue in his text, Mitchell supplies a table (p. 159) that shows a local charity differentiated between Irish Protestants and Irish Catholics. Protestants from Ireland were in Lowell. At least during the early era, some may have thought of themselves as Irish; throughout the period, some may have harbored special animosity towards Catholics. In

any case, they may have played a significant role in the emergence of an Irish Catholic ethnic group. More attention to gender would strengthen, and complicate, Mitchell's tale. Furthermore, while Mitchell incorporates a considerable amount of evidence about poorer Irish people in Lowell, they come across as fairly passive characters. They engage in a range of uncouth behaviors. They rely on muscle power and family loyalties to survive. They contribute to, and defend, the Catholic Church. Mitchell acknowledges that there were some nonbelievers, but he sees Lowell's Irish workers as safely tucked within the arms of the Church by the 1850s. Certainly, as one form of Irishness, a Catholic-centered enclave-like variety was emerging not just in Lowell, but in locales throughout the United States by the 1860s. However, even many Catholic Irish ventured out from under the Church's mantle. Mitchell does mention a brief Irish-led mill strike in 1859. This study's end date is 1861, but it is relevant to note that nationwide, the 1860s ushered in an intense era of Irish-American involvement in the Church-denounced Fenian movement which aimed to free Ireland from British rule through force of arms. In other words, the projection of an isolationist and monolithic Catholic-Irish ethnicity underplays the range of roles that the Irish actually played and the complexity of their accommodation to nineteenth-century American society.

In sum, Mitchell authored an intriguing study in 1988 that succeeds in demonstrating his basic contention that antebellum Lowell's urban evolution and the ethnicization of the Irish occurred as interdependent processes. This reprint paperback edition makes Mitchell's fine study readily available. His new preface includes a short list of citations to recent works but it is notable for his assertion that this investigation of Irish experiences in antebellum Lowell has relevance for analyses of present-day immigrants' roles in urban American society. Such comparisons could indeed generate probing questions. Among other issues, any comparisons between the past and today must consider both race and economic power. Apparently, Mitchell does not view race as relevant to his topic. His new preface does not cite recent scholarship on nineteenth- and twentieth- century European immigrants and race. Furthermore, Mitchell certainly does not display hypersensitivity to anti-Irish prejudice. For example, he adopts the Yankees' term "paddy camps" without quotation marks to designate early Irish settlements in Lowell. Despite Mitchell's lack of emphasis on these points, his own probing research demonstrates that the early Irish residents of Lowell were subjected to high lev-

els of segregation and discrimination. Readers could easily perceive the early situation of the Irish in Lowell as an example of incipient racialization. Ultimately, the Irish managed to evade race typing and an argument could be made that no European group was in serious jeopardy of falling victim to full-scale racism during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Still, European groups' accommodation to evolving race practices in the United States have shaped the setting in which present-day immigrants, largely from non-European homelands, now maneuver. Even if Mitchell's stance is correct, and race is not a useful conceptual category for analyzing the Irish experience in nineteenth-century Lowell, race dynamics clearly operate now as immigrants settle into and reshape urban American society. What was it about nineteenth-century Lowell, the Irish, and the broader national context that helped the Irish escape from the most intense forms of prejudice and discrimination?

While the absence of race in Mitchell's analysis can generate useful questions, his concentration on the social power derived from control over economic resources yields direct interpretive dividends. First, his emphasis

on the power of absentee owners to make fundamental economic decisions and leave locals to compete, pick up the pieces, and find ways to maintain a functioning social order suggests straightforward parallels to contemporary times. Second, Mitchell describes a process in which the Irish took advantage of the owners' shift in labor force preferences to pry an opening for themselves in the local economic order and establish a base for the development of Irish community life. In other words, the Irish were active, if unequal, partners in the mill-owners' economic stratagem against local Yankees' notions of an idealized social order. Using Mitchell's study as a basis for thinking about contemporary concerns could lead to gloomy conclusions. Even without race, Mitchell traces an evolution of economic competition, the hardening of prejudice, and the resultant strengthening of ethnic group self-consciousness as group members retreated into fortress-like isolation. Mitchell may overemphasize the resultant hegemony of a parochial mentality among Lowell's Irish. Still, readers may conclude that the experiences of Lowell's nineteenth-century Irish suggest that contemporary immigrants should brace themselves for a choppy course forward.

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