

The Irish Emigrant and American Nativism as Seen by British Visitors, 1836-1860

ENGLISH travelers who visited the United States during the quarter-century preceding the Civil War were a motley lot. They included authors, journalists, scientists, lecturers, businessmen, clergymen, artists, politicians, songwriters, actors, promoters, sportsmen. How many of them came to America during this period can never be definitely known, since no statistics of this type were kept by either the British or American governments. However, the number appears to have been quite large. Approximately two hundred and thirty of them published accounts of their travels. These Britons came for many reasons and saw many things, their travel accounts naturally reflecting their special interests. Practically all of them, however, gave some attention to the Irish in America, while a few went so far as to devote a full chapter to the problem.¹

The Englishman was not long in America before he became cognizant of a general antipathy towards foreigners. James S. Buckingham, lecturer, world-traveler, and former Whig Cabinet Minister, who toured the United States from 1837 to 1841, came to the conclusion that "one of the strongest of the national prejudices of the mass of the people of America, embracing all classes except the highest and most intelligent, is a dislike . . . of all foreigners."² He was surprised to learn that this anti-foreign sentiment was directed chiefly against the English. Mrs. Felton, another British visitor, came to the same conclusion. She reported with a certain

¹ See Max Berger, *The British Traveller in America, 1836-1860* (New York, 1943) for a complete annotated bibliography of these travelers, and for an analytical summary of their impressions of America.

² J. S. Buckingham, *America* (London, 1841), I, 283.

degree of incredulity that "generally speaking the Irish meet a much better reception than the English. So indeed, do all other foreigners."³ Anti-British sentiment remained strong throughout all parts of the country well into the 'fifties. An Irishman who had spent several years in rural areas of the Midwest declared in 1852 that the Irishman was "undoubtedly liked, and certainly more respected and liked than an Englishman of the same class."⁴

In the East, however, popular sentiment had shifted. Although the Englishman was still viewed with suspicion, the Irishman was now thoroughly disliked. Nativist prejudice had turned its chief animus against the latter. As early as 1836, Harriet Martineau noted the clamor for shipping Irish emigrants back to Ireland. Other Britons were told that the "plague of the Irish" was the worst plague of all.⁵ Anti-Irish feeling increased steadily thereafter. T. C. Grattan, British Consul to Boston during 1839-1846, reported that "the Irish have to encounter considerable prejudices . . . in almost every section of the Union, though in different degrees."⁶ The mere fact of being an Irishman was considered all but a crime by Americans, the consul affirmed. Irish nationality was "almost sufficient to warrant his conviction if arraigned before an American jury," reported still another visitor.⁷ The latter claimed to have seen Irishmen turned out of New York stores, the owners refusing to sell to them.⁸

The Famine Emigration, coming shortly thereafter, fanned this sentiment to a white heat. In 1849, when Major Thornton suggested to an American friend that the deportation of Negroes might solve the slavery problem, the American, a Bostonian, retorted that the deportation of the Irish would be preferable.⁹ The American attitude of the 'fifties was reflected in the story of the Irishman who had beaten his ten-year old American-born son. "The boy was very indignant, and said it was not the beating he minded, but the being

³ Mrs. Felton, *American Life* (London, 1842), 48.

⁴ Charles Casey, *Two Years on a Farm of Uncle Sam* (London, 1852), 222.

⁵ Harriet Martineau, *Society in America* (New York, 1837), I, 435; Andrew Bell, *Men and Things in America* (London, 1838), 108.

⁶ T. C. Grattan, *Civilized America* (London, 1859), II, 28.

⁷ Francis Wyse, *America: Realities and Resources* (London, 1846), III, 33.

⁸ *Ibid.*, III, 37.

⁹ Major John Thornton, *Diary of a Tour through the United States and Canada* (London 1850), 87.

beaten by an Irishman."¹⁰ To be called an "Irishman" had come to be almost as great an insult as to be called a "nigger."¹¹

What were the causes for so virulent a prejudice? the traveler wondered. A few visitors felt that it was a carry-over of traditional national animosities on the part of the English stock. Grattan, for example, attributed the intensity of the anti-Irish sentiment in New England to the strong English traditions of that region. Most Englishmen, however, regarded American nativism as an indigenous product.

In respect to economic causation, the English traveler was convinced that, except for the free Negro, the native had little to fear from Irish competition, since the Irish engaged in menial and ill-paid tasks that native labor spurned. Francis Wyse mentioned the "very general" fallacy that the huge emigration of 1845-1846 had caused an increase in prices.¹² D. W. Mitchell, a former resident of the South, also ridiculed American claims that pauperism among the natives was caused by the Irish immigration.¹³ Another Briton mentioned the fact that the Protestant Irish were very strict about maintaining the prevailing wage rates, and were regarded very highly in the community. But he failed to correlate these two factors.¹⁴ Only Grattan and Sir Charles Lyell, the famous geologist, recognized the importance of economic competition in arousing hostility between native and Hibernian. Lyell went so far as to remark that although the Irish were disliked by American labor, they were regarded as essential by American capitalists. The latter spoke of the Irish "with kindness . . . saying they are most willing to work hard, keep their temperance vows, . . . and are putting by large savings."¹⁵ Lyell's clarity of vision was not shared by most other Britons.

A widely credited cause for native prejudice was the contempt the Irish aroused solely because they were foreigners. Even Grattan, who was well-disposed towards them, was compelled to admit that the

¹⁰ Sir Edward Sullivan, *Rambles and Scrambles in North and South America* (London, 1853), 196.

¹¹ Mrs. M. C. J. F. Houstoun, *Hesperos* (London, 1850), I, 179.

¹² Wyse, *op. cit.*, I, 62.

¹³ D. W. Mitchell, *Ten Years in the United States* (London, 1862), 153.

¹⁴ William Chandless, *A Visit to Salt Lake* (London, 1857), 50.

¹⁵ Sir Charles Lyell, *Second Visit to the United States* (London, 1849), I, 187; see also Grattan, *op. cit.*, II, 12.

Irishman's "uncouth air, his coarse raiment, his blunders, and his brogue are unattractive or ludicrous."¹⁶ The emigrant's abysmal poverty, the filth and squalor of the emigrant ships, towboats, and railroad vans, the terrible condition of the slums they inhabited, all combined to present them in an unattractive light.

The financial burden of maintaining homes and hospitals for sick and destitute emigrants was also a heavy one. In New York City alone, \$817,336 was spent for this purpose in 1850.¹⁷ Although visitors felt that America was doing more than its share for the indigent emigrant, they realized that it was only natural for the nativists to look askance at such expenditures.

It was not unusual for Britons to agree with the nativists that many of the younger emigrants were "idle bums and hoodlums."¹⁸ Although the Irish had come to monopolize police work by 1840, it was charged that they had likewise begun to monopolize the jail cells. In New York City fifty per cent of the prison inmates were alleged to be Irish.¹⁹ Considering the fact that this proportion dropped to twenty per cent in upstate Auburn, and to a still lower figure in Pennsylvania where the Irish were proportionately fewer in number, the belief that the Irish constituted the bulk of the criminal element was scarcely justified. Yet nativists pointed to the fact that during 1848 Virginia had only one arrest per 23,000 persons while Massachusetts had one per 7,586 persons. Ruffianism in the construction camps, election disorders, and riots with the nativists, all of which came to the attention of the foreign traveler, added to the poor opinion of the Irish then current.

It was regarded as almost a truism by most travelers that the Irishman and drink were inseparable. Even those most favorably disposed towards the Sons of Erin accepted this. T. C. Grattan, an Irishman himself, went so far as to characterize intemperance as "the true source of every excess committed by Irishmen in America."²⁰ Although Grattan maintained that the American contractors

¹⁶ Grattan, *op. cit.*, II, 7-8.

¹⁷ G. M. Stephenson, *History of American Immigration* (Boston, 1926), 99.

¹⁸ Mrs. I. L. Bishop, *An Englishwoman in America* (London, 1856), 384; J. S. Buckingham, *Eastern and Western States* (London, 1842), II, 18.

¹⁹ W. F. Adams, *Ireland and Irish Emigration to the New World from 1815 to the Famine* (London, 1932), 364.

²⁰ Grattan, *op. cit.*, II, 29.

who furnished the work gangs with whiskey were the real culprits, other visitors, and the nativists, too, ignored this factor completely. Occasionally a visitor would have the temerity to deny Irish intemperance despite all the evidence to the contrary.²¹ But these were the rare exceptions. English temperance advocates who attended meetings of the New York Council found them "marked by slang, ribaldry, and drunkenness." When they discovered that the councilmen were chiefly "Irishmen of intemperate habits, who have been unable or unwilling to gain a livelihood in any honest calling,"²² they were only too willing to agree with the nativists that the "drunken Irishman" was a menace to society. Knowledge that from one-half to one-third of New York's liquor trade was in the hands of the Irish, and the fact that even grocery stores dispensed liquor, confirmed this opinion.

Another factor recognized as contributing to nativist prejudice was the contempt aroused by the fact that the Irish worked at the lowest menial tasks, tasks which were despised by native Americans. When the Irishman did the work of a Negro, he sank to the Negro's level. As a result, said one traveler, "it would be difficult to say which are held in greater contempt."²³

Irish clannishness was recognized to be still another basic cause for nativist antipathy. E. L. Godkin, who later became editor of the *Nation*, called it the paramount factor.²⁴ America had not yet become accustomed to the sight of foreign "quarters" in her cities, and viewed their existence with suspicion and alarm. The tenacity with which the Irish held on to such Old World customs as the "wake" disturbed many Americans. In this respect the Irish were contrasted to the Scots and to the English who were more readily assimilated.²⁵ Captain Frederick Marryat, famous author of sea stories, pointed to the Irish quarters as proof that the Irish were "just as little pleased with the institutions of the United States as they are with the government at home."²⁶ Godkin, an Irish Protestant, on the

²¹ A. M. Maxwell, *A Run through the United States* (London, 1841), II, 141; Reverend Jabez Burns, *Notes of a Tour in the United States and Canada* (London, 1848), 172.

²² R. Ogden, ed., *Life and Letters of E. L. Godkin* (New York, 1907), I, 183.

²³ Houstoun, *op. cit.*, I, 293.

²⁴ Ogden, *op. cit.*, I, 183.

²⁵ Houstoun, *op. cit.*, I, 293.

²⁶ Frederick Marryat, *A Diary in America* (London, 1839), second series, II, 141.

other hand, blamed these quarters upon the priesthood which, he alleged, refused to allow emigrant children to attend the common schools and thus assimilate American ways. He charged that the Church was "vehemently opposed to emigration to the West, since they [the Irish] are more difficult for the Church to control when so scattered."²⁷ A third, and more accurate, explanation for these foreign quarters was given by J. R. Godley who did not permit his staunch Anglicanism to obscure his better judgment. The Irish lived together, said Godley, solely because they were regarded as a pariah class and no one else would live with them.²⁸

Irish clannishness extended even to the formation of separate militia units. In 1846 it was noted that "there is scarcely a city of any note in the United States in which an Irish volunteer corps is not to be found, clothed in the national colour and ornamented with the harp, shamrock, and other national emblems."²⁹ Since this observer favored rapid assimilation, he regarded such segregation as disgusting and dangerous. He pointed out that the Irish were "marshalled at the tail-end of every military procession or movement in which they are permitted to take part; [and that] they seldom succeed in securing the respect of a single American."³⁰ As might be expected, friction between Irish and native militia units was not uncommon. During the Boston anti-Catholic riots of 1837 and the Philadelphia nativist riots of 1844, open clashes occurred.³¹ But the Irish units remained in existence. At the time of President Taylor's funeral, an Englishwoman noted their presence in large numbers in the procession. "A cleaner, better dressed, more respectable looking set of men I have seldom seen," she commented.³²

Of all the factors enumerated by visitors as having stirred up American nativist sentiment, the one regarded as the most influential was the role the Irish emigrant played in politics. Here, the Irish

²⁷ Ogden, *op. cit.*, I, 183.

²⁸ J. R. Godley, *Letters from America* (London, 1844), II, 175.

²⁹ Wyse, *op. cit.*, II, 110. Contemporary Irish-American sources bear this out, placing the total number of Irish militia companies in the United States between twenty-five and thirty. New York had a full regiment. See T. D. McGee, *History of the Irish Settlers in North America* (Boston, 1855), 191-192.

³⁰ Wyse, *op. cit.*, II, 111.

³¹ J. T. Adams, *New England in the Republic* (Boston, 1926), 337.

³² Marianne Finch, *Englishwoman's Experience in America* (London, 1853), 22.

were universally regarded as a corrupting influence. Not even their staunchest friends attempted to deny the charge. Beginning with Harriet Martineau's remark, in 1836, that an Irishman just landed had perjured himself and voted nine times, and continuing down to Charles Mackay's recital of the New York election contest of 1857, "when the whole male immigration, landed in the morning from a Cork or a Liverpool vessel, . . . voted ere the afternoon for one ticket or the other," the tale was repeated with infinite variations by one traveler after another.³³ Plural voting was of course comparatively simple since registration laws were either lax or lacking.

Britons noted that Americans were especially indignant at the manner in which the naturalization laws were evaded—usually through the connivance of officials affiliated with the dominant party machines.³⁴ Britons hostile to American democracy were happy to repeat the charge that "there were hundreds of foreigners (principally the labouring Irish) naturalized free of expense by the Jackson party, although they had only just arrived in the country."³⁵ The ruffianism of Irish hoodlums "who having obtained the franchise in many instances by making false affidavits, consider themselves at liberty to use the club also,"³⁶ did nothing to soothe native susceptibilities. "They are the leaders in all the political rows and commotions," declared Marryat, paraphrasing the nativists.³⁷ Election riots resulting in property damage and bloodshed occurred frequently, particularly during the Know-Nothing campaigns.³⁸ These riots were so serious that it was sometimes necessary to call out the militia.³⁹ Inasmuch as election corruption was regarded by English visitors as purely an urban phenomena, and since the Irish were concentrated in cities, it was but natural that in the end all

³³ Martineau, *op. cit.*, I, 340; Charles Mackay, *Life and Liberty in America* (London, 1859), I, 178.

³⁴ Buckingham, *op. cit.*, I, 493; Alfred Bunn, *Old England and New England* (London, 1853), II, 6.

³⁵ Anonymous, *Uncle Sam's Peculiarities* (London, 1840), I, 229.

³⁶ Bishop, *op. cit.*, 384.

³⁷ Marryat, *op. cit.*, second series, II, 141.

³⁸ *Uncle Sam's Peculiarities*, I, 228; Bishop, *op. cit.*, 385-386; Robert Everest, *A Journey through the United States and Canada* (London, 1855), 149.

³⁹ Buckingham, *op. cit.*, I, 492-494.

corruption was laid at their door.⁴⁰ New York and Philadelphia had the unenviable reputation of being the worst in this respect. As late as 1860 the government of the former was reputed to be in the hands of politicians who constituted "the very scum of the Irish population."⁴¹ Earlier friends of the Irish had blamed this corruption either on "faults in the system of registration" or on "the cosmopolitan seaport population and universal suffrage."⁴² Travelers after 1840 refused to accept such apologies, and the fact that the Irish element almost always supported the ultra-democratic parties, such as the Loco-Focos of the late 'thirties, added nothing to their credit in English eyes.⁴³

The Irish vote was credited with great importance for a number of reasons. In the first place the Irish controlled or at the least enjoyed a considerable influence in the politics of several of the leading cities. This control was entirely disproportionate to their number, and Britons viewed the situation with suspicion, contempt, and disgust. Sir Charles Lyell's remark that the pigs could not be banned from New York streets since their Irish owners had votes and would not submit to it, typified this attitude.⁴⁴ More important than control of any one city, however, was the fact that such control gave the Irish "the balance of power." This, it was alleged, had proved the decisive factor in many an election.⁴⁵ For example, the emigrant vote was assumed to have tipped the scales in favor of the Democrats as far west as Ohio.⁴⁶ Since both New York and Pennsylvania were important among the "doubtful" states, the alleged control of these

⁴⁰ Alexander Mackay, *The Western World* (London, 1850), II, 26. Alexander Mackay was the Washington correspondent of the *London Morning Chronicle*. He was undoubtedly the most acute observer of the American political scene of all the Englishmen who visited this country during the period.

⁴¹ William Hancock, *An Emigrant's Five Years in the Free States of America* (London, 1860), 57.

⁴² Martineau, *op. cit.*, I, 340; George Combe, *Notes on the United States of North America* (Edinburgh, 1841), I, 223.

⁴³ Wyse, *op. cit.*, III, 51-52; *Uncle Sam's Peculiarities*, I, 229; J. G. Taylor, *The United States and Cuba* (London, 1851), 29; Godley, *op. cit.*, II, 176-177; Houston, *op. cit.*, I, 179.

⁴⁴ Lyell, *op. cit.*, I, 249-250.

⁴⁵ Bunn, *op. cit.*, II, 9; H. S. Tremenheere, *Notes on Public Subjects during a Tour of the United States and Canada* (London, 1852), 124; Houston, *op. cit.*, I, 179; W. E. Baxter, *America and the Americans* (London, 1855), 154; D. W. Mitchell, *op. cit.*, 149.

⁴⁶ Sir Charles Lyell, *Travels in North America* (New York, 1852), II, 79.

states by Irish politicians convinced many natives and visitors that ignorant emigrants actually ruled the country.⁴⁷

One result of this, as it seemed to the British, was that the Irish were wooed by all parties. And in turn the Irishman took advantage of the situation to extend his influence still further. J. F. W. Johnston, an English agricultural expert, visited a Catholic bazaar in Albany in 1850. He was amazed to find everyone in town patronizing it. Upon inquiry he learned that the Irish-Catholic vote was "so strong that nobody who looks for any public office, and no party, dare give them offense. Everyone courts them, and thus they continually gain in strength, wealth, and influence."⁴⁸ It was for this reason that some Englishmen attributed all the anti-British utterances of American public figures to the fact that the latter had to "throw the bunkum" in order to secure the Irish vote.⁴⁹

Wherein lay the secret of Irish success in politics? Some reasons were more or less obvious to even the most casual of the foreign observers, namely, the Irishmen's corruptibility, their violence at elections which intimidated the opposition, and their clannishness. Control through petty patronage, such as pre-election employment on municipal "pipe-laying" projects in New York, or "reed-cutting" jobs in Savannah, was also noted.⁵⁰ Yet none of these constituted a wholly satisfactory explanation. In the end the British visitor concluded that the answer was to be found in organization. This, they alleged, was directed and controlled by the priesthood. "On account of their unanimous subordination to their leaders," the Irish vote was the strongest and the best organized in New York, where "Archbishop Hughes could rely on them to a man."⁵¹ Hence, the Archbishop had a "greater disposable force at his command than any political leader in the Union."⁵² The ability of the Catholic hierarchy to control the electorate was reiterated time and time again—but

⁴⁷ Bunn, *op. cit.*, II, 9; Marryat, *op. cit.*, second series, II, 142; Mitchell, *op. cit.*, 149.

⁴⁸ J. F. W. Johnston, *Notes on North America* (Boston, 1851), II, 236; see also Bunn, *op. cit.*, II, 9; Mitchell, *op. cit.*, 149-150; Buckingham, *op. cit.*, I, 567, II, 17; Wyse, *op. cit.*, I, 61.

⁴⁹ Mitchell, *op. cit.*, 280; Charles Mackay, *op. cit.*, I, 176, 181; James Robertson, *A Few Months in America* (London, 1855), 20.

⁵⁰ Tremenheere, *op. cit.*, 124; Sir Charles Lyell, *Second Visit to the United States*, II, 6.

⁵¹ Mitchell, *op. cit.*, 151, 275.

⁵² Godley, *op. cit.*, II, 176.

never proved. Thus, while Sir Charles Lyell affirmed that the Cincinnati priesthood had instructed emigrants to vote for Polk, his evidence was based upon hearsay.⁵³ Of the latter there was plenty. Baxter, a businessman, for example, stated that "in all parts of the country I heard complaints . . . of priests exercising an unconstitutional power over ignorant voters."⁵⁴

In view of this belief, the increase in Catholic diocese from thirteen to thirty-nine between 1837 and 1849, and the corresponding growth of churches from 300 to 1,024, chiefly in the large cities and in the Midwest, aroused trepidation and suspicion among British visitors as well as among native Americans.⁵⁵ Both groups were preponderantly Protestant. When a man as worldly as Buckingham became worried by the proselytizing activity of the Catholics, its importance in arousing native Protestant opposition cannot be overlooked.⁵⁶

There is also a hint that the prolific birthrate of the dread "Romanists" was another cause for anxiety on the part of the native population.⁵⁷ However, Britons were almost unanimous in declaring that the second generation of emigrants was rapidly becoming assimilated. The most important factor towards this end was declared to be the common school.⁵⁸ Evidently the Church recognized this, for according to British observers it did its utmost to maintain its own schools.⁵⁹ Its success in 1840 in temporarily securing a share of the public funds for the use of the New York parochial schools dismayed Godley and many another staunch Anglican. Godley felt that it was the beginning of the end of the separation of Church and State, a separation which he admired in America but deprecated in England.⁶⁰ The complaint of the English visitor who declared that "every Irish street urchin attended a Catholic school" was cited as proof of the

⁵³ Lyell, *Second Visit to the United States*, II, 291.

⁵⁴ Baxter, *op. cit.*, 155; see also Charles Mackay, *op. cit.*, I, 178; Bunn, *op. cit.*, II, 9.

⁵⁵ Johnston, *op. cit.*, II, 410; Marryat, *op. cit.*, second series, III, 163.

⁵⁶ J. S. Buckingham, *America*, III, 349.

⁵⁷ Bunn, *op. cit.*, I, 23.

⁵⁸ Charles Mackay, *op. cit.*, I, 182; Baxter, *op. cit.*, 156; William Chambers, *Things As They Are In America* (London, 1854), 350; Johnston, *op. cit.*, II, 409.

⁵⁹ Reverend George Lewis, *Impressions of America and American Churches* (Edinburgh, 1845), 253.

⁶⁰ Godley, *op. cit.*, II, 32.

Church's hold on a large part of the emigrant population.⁶¹ Godkin, an Orangeman, despaired of any real improvement until the flow of emigration could be lessened or stopped.⁶² Other travelers, however, took a more optimistic view. They were gratified by the tendency of the younger generation to be less subject to the Church than their parents had been, and were particularly delighted to note an increasing number of desertions from Catholicism.⁶³ Occasionally, however, wishful thinking outran the facts. The report that of the second generation "scarcely any adhere to the religion of their fathers," was obviously untrue.⁶⁴

In any event a large number of Americans were ready to believe the worst concerning the emigrant. The result was the nativist movement. In 1835 the Native American Party was formed. It elected a representative to Congress, and in the following year ran a candidate for the mayoralty. The party soon spread to Pennsylvania, and from thence southward, holding a state convention in Louisiana in 1841. The anti-Catholic riots in Philadelphia (1844) were laid at its door. In 1845 it claimed a membership of 48,000 in New York, 14,000 in Massachusetts, but a mere 6,000 in the other states.⁶⁵ Obviously, it recruited its greatest strength in the two states that had the largest Irish population.

The Native American Party was short lived as a distinct political organization and soon disappeared from the scene. However, nativism remained as virulent as ever, and in fact grew stronger. Soon it was manifested under a new banner, the Know-Nothings. Beginning as a secret organization in New York in 1850, the Know-Nothings spread like wildfire. Essentially an anti-emigrant movement, their activity was not directed against the newly arrived of any particular nationality. Thus, while anti-Irish in New York, it was chiefly anti-German in Maryland where the German population was more than double that of the Irish.⁶⁶ The Know-Nothing platform called for the stop-

⁶¹ John Macgregor, *Our Brothers and Cousins* (London, 1859), 59.

⁶² Ogden, *op. cit.*, I, 184.

⁶³ Godley, *op. cit.*, II, 172; Reverend Henry Caswall, *Western World Revisited* (Oxford, 1854), 157.

⁶⁴ Robertson, *op. cit.*, 157.

⁶⁵ H. P. Fairchild, *Immigration* (New York, 1925), 69.

⁶⁶ L. F. Schmeckebier, *History of the Know-Nothing Party in Maryland* (Baltimore, 1899), 46-47; L. D. Scisco, *Political Nativism in New York State* (New York, 1901), 17.

page of immigration, the restriction of public office to the native born, and a check upon the spread of "Romanism."

By 1854 the party had become so powerful that it polled 122,282 votes in New York State, electing forty members to the State legislature. In Massachusetts the Know-Nothing candidate won the governorship. Almost every legislator professed a sympathy with the party's tenets. Know-Nothing candidates to Congress were also successful. The movement reached its height in 1855. In that year Know-Nothing candidates were elected to governorships in Rhode Island, New Hampshire, Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Kentucky; the party controlled the legislatures in eight states; and had powerful minorities in four others. This, however, was the crest of the wave. Defeat in Virginia damaged the party's prestige, and a split in party ranks over the slavery issue brought about a collapse. The poor showing made by the Know-Nothing presidential candidate in 1856, ex-President Fillmore, relegated the party to oblivion.⁶⁷ Although they made a strong impression on contemporaries, the Know-Nothings had little real influence on legislation.

What new light can a study of the reports of British visitors throw upon this movement? The intricacies and details of party organization, of election statistics, and of legislative manoeuvring did not interest the traveler. But the causes and the demands of the nativist movement did interest him profoundly. Grattan traced the origin of nativism back to the Founding Fathers, quoting Madison to the effect that "foreign influence is a Grecian Horse to the Republic. We cannot be too careful to exclude its entrance."⁶⁸ Francis Wyse, who like Grattan had spent many years in America, discussed the formation of the Native American Party. He pointed out that its avowed purpose was to check emigration and to deprive specific nationalities, principally the Irish, of the basic rights of American citizenship. Wyse noted that the power of the nativists was concentrated along the seaboard where there was no shortage of labor. He added that the Native American Party had been most successful in New York, a city which was "at all times remarkable in its antipathies and ill-concealed dislike to the emigrant stranger."⁶⁹ If one is surprised at

⁶⁷ G. M. Stephenson, *op. cit.*, 112-114.

⁶⁸ Grattan, *op. cit.*, II, 22.

⁶⁹ Wyse, *op. cit.*, I, 45.

the strength of the nativist movement in this stronghold of the Irish, it should be recalled that although the latter were often accused of wielding decisive political power, and of using it for their own ends, yet the very states in which they were strongest were precisely the ones which first attempted to restrict emigration.

Observers hostile to America did not hesitate to exaggerate nativist tendencies in order to create an adverse reaction in Europe. D. W. Mitchell, for example, who wanted to further anti-Union sentiments in England during the Civil War, went so far as to state categorically that if let alone the native-born population in the northern states would "at once stop immigration from Europe."⁷⁰

The controversy concerning the grant of state aid to the New York parochial schools drew the attention of British visitors to the Native American Party which was the focus of opposition to the grant. This party received further notoriety as a result of the nativist riots in Philadelphia in 1844. Wyse, a Catholic, claimed that many persons had been killed, and over a hundred buildings burned, including churches, convents, and schools.⁷¹ Lyell, on the other hand, being sympathetic to the nativists, glossed over the damage done, implying that it was no greater than the Irish deserved.⁷² Considering the excitement aroused by the incident throughout the Union, its treatment by the traveler is disappointing. Biased opinions we have, but little in the way of serious attempts to get at the fundamental implications of the riots.

W. E. Baxter and Charles Mackay, both ardent anti-Catholics, justified the Know-Nothing movement on the ground that it was an understandable reaction to the ecclesiastical power that controlled the Irish vote.⁷³ Voting frauds, clannishness, election violence, all played their part in promoting the movement, the two Britons stated, but the religious factor in their opinion was paramount. Most Englishmen agreed with them as to the causes of the movement, whose purpose in the eyes of these observers, was to eliminate the threat of control by Rome. This would be accomplished by prevent-

⁷⁰ Mitchell, *op. cit.*, 270.

⁷¹ Wyse, *op. cit.*, I, 58.

⁷² Lyell, *op. cit.*, I, 257.

⁷³ Baxter, *op. cit.*, 154; Charles Mackay, *op. cit.*, I, 178.

ing any but "native born Americans from voting."⁷⁴ Later, emigration would be stopped and naturalization restricted.

It was this anti-emigration policy that aroused the wrath of Grattan who favored maintaining America as a haven for the poor and oppressed of Europe, and who was in any case sympathetic to the Irish, since he was Irish himself. Others also opposed the Know-Nothings. James Stirling, who had witnessed the anti-foreign terrorism incident upon the Know-Nothing control of New Orleans, called for the formation of a vigilante committee of "angry and energetic foreigners." Such a committee, he was sure, would speedily put an end to the disorders. Being himself opposed to democracy, Stirling quite naturally characterized nativism as a "pestilent symptom of the gangrene of ultra-Democracy."⁷⁵ Another, less prejudiced, visitor pointed out, however, that nativism by its very nature was incompatible with the democratic principle.⁷⁶ D. W. Mitchell, a man of southern sympathies who was interested chiefly in discrediting the North during the Civil War, affirmed that the Know-Nothing leader, Ned Buntline, had been whipped on Broadway by a prostitute. Inasmuch as Buntline was notorious for his anti-British utterances, Mitchell regarded this action as eminently just. Yet the very next moment he prayed that the Know-Nothings might succeed in wiping out the Irish in America.⁷⁷

It was this anti-Irish attitude that won the Know-Nothing movement its support among certain English visitors. One woman, after witnessing the election disorders of 1854, became so rabidly anti-Irish that she called the Know-Nothings the party of true Americanism.⁷⁸

On the whole, visitors took these election incidents seriously, far more seriously than did Americans. Said one Briton regarding such an altercation, "Civil war was declared between the Irish and the lower classes of native citizens."⁷⁹ Attempts to fire Catholic churches were prevented only by the presence of Irish guards, and, in Philadelphia, this traveler stated, a house had been destroyed and many

⁷⁴ Charles Mackay, *op. cit.*, I, 179.

⁷⁵ James Stirling, *Letters from the Slave States* (London, 1857), 141-144.

⁷⁶ H. A. Murray, *Lands of the Slave and the Free* (London, 1855), II, 388-389.

⁷⁷ Mitchell, *op. cit.*, 269, 283.

⁷⁸ Mrs. Bishop, *op. cit.*, 418-420.

⁷⁹ *Uncle Sam's Peculiarities*, II, 190.

lives lost in a fight of this kind.⁸⁰ Willingness to believe such tales, seldom witnessed by the author, was of course influenced by the Briton's traditional hostility towards the Irish. Mrs. Bishop claimed that New York newspapers had variously set the number of election-day (1854) casualties at from 45 to 700 persons killed or wounded. Irishmen firing on a Know-Nothing assemblage had precipitated three days of fighting which necessitated calling out the militia. She herself had seen two dead bodies on the blood-covered walks and roadways of the Five Points slum. Yet, she reported incredulously, business went on as usual. Her American acquaintances passed off the matter with the remark that it was "only an election riot."⁸¹

In the writer's opinion, the British traveler's views on nativism were the end-product of a conflict of prejudices. On the one hand he tended to endorse its anti-Irish stand; on the other, he had a natural aversion to the movement, since he himself was a foreigner. Nor did it take too much reflection on his part to realize that the nativistic movement was not only anti-Irish and anti-German, but anti-British, also. Perhaps it was this factor which led one very conservative visitor to caution the nativists on the foolhardiness of America's stopping the flow of immigration to her shores.⁸² In the end, much as he might sympathize with its anti-Irish position, the British visitor remained perforce highly critical of American nativism.

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⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, I, 228.

⁸¹ Bishop, *op. cit.*, 386.

⁸² Murray, *op. cit.*, II, 388-389.