“Full of Proud Memories of the Past, on which Irishmen Love to Dwell”: Irish Nationalist Performance and the Orange Riots of 1871

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As a mode of communication, performance has often been thought of as embodied messages whose meanings are negotiated between performers and audiences. Richard Bauman argued in 1975 that analysis of the unique qualities of “performance situations” can better capture what is communicated between parties in a given setting than mere textual analysis of the message. Bauman attempted to get at the nature of performance by paying attention to the way verbal messages were formulated and received. This approach to performance analysis highlights “keys” or “frames” that indicate how a performance should be interpreted in “some special sense,” providing contextual meanings easily overlooked outside of the specific moment of articulation.1

Bauman argued that a kind of social compact is implicit in interactions between a performer and an audience. The performer has the responsibility to display a kind of “communicative competence” to this audience by using such keys or frames – codes, patterns of articulation, appeals to tradition – to highlight his or her ability to “speak in socially appropriate ways.” This imperative makes the performer accountable to the audience, which evaluates the competence of the activity. The act of expression elicits a heightened awareness, giving “license to the audience to regard the act of

expression and the performer with special intensity.” Adeptness at performance can have such a strong impact, Bauman notes, that it can bind the audience to the performer and even transform social structure, suggesting that the performer has a powerful role in shaping any society.

While considering Bauman’s model, one cannot help but wonder about those performers and performances who fail, whose frameworks for articulating a message use the wrong keys or the wrong codes, and who therefore are unable to bind an audience to them and forsake their power to alter social structure. Perhaps their performances simply fall into obscurity. Perhaps their messages are not received with the “special intensity” intrinsic to performance, and are merely ignored. The implications may not initially seem far-reaching, based on the intimate examples Bauman uses. Japanese storytellers either display their competence or they do not. An African-American boy who tells jokes either improves his social situation or doesn’t. A marriage request in a Malagasy kabary (a form of ceremonial speech) is either accepted or it is not. However, the implicit relationship established between performer and audience involved in any cultural performance can have broad social implications regarding the way it is used to affirm or challenge social structures. This is illustrated by the ways that performances are used to constitute national cultural identities, and formulate social relations between nations.

A number of scholars have found in the last decade and a half that performative practices play central roles in the articulation of national identities. Richard Handler has noted that cultural performance constitutes a national imaginary in terms of a perceived consensus within the nation itself. The nation is thought to be more homogenous than heterogeneous, and images of the nation on stage or on parade can confirm that perception of internal sameness. Similarly, ritualized or staged activities often embody social memories crucial to a group’s image of itself. Certain presentations invoke

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2 Bauman, 293.
memories of a national golden age, which are used by elites to promote their own social and political interests.3

However, scholarship about the ways performance presents national identity in terms of a perceived consensus can often overlook the relationship between performers and audiences that is so central to Bauman’s model of performance. To consider how national identities are staged by performers in terms of homogeneity and social memory and to examine how they are received and evaluated by audiences complicates our understanding of performed nationalisms. Kelly Askew has more recently borrowed from Bauman’s model to argue that different varieties of performed nationalism must be formulated in terms of a dialogic interaction between those staged identities and audiences who receive and evaluate them. Performance in this case is a process that grants power not only to performers, as in Bauman’s model, but also to all engaged in the action of evaluating that performance. The meanings of the social identity created by performances are arrived at collectively, in emergent ways that are contingent upon specific

performative contexts, and these collective meanings lend themselves to the “active construction of social life.”

I argue here that the performative constitution of a national identity shapes and transforms social life, and that even seemingly unsuccessful forms of communication in performance settings can have a profound impact on a nation’s image (or images) of itself. This is directly due to the dialogic quality of a nation constructed in performance. If, for instance, a performance elicits a sense of a nation’s internal homogeneity or portrays a glorious past, certain keys or frames within that performance enact those meanings and are subject to evaluation by an audience. The dialogue that emerges from such audience responses to the coded message of the performance rarely if ever rises to the ideal of consensus. Instead, the nation’s self-image is contested as audiences evaluate the performance. Though such emergent performances do have potential power to reinforce an identity constructed by nationalist elites, they only acquire such power to the extent that performers meet often unstated social perceptions harbored by the audience. In cases when this social compact between performer and audience is breached, open conflict emerges in the public sphere, leading to a very different kind of transformation from the type Bauman describes.

This was just the case in New York City in the spring and summer of 1871. In that year, different memories of a distant Irish past were staged as part of two street demonstrations, leading to a conflict that played itself out in the city’s newspapers and, ultimately, on the streets themselves. In particular, these different memories were identified with Protestant and Catholic interests, and although this perceived dualism misrepresented the complex nature of the fissures within the Irish community in New York, it created the perception that sectarian Irish conflict had been transplanted to the shores of the United States. In fact, audience response to the two parades that were the subject of controversy revealed that there were many different ideas about the Irish identity at play in the city. Presented with two processions that remembered an Irish “golden age” differently, respondents revealed not the internal homogeneity

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4Askew, Performing the Nation, 23
crucial to the national project, but instead uncovered a diverse set of views about the Irish that threatened to undermine any perception of a national consensus. The ensuing conflict was over the meaning of a staged Irish past, and it led to real violence on the street. And while the so-called “Orange riots” of 1870 and 1871 have been explained in terms of innate Irish bellicosity or in terms of class antagonisms that were expressed through different historical imaginaries, I argue that the special nature of performance suggests that these parades and the public dialogue about them constituted the conflict and had the effect of transforming the shape of the Irish community in New York.5

Parades and Power – St. Patrick’s Day and the Gallowglasses

In the early 1850s, Irish immigrants in New York City, struggling to survive emigration from their famine-plagued homeland and beset by an increasingly intolerant American public, developed social and cultural institutions that promoted their own national identity. Like many before them, these immigrants sought refuge in public demonstrations of solidarity, most notably the annual St. Patrick’s Day parade. Celebrated by different processions in the city as far back as 1762, St. Patrick’s Day in New York was by the middle of the nineteenth century both a spectacle for the masses and an occasion for the Irish elite in the city to reaffirm ethnic and national solidarity. As one leader said in 1853, the newly organized parade “shamed [rival Irish groups] out of their envious feelings of one another” and “established a character” for the Irish in the United States that New Yorkers would have to recognize. In addition to the parade, Irish businessmen, political leaders, and nationalists would gather at fancy dinners and offer oratorical “toasts” to the perseverance of the Irish

nation. Speakers at those dinners often observed that the parade and the day’s festivities represented an image of the Irish nation alive and well on the streets of North America’s fastest growing metropolis.\textsuperscript{6}

Such parade traditions in the nineteenth century were often conceived of as a way to ritually establish group ties, and to celebrate the civic virtues crucial to republican political ideology in the United States. At the same time, they were also often sites for marginalized and underprivileged people in urban centers to represent themselves in demonstrations that at times embodied resistant or oppositional ideologies. Laborers, women, workers’ unions, and immigrant groups all found in public demonstrations opportunities to express alternative social and political perspectives. Even though they could be used to create order where patricians envisioned chaos, parades also gave voice to underrepresented perspectives. Rather than producing consensus, then, public processions constituted a cultural process that opened up public debate about cultural identities and social policies. As David Román observes, “performance produces an opportunity for a critical reappraisal of the official culture and makes space for other modes of understanding.”\textsuperscript{7}

In the years between the consolidation of the unified St. Patrick’s Day parade in the 1850s and the 1870s, religious and civic societies, benevolent groups, military units, and elite organizers had contributed to the invention of Irish traditions that were expressed as em-


bodied codes in the parade. Often these symbols underscored the unity of the Irish people who persisted as a community in the diaspora despite the hardships they encountered. Military, political, and cultural heroes were most prominent as emblems of this unity. Significantly, these predominantly male heroes represented both an unbroken connection to a heroic Irish past and a “bold” Irish masculine character that spoke to republican virtue among the members of the Irish nation. By 1871, the presence of the New York 69th Regiment, which had distinguished itself in the Civil War, was as much a part of the official tradition as the bust of the Catholic hero Daniel O’Connell, who rode alongside a mythic harpist representing Irish musical culture atop a cart pulled by several rows of white horses. They joined members of the Ancient Order of Hibernians, Irish county organizations, civic assemblages and benevolent societies parading down Broadway and passing in review before New York Mayor A. Oakey Hall.8

Such parades served a dual function – to remind fellow New Yorkers of the civic virtues of Irish immigrants, and to affirm national bonds among the members of the Irish community. However, in 1871, the stakes for the parade had been raised by two developments that threatened the image of a coherent and virtuous Irish nation in New York. During the first years of the decade, perceptions were growing that patronage sponsored by Boss William Tweed’s Democratic political machine corrupted American republican institutions, and a growing reform movement targeted the Irish and particularly Irish Catholics for their untoward influence on city officials like Mayor A. Oakey Hall. Editorials in Republican-friendly publications like the New York Times and the New York Herald indicated the possibility that by 1871 anti-Catholic, anti-Irish nativism was again on the rise. Perhaps even worse was the growing perception that the Irish community was itself susceptible to fragmentation. Irish Catholic residents in 1871 feared that a significant portion of the city’s middle- and upper- class population – both Anglo-American and Irish Protestants in particular – harbored

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hostile feelings to the working-class Catholic Irish. In addition, support for “Fenian” insurrection in the 1860s, both in the United States and Ireland, had demonstrated that discord existed among the city’s nationalists and clergy. In fact, in 1870 Catholic leaders had denounced the movement. Such intra-group conflicts based on political, religious, and class differences had culminated in a bloody riot the previous July.9

As Bauman notes, cultural performances like the St. Patrick’s Day parade must be read contextually, as an emergent form of communication that addressed specific social and political dynamics inherent in the prevailing social structure. The anxieties that many Irish residents of the city experienced in 1871 formed the raison d’être for the emergent feature of the St. Patrick’s Day parade: a procession of Galloglach. Also known as Gallowglasses, this group of men reenacted a scene from almost three centuries earlier, in which a corps of Irish soldiers (Galloglach) led by the first Earl of Tyrone Shane “The Proud” O’Neill paraded in London before the British monarch, Queen Elizabeth I. The procession elicited memories of an

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Irish golden age, a period before the 1603 “flight of the Earls” from Ireland, in which a number of Irish nobles, including Hugh O’Neill, the second Earl of Tyrone, left Ireland for France under pressure from the English military. The departure of Hugh and other nobles from northeast Ireland had become the subject of Irish ballad mythology in the intervening centuries, and the reenactment of the first Earl of Tyrone’s parade on New York streets recalled an era before the English plantations took root in Ulster, before the bloody battles with Oliver Cromwell of the mid-17th century, and before the loss suffered by the Catholic Irish forces at the hands of William of Orange at the Battle of the Boyne in 1690. The display represented a pre-colonial Ireland in which its noble leaders were fully men, before colonial rule had emasculated them.\textsuperscript{10}

Descriptions of the parade emphasized Irish cultural traditions, revealing the coded framework in which the parade of Gallowglasses was viewed. The corps marched before the “triumphal car” carrying an ancient Irish bard, one report noted, and they were “greeted with rousing cheers” as they approached City Hall, “as they had been several times before on the route, and were several times subsequently.” The “giants” – all of those chosen to act the part were described as “handsome youths,” of “unusual stature, from 6’4” to 6’7” – appeared “in the exact costume worn by that famous body of Irish soldiery under the celebrated Ulster chief, Shane O’Neill, on the occasion of his visit to Queen Elizabeth, and consequently their attire was rather of a gala than a martial character.” The outfits, said to cost the St. Patrick Mutual Alliance $7,000, included saffron-tinted cloaks, long green waistcoats, saffron-colored tights, sandals, and gilt “leathern helmets.” Bracelets and facsimiles of the “brooch of Tara” decorated the men’s bodies. They carried with them large battle axes and shields adorned with “gilt devices of a rampant lion, ‘the Babylonish lion, which proves that the Irish race were of Phoenician origin,’ as one of the wearers logically affirmed.” The ancient

“warrior-bard” who joined the Gallowglasses wore an “immense white wig,” as well as “jingling bracelets, and great laurel wreath.” In his arms, he carried a gilded harp, representing the Irish musical tradition. The 25-foot car contained a pyramid-shaped structure; at the top of the pyramid was a bust of Daniel O’Connell, the Catholic “Liberator” whose legislative and judicial efforts in the early decades of the nineteenth century had helped to curb and eventually eliminate the last of the Penal Laws, a set of British ordinances aimed at suppressing Catholicism in Ireland.\textsuperscript{11}

These keys to the parade demonstrated that it appealed to a commonly held perception of a glorious Irish history and set of cultural traditions that expressed a “bold” masculine heroism thought to inhere in all Irish men. Enthusiastic editorials in the Democratic and Irish press in particular promulgated the relevant history that underscored the national masculine ideology of the parade. The \textit{New York World} and the \textit{Irish World} both observed that “the appearance of a body of Irishmen in the commercial capital of the New World on the ensuing 17\textsuperscript{th} of March, arrayed in a long-forgotten costume […] cannot fail to excite in the beholder a curiosity […] fully as great as their elder brothers excited among the citizens of London more than three hundred years ago. Nations are said to have long memories: the demonstration on Friday next will go far to vindicate the assertion.” The “rousing cheers” along the parade route and praise in Democratic and Irish newspapers provided evidence that the unit was representative of Ireland’s national history. In their nobility, stature, and strength, they served as substitutes for the entire Irish nation, and like much nationalist discourse were intended to indicate to all Irish in the diaspora that an independent Ireland should still be the goal of patriotic men and women.\textsuperscript{12}

An article in the \textit{New York Sun} underscored the relevance of O’Neill and his corps, noting that it was an “effort to revive the ancient glories of the Irish nation,” which “deserves every encouragement.” The Gallowglasses were “stern Roman Catholics” whose

\textsuperscript{11} \textit{New York Sun}, March 18, 1871; \textit{New York World}, March 18, 1871; \textit{Irish World}, March 25, 1871.

\textsuperscript{12} \textit{New York World}, March 12, 1871; \textit{Irish World}, March 25, 1871.
richly ornamented costumes and shields “with Phoenician devices” represented their ancient origins. And their weapons, “enormous battle axes,” were said to be “so large that the Cockneys were unable to lift them.” The editorial noted that the unit was an affront to the English of Queen Elizabeth, an item of particular significance to the organizers of the St. Patrick’s Day Parade in 1871. The Gallowglass commander O’Neill was “probably one of the bravest men Ireland ever produced,” a “standing terror to the Earl of Sussex, the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland” who “advised Queen Elizabeth to imprison the whole party when they arrived in London.” However, Elizabeth was charmed with O’Neill and his corps, and welcomed them to London “much to the chagrin of the Earl of Sussex.”13

This story of Irish heroes in sixteenth-century London provided a potent analogy for the Irish community in New York in the 1870s. Like the Gallowglasses, the New York Irish in 1871 had a powerful patron among the ruling elite – the “Tammany Hall” Democratic political machine ruled by Boss Tweed. But there were also well-placed antagonists who condemned the Irish and feared their influence on their elite patrons. A growing reform movement spearheaded by the New York Times and Harper’s magazine was targeting the Irish, and specifically the Irish Catholic, population in the city. Fearful of the Irish community’s tendencies to elevate loyalty to the pope above republican political values and of the potential the working-class Irish represented for social degeneracy, editorial writers and cartoonists like Thomas Nast filled their columns with condemnations of this “foreign” influence in America. Due in part to the advent of Boss Tweed’s political machine and in part to the valor displayed by Irish soldiers during the Civil War, this variety of nativism had diminished throughout the 1860s, and the New York Irish gained economically from the patronage that the political machine made possible. Such gains, however, were double-edged. When Irish nationalists attempted to channel the military experience of Civil War soldiers into insurrection as part of Fenian activities in Ireland in the 1860s, their efforts were met with ambivalence and distrust – emphasized in editorials and stories in leading newspapers.
like the *New York Times*. The specific memory of the Gallowglass victory over the Earl of Sussex and success in eliciting the admiration of the English queen directly addressed power dynamics in New York. Irish masculine martial prowess would, leaders hoped, win over Democrats in Tammany Hall just as Shane O’Neill’s forces had won over Queen Elizabeth. It could do so, more importantly, while silencing powerful but subordinate enemies of Ireland – the Earl of Sussex in sixteenth-century London, and American persecutors of Irish immigrants in nineteenth-century New York.¹⁴

The parade also had the potential to heal rifts in the Irish community in the city, divisions especially represented by Catholic-Protestant sectarian violence the previous year. In July of 1870, a riot on the city’s upper west side resulted from the confrontation between bourgeois Protestant Irish celebrating “Boyne Day” and Catholic Irish laborers who protested that the event was offensive. The conflict began with a parade of “Orange” lodges that were commemorating the victory of William of Orange over Catholic forces in the Battle of the Boyne in Northeast Ireland in 1690. Outraged by songs and slogans sung and shouted during the parade, a large group of working-class Catholics fell on the Protestants who had gathered at one of the city’s parks for a celebration after the parade. The ensuing violence left eight men dead and many more injured, and the New York press cast it as evidence of Irish unruliness. Even worse, the songs that the members of the Orange lodges sang were identified as sectarian “party tunes” and provided some Irish critics with fodder to condemn all aspects of Irish culture. The references to virtue, masculinity, and tradition in the public descriptions of the Gallowglasses in 1871 were attempts to rehabilitate Irish traditions, and to confirm in the minds of all spectators the existence of “authentic” Irish traditions and the virtues of Irish men.¹⁵


¹⁵ Michael Gordon’s *The Orange Riots* is the best source of both the 1870 and 1871 riots; for a comprehensive account of the 1870 riot, see pp. 1-52.
The social memory on parade in March of 1871, then, represented an Irish golden age that underscored the authenticity and coherence of the Irish nation in New York. It did so in the context of masculine martial heroism, forging ties between the apparent strength and bravery of the Gallowglasses in the Irish past and the corresponding virtues of Irish men in the 1870s. The emphasis on a common culture and common Irish traits that emerged in the evaluations of the parade linked all Irish men together as a homogenous body that constituted a solemn nation on parade. It also provided those virtuous men with a national history that was continuous with the heroic past. Patrick Ford, a leading journalist and purveyor of this perspective, put it this way in the columns of his *Irish World*:

> On this one day in the year an Irishman is a man. During the other three hundred and sixty four days, an Irishman feels himself ‘curtailed’ of his fair proportions. But on this one day he attains to his full height. He does not slink into a corner; he does not conceal himself in the shade, lest people may think he is Irish, but he goes abroad in the plenitude of his stature, and he bears himself aloft, the equal, head and shoulders, of the proudest in the land.

The emphasis on manhood and stature is a thinly-veiled reference to the Gallowglasses, whose history was celebrated on the same editorial page as this column. Ford saw the parade as a one-day respite for Irish men from their own humiliations. Like the soldiers, Irish citizens once a year “attained to their full height,” regardless of the humiliations heaped on them by an intolerant Anglo-American society. It was not merely this stature, but the story of the Gallowglasses, which was significant. They “offered an astonishing spectacle to the citizens” of sixteenth-century London “who regarded them as the intruders from some very distant part of the globe.” St. Patrick’s Day in 1871 was for Ford “a day of mighty significance” because it was “full of proud memories of the past, on which Irishmen love to dwell.” And though those recollections, “from

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16 Smith’s “The ‘Golden Age’ and National Renewal” notes that memories of such national golden ages provide nationalist elites the opportunity to justify their positions by appealing to the authenticity of such memories.
which our race draws inspiration,” do not blind the Irish to the duties of the present or future, they were “suggestive of noble thoughts and high resolve.”

However, not all evaluations of the parade were so positive. The Gallowglasses, as well as St. Patrick’s Day itself, indicated to some New Yorkers that the very traditions that anchored Irish claims of nationhood, authenticity, and masculine glory were historically inaccurate and politically corrupt. A barrage of letters and editorials, especially in the pages of Republican-friendly journals like the *New York Times* and *New York Tribune*, protested that questionable Irish influence in municipal and state governments was evident in traditions surrounding the parade. Even worse, they argued, the state legislature was considering a bill proposing to make March 17 a national holiday. One anonymous writer wondered whether Americans have “any rights which Irishmen are bound to respect.” Citing both the state bill and the “illegal” obstruction of city streets, the author wondered, “Have we all bowed the knee to Baal? Has all our manhood disappeared?” An “Indignant American Woman” argued that “American men have sold their birthright for a mess of pottage, and are now humiliated beneath Irish rule.” Editorials referred to the legislative proposal as “Humbug” and scorned the Irish traditions as patently “illegal.” Even after the proposal was voted down in Albany, one editorial noted it was indicative of the “illegal festivities” and the “occasional defiance of the law and its ministers that usually characterized the 17th of March.” The *Times* even went so far as to publish a song, “The Exiles of Erin,” that satirized an Irish national song – “Erin go bragh,” or “Ireland Forever” – by claiming that the Irishman believed he was “born for the world’s greatest blessing,” and proudly trumpeted “‘Erin go bragh whenever he had the opportunity.”

The emphasis on masculine Irish conceit and American humiliation contributed to the view that St. Patrick’s Day parade was an affront to its host country. One “American” response to the Irish Gallowglasses, then, was to ridicule the arrogance and hero-worship

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17 *Irish World*, March 15 and April 1, 1871.
18 *New York Times*, March 8 and March 12, 1871, my emphasis.
that characterized immigrant Irish traditions and corrupted American institutions. The *Times* explicitly derided the parade as a fraudulent masquerade, describing the “promised pageant” as a spectacle that engendered doubt about Irish cultural traditions. Referring to the famous Battle of the Boyne in which English forces under William of Orange defeated a Catholic Irish army in 1690, the editorial said that the costumes of the Gallowglasses were “to be red instead of green, because ‘at the battle of the Boyne the Germans and English wore green coats, while the Sarsfield-Hamilton Irish loyalists suffered their defeat in scarlet and gold.’” Though the editorial misrepresented the colors of the costumes, the point was that Irish “traditions” in New York were inauthentic: “If this innovation is to be permitted, what is to become of all our wearing of the green, and all our putting of the green above the red?” The editorial sarcastically asked “the managers of this festival to think twice before they sacrifice to stupid historical accuracy a familiar and time-honored tradition.” It also hinted at the divided national loyalties — and thus the corruption — of New York Mayor A. Oakey Hall, “whose patriotism, it is said, has prompted him to dress entirely in green on these occasions.” If the national colors were yellow, or the coats of Irish soldiers red (an assertion not supported by subsequent descriptions of the parade on March 18, though the “ancient harper” wore red), then maybe the Irish traditions of St. Patrick’s Day, and national ballads like “The Green Above the Red” and “The Wearing of the Green” were themselves historically inaccurate.19

Irish nationalists who sought an authentic national past in the period before 1603, and certainly before 1690, found such doubts offensive, especially since they saw the “Phoenician” designs on the shields of the Gallowglasses as representative of the ancient heritage of the Celtic race, evidence of the biological origin that joined together all members of the Irish nation. It was in fact this Celtic racialism represented by the soldiers on parade that different Irish leaders trumpeted in the days following. One orator at the elite Friendly Sons of St. Patrick Dinner on March 17 opined that though the Celtic race was stereotypically combative, it was because they, like

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Americans, were formed out of a mingling of the blood of many races ("inharmonious bloods, refusing to flow smoothly together"). That was why the Irish made good Americans, blending “in the only way in which they can be musically blended, the national motifs of Ireland and America on his beckoning sign; with this ‘Erin go Unum, E Pluribus Bragh’.”

Not everyone saw it that way. Editor Patrick Ford also shared a conviction that Celts were ideal citizens, but criticized the orator’s deference to Anglo-Americans. He found such rhetoric disingenuous, dismissing the Friendly Sons of St. Patrick as a “so called Irish Society with strong English leanings, and a thirst for drinking to the Queen’s health.” By contrast, Ford’s view envisioned the Irish nation as an organic body. The idea that in New York and even in England “Ireland’s songs are sung, and Ireland's tale is rehearsed,” indicated that those songs and stories were heard by “a living race” which was “irrepressible” and “un-subjugated.” Though scattered over the globe, the Irish, Ford noted, were “one people, possessing our own individuality, our indestructible faith, and our traditions.” And its representatives, symbolic fighters on parade and spirited leaders like Ford in the press, were vigilant in defending any questions of its character. This was particularly important, since the home island itself had been invaded. Given the dominance of the Irish homeland by a foreign power and the flight of its people to locations around the globe, what was left of the nation but the character of the people, a character that existed because traditional rituals, performances and music existed; because the race existed; and because the history of that race, that character, had continued unbroken since earliest recorded history?

Ford used these traditions as a foundation for his assertions of the purity of the Irish people – racial “Celts” in his view. Though the Friendly Sons of St. Patrick orator had argued that the race was an amalgamation of inharmonious “bloods,” Ford’s paper found they were not a race of hybrids, but a pure, homogeneous people who prevailed despite being scattered throughout the world. In fact, an

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Irish World editorial depicted Anglo-Saxons as corrupt, soiled by intrusions of inferior stock, while the Celts remained “clean”:

In this country, as well as in England, the national character of the Irish has been studiously maligned. Our enemy the Saxon [...] has persistently libeled us. Harper’s Weekly, the pictorial organ of Anglo-Saxon American ‘civilization’, has specially signalized itself by its vile caricatures on the Irish. [...] But [...] our indestructible race still maintains the field. In this western world the Saxon aims at ascendancy by ABSORBING THE IRISH and thereby obliterating them as a distinctive element. [...] The New England Yankees are dying out, and they need fresh blood. But the Yankee is destined to fall. We want no amalgamation. [...] The hardy, vigorous Irish are a clean seed, and shall ever remain what nature and grace have made them.

Ford’s piece countered the threat of assimilation by celebrating Ireland’s positive qualities embodied by the Gallowglasses. This Irish national imagination in 1871 assumed the pre-existence of a homogeneous social body. The memory of this body – especially enacted by street performances – united the members of the nation and resisted intrusions as evidence of degeneration, or pollution of the “clean seed.” In addition, the masculinized Irish nationalism re-created a “golden age” in which the assertion of Celtic male racial purity both “appropriated antiquity” and served to renew the nation, delineating the nature of “the ‘true self,’” the authentic being, of the collective.

Though some elite Irish orators, the New York Times, Harper’s Weekly, and others maligned the Irish racial character on parade, Ford attacked anyone who undermined the Irish community and Irish nation by humiliating its people or its traditions. The racial distinctions made in the editorial were part of ongoing cultural dynamics in which European immigrant groups attempted to distinguish themselves as white, to achieve dominant status in a culture in which “superiority” was awarded to those unmarked by

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22 Irish World, March 11, 1871; Handler, in Nationalism and the Politics of Culture, argues that the “collective individual” or “collection of individuals” critical for the project of nationalism assumes a “natural” selfhood perpetually threatened by pollution and death, 50-51. Nash, “Embodied Irishness,” 114; Smith, “The ‘Golden Age’ and National Renewal,” 39, 49.
inferior racial traits. However, Ford embraced both whiteness and a distinctive Celtic identity, and suggested that his racial group ought to be considered the dominant group: “The true American type is therefore not a hybrid Anglo-Saxon, but a pure-bred Celtic race, as their language, their history, their physique, and impulsive, versatile genius testify.” And the Gallowglasses served as a perfect embodiment of these virtues. The St. Patrick’s Day parade in which they appeared, however, provided just one vision of an Irish nation in the diaspora. To the chagrin of Ford and other nationalists, another vision emerged just three months later as another Irish parade was being planned. This vision would provoke a conflict in the Irish community over cultural performances and their efforts to express a unified national identity.  

“Boyne Water”: The Protestant Irish on Parade

In the late spring and early summer of 1871, contrary ideas about the Irish past reinforced class and religious differences and linked social concerns about the Irish in the United States with national humiliation and the authenticity of Irish traditions. The conflict centered on the stated desire by members of Protestant Irish organizations known as Orange lodges to celebrate Boyne Day, a July 12 event commemorating the Protestant victory of William of Orange over the “Green” forces of James II in 1690 at the Boyne River in Ireland. One year earlier, in 1870, a group of Irish Catholic laborers attacked an Orange assembly who had marched up Broadway singing Protestant “party songs” like “Boyne Water” and “Croppy, Lie Down.” The songs associated “papists” with “rabble” and celebrated Protestant torture of Catholic rebels during an Irish uprising in 1798. In the aftermath, New York dailies argued for weeks about the source of the conflict – Catholic thugs, Protestant provocateurs, or the inherent dispositions of Irish parade and musical performances.

culture. The issue gained prominence again in 1871 as Irish Protestants planned another July 12 event. These “Orangemen,” Irish Catholics, and other observers were soon arguing about Irish traditions celebrated in America and whether they would provoke a riot. Although the Protestants protested that they were simply adhering to the same rights Catholics demanded during St. Patrick’s Day, the Catholic laboring classes grew increasingly incensed by what they viewed as Protestant and Anglo-American humiliation of the Irish.  

The press coverage of the rising conflict undermined the perception that there were commonly held views about what it meant to be Irish in the United States, and the debates over Irish memories on parade earlier in the year became even more vehement in June. In addition, the reports revealed what diverse audiences expected from performers of an Irish tradition. In Bauman’s terms, different keys or frames for understanding Irish parade traditions were at play in the city. Catholics – including clergy, lay “gentlemen,” and working class “Hibernians,” argued that the demonstration insulted “all Irishmen,” implying that the nation was homogenous in its understanding of an Irish past. Irish Protestants responded that celebrating July 12 was part of their national tradition, and as Americans, they had a right to march. This drew criticism from Catholics that such celebrations were not timeless traditions, but political gestures that had other implications: it meant that “Anglo-Americans” and “Anglo-Irish” who celebrated loyalty to the British throne really represented a foreign influence.

Newspaper accounts revealed that one key aspect of the conflict concerned whether Irish Catholic or Protestant traditions coincided with “American” citizenship. From one Irish Catholic perspective, the planned Protestant display was anti-American. An Irish Civil War veteran interviewed in the New York World asserted that the Orange parade would inflame the sensibilities of all patriots: “[W]hat right have thim fellows, and there’s not one of thim an Amerikan citizen, to parade here. I tell you wan thing, if they turn out on Wednesday,

24 Gordon’s discussion of inter-class rivalries and competing social memories in The Orange Riots, passim., is particularly illuminating.
we’ll bore holes through their bodies.” Though the soldier’s brogue emphasized his Irish identity and therefore cast him as a Catholic spokesman, the argument provided the rationale for opposing the parade – it honored a British monarch in the republic of America. The views of the Orangemen, largely reported in the *New York Sun* and *New York Times*, equated Irish “foreign” influence with Catholicism, a working-class (“rude” or “rough”) mentality, and political corruption, and blamed the previous year’s riots on the lack of restraint that such “dangerous classes” exhibited in emotionally-charged situations. One letter in the *Times* found that appeals made to the Catholic clergy to help quell a riot were a “disgrace” and a “humiliation” to city residents. The author also criticized Mayor Hall, who was “pandering to the disciples of St. Patrick.” Catholic “fanatics” who were arming themselves for a street battle “should understand that their blood will be on their own heads,” the *Sun* opined on July 8. “[T]hey are deliberately planning a crime that will rock the country to its centre.” Such appeals viewed the Catholic working class as a threat to the entire American nation. It also highlighted the hypocrisy of the advocates of the Gallowglasses in the national procession earlier in the year: “Orangemen have the same right to parade as gallowglasses [sic] and the Sons of St. Patrick,” the *Sun* argued, “and that right will be maintained by the whole military power of the nation.” Rather than a display of Irish nobility and Celtic valor, St. Patrick’s Day became a symbol of sectarian intolerance and Irish contentiousness. If Irish Catholics, working men, and Irish nationalists of all stripes expected the right to march on St. Patrick’s Day, they should accept that another procession, which undermined their tradition, would also be allowed to occur.25

For outsiders like the editors of the *New York Times*, both groups were at fault, neither recognizing that Irish traditions had no place in the United States. Arguing for assimilation, one *Times* editorial recommended that the Protestant Irish “rise above the bigotry of the seventeenth century” and agree not to parade on July 12. The editorial said that in contrast to “their ignorant Catholic fellow

25 *New York World*, July 9, 1871; *New York Times*, July 8, 1871; *New York Sun*, July 8, 1871.
Stephen Robs

countrymen,” members of the Orange associations ought to recognize “the false position they occupy with reference to both our Republican Government and our national spirit of toleration.” Because the “Orange Institution of the United States” defined itself as being loyal to the “Royal Family of Great Britain,” its traditions raised doubts about its members’ “transformation into American citizens.” Just as Irish Catholics obtained the “right” to celebrate their traditions by abusing the political patronage of city leaders, Protestant Irish were disingenuous in their claims to an American identity. Instead of symbolizing religious liberty and the spirit of tolerance as Orange advocates claimed, the Boyne Day procession exploited American civil tolerance. The best outcome for such disputes, the editorial said, was for Irish Protestants to lead the way in eradicating “ancient memories” from the Irish-American collective past.26

This position outraged Irish Catholics like editor Patrick Ford, whose commentary on the parade maintained the existence of an authentic Irish nation in New York. The Orange parade represented to Ford an inauthentic tradition that ought to be opposed by a manly defense of the “true” nation. Believing that the Times was calling for the erasure of the collective memory of the Irish, Ford angrily claimed that the Irish were being forced to assimilate. “[The Irish] must become Yankees first, before they can be regarded as Americans. There you have it,” an editorial sarcastically commented in late June. In the face of what he saw as prerequisites for American citizenship that harbored anti-Irish and anti-Catholic intolerance, Ford published three ballads, two by nationalist Thomas Davis, on the front page of his July 8 issue. The songs conveyed to his readership his militant stance on “Yankee” nativism and Orange obstinacy, and outlined how Irish Catholic laborers should face the conflict in the coming days:

This being Fourth of July week, we feel patriotic; it also commemorates the accursed Battle of the Boyne, and we feel wrathful. The poetical selections we have made are in keeping with the memories of those events, and will be acceptable to every true

Irish-American — to every determined opponent of Anglicized ideas the wide world over.

The inference was that the Irish shared common feelings: “we” feel patriotic or wrathful given “our” collective memory of national events, both in America and Ireland. Imagining the Irish in America in this way assumed that the national community was homogeneous, and its remembrances and the meaning it makes of them bound the Irish together. To be a “true” Irish immigrant in America was to agree with Ford’s choices for ballads that commemorated national traditions. It also meant recognizing that musical choices and public processions themselves were signs of inclusion in or exclusion from the national community.27

Divergent views also represented different class-based ideas about Irish national identity. Working-class Irish men privileged national pride over restraint and echoed Ford’s views in advocating violence. Equating Catholicism with righteous defense of Ireland, Michael Madigan, an “influential member of the Ancient Order of Hibernians and an Irishman of great prominence,” noted in the New York World three days later that the Orangemen had no right to parade since the July 12 procession commemorated the “conquest of Ireland” and the “uprooting of the holy Catholic religion,” and in doing so celebrated the “degradation of a proud nation and a still prouder people.” The humiliation that accompanied the reminders of the battle — an insult that linked the past and present experiences of the suffering Catholics — was integral to the celebration. Madigan said that the tradition was vehemently not Irish because singing “party tunes” and parading were understood as insults to such “true” suffering Irishmen. Even among working-class Hibernians, however, differences of opinion regarding violent action emerged. In the New York World, an article reported that a “convention of Irish societies” held at Hibernia Hall on Prince Street July 7 debated several possibilities regarding the proper response to any Orange demonstration. “Many were in favor of open resistance,” the article noted, while others “advocated more peaceful measures.” One colorful individual, decked out in a “tall white hat and carrying a huge

27 Irish World, June 24, July 8, 1871.
cane,” suggested that an Irish committee visit Mayor Hall and demand he prohibit the Orange parade. If the mayor or the authorities declined to act, then “the people should take the matter in their own hands, and stand up for their rights.”

For more bourgeois Irish Catholics and nationalists, however, different ideologies informed their message of restraint. Many priests charged that the use of force did not represent a Catholic point of view. “We preach peace and charity all the time,” one pastor noted, “and if any Catholic should attempt to prevent the Orangemen from parading, it would be against our will and counsel.” On July 9, the Sunday before the planned Orange demonstration, one Father Kearney conveyed Archbishop John McCloskey’s wishes that Catholics not oppose the Orange parade. Denouncing the “body of men who call themselves Catholics, belonging to various secret societies” who “intended to hold a picnic on the same day” as the Protestant parade “with the avowed intention of creating a disturbance,” Kearney said they were “Catholics only in name.” The message of restraint characterized some lay Irish outlooks as well. An interview with a “Gentleman” in the July 11 New York World indicated that Catholicism provided a moral remedy to Orange insults. The respectable “New York Celt” maintained that the “Catholic Church has taken the most ample precautions to separate itself from this movement and to disavow completely all responsibility for it.” Such interviews demonstrated that for some Irish men, Catholic restraint trumped Irish nationalist outrage.

Other nationalists also urged restraint, arguing for a militant nationalist perspective that was non-sectarian. For John Savage, the “Head Centre of the Fenian Brotherhood,” to be Irish meant joining Catholics and Protestants in a common effort to overthrow British rule in Ireland. Noting that while the 1870 riots raged, Protestants and Catholics “were fraternizing in Ireland for the cause of Ireland,” Savage said that religious faction fights undermined the cause of Irish independence. “As an American, I desire to see amalgamation and unity among all Irishmen, which the American people offer to all

28 New York World, July 8, July 11, 1871.
29 New York Sun, July 9, July 10, 1871; New York World, July 11, 1871.
nations.” But even among organizations headed by such leaders, agreement about what course to take did not come easily. At a meeting of the Fenian clubs on July 9, Augustine Costello, chairman of the confederation, implored the members to “rise above all party considerations” in the coming days. He then introduced a resolution that “deprecated any attempt on the part of our people to obstruct or prevent the Orange procession.” The resolution failed, 10 to 9, with several members abstaining. The New York Sun reported that at one point, several of the delegates rushed for the doors, and another tried to jump out of the window to avoid voting on the measure. One of the men who refused to vote said, “The devil a way will I vote, but if the Orangemen are there, then I’ll be there.”

In addition to the clearly defined religious rift, then, the Irish community in the city was also split along class lines, and within nationalist and Catholic camps. Each perspective shared one common outlook, however: they all recognized that the Orange procession attempted to establish an alternative Irish tradition in New York, a tradition that both Irish and Americans in the city equated with the annual March 17 celebrations. The dissension was caused by the interpretation of what that gesture meant. For Protestants and some nationalist leaders, the parade merely was a celebration of a national independence day, and the songs were historical ballads associated with that day. For other nationalists and some Catholics, mostly laborers and members of AOH lodges, the parade and songs were not “true” Irish traditions, but insulting political gestures that demanded the violent defense of Irish honor. More often than not, this perspective understood the Orange procession as an attempt to humiliate the Catholic Irish in the city, so their response evoked another Irish tradition – martial ballads exhorting men to fight to reclaim their lost country and their lost pride. For “genteel” Irish and clergymen, as well as some nationalist leaders, the parade offered insult, but was more significantly a symbol of Protestant and British machinations. To respond in a riotous display of Irish brutality would be not only unseemly, but would play

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30 New York Sun, July 10, July 11, 1871.
into the hands of Irish enemies, both in America and across the ocean.

Two days before the planned procession was to take place, one William Hill, “an Irishman by nationality and a Protestant by religious profession” offered a plan intended to ameliorate relations between Catholic and Protestant Irish. In “a new departure,” Hill proposed a new tradition in New York on July 12. His plan allowed the procession to take place but “with a new arrangement of banners and style of regalia – the orange interwoven with the green.” He also audaciously recommended that “Catholics, as represented by their social, religious, and political societies, duly fall into line with their countrymen.” The Irish 69th Regiment, battle tested in the American Civil War, would act as a “guard of honor” in this non-denominational procession which would take the form of a funeral march. An effigy representing “the demon of religious discord” would be buried as the central ritual of the day. “[T]he pall-bearers shall be thirty-two in number, to represent the thirty-two counties of Ireland,” he wrote, “and [...] they shall be indiscriminately selected from the Orange organization and the St. Patrick’s Society.” The “‘chief mourners,’ conspicuous by their absence will be the enemies of Irish liberty the wide world over.” The July 12 procession will be “imposing and ever memorable” if this course is taken, Hill wrote, because the unified New York Irish would dictate which traditions would live and which must die. This vision imagined tradition itself – the memory of the fight at Boyne River – as both an organic, living entity and invented, a feature of the Irish nation actively selected by its people. Because “the Battle of the Boyne as a historical event is linked with the political enslavement of Ireland,” Hill argued, it was only through “the force of politico-religious reaction” and “the fraternal unification of her exiled children” that her “future deliverance” might be assured. The celebration of tradition must be something carefully staged, he observed, in an event that communicated to the public, Irish and American alike, the core of the Irish identity.31

31 New York Sun, July 10, 1871.
Parades as Contested Irish National Memories

Hill’s audacious use of nationalist imagery to establish a new ceremony of unity among many factions failed to gain any support in the days leading to the planned Orange parade. Simply put, the appeals to tradition crucial to his performative framework did not correspond to the expectations of his audience. Instead, different groups favored seemingly incompatible visions of an Irish past on parade that corresponded to different ideas about the nation itself. As a mode of communication in nineteenth century New York, these Irish processions enacted a dialogue that revealed important fissures within the community. They also highlighted the nation’s vulnerability to outside critics who were only too happy to point out the problematic assumptions of all Irish national performances. If one faction claimed a parade represented an authentic past that underscored Irish traditional culture and another contested those claims, critics could simply ridicule and condemn both the traditions and the controversies they engendered. Given the masculine nature of these performances and the atmosphere of suspicion from a neo-nativist reform movement, the humiliation many Irish men expressed provided fuel for the growing conflict.

On July 12, hours after New York Governor John Hoffman issued a proclamation ensuring the Orange parade would go forward, symbolic acts reflected diverse positions on performed Irish traditions. At 9 a.m., an assembly of agitated Irish men convened at Hibernia Hall on Prince Street and threatened to expel anyone not actively opposing the Orange parade. Nearby, an effigy of a man with Orange regalia was hung in front of Oliver Finney’s liquor store on Spring Street. When the grand marshal of the Orange lodges, John Johnson, arrived at their headquarters on Eighth Avenue, the World and Times reported that he seemed to “invite an attack by the exhibition of a pistol in a large holster.” A New York Herald reporter, who like many journalists was assigned to range over the city to report on Irish activities, ran into a street paver and his friend, who agreed to sing Catholic “party” songs for him. One song affirmed that if the singer, Kelly, “had but a knife in the hat,” he would “shtick it right into an Orangeman.” At the Orange lodge, one “gentleman’s”
speech underscored the masculine nature of their parade, and the
drévery implicit in showing one’s national allegiances on the street. It
was a “conquest over all our enemies,” and significantly imagined the
street as a battlefield. At another locale, one man went so far as to
“read the song of the Boyne Water” aloud, and “as he finished
reading, he tore the paper in bits and stamped upon them.” The
violence quickly became real. When the Orangemen stepped onto the
street, a “rough crowd” waiting for them hissed and threw bricks. As
they were passing the blocks between 26th and 23rd streets, the parade
halted, and several shots were fired from the crowd. A “piece of
crockery” was thrown from the roof of a liquor store, and a brick hit
a captain in the 84th Regiment in the head. Soon thereafter, members
of the 84th opened fire on the throng. In five minutes, scores of
people were killed or wounded.32

Tragically, the incident revealed that performed traditions have
the potential not only to confirm positive nationalist visions of unity
and authenticity that make a golden age so appealing, but to reveal
dissenting views that undermine those positive visions. Significantly,
the dialogue among audiences made possible by the nationalist
performances of 1871 demonstrated that memories of the
Gallowglasses and of the Battle of the Boyne had varied meanings for
different factions of Irish residents in New York. By participating in
the construction of these meanings, supporters and critics, orators
and performers, as well as those who turned out on the streets to
offer support or censure, all participated in the constitution of a
nation imagined in performance. And although the disaster that
ensued was almost certainly not what elite organizers of parades
envisioned, it had the effect of shaping the public image of one of
New York’s largest immigrant groups.

32 New York Times, July 11, 12, 13, 1871; New York World, July 12, 13, 1871; New
York Sun, July 11, 12, 13, 1871. Gordon’s The Orange Riots, reconstructs the events
of the day in detail, 104-148; Catholic party songs quoted in The Orange Riots, 95.