

PROFILE OF AN IMMIGRANT BISHOP: THE EARLY CAREER OF JOHN HUGHES

BY VINCENT PETER LANNIE*

DURING a visit to the United States a foreign Catholic prelate became understandably impressed with the high esteem Bishop John Hughes commanded in this country. When he asked an American priest to explain Hughes's extraordinary influence on both Catholics and non-Catholics, the clergyman replied: "I think that it is because he is always game."

In a period when manifest destiny was expanding the American frontier, this "game" bishop constantly expended his energies in behalf of his church, his immigrant flock, and his adopted country. As the foremost Catholic leader of his time, Bishop Hughes epitomized the Catholic spirit of his age and represented his church "as its able and heroic champion, as the defender of its faith, as the advocate of its honor."¹ Although respect for the bishop intensified with the passage of time, few men have ever been subjected to the plethora of abuse, scorn, criticism, and misstatement experienced by this churchman. No distortion of his spiritual office was overlooked by his enemies. He was branded as a partisan and unprincipled politician, violator of the hallowed separation of church and state, ravager of the American common school, perverter of the American democratic heritage and destiny, and the vassal of a degenerate papacy and decadent church. Praised by his friends, reviled by his enemies, respected by all, this leading spokesman of the Catholic Church of Jacksonian America emerged and remained a paradox in a paradoxical age.

John Joseph Hughes was born on a small eroded farm at An-nalaghan, County Tyrone, Ireland, on June 24, 1797.² Economic instability and religious disability impelled the growing boy's

*Dr. Lannie is assistant professor of the history of education at Western Reserve University.

¹ Lawrence Kehoe, ed., *Complete Works of the Most Rev. John Hughes, D.D.* (New York: American News Company, 1865), I, 18.

² Kehoe is mistaken when he declares that Hughes was born "towards the close of the year 1798."

father, Patrick, to emigrate to America in search of a better way of life. Farmer Hughes landed in the "Promised Land" in 1816 and, after a few months of uncertainty, finally settled in the little Pennsylvania village of Chambersburg. The following year, John made the same transatlantic trip to begin a new life with his father in a glorious country "in which no stigma of inferiority would be impressed on my brow, simply because I professed one creed or another."³

An ocean voyage and a new country did not diminish the youth's childhood desire to enter the religious life. A year of working at odd jobs only strengthened his ambition to study for the priesthood. Convinced of his vocation, in 1818 John sought admittance to the college and theological seminary of Mount St. Mary's at Emmitsburg, Maryland, a distance of some thirty miles from his hometown.⁴ However, he could not be accepted because the seminary already had its full complement of students. Still resolved to be a priest, he re-applied the following year. There was still no vacancy at the college, but the president of the institution, the Reverend John Dubois, a French educator in exile, became impressed with the pertinacity and sincerity of the youth. John was hired as a gardener and in return for his labor received room, board, and private tutoring to prepare him to enter the seminary as a bona fide student.⁵ After one year of this accommodation, the reluctant gardener relinquished his flowers and vegetables for the philosophy and theology of a full-time student. Six years of scholarly pursuits culminated in his ordination to the priesthood on October 15, 1826, in St. Joseph's Church in Philadelphia.⁶

Father Hughes spent the first seven years of his ministry in the pastoral charge of the same St. Joseph's. In 1832 he established the parish of St. John's and remained its pastor for the remainder of his stay in Philadelphia. In addition to his parochial duties he

³ John R. G. Hassard, *Life of the Most Reverend John Hughes, D.D.* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1866), p. 20.

⁴ Hughes had heard that poor students were sometimes admitted without the necessity of paying tuition on the condition that they would perform various tasks including the instruction of lower classmen.

⁵ Since his father had required his services on the farm in Ireland, John had to leave school before his eighteenth birthday. Before his admission to Mount St. Mary's, the only subsequent education he had acquired was self-taught.

⁶ Two weeks later, the Reverend John Dubois, president of Mount St. Mary's and instructor and benefactor of Hughes, was consecrated as the third bishop of the diocese of New York.

became engaged in a religious polemic with the Reverend John Breckenridge, a prominent Presbyterian minister. The controversy was excitedly reported in the religious and secular journals for months, and although neither of the protagonists achieved the ascendancy, Hughes proved to be a skillful adversary and a competent and resourceful defender of his church. Many Protestants began to acknowledge him as an intelligent and able exponent of his faith. This laudatory opinion of the young controversialist was due in part to his firm resolution never to malign intentionally anyone's convictions or character, a decision he respected during the Breckenridge controversy: "I have wounded no man's feelings; I have ridiculed no man's religion; I have injured no man's character. . . . I am proud to believe, and have reason to believe that, though a Catholic and a priest, I stand as high in public, even Protestant, estimation as Mr. Breckenridge himself."⁷

During the height of his dispute with the Protestant divine, Hughes was considered as a candidate for the vacant bishopric of Cincinnati. Another qualified American priest, John Purcell, was also suggested for this important position. The American hierarchy desired an immediate appointment and so informed Bishop John England of Baltimore, who was visiting Rome at the time. A Roman cardinal advised England that Rome did not have sufficient information to prefer one candidate over the other. "If you can mention any particular," the Italian suggested, "no matter how trifling, in which one seems to you better qualified than the other, I think a decision may be reached at once." Bishop England was thrust into an obviously discomfiting position. After reflecting upon both nominees for a moment, the Baltimore prelate did venture a truly "trifling" item: "There is one point, your Eminence, which may deserve to be considered. Mr. Hughes is emphatically a self-made man, and perhaps he would be on that account more acceptable to the people of a Western diocese than Mr. Purcell."⁸ The following day the cardinal approached the bishop and expressed his gratitude for such an "astute" observation. "As soon as I told the cardinals what you said about *Mr. Purcell's* being a self-made man, they agreed upon him unan-

⁷ Hassard, *Hughes*, pp. 145-146.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 146.

imously, and the nomination will be at once presented to His Holiness for approval."⁹ The American bishop considered this "blunder" to be really a manifestation of the Divine Will and consequently did not attempt to correct the error. The autumn of 1833 witnessed the solemn consecration of the "self-made man" as bishop of Cincinnati, while Father Hughes continued his pastoral duties at St. John's in Philadelphia for several more years.¹⁰

The venerable bishop of New York, the Reverend John Dubois, celebrated his seventy-third birthday in 1837. A long and arduous priestly life in France and America as an educator, missionary, and college president had culminated in his episcopal elevation to the extensive diocese of New York, which included all of the Empire State and part of New Jersey. But the Biblical three score years and ten had taken its toll. Afflicted with physical infirmities and burdened with serious episcopal difficulties, the senior churchman petitioned Rome for a coadjutor bishop.¹¹ Once again Dubois's former student was one of three priests nominated for the position. Although the official Papal documents did not arrive until November 3, word of John Hughes's appointment soon filtered out to various bishops. Coadjutor Bishop Francis Kenrick of Philadelphia congratulated Dubois upon the choice and suggested that his loss was New York's gain: "I rejoice that you are to have his efficient aid for the administration of your vast diocese. I trust that his useful ministry will be now succeeded by a more extensively useful and long coadjutorship."¹² Archbishop Samuel Eccleston, the fifth prelate of Baltimore, had the privilege to inform Hughes officially of his new honor. "I have the honour and heartfelt gratification," he wrote, "to announce

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

¹⁰ Hassard's report of this incident is at best secondhand. Bishop England did not personally tell him this story. A guest of Hassard who heard it directly from England related the incident to him.

¹¹ Dubois's request was certainly favored by several other American bishops, including England, who believed that the elderly New York bishop was in need of assistance in governing his diocese. Cf. England to Frasoni, Charleston, February 27, 1837, New York Archdiocesan Archives, St. Joseph's Seminary, Yonkers, New York. In this letter Bishop England favored Dubois's vicar general, the Reverend John Power, for the coadjutorship. Henceforth, the New York Archdiocesan Archives collection will be identified as *NYAA*.

¹² Kenrick to Dubois, Philadelphia, October 4, 1837, cited in Hassard, *Hughes*, p. 179.

to you officially your appointment to the Episcopal See of Basilipolis [*sic*] in part[ibus] infid[elium], and to the coadjutorship of New York."¹³ The archbishop had the formal Papal bulls in his possession and intended to forward them to Hughes "in such manner as you may designate."¹⁴

Shortly after the bishop-elect received formal notification of his elevation, he wrote to "self-made" Bishop Purcell of Cincinnati. He freely admitted that although the episcopacy was a great honor and responsibility, a decade of pastoral ministration in Philadelphia had eternally endeared the city and its people to his heart. The very thought of leaving filled him with "sorrow and affliction of heart." After requesting Purcell's attendance at his consecration, the devoted Philadelphian proudly remarked that Bishop Kenrick subsequently would reside at his beloved St. John's "and make it the cathedral."¹⁵ On November 17 he mailed to Bishop Dubois "the letter which contains my acceptance."¹⁶ On the same day the coach carried a letter to the Reverend Thomas F. Mulledy, S.J., president of Georgetown College, requesting the Jesuit educator to "preach my Consecration Sermon."¹⁷ At first Mulledy declined the honor because of previous commitments. However, the newly acquired influence of the episcopal state was sufficiently convincing to eliminate the obstacles responsible for the Jesuit's initial refusal.¹⁸

Friends, congregation, and fellow clergymen bade him an affectionate farewell and a successful future. Then, early on the morning of January 2, 1838, Philadelphia was left behind, and after a cold and dreary ride, John Hughes arrived in Manhattan with his baggage and a contracted cold and hoarseness of voice.¹⁹ Five days were required for adjustment and preparation, and on the seventh of January, the impressive figure of John Hughes in splendid episcopal robes entered St. Patrick's Cathedral and

¹³ Eccleston to Hughes, Baltimore, October 28, 1837, *NYAA*.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Hughes to Purcell, Philadelphia, November 23, 1837, *NYAA*.

¹⁶ Hughes to Mulledy, Philadelphia, November 17, 1837, *NYAA*.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* According to Hughes, the date for his consecration "at present fixed is the Feast of the Epiphany, January 6, 1838." However, this date was subsequently postponed one day, since he was actually consecrated on January 7, 1838.

¹⁸ Hughes to Mulledy, Frederick, Maryland, December 7, 1837, *NYAA*.

¹⁹ Hughes to M. A. Frenaye, New York, January 3, 1838, cited in Hassard, *Hughes*, p. 183.

strode magnificently down its center aisle to be solemnly consecrated by Bishop Dubois, assisted by Bishop Kenrick of Philadelphia and Bishop Fenwick of Boston. At the appointed time, Father Mulledy entered the sanctuary, ascended the steps of the pulpit, and preached a sermon befitting the occasion. Twenty-six years later to the very day, Bishop John McCloskey, protege of the recently departed Archbishop Hughes, mounted the same pulpit to deliver a eulogy for his deceased mentor and friend. Reflecting upon the then far-removed day of Hughes's consecration, he sketched a picture of a confident, robust and impressive churchman:

[He] stood up in all the fullness of health and vigor, in all the freshness and maturity of great intellectual as well as physical strength and power, and then knelt before the venerable Bishop Dubois to become a consecrated Bishop. . . . I remember how all eyes were strained to get a glimpse of their newly consecrated Bishop; and as they saw that dignified and manly countenance, as they beheld those features beaming with the light of intellect, bearing already upon them the impress of that force of character which peculiarly marked him throughout his life, that firmness of resolution, that unalterable and unbending will, and yet blending at the same time that great benignity and suavity of expression—when they marked the quiet composure and self-possession of every look and every gesture of his whole gait and demeanor—all hearts were warmed towards him. . . .²⁰

Although Bishop Hughes's joy was unbounded, one rebuff marred this splendid occasion. It had been known for some time that his appointment was not generally approved by the clergy of New York. Not that they resented the new bishop personally. They complained, rather, that the Reverend John Power, co-vicar general of the diocese and a man respected and admired by both clergy and people, should have received this promotion. Resentment at the appointment of an interloper became so pronounced that practically none of the clergy attended the consecration ceremonies.²¹ The shrewd coadjutor was not so naive as to be

²⁰ Kehoe, *Complete Works*, pp. 18-19.

²¹ Augustus J. Thebaud, S.J., "Forty Years in the United States of America (1839-1885)," *United States Catholic Historical Society, Monograph Series*, II (1904), pp. 284-287; John Farley, *The Life of John Cardinal McCloskey* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1918), pp. 149-150.

unaware of this embarrassing hostility. Less than a month after his elevation to the episcopacy, Hughes wrote a letter to his episcopal friend of Cincinnati, John Purcell, in which he candidly acknowledged this disconcerting affair. Slowly but perceptibly, however, the passage of time and Hughes's effervescent personality began to thaw the ill-will manifested towards him, though how genuine the transformation was the bishop could not determine: "There is a general good disposition which if appearances are to be trusted makes the prospect less gloomy than one could suppose. Whatever disappointment the event has produced, is disguised or borne with as much fortitude as could well be expected."²²

From the time of his arrival, the new bishop resided in quarters prepared for him in Bishop Dubois's residence at 234 Mulberry Street.²³ His episcopal duties commenced in his forty-first year and found him in the prime of his life, mentally alert and physically vigorous. His personal appearance was sure to impress. In height about five feet, nine inches, he was a well-proportioned man with a powerful frame and erect posture, a great round head, blue eyes, high forehead, and a large Roman nose.²⁴ A smooth face and brown hair completed his delicately precisioned features.²⁵ His

²² Hughes to Purcell, New York, February 24, 1838, *NYAA*.

²³ Mary Peter Carthy, "Old St. Patrick's," *United States Catholic Historical Society, Monograph Series*, XXIII (1947), 77. In 1853 an out-of-town episcopal residence was purchased in Manhattanville, then an attractive country suburb, for Hughes. Cf. Extracts of the Minutes of the Trustees of St. Patrick's, June 27, 1853, *NYAA*. However, Hughes rarely frequented this country residence. Therefore, in 1856 the Manhattanville house was sold and in its place a residence at Madison Avenue and 36th Street was acquired. During the latter years of his life, the bishop made his home here. Cf. Extracts of the Minutes of the Trustees of St. Patrick's, November 12, 1856, *NYAA*. The Mulberry Street building was transformed into diocesan offices from which all diocesan business was transacted.

²⁴ A contemporary and acquaintance of Hughes, the convert Orestes Brownson, declared that Hughes was rather short and "much under the medium size." The convert-editor parenthetically added that although the bishop was physically undersized "he always left the impression that he was far above it." Cf. Henry F. Brownson, ed., *The Works of Orestes A. Brownson* (Detroit: Thorndike Nourse, 1882-1887), XIII, 497.

²⁵ This description is a composite taken from two contemporaries who had known Hughes. One is his biographer, Hassard, *Hughes*, p. 327. The other is Governor William H. Seward's son, Frederick W. Seward, in his *Autobiography of William H. Seward from 1831 to 1834 with a Memoir of His Life and Selections from His Letters from 1831 to 1846* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1877), p. 502. Hassard thought Hughes had "keen gray eyes" rather than blue eyes. Bishop Hughes had become prematurely bald by the time of his consecration and henceforth always wore a "scratch-wig." Frederick Seward, who had the opportunity to study the bishop during

clear and sonorous voice had just a trace of ancestral lilt to mark him. He was neat but never ostentatious in dress and personal habits. His ecclesiastical attire was the traditional purple cassock with red buttons, a pectoral cross, and a clerical hat.

While the newly elected bishop was becoming acquainted with his new diocese—visiting churches and meeting his clergy, befriending his predominantly immigrant people, and ascertaining the condition and needs in the new field of his pastoral endeavor—Bishop Dubois suddenly suffered a paralytic stroke barely two weeks after his consecration.²⁶ Although he partially recovered from this attack, other seizures soon followed which further incapacitated the ebbing bishop. Writing to a friend in February, 1838, Hughes mentioned a second attack sustained by Dubois, who “does not recover so fast this time as after the first.” The attending physicians confided to Hughes that their patient would never recover completely and that the end could come at any time.²⁷ As a result of his debilitating condition, Dubois never again actively participated in the affairs of his diocese, though he jealously guarded his episcopal authority and jurisdiction. Practical administration of the diocese devolved into the capable hands of the newly consecrated coadjutor.

Bishop Hughes approached this task with a consuming energy and determined desire to invigorate the spiritual and material condition of the diocese. With Bishop Dubois's approval, he purchased a 460-acre estate at Lafargeville, New York, for twenty thousand dollars, for the purpose of establishing a seminary to train the diocesan clergy.²⁸ After its original purpose was broadened to include a college for secular education, the institution opened its doors on September 20, 1838, under the name of St. Vincent

the latter's visits to the governor's Albany residence, was unaware of this fact and believed that Hughes kept his hair cut short because of the rule of the bishop's religious order. However, Hughes did not belong to any religious order but had been a diocesan priest under the direct jurisdiction of a diocesan bishop.

²⁶ Hughes to Purcell, New York, February 24, 1838, *NYAA*, Hassard maintains that Dubois suffered his stroke two weeks after Hughes's arrival in New York. As a result there is a five-day discrepancy between the two accounts.

²⁷ Hughes to Purcell, New York, February 24, 1838, *NYAA*; Hughes to Frenaye, New York, February n.d., 1838, cited in Hassard, *Hughes*, p. 187; Hughes to Purcell, New York, March 18, 1838, *NYAA*.

²⁸ Hughes to Frenaye, New York, May 3, 1838, cited in Hassard, *Hughes*, p. 190.

de Paul. This venture was not an eminent success because there were not enough theological students, and other young men found the distance too great. Consequently, after completing an episcopal visitation to the northern and western parts of his diocese, Hughes entered into negotiations to acquire suitable property more proximate to New York City. The prelate's gaze focused ten miles north of the city on Westchester County.²⁹ A beautiful historical estate located in the Fordham district, Rose Hill, appealed to Hughes as ideally situated both for a seminary and a college. In addition to its initial cost of thirty thousand dollars, ten thousand more was needed to convert the estate into a suitable educational institution. By September, 1839, fifteen thousand dollars had been subscribed by the bishop's flock and friends. Hughes promised that when pledges totaled twenty thousand dollars, he would go to Europe to seek more funds for the enterprise as well as to engage a faculty to staff the institution.³⁰

During the two years subsequent to Hughes's consecration, the emaciated Dubois experienced recurrent attacks which not only paralyzed his body but more pitifully began to tamper with his once renowned intellect. Nevertheless, he still exercised absolute ecclesiastical control of his diocese. A bad situation was made worse as the infirm bishop became increasingly pathological concerning the maintenance of his episcopal authority and dignity. The coadjutor was placed in the unenviable position of shepherding the diocese but with none of the shepherd's attendant authority. Matters became so bad that Hughes desperately sought advice in a private and confidential letter to Archbishop Eccleston. The bewildered bishop believed that he would be morally culpable if he remained silent any longer. He presented the chaotic state of the diocese vividly and in clear perspective. Dubois's health was not improving and the paralytic bishop was suffering increasingly recurrent memory lapses. "In a word, his mind is so relaxed that, whatever he was heretofore, he is that no longer." Chaos had descended upon the diocese and episcopal government had collapsed. Dubois never sought his coadjutor's opinion or assistance,

²⁹ In 1839 New York City consisted only of Manhattan. What is known as the Bronx was then a part of Westchester County.

³⁰ Hughes to Frenaye, New York, September 19, 1839, cited in Hassard, *Hughes*, p. 204. During 1839, Bishop Hughes also had serious difficulties with the lay trustees of St. Patrick's Cathedral.

"but on the contrary seems glad of every opportunity to prove to himself and others that he does not stand in need of it. The consequence is that I see and hear things which require to be remedied [but am] unable to apply the remedy." What was to be done? This situation could not be allowed to continue for "I fear the consequences will be disastrous." Bishop Hughes' solution obviously envisioned his superior's resignation and "I think if the matter were urged upon him by Bishop Fenwick [of Boston], he would resign."³¹ As the situation progressively worsened, the harried subordinate found it necessary to inform the Roman authorities of the abuses emanating from Dubois's lamentable incapacitation:

He is now better, now worse. His faculties both of mind and of body are impaired: his memory especially fails him. . . . Devoted to him with my whole heart, as he is to me, I have made no attempt to interfere in the government of the diocese, except in the way of advice and persuasion, which are of little avail, because he is very set in his purposes. . . . I write of these things . . . not that any authority for governing the diocese may be taken away from him, or conferred upon me; but in order that you may be informed of the state and circumstances of ecclesiastical affairs. On the contrary, I should be deeply grieved if any thing should be done or ordered by the Holy See to diminish his authority or dignity. I know that it is my part to assist the venerable Bishop of New York, "so far as he himself wishes," and I know not whether I ought to have said what I have. . . .³²

Though Hughes did not urge that episcopal jurisdiction be withdrawn from the ailing prelate, the implication was obvious and his letter certainly had this effect. A large official envelope which bore the postmark of the Papal States arrived at St. Patrick's rectory during the summer months of 1839. Dubois was undoubtedly aware of the somber message the letter carried. The Holy See, solemnly began the cardinal prefect of the Propaganda of the Faith, was not only aware but solicitous of the venerable bishop's poor health. In order to facilitate his physical improvement and to provide for the welfare of the diocese, Dubois was

³¹ Hughes to Eccleston, New York, October 29, 1838, *NYAA*.

³² Hassard, *Hughes*, p. 199.

feliculously but firmly informed that his jurisdiction over the diocese of New York was here and now suspended. Young Bishop Hughes was directed to exercise full jurisdiction over the diocese.³³ In order to mitigate this humiliating blow, Bishop Dubois was permitted to retain the exercise of certain of his episcopal powers: celebration of Pontifical Mass, administration of the sacrament of Confirmation, and the conference of major orders upon aspirants for the priesthood. The cardinal prefect exhibited a knowledge of human nature when he assured the deposed bishop that his successor had expressed only the highest admiration and consideration toward him. Further salve was applied to the wound since the new administrator was admonished never to permit Bishop Dubois's episcopal dignity to be debased in any way.³⁴

By means of a circuitous chain of events, the poor Irish lad and part-time gardener had superseded his former benefactor and instructor as the episcopal shepherd of the largest American metropolis. Although Dubois obediently but reluctantly obeyed Rome's decision, he never expressed agreement with its wisdom or its expediency. This decision unfortunately precipitated a marked coolness in Dubois towards the younger man, and during the closing years of his life, the Frenchman remained civil but definitely aloof in his relations with his former gardener and student. Physically they dwelt in the same house, but they were never one in spirit and in comradeship. Hughes attempted to mollify the sting of his friend's episcopal loss, for he understood the enormity of Dubois's mortification and injury resulting from the unavoidable deposition. "But," as Hassard comments, "in his infirm state of mind [Dubois] could not conquer a natural repugnance toward 'Mr. Hughes,' as he persisted in calling him."³⁵

On October 14, 1839, the new administrator published a pastoral letter in which he asked the Catholics of New York to sup-

³³ Franson to Dubois, Rome, June 1, 1839, *NYAA*. The exact instructions, written in Latin, read as follows: "Scilicet Sanctissimus Dominus Noster probata Sacrae Congregationis sententia, suspendit in te jurisdictionis episcopalis exercitium, et R. P. D. Joanni Hughues episcopo Basileopolitano coadiutori tuo gubernandae diocesis Novi Eboraci auctoritatem omnem ac potestatem jurisdictionis contulit, et simul concessit ut intra diocesis Novi Eboraci limites possit R. P. D. Hughues iis facultatibus uti quae A. T. tanquam Novi Eboraci episcopo tributae sunt."

³⁴ Franson to Dubois, Rome, June 1, 1839, *NYAA*.

³⁵ Hassard, *Hughes*, p. 200. Bishop Dubois continued to linger until his death on December 20, 1842, at the advanced age of seventy-eight.

port the new seminary and college and announced that Bishop Dubois's resignation resulted from advanced age and infirm health. Two days later he was bade bon voyage and the *Louis Philippe* carried him off to Europe to beg for aid for his diocesan ventures, especially the new seminary, to recruit more priests to minister to his expanding flock, and to enlist a competent faculty for the seminary and college. The immigrant lad was crossing the Atlantic once more—in very different circumstances.

Under Bishop Dubois vigorous and dynamic direction was obviously lacking in New York. The new administrator, on the other hand, possessed an energy of leadership which never diminished with the passage of years but rather soared to command pre-eminent attention both within and without Catholic circles.³⁶ And he was Irish! The Gallic Dubois never fully understood the temperament of his predominantly Irish flock. He was never truly one of them. But now their new bishop was flesh of their flesh, possessing all the wonderful Celtic charms as well as peccadillos. His was an energetic person given to bold, decisive, and at times precipitous action.

He was a keen student of his times and carefully weighed contemporary events and movements at home and abroad to measure their effect upon Catholic interests. Scholarly accomplishment and theological profundity may not have been his forte, but his acute mind was incisive and logical and often able to pierce the subtle arguments of more learned men. Writing his memoirs in the early twentieth century, the aged Cardinal Gibbons reminisced that his predecessor and intimate friend of the New York bishop, James Roosevelt Bayley, "informed me that he regarded Archbishop Hughes as one of the ablest minds he ever encountered."³⁷

³⁶ Bishop Hughes's leadership qualities were not ignored by a number of American statesmen of his time. President Polk tried unsuccessfully to discharge him on a mission to Mexico at the outbreak of the Mexican War in 1846. During the Civil War, President Lincoln prevailed upon Hughes, no doubt through the recommendation of the President's Secretary of State, William Seward, longtime friend of the bishop, to travel to Europe and help secure the neutrality of France. Later, Governor Horatio Seymour implored the then aging and infirm bishop to help quell New York City's draft riots in 1863. Throughout his life, Bishop Hughes retained the deep friendship and unquestioned loyalty of William Seward and Thurlow Weed. Hughes died on January 3, 1864, at the age of sixty-seven.

³⁷ James Gibbons, *A Retrospect of Fifty Years* (Baltimore and New York: John Murphy Company, 1916), II, 36. In 1850, the diocese of New York was elevated to the status of an archdiocese and Hughes honored to the dignity of an archbishop.

A study of Hughes's prolific writings reveals a writer of unmistakable talent. Collectively analyzed, they reveal a lucid, forceful and dignified style frequently interspersed with morsels of Celtic wit. A critical and controversial contemporary, Orestes Brownson, ascribed the principal defect of the bishop's intellect to his "habit of taking practical views of all questions, and of acting according to circumstances. In discussing a question he rarely states distinctly the principle on which the question turns, and gives it only in his practical solution, from which it is not always easy to gather it."³⁸ Never a theorist but eminently practical in his views, Hughes dedicated his long episcopacy to a defense of his church and his immigrant flock against all critics and vilifiers.

Because of the vulnerable position of his naturalized countrymen, the bishop's primary burden was not the erection of great universities and other institutions for cultural attainments. He was principally absorbed in providing for the spiritual ministrations of his people, instructing his youth in the principles of their faith, and defending all things Catholic from the fury of nativist excesses. In a very real sense, Hughes was a missionary laboring under quasi-missionary circumstances. Erection of more churches and schools, the search for able priests and religious teachers, a humiliating poverty which forced reliance upon European Catholics for material assistance, and the protection of his often pugnacious flock within a politically, religiously, and economically hostile society—these efforts comprised the substantive work of Hughes's episcopal ministry for over a quarter of a century.

Unalterable in principle and indefatigable in contest, Bishop Hughes perceptibly welded the Catholics of his diocese into a durable unit to protect their interests and resist the onslaughts of the nativist frenzy. Under the resolute leadership of Hughes and his brother bishops, an earlier submissive American Catholicism began to manifest a militant, aggressive, and confident character. Catholics now ceased their retreat as a suffered and suspect minority and boldly began to champion and demand the political and civil rights guaranteed to all American citizens, native and naturalized.³⁹ Ray Billington in *The Protestant Crusade, 1800-*

³⁸ Henry F. Brownson, ed., *Works of Orestes A. Brownson*, XIII, 497.

³⁹ An interesting analysis of the rise of "aggressive" Catholicism during this period and its consequent influence on the development of American Catholic culture is found in Thomas T. McAvoy, "The Formation of the

1860 labels this emergent crusading spirit as one of "arrogance" and styles John Hughes as the man primarily responsible for its emergence.⁴⁰ In an incisive evaluation of the militant bishop, Professor Billington weighs his words carefully: "Ill-suited by temperament and training to any compromise policy, he was blindly loyal to the Catholic Church and strove constantly to make that church stronger and better. There can be no doubt too that his actions and utterances aroused considerable resentment among Protestants."⁴¹

Policy and personality melded harmoniously in the person of Hughes. His every action and his every word were directed to a defense of Catholic interests and the extension of the Catholic Church in America. His stewardship of a hated Church and a despised flock, his controversy with the Public School Society, his alleged political party, his lectures and his sermon on "The Decline of Protestantism," and his determined threat to use force to protect his churches against a potential nativist mob—his whole episcopal policy must necessarily be understood and interpreted within the framework of the militant and uncompromising Catholicism of his time. Certainly, contemporary conditions influenced the bishop's actions. An immigrant himself, he represented the immigrant point of view. A Catholic prelate, he defended the Catholic Church with every legitimate means at his disposal. A naturalized American, he glorified America with the dedicated zeal of a *Mayflower* descendant. At times politically precipitous and historically naive, his policy was periodically shortsighted and its implementation often injudicious. But his motives were pure—if not always politically sagacious or socially perceptive—and his leadership strong.

Catholic Minority in the United States, 1820-1860," *Review of Politics*, X (1948), 13-14. Culturally, McAvoy contends, "the policy of Hughes set back the progress of the Irish immigrant at least a generation," because it delayed the assimilation of the Irish into the American culture.

⁴⁰ Ray Allen Billington, *The Protestant Crusade, 1800-1860* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1938), p. 290.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*