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EXHIBITION REVIEWS

Taking Care of Irish Culture

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***Gaelic Gotham: A History of the Irish in New York,* at the Museum of the City of New York, 13 March 1996–27 October 1996. Edward T. O'Donnell, project historian. Whirlwind & Co., exhibition designers. Funded by major grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities and Elan Corporation. No catalog.**

RARELY HAS A MUSEUM EXHIBITION IN NEW YORK CITY GENERATED SO much controversy before it opened as *Gaelic Gotham: A History of the Irish in New York.* The controversy arose from a dispute, in spring 1995, between the Museum of the City of New York (MCNY) and the historian Marion R. Casey, who researched and wrote the bulk of the museum's application for a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). Casey had expected to be appointed guest curator for the forthcoming exhibition; instead, in the midst of an acrimonious dispute, MCNY director Robert Macdonald first offered her a temporary contract as a scriptwriter and then, when this offer was declined, removed her from any further involvement in the project. MCNY could scarcely have known how powerful and well-connected a figure in New York's Irish-American cultural community had thus been summarily dispatched. A doctoral candidate at New York University, Casey is a member of the board of directors of the Irish Institute and has served as president of the New York Irish History Roundtable and secretary of the Columbia University Seminar on Irish Studies. She is the best-known and best-respected historian of the Irish in New York City, a subject to which she has devoted all of her professional

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life. Justifiably upset at how she had been treated, Casey mobilized a powerful response among historians of Irish America and the doyens of Irish-American culture in New York City. The result was a counterattack on MCNY which came close to shutting down *Gaelic Gotham* altogether, generating one of the most heated and bitter debates on museum culture in the history of the city.[1]

The first major blow delivered against MCNY was the departure of the three leading historical advisors for *Gaelic Gotham*: Ronald Bayor, who recently coedited *The New York Irish*, a major collection of interpretive essays published under the aegis of the New York Irish History Roundtable and the Irish Institute in 1996; Kerby Miller, author of the monumental *Emigrants and Exiles* and the leading historian of Irish America; and David Reimers, an expert on immigration and ethnicity at New York University.[2] The departure of these three leading historians robbed *Gaelic Gotham* of some indispensable intellectual input. But it was just the beginning, being followed in rapid succession by the withdrawal of a $15,000 contribution in matching funds by the Irish Institute; the refusal of New York University's Ireland House and the Columbia University Seminar on Irish Studies (hosted by Columbia, but only loosely affiliated with the university) to support the exhibition or participate in its planned public forums; and the refusal of numerous leading writers, artists, filmmakers, and other cultural figures in New York's Irish community to participate or lend their support, including musician and folklorist Mick Moloney and novelist Peter Quinn. Many institutions, among them the Ancient Order of Hibernians, the Veterans of the 69th Regiment, and the Irish American Cultural Institute, withdrew offers to lend artifacts and documents to the museum. So, too, did many private donors. This hurt *Gaelic Gotham* badly, forcing the museum to draw heavily on its own artifactual resources, with the result that many of the images presented in the exhibition were generic rather than specifically Irish.

More interesting than the parade of stars and luminaries who defected from *Gaelic Gotham* in solidarity with Marion Casey is the shifting ideological content of the controversy. What began as a disagreement over contract soon became a dispute over intellectual property, then turned into an argument over the size and scope of the exhibition, and eventually took the form of a full-blown controversy over who should act as the custodians of Irish-American culture. While there can be no doubt that Casey was treated very shabbily by MCNY, the position advanced by her supporters grew increasingly less convincing as the dispute progressed.

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Behind the initial contractual dispute lay a deeper question regarding intellectual copyright. As the controversy intensified, Casey laid claim to property rights on the work she had produced for the exhibition over the previous four years. This claim MCNY director Robert Macdonald rejected as "antithetical to professional museum practice."[3] Casey and Macdonald parted company, and the stage was set for a major controversy, with the embattled MCNY facing a barrage of criticism from the principal Irish-American cultural institutions in the city. The campaign was orchestrated by the New York Irish History Roundtable, a five-hundred member group founded in 1985, of which Casey is a prominent member and past-president. "The activities of this small group has [sic] every potential to hurt this project," predicted Robert Macdonald in July 1995, in what turned out be a serious understatement.[4]

The dispute began when MCNY received the results of its application for major funding from the NEH. The museum had applied for $455,496 out of a total projected budget of $1,191,348. The NEH agreed to provide $250,000, plus $50,000 in matching funds, a remarkably generous grant in the current cultural and political climate. Faced with a grant of at best three-quarters of the sum applied for, MCNY apparently decided to scale back the exhibition a little. This was the immediate context in which the argument between Macdonald and Casey erupted, quickly followed by the larger controversy between MCNY and the Roundtable. The critics of MCNY charged that the museum had engaged in a duplicitous "bait-and-switch"—proposing one sort of exhibition in order to get funding from the NEH and from Irish-American cultural institutions, only to propose a wholly different and substantially diminished exhibition once that funding and support had been secured. The criticism levelled against MCNY on this score seems quite unfair. Surely it is standard practice for a museum (or an independent scholar) to adjust plans downward when a grant falls short of expectations. According to Robert Macdonald, the people at the Roundtable did not quite understand how exhibitions are developed and administered, nor how NEH grants are awarded. Moreover, the budget for *Gaelic Gotham* eventually reached more than $770,000, three-quarters of the projected original.[5]

If the accusation of a "bait-and-switch" is unconvincing, the most substantial objection raised by the Roundtable and its supporters concerned the intellectual content of the exhibition and the related question of who was to speak for the Irish-American community of New York City. The dispute was remarkably short on intellectual substance, but remark-

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ably long on cultural politics. One issue of intellectual substance did divide the contending factions, however: MCNY claimed to be presenting a "warts-and-all" approach to history, while Marion Casey and her allies emphasized progress and consensus over conflict and dissension. In this respect, it must be said, neither the Roundtable nor MCNY presented a particularly compelling case.

"Don't we already know everything we need to know about the Irish?" Casey ironically asked in the *Irish Echo*. "Can't Irish New York be summed up by the Five Points and disintegrating families, the Draft riots and bigots, Tammany Hall and corrupt politicians, the cathedral and overbearing Catholicism, the parade and complacent cops?"[6] Casey dismissed this type of narrative, in which the "wild" Irish are "tamed" and turned into good Americans, as a form of arrogant preaching by MCNY to the Irish, the equivalent of "Big House" history in Ireland, whereby the natives receive their history from their oppressors.[7]

MCNY, by contrast, proposed an earthier, more conflict-ridden narrative of New York's Irish past. Project historian Ed O'Donnell, interviewed by the *Irish Voice* on the eve of the exhibition's opening, frankly defended this approach. *Gaelic Gotham*, he promised, would emphasize the embarrassments as well as the accomplishments: corruption as well as political achievements, Irish contractors who exploited their own as well as trade unionists who fought back, racism and bigotry as well as civil rights activism:

> To deny the existence of Thomas Nast's anti-Irish and anti-Catholic cartoons, or the existence of alcohol abuse, the draft riots and crime, is a historical whitewashing of the past. . . . If you downplay these issues, you lessen the heroic struggle of Irish Americans who overcame the association with drink, rioting and crime."[8]

Practiced with subtlety, this approach to history is both laudable and necessary. But O'Donnell clearly did not go as far in this direction as he would have liked. Perhaps he was constrained by the criticism leveled at MCNY by the Roundtable and its allies. A more disturbing possibility is that the museum's claim to be presenting a gritty, "warts-and-all" history was less a genuine intellectual commitment than a publicity ploy which, among other things, justified its treatment of Marion Casey. Whatever the reason, the "dark" and violent sides of Irish history received very little attention in *Gaelic Gotham*. Yet, they would clearly have received even less attention in the version of the Irish past proposed by the Roundtable.

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Related to the question of intellectual content was a vituperative debate over the credentials of the historians responsible for *Gaelic Gotham* after Marion Casey's departure. There can be no doubt that the withdrawal of Kerby Miller, Ronald Bayor, and David Reimers robbed the exhibition of a degree of expertise unmatched elsewhere. With this trio of historians absent, MCNY's critics charged that the museum lacked the expertise, and even the competence, to put together an adequate presentation. Yet, project historian Edward O'Donnell (*de facto* curator of *Gaelic Gotham*) is eminently well-qualified in Irish-American studies, and he was assisted by a team bearing impeccable credentials in the study of nineteenth-century immigration, ethnicity, social and urban history, art history, and material culture.[9] To deny that these historians had the ability to put together an exhibition on the Irish is to deny the possibility of scholarship itself. At least some members of the Roundtable were apparently willing to do just that, in the name of a higher good—control over the culture and history of Irish America.

This raises the central question in the controversy. As an editorial in the *New York Times* put the matter on 1 February 1996, the controversy "has diminished hopes for the exhibit, heightened tempers and raised a question that repeatedly rends this diverse country. Who should speak for or about a people?" Marion Casey addressed precisely this question in an op-ed piece in the *Irish Echo* of 21–27 February 1996. "Who sets the cultural agenda?" she asked, the Museum of the City of New York or "the Irish community?" In New York more than anywhere, Casey argued, "the public interpretation of an ethnic community's past must be a two-way process characterized by respect and integrity." The point is well taken. But MCNY always insisted that it was putting on an exhibition *about* the Irish, rather than an exhibition *for* the Irish, as Casey and the Roundtable wanted. Fully aware that it is impossible to tell a story about any ethnic group in New York City without telling a story about the city as a whole, MCNY clearly intended *Gaelic Gotham* to be an exhibition for all New Yorkers, not just those of Irish heritage. Only in this way could the museum fulfill its public function.[10]

Intertwined with this question of public responsibility, for Macdonald, was the critical question of intellectual freedom. MCNY, he insisted, had the right to put on the exhibition it judged best, free from pressure and intimidation by special interest groups. Macdonald rejected all claims "that certain individuals and organizations are the possessors and arbiters of the [sic] New York City's Irish heritage." By the same token, he continued, MCNY did not claim ownership of the history of the Irish in New York

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City. But it did claim "its rights of intellectual freedom and independence to develop and present an exhibition based on the best scholarship available and conforming to the highest professional standards."[11] As the controversy spread to the pages of the *New York Times*, MCNY received some rare support from Thomas A. Livesay, director of the Museum of New Mexico, who insisted: "It is not the responsibility of museums to propagandize the ideas and viewpoints of a particular group, but rather to present a forum for those ideas through multiple viewpoints and accurate information." Demands to close the exhibition, Livesay concluded, were a straightforward matter of censorship.[12] In an editorial, the *Times* endorsed this position, concluding that "responsibility for staging an exhibition must rest with a museum and its director, not with any particular ethnic community or group of scholars."[13]

The potential problem with these arguments is the implicit assumption that museums are neutral producers of culture that, free from outside interference, will produce an objective, balanced, and unbiased presentation. The dictates of funding alone, whether private or public, place a large dent in this argument. Nonetheless, the position of MCNY is ultimately preferable to the more extreme argument for control and authenticity presented by some members of the Roundtable. That the exhibition was in part publicly funded lent some weight to the Roundtable's calls for inclusion of the Irish-American "community." But, to the extent that any such "community" exists at all, the chief weakness in the Roundtable's case is its claim to be the custodian of that community's culture and history.

This claim was made explicitly and repeatedly. In a letter to the *Irish Echo* on 9–15 August 1995, for example, Thomas Heffernan, chair of the Columbia University Seminar on Irish Studies, drew a distinction between the "temporary guardian" and the "real possessor" of the city's Irish-American culture, placing MCNY in the first category and Marion Casey and the Roundtable in the second. The latter, he wrote, "have penetrated Irish New York; they know where it really resides."[14] This remarkable claim was echoed by Casey, who declared that *Gaelic Gotham* "*can't be history* when the museum refused to hear the voice of Irish New York."[15] The exhibition, Casey announced, had failed to find "the soul of Irish New York" and so "can be nothing more than a dim reflection of the real thing."[16] This position is doubly problematic. The version offered by MCNY *can* be and is a form of history, regardless of which members of the local community were consulted. More troubling is the related claim to be able to apprehend the "reality" of the past or locate its "soul," which

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smacks of an approach to history and epistemology long considered outmoded by most museums and universities, and raises troubling questions of ethnic chauvinism.

In this respect the position of MCNY was surely more appealing than that of its critics. Ultimately, however, neither side to this debate was particularly attractive or persuasive. Not only were MCNY's claims to impartiality inherently flawed, its vigorous protestations on this point seem to have been designed in part to deflect attention away from its shabby treatment of Marion Casey. But, in rallying to her defense, Casey's supporters often did her case more harm than good. Such was the controversy that preceded the opening of *Gaelic Gotham*. It was a controversy in which there could be no real winners. But it brought to the forefront some critical questions of academic freedom, cultural control, and cultural authenticity of pressing contemporary relevance.

Given the extent of the controversy, it was both ironic and disappointing to finally visit *Gaelic Gotham* and discover its overriding characteristics to be caution, balance, and even blandness. After all the bitterness and fighting that preceded its opening, there was virtually nothing controversial about the exhibition itself. No daring new interpretation was on view, no tendentiousness, not even a hint of scandal. Overall, the exhibition was a solid, if by no means spectacular, success; far from breaking new ground on Irish-American history, it presented an entertaining but quite conventional narrative.

Gaelic Gotham was clearly the main attraction at MCNY during its run, taking up one wing of the first floor and most of the basement. In the lobby was a huge oil painting by Samuel B. Waugh (1814–1855) of the "Bay and Harbor of New York," depicting the arrival of immigrants through Castle Garden, New York's main clearing center before Ellis Island. Though not a particularly Irish scene, the painting does include several Irish components, including a trunk prominently displayed in the right foreground, bearing the legend "Pat Murfy, For Ameriky"; and, in the center foreground, a caricature figure of the Irish farm lad, with stove-pipe hat and without shoes. Above this painting hung a large sign introducing the exhibition, *Gaelic Gotham: A History of the Irish in New York*. Thus, all visitors to the museum were guided to this one, principal attraction. The centrality of *Gaelic Gotham* was confirmed in the museum bookstore, which was filled with the works of historians and writers like Kerby Miller, Noel Ignatiev, Jay P. Dolan, Hasia Diner, Thomas Cahill, Michael Gordon,

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Robert Scally, and Peter Quinn, along with the recent compendium, *The New York Irish*, on prominent display.[17]

The exhibition consisted of about 480 artifacts, in the form of paintings, prints, photographs, newspapers, magazine covers, playbills, personal belongings, and various other memorabilia. These were linked by an informative and generally coherent narrative presented on attractive wall signage of emerald green, turquoise and blue. Above each section, on mauve signage, was a brief, descriptive title for that section's content, for example, "Seeking Refuge: The Creation of Irish Communities in New York City, 1830–1880." Six chronological sections took the visitor on a tour through time from the seventeenth century to 1970; the remaining four sections, largely two-dimensional or audio-visual in content, examined recent issues in the Irish-American community of New York City, including the resurgence of immigration in the 1980s, and the ongoing debate on the meaning of Irish ethnicity.

Waugh's "Bay and Harbor of New York" served as a memorable, if strangely non-specific, prologue to *Gaelic Gotham*. From the lobby, one entered a section called "Beginnings" which commenced with a necessarily scanty presentation on Irish settlers in colonial New York, including Dublin-born Thomas Dongan, who served as governor of the colony from 1682 to 1688, and whose "Charter of Libertyes" (1684) was on prominent display. The first section took the story as far as 1830, by which time a small but socially and politically prominent Irish community had emerged in the city, dominated by exiles from the Irish insurrection of 1798 like Thomas Addis Emmet and William Sampson, and characterized by a religious harmony between Catholics and Protestants atypical of Irish and Irish-American history before or since. This opening section was fine as far as it went, but what was sorely lacking was any sense of context, especially a sense of what was going on in Ireland before 1830. This is a hiatus not just in *Gaelic Gotham* but in Irish-American historiography generally, with the significant exception of Kerby Miller's work. Typically, and understandably, the question of context arises only with the Great Famine of the 1840s, with its familiar tales of starvation, eviction, and tragedy.

Context of this sort was effectively provided to frame the second section, which dealt with immigration and the creation of communities in the crucial era between 1830 and 1880. This is the formative period in Catholic Irish-American history. An all-too-brief display on "Struggle and Conflict" vividly portrayed some of the central themes and events: the Astor Place

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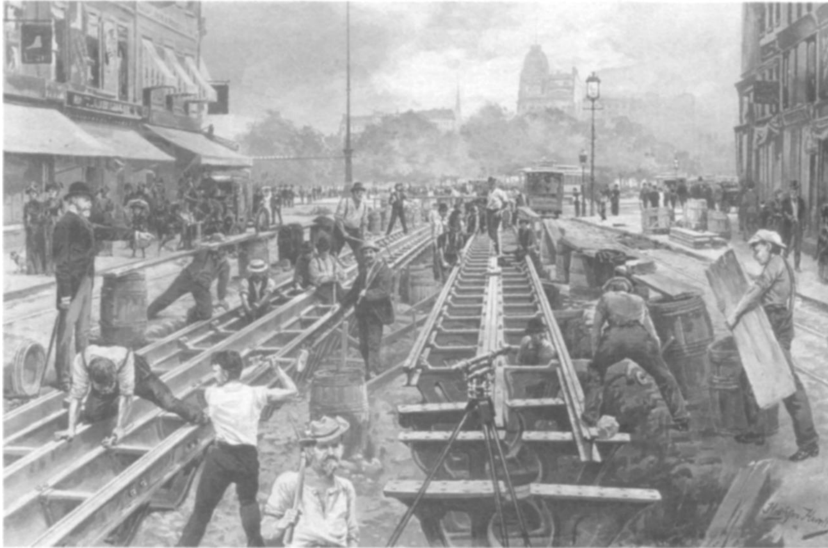

Fig. 1. Hughson Hawley (1850–1936), "Broadway and 14th Streets, Laying Tracks." Gouache, ca. 1880. Museum of the City of New York. Gift of Thomas Crimmins, 42.323.104.

Riots of 1849, depicted in a lithograph with accompanying signage; the Draft Riots of 1863, illustrated by prints from *Harper's Weekly* and *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper;* and the life of Irish squatters in Central Park, captured in a sketch by D. E. Wyland. Life in Five Points, New York's notorious Irish slum, was very effectively presented with artifacts from the 1991 excavation of the area, including a child's mug, a thimble, a paper of pins, and some clay pipes. Anti-Irish nativism and the Orange and Green Riots of 1870–1871 were also briefly mentioned.

In these dramatic scenes and events lies the heart of the Irish-American experience in New York City, and indeed the United States as a whole, in the mid-century period. Studied thoroughly and sensitively, they reveal the principal themes in Irish-American history at this time, including the nature of working and living conditions; the relation between religion and ethnicity; the connection between ethnicity and politics; anti-Irish nativism and bigotry; violence and class conflict; the racism directed at the Irish; and the racism directed by them at others. Yet all of this material on "Struggle and Conflict" was greatly understated at *Gaelic Gotham*; physically, it was placed safely out of harm's way, occupying a far from prominent place as one of six components in the section on 1830 to 1880.

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Why this reticence? One again, one wonders whether MCNY felt constrained by the criticisms of the Roundtable; or whether, despite its loud protestations to the contrary, it ever had a genuine interest in doing this type of history.

The remaining five parts of the central section on the period 1830 to 1880 examined themes of labor, culture and leisure, politics, nationalism and the Civil War, and the crucial theme of religion. The brief section on labor was quite effective, with illustrations of Irish construction workers on street railways and the Croton Aqueduct (fig. 1). The varieties of "women's work" in 1868 were also illustrated, though the scenes depicted—dressmaking, domestic service, and factory work, among others—applied to working-class women in general, not just to Irish immigrants. The presentation on "culture, leisure and ethnic pride" featured one of the highlights of the show, a steamer trunk and its contents that belonged to an immigrant named Annie Finnegan (1877–1948), who came to New York City from Ireland at the turn of the century to work as a domestic servant. The trunk, donated anonymously to the museum for the purposes of the exhibition, contained letters of reference, postcards, religious medals and mass cards, segments of handmade lace, and various items of clothing. This is social history at its finest, of the sort that only museums can present. It gives us a sense of Annie Finnegan's life that no textual description could hope to match.

By contrast, the displays on politics, nationalism, and the Civil War were rather bland and sometimes confusing. The section on politics included a remarkable "Testimonial of Appreciation" presented in 1869 by the Board of Aldermen of New York City to Thomas Coman, an Irish immigrant active in city politics (fig. 2). Coman, who came to New York City from Ireland as a young boy in 1838, served as president of the Board of Aldermen and acting mayor of New York City in the late 1860s. The testimonial, donated to MCNY by the Coman family, was among the finest artifacts in the exhibition. But the section on politics also included some material that would have been better placed elsewhere, including two famous anti-Irish cartoons by Thomas Nast, "The Day We Celebrate," portraying simian Irishmen in the midst of a vicious brawl, and "The American River Ganges," portraying Catholic bishops as crocodiles landing on the American shore. Why was this material included here, instead of in the section on "Struggle and Conflict" or, better yet, in a separate thematic treatment of nativism? By the same token, why were the Draft Riots tucked away almost out of sight in the section on "Struggle and

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Fig. 2. Testimonial of Appreciation from the Board of Aldermen to Thomas Coman, President of the Board of Aldermen, December 31, 1869. Calligraphy, inset lithographic view of Aldermanic Chamber, carved walnut and burl walnut frame. Museum of the City of New York. Gift of Morgan Coman and Miss Teresa J. Coman, 40.345.8.

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Conflict," when most visitors would have expected them to feature prominently under the heading of the Civil War?

The final component of the presentation on the mid-nineteenth century is religion, and here *Gaelic Gotham* was at its weakest. Religion is the most controversial of subjects to deal with historically, and MCNY was probably concerned about treading on any more sensibilities. Whatever the reason, the treatment of religion was safe to the point of blandness. The subject was featured in the section on 1830–1880, under the heading "Sanctuary and Strength: The Immigrant Church" and in the following section, on 1880–1930, as "Faith and Community." A brief account of anti-Catholicism preceded a triumphalist narrative of the growth of the Catholic Church under Irish leadership, with profiles of leading members of the hierarchy and laity. Here, a major opportunity for historical analysis was missed, or perhaps deliberately avoided. The most interesting dimension of recent scholarship on Irish Catholicism is the extent to which immigrants to mid-nineteenth century America underwent a "devotional revolution." On both sides of the Atlantic, the Catholic Church waged a campaign against popular religious beliefs and practices (including wakes, "pattern days," holy wells, and various forms of folk magic), enforcing strict adherence to formal Catholic doctrine for the first time. Hand-in-hand with this process went a decisive Catholic contribution to the meaning of national identity in Ireland and the meaning of ethnic identity in Irish America. This dimension of Irish-American religious history, which involved a struggle for cultural power *within* the Irish "community," is decisively absent from *Gaelic Gotham*. Too controversial perhaps; but the treatment of religion is bland and lifeless without it, failing to capture the full power and significance of Catholicism in Irish-American life, past and present.[18]

The tour through *Gaelic Gotham* led next to a somewhat amorphous section on the period 1880–1930. Typical was the part entitled "Pursuing the American Dream: Work, Class and Mobility." It consisted of a picture of the Brooklyn Bridge, constructed with lots of Irish labor, both skilled and unskilled; an advertisement for houses by an Irish realtor; a description of "Hell's Kitchen," an Irish neighborhood in Manhattan; pictures of houses in Brooklyn and Queens; photographs of families; a painting of McSorley's Old Ale House; and various odds and ends. These artifacts were thrown together without apparent rhyme or reason, while the accompanying signage confidently proclaimed the progress of the Irish

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through manual to skilled labor and then into the professions. The disparate, thrown-together quality of this display made it visually one of the least effective in the exhibition. In general, the remaining material on the twentieth century up to 1970 lacked the coherence of the preceding material. But this is hardly the fault of the museum alone. The critical issues are much less clear in the historiography for the twentieth century than for the nineteenth, and it was scarcely surprising to find a similar disparity between the two periods in *Gaelic Gotham*.

The year 1970 served as the terminus of the chronological tour, the remainder of the exhibit taking the form of a thematic examination of contemporary history. It will be useful to pause briefly at this turning point to assess the effectiveness of the exhibition so far, before examining the remainder of the show. The chronological approach, with its thematic components, was generally quite effective in *Gaelic Gotham*. But it was also confusing at times. Striking a proper balance between narrative and analysis is, of course, the perennial problem in all forms of historical interpretation. "More analysis and less narrative" has become a mantra among teachers of history at college level, as they encourage their students to impose order on the potential tyranny of discrete historical "facts." In general, *Gaelic Gotham* handled this problem quite well, in that the presentation was coherent and easy to follow. Nonetheless, there are pitfalls involved in a mainly chronological approach, not least of which is the inability to examine central themes with the depth and thoroughness they deserve.

Nationalism is a case in point. Irish Americans made a crucial contribution to the eventual liberation of Ireland, and New York City was their center of operations. When I finally encountered the part of the exhibition called "Irish Nationalists and American Patriots," I was disappointed and confused to find virtually no information there, and only one obscure nationalist featured. Only after some pondering did I realize that I was now in Section IV, "Social Progress and Ethnic Endurance, 1880–1930." This clarified the matter; there was still no sign of John Devoy, the chief nationalist ideologue in New York City in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but I knew I would now be able to locate the veterans of 1798 and 1848, and the Fenians, scattered in their appropriate chronological slots. The problem with this mode of presentation, however, is that it greatly diminishes the importance of the nationalists; a single thematic, rather than chronological, presentation on this topic would have been vastly more effective. The same might be said of the Draft Riots, or of Irish

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collective violence in general. Indeed, one visitor expressed his regret and frustration in the Visitors' Book that the Draft Riots had been entirely ignored, evidently having missed the brief account of them tucked away in the "Struggle and Conflict" part of the section on 1830–1880. In the same way, a single thematic section on the Church, at least for the nineteenth century, would have allowed for greater depth and nuance of interpretation.

The chronological approach is a highly effective way of presenting a seamless narrative of the past. Indeed, it is indispensable if any coherent narrative is to be presented, and could not therefore have been avoided by *Gaelic Gotham.* It is nonetheless important to point out that coherence of this sort has its price. The past itself was nowhere near as coherent as its subsequent representations in books and exhibitions. It was ragged, untidy, indeterminate, and ridden by conflict and disagreement. Such breaks and ruptures are neatly papered over in *Gaelic Gotham.* One way to uncover them again is to employ some tools of analysis rather than description, especially the categories of race, class, and gender. What can these categories offer a critic of *Gaelic Gotham?* On the question of race, the exhibition was strangely silent. There was virtually no sense of how the Irish interacted with other groups. More important, there was no sense that racial identities, far from being natural or given, are historically constructed. In the best recent historiography, by contrast, categories of racial identity are taken as subjects of historical inquiry rather than unproblematic descriptive tools. Instead of writing the history of relations between "races," historians are examining how blackness, whiteness, and yellowness acquired their meaning historically, an approach pioneered by David Roediger and encapsulated in the title of Noel Ignatiev's recent work, *How the Irish Became White.*[19] Such an approach was entirely lacking from *Gaelic Gotham.*

So, too, was gender as a category of analysis. There were plenty of women in the exhibition, of course. But there was no sense of how cultural meanings among the Irish were encoded in feminine and masculine terms. The masculinity of skilled workers and their definitions of class, for example, might have been analyzed in this way. Moreover, not only was the category of class taken as inherently masculine, it was scarcely used in the exhibition at all. There was some vague analysis of social mobility, but no sense of class divisions *between* Irish Americans. This would have been particularly useful in the case of religion and nationalism. A much more detailed account of the rebel priest and labor activist, Father Edward McGlynn, for example, was surely warranted. His role in the decisive

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events of 1886 was mentioned, but it cried out for more detailed consideration. So, too, did the general relation between organized labor and the Catholic Church, especially in the nineteenth century. By the same token, the analysis of nationalism would have benefitted greatly from an account of exactly which social groups were supporting which movements, and why. Again it must be added, however, that the version of history propounded by the Roundtable is even less likely to have grappled with these questions than *Gaelic Gotham.*

These criticisms aside, the tour through Irish New York from the seventeenth century to 1970 was a pleasant and informative one. The objections I have raised are those of an academic historian, and it must be emphasized that *Gaelic Gotham* was developed not for specialists but for the varied and demanding people of New York City. On the rainy Friday I first visited the exhibition, it was crowded, both before and after lunch, with visitors of every age and background, including several large parties of school children. Most of them seemed to be enjoying the show immensely; comments written in the survey provided by the museum, or overheard as visitors left the building, were almost uniformly favorable. Moreover, the museum produced an impressive Guide for Teachers, and sponsored a series of public lectures (greatly diminished by the controversy), presentations, and walking tours, to accompany *Gaelic Gotham.* In all of this, MCNY stands vindicated. The Roundtable had insisted on an exhibition *for* the Irish as well as *about* them; MCNY insisted on offering its exhibition not to the Irish alone but to the people of New York City. As was effectively demonstrated by the reception of *Gaelic Gotham* once it had opened, the experience of the Irish speaks directly to all New Yorkers.[20]

This engaging, public dimension to the exhibition was at its most effective in its final sections, which dealt with contemporary history. Unfortunately, most of this material was located in the basement, and if I had not picked up a floor plan at the outset, I might have thought that *Gaelic Gotham* had ended when I reached 1970, and gone home without seeing the most interesting part of the show. On the way to the basement, one could stop at a video room showing a documentary on recent Irish immigrants to New York. Produced for the Irish national television station, RTE, in conjunction with WNYC-TV, this engaging piece of work raised three critical questions. How do the Irish in America differ from those in Ireland? How have established Irish-Americans and immigrants of the 1950s reacted to the sophisticated and well-educated newcomers of the 1990s? And what is it like for the most recent immigrants to raise their

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children in, of all places, New York City? The first of these questions might profitably have been addressed throughout *Gaelic Gotham*. The various answers to the second question revealed considerable generational tension on issues like religion, the meaning of assimilation, and the ability of recent immigrants to return to Ireland on a regular basis; as well as an admission by the older generation that work was much more readily available in their day, and an expression by the new generation of disbelief and fear that they will eventually grow old in America. As for the third question, the tone of this highly effective video was perhaps best captured by one mother's comment that in Ireland a bruise on a child's knee is seen as a bruise on the knee, whereas in New York it is liable to be seen as the first sign of child abuse. The newcomers also expressed shock and anguish over the cost of health care. In such quotidian details is the stuff of cultural adaptation made.

Descending to the basement, one passed a graphic illustration of a St. Patrick's Day parade flanking each side of the corridor, before reaching a theater with a series of displays outside. The first of these, "A History in the Making" offered a montage of themes in the history of the Irish since 1970, ranging from IRA prisoner Joe Doherty and Sinn Fein activist Gerry Adams to the Irish Lesbian and Gay Organization and its much-publicized battles with the Ancient Order of Hibernians. Also detailed were the impressive range of Irish cultural institutions founded in the city in recent years, inspired in many cases by the influx of talented and highly-educated immigrants. Next to this display was a useful section where visitors were asked "What do you think?" and invited to write their comments in a survey. Unfortunately, these two sections were located directly beneath the video room, and next to the theater. The noise was distracting and irritating. One wondered why *Gaelic Gotham* could not have been allowed to occupy the entire first floor, especially given its domination of the museum as a whole.

The exhibition's final offering was a short film entitled "Voices of the Irish New York," specially produced by the designers of *Gaelic Gotham*, Whirlwind & Co. The acoustics in the large, gloomy theater were disappointingly poor; but the film was very effectively done, consisting of brief interviews with more than forty Irish New Yorkers, among them a few public figures, but most of them obscure or unknown. Their spoken words were accompanied by scenes of Manhattan and the other boroughs, most of them with Irish motifs. (Prints of thirty-six of these images lined the hallway outside the theater.) The faces of the interviewees were not shown,

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but each was introduced with a self-identifying label, including "Irish, Irish-American," "Irish-born New Yorker," and "Totally New York Irish." On a technical level the film was impressive; but, as with *Gaelic Gotham* as a whole, one exited the show wishing for more analytical bite. The film did examine the question of what it means to be Irish in America and New York, but it neither posed nor addressed that question as sharply as the video above.

And so I left *Gaelic Gotham,* informed, edified, and entertained, but still hungry for something to stir things up just a little. I had the distinct impression that MCNY had decided to play things as carefully as possible. Despite the museum's public defenses of a "warts-and-all" approach to history, the exhibition steered safely clear of the seamier, less savory sides to Irish life. The result was an attractive exhibition, well worth at least one visit, though scarcely the hotbed of controversy I had anticipated. The unfair treatment of Marion Casey lingered in my mind, casting a shadow over the affair as a whole; but sympathy for Casey was balanced by frustration at the way her supporters had pressed her case. For better or worse, MCNY had clearly emerged victorious from the fray. The museum's true triumph, in a final twist of irony, lay not in the exhibit but in the controversy that had preceded it. For, as a journalist in the *Irish Echo* observed a week before the opening: "If one purpose of a historical exhibition is to generate debate, then *Gaelic Gotham: A History of the Irish in New York* has already been an astounding success."[21] Both before and during its run, this controversial history of one of New York City's principal ethnic groups raised a host of questions relevant to all New Yorkers and all Americans.

NOTES

1. The controversy was reported and played out in articles, letters, op-ed pieces and editorials in the following sources: *Irish Echo*, 19–25 July 1995, lead article, "Anger erupts over Irish exhibit"; *Irish Echo*, 9–15 Aug. 1995, letters to the editor from Edward Cortese, and Thomas F. Heffernan, chair of the Columbia University Seminar on Irish Studies; *Irish Echo*, Sept. 6–12, 1995, letter to the editor from Robert R. Macdonald, director of the Museum of the City of New York; *Irish Echo*, 13–19 Sept. 1995, letters to the editor from Marion Casey, past-president of the New York Irish History Roundtable, and Maureen Nantista, president of the Irish Family History Forum; *Irish Echo*, 20–26 Sept. 1995, letter to the editor from Brother Emmett Corry, president of the New York Irish History Roundtable; *New York Post*, 21 Dec. 1995, article, "1996: Time

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of the Troubles"; *Irish Echo*, Jan. 17–23, 1996, article, "Irish Ire Erupts over New York Show"; *Irish Echo*, 24–30 Jan. 1996, letter to the editor from Brendan Keane; *Irish Echo*, 31 Jan.–6 Feb. 1996, letter to the editor from Edward O'Donnell, project historian for "Gaelic Gotham"; *New York Times*, 2 Feb. 1996, letter to the editor from Thomas A. Livesay, director of the Museum of New Mexico, Santa Fe; *Irish Voice*, 13–20 Feb. 1996, lead editorial, "The Mess at the Museum"; *Irish Voice*, 21–27 Feb. 1996, article, "Mess at the Museum?"; *New York Times*, 13 Feb. 1996, editorial on the "Fighting Irish"; *New York Times*, 19 Feb. 1996, letter to the editor from Michael J. Turbidy Jr.; *Irish Echo*, 21–27 Feb. 1996 article, "Academic groups postpones meeting over 'Gaelic Gotham'" and op-ed piece by Marion R. Casey, "Who sets the cultural agenda?"; *Irish Echo*, 28 Feb.–5 Mar. 1996, article, "'Gotham' exhibition to go on as planned, project historian says"; *New York Times*, 15 Mar. 1996, review of "Gaelic Gotham"; *Newsday*, 26 Mar. 1996, review of "Gaelic Gotham"; *Irish Echo*, 27 Mar.–2 Apr. 1996, review of "Gaelic Gotham"; *Irish Echo*, 7 Apr. 1996, letter to the editor from Patrice Hannon; *Irish Echo*, 24–30 Apr. 1996, op-ed piece by Helena Mulkerns.

2. Ronald H. Bayor and Timothy J. Meagher, eds., *The New York Irish* (Baltimore, Md., 1996); Kerby A. Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America* (New York, 1985).

3. *Irish Echo*, 6–12 Sept. 1995, letter to the editor from Robert Macdonald.

4. Macdonald, quoted in *Irish Echo*, 19–25 July 1995.

5. On accusations of a "bait-and-switch," see *Irish Echo*, 9–15 Aug. 1995, letter to the editor from Edward Cortese, and 13–19 Sept. 1995, letter to the editor from Maureen Nantista; on Macdonald's position, see *Irish Echo*, 19–25 July 1995, which also contains the budgetary details cited in this paragraph.

6. *Irish Echo*, 21–27 Feb. 1996.

7. In an equally far-fetched analogy, Maureen Nantista of the Irish Family History Forum declared that the duplicity and treachery of MCNY had reproduced the experience of the suffering immigrants a century before. See *Irish Echo*, 13–19 Sept. 1995, letter of Nantista to the editor.

8. *Irish Voice*, 21–27 Feb. 1996.

9. The team included deputy director Jan Ramirez, an expert on nineteenth-century painting and sculpture; curatorial coordinator Deborah Walters, an expert on nineteenth-century furniture; Jack Salzman of the Jewish Museum; Bernadette McCauley, an expert on nineteenth-century New York religious, social and Irish history; and exhibition coordinator and project historian Ed O'Donnell, whose specialty is nineteenth-century labor, immigration and politics, with an emphasis on the Irish.

10. For Macdonald's position that the exhibition was about the Irish rather than for them, see *New York Times*, 13 Feb. 1996; see also, letter from Brother Emmett Corry, president of the Roundtable, to his fellow-members, 8 July 1995.

11. *Irish Echo*, 6–12 Sept. 1995, letter to the editor from Robert Macdonald.

12. *New York Times*, 8 Feb. 1996, letter to the editor from Thomas A. Livesay.

13. *New York Times*, 13 Feb. 1996, editorial.

14. *Irish Echo*, 9–15 Aug. 1995, letter to the editor from Thomas F. Heffernan.

15. *Irish Echo*, 21–27 Feb. 1996, op-ed piece by Marion Casey; italics added.

16. *Irish Echo*, 21–27 Feb. 1996, op-ed piece by Marion Casey.

17. Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles*; Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York, 1995); Jay P. Dolan, *The Immigrant Church: New York's Irish and German Catholics* (Notre Dame, Ind., 1983); Hasia Diner, *Erin's Daughters in America: Irish Immigrant Women in the Nineteenth Century* (Baltimore, Md., 1983); Thomas Cahill, *How the Irish Saved Civilization* (New York, 1995); Michael A. Gordon, *The Orange*

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Riots: Irish Political Violence in New York City, 1870 and 1871 (Ithaca, N.Y., 1993); Robert Scally, *The End of Hidden Ireland: Rebellion, Famine, and Emigration* (New York, 1995); Peter Quinn, *Banished Children of Eve* (New York, 1994).

18. On the concept of a devotional revolution in Irish Catholicism, see Emmet Larkin, "The Devotional Revolution in Ireland, 1850–75," *American Historical Review*, 77 (June 1972): 625–52; and David W. Miller, "Irish Catholicism and the Great Famine," *Journal of Social History*, 9 (1975): 89–110. For an application of one version of this concept to Irish-American history, see Kevin Kenny, "The Catholic Church and the Molly Maguires," *Labor History* 36 (summer 1995): 345–76. For a similar argument on Catholic middle-class hegemony in Irish-America, see Kerby A. Miller, "Class, Culture, and Immigrant Group Identity," in *Immigration Reconsidered: History, Sociology and Politics,* ed. Virginia Yans-McLaughlin (New York, 1990), 96–129.

19. David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York, 1991), esp. chap. 7; Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White*, passim. For a theoretically instructive parallel in the history of the Irish in Britain, see Robert Miles, *Racism and Migrant Labor* (London, 1982), esp. pt. I and chap. 6. *The New York Irish* features essays on Irish interaction with African-Americans and Chinese but does not historicize the category of race in the sense indicated here.

20. There is no catalog for *Gaelic Gotham*, but a "script" (a text without images) is available for $25: *Gaelic Gotham: A History of the Irish in New York* (New York, 1996), 155 pages.

21. *Irish Echo*, 28 Feb.–5 Mar. 1996.

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