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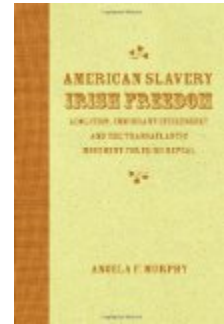
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Angela F. Murphy. *American Slavery, Irish Freedom: Abolition, Immigrant Citizenship, and the Transatlantic Movement for Irish Repeal*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2010. 304 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8071-3639-3.

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Citizenship, Nationality, and the Transatlantic Irish in 1840s America

Ever since the 1790 immigration laws defined citizenship as being the prerogative of “free white persons,” notions of American citizenship and American nationality have contradicted each other regularly. While the legal apparatus defines the parameters of citizenship, nationality is defined through various cultural, ideological, and political discourses that compete within the U.S. cultural imaginary. Representing the psychic and social dimensions of citizenship, “nationality,” writes Robert G. Lee, “contains and manages the contradictions of the hierarchies and inequalities of a social formation.”[1] Unlike citizenship, which is fixed within the state, nationality is an unstable and contested concept. The difference between these two notions mirrors the difference between race and ethnicity in nineteenth-century America.

Nowhere is the contradictory relationship between citizenship and nationality clearer than during the intricate *pas de deux* performed by the Irish repeal and American abolition movements in the United States during the 1840s. Angela F. Murphy’s timely book, *American Slavery, Irish Freedom*, presents the first in-depth treatment of this transnational ballet. While the work is not specifically aimed at exposing the differences between citizenship and nationality, it does so with admirable clarity.

The central figure in Murphy’s study is Irish nationalist leader and committed abolitionist Daniel O’Connell. O’Connell’s crucial role in the transatlantic abolitionist movement began as far back as 1824, but he has been

curiously neglected in the historiography of the anti-slavery movement. Yet, as Murphy’s research shows, O’Connell’s influence went well beyond the confines of Irish nationalist discourse. *American Slavery, Irish Freedom* opens with an account of O’Connell’s prominent role at the World Anti-Slavery Convention held in London in 1840 and ends with his death in Genoa in 1847. Murphy charts the rise and fall of O’Connell’s transatlantic influence in the intervening years, particularly between 1842 and 1845.

In addition to being the year that the first determinedly transatlantic abolitionist organization was founded, 1840 marked the onset of the O’Connell-led Irish repeal movement, set up to garner support for ending the parliamentary union between Ireland and Great Britain. Ireland’s first mass movement, it soon led to the establishment of enthusiastic support groups throughout North America. These organizations proved popular with American politicians, especially Democrats eager for the votes of the burgeoning Irish American population. O’Connell’s antislavery stance, however, would present the U.S. repeal movement with some thorny problems.

Conventional wisdom holds that the Irish repeal organizations in the United States were run by recently emigrated, insular, Irish Catholic, working-class men, who defended slavery in order to advance their own social status. Murphy, however, reveals a much more complicated

scenario. She finds that the U.S. repealers' rhetoric reflected an antebellum Irish middle-class leadership and that the organization's membership, far from being homogenous, comprised both Catholic and Protestant immigrants, politically active women as well as men, and native non-Irish as well as Irish. Repeal agitation in the United States was the domain of the pre-Famine Irish who, in contrast with Famine immigrants, were generally more affluent and skilled. Indeed, several studies show that in parts of the United States, repealers were mainly white-collar workers organized under a leadership that emphasized assimilation rather than ethnic separatism.

Two key moments dominated the American repeal movement. The first followed the *Address from the People of Ireland to Their Countrymen and Countrywomen in America*, the brainchild of Dublin Quaker Richard Webb. It called on Irish people in America to recognize their common cause with American slaves and unite behind the abolitionist movement. Circulated in 1841 throughout most of Ireland by the Hibernian Anti-Slavery Society, the document generated sixty thousand signatures in support by the end of the year, including those of O'Connell and temperance leader Father Theobald Mathew. The signature drive enjoyed the considerable help from O'Connell's Irish repeal organization. William Lloyd Garrison and the U.S. abolitionist movement then attempted to use the *Address* to recruit Irish Americans to their cause. The effort failed dramatically, a fact that has led some historians to label the Irish in America as pro-slavery, yet Murphy shows that was not entirely the case. The Boston *Pilot* newspaper, for example, spoke out against slavery, as did other leading voices of the Irish American community. But the tone changed following the *Address*.

Before the *Address*, most Irish public figures in the United States preferred to ignore the slavery issue altogether, concentrating instead on their Irish nationalist agenda. But when Garrison sought to use the *Address* to garner support for abolition, Irish American leaders reacted angrily. They resented being singled out as an ethnic group on this issue. Many had qualms about the decidedly Protestant, evangelical, and anti-Catholic element within the abolitionist movement. The *Pilot* pointed out that the general tenor of American society was conciliatory toward the South, so that it would be inappropriate for new Irish American citizens to support the antislavery crusade. The admonition echoed a view held by most Americans at the time, that abolitionism threatened the Union. Besides, most Irish Americans questioned the authenticity of the *Address*—many claimed

that O'Connell did not support it.

Much to Garrison's disgust, O'Connell appeared reluctant to cross these American repealers. Indeed, the two men endured an uneasy alliance that erupted in public spats from time to time. By the summer of 1843, O'Connell appeared to have aligned himself with Irish American repealers against Garrisonian abolitionists, branding the latter as antireligious in general and anti-Catholic in particular. He also labeled the Garrisonians promoters of racial violence. However, following an approach by the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society, O'Connell changed his tune and issued his most stern admonition of Irish America yet. "Over the broad Atlantic," he stated, "I pour forth my voice saying 'Come out of such a land, you Irishmen; or, if you remain, and dare countenance the system of slavery that is supported there, we will recognize you as Irishmen no longer'" (p. 122). To a group of Cincinnati repealers who objected to his abolitionist stance, he wrote: "It was not in Ireland that you learned this cruelty!" As Murphy points out, O'Connell "addressed the American repealers as Irish men. They had responded as Americans" (p. 149).

Murphy argues that in the end most repealers separated O'Connell's antislavery views from his Irish nationalist ones. They attacked abolitionism but not O'Connell. Some southern repeal organizations did disband over O'Connell's antislavery remarks, but the repeal movement was far from eliminated in the slave-owning states. By 1844, it seemed stronger than ever in the United States, mostly as a result of the increasingly coercive actions of the British administration of Ireland. Her Majesty's government fretted over the size and intensity of the Irish repeal movement. Hence they arrested O'Connell, put him on trial before a packed jury, and imprisoned him. This event all but guaranteed his ongoing popularity in Irish America.

The second key moment in the history of the American Irish repeal movement occurred shortly after O'Connell's release from prison having served several wearing months. He emerged a changed man. Not only did he adopt a more conciliatory attitude toward the British government but he also became distinctly pro-British and belligerently anti-American with regard to the fate of Oregon and the annexation of Texas, disputes that nearly led to war between the United States and Britain. Contrary to some historical accounts, then, it was not the slavery issue that caused the decline in the repeal movement in America, but rather O'Connell's perceived anti-Americanism.

Murphy concludes that Irish Americans failed to join the antislavery cause partly because neither they nor abolitionists saw beyond their own narrow concerns and prejudices. American repealers by and large saw abolitionism as a threat to the unity of their adopted country, a position, Murphy argues, that was hardly unique but rather reflected the anxieties of the larger American public, both the North and South. “In sum,” she concludes, “while Irish American repealers maintained a pride and love for their homeland, they acted unabashedly American in the way they dealt with the slavery controversy” (p. 218). They felt it their duty to uphold the established institutions of the United States, of which slavery was a major component.

In short, Murphy’s study of the various debates on slavery and repeal reveals what motivated Irish American repealers most was their desire to match their nationality with their American citizenship. Irish adoption

of an American national identity required not only the subordination of their Irish ethnicity, but also their acceptance of the U.S. racial state.

American Slavery, Irish Freedom tends somewhat toward repetition, but perhaps this is to be expected given Murphy’s decision to present the full weight of the evidence in support of the conclusions she draws that contradict preceding historiography. Well written and impressively researched, this work should be of significant value to scholars of nineteenth-century transatlantic social movements, as well as to those interested in racial formation in the United States.

Note

[1]. Robert G. Lee, *Oriental: Asian Americans in Popular Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999), 6.

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