

“English Institutions and the Irish Race”: Race and Politics in Late Nineteenth-Century Australia*

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During the 1880s there was fierce debate in colonial Australia and throughout the English-speaking world about the functioning of increasingly democratic societies and especially who, in terms of race, class and gender, was qualified to participate in the political process. In this formative period of what later became known as the “White Australia policy”, minorities were under intense scrutiny and, within the settler population, the Catholic Irish were the most numerous minority. This paper discusses two controversial and widely-reported 1881 articles by Melbourne writer, A. M. Topp. He argued strongly that the Celtic Irish were actually an “alien” race, fundamentally antithetical to English governance and morality. Mass Irish migration, in Topp’s view, constituted a threat to the political stability and racial superiority of the whole English-speaking world. Topp drew upon contemporary racial science and the works of leading intellectuals, but he was also influenced by political crises then occurring in the United Kingdom, the United States and Australia. Topp’s articles, and the responses they elicited, highlight the complexities of race in colonial Australia by demonstrating that major racial differences were perceived by some to exist within what has often been portrayed as a largely homogenous “white” settler society.

Introduction

In the summer of 1881, A. M. Topp, an English-born Melbourne businessman and writer, published an outspoken article in the *Melbourne Review* warning of the dangers posed to the Australian colonies by a race of “morally, socially, and intellectually” inferior people, who were intent upon “corrupting our political institutions and our public and private morality”. The core problem, according to Topp, was that this race was too often treated as if it was on the “same level of intelligence, social fitness and morality” as the English.¹ The conservative Melbourne *Argus*, in predicting that Topp’s article would create a storm among colonists, highlighted one particular sentence: “It cannot be too strongly impressed upon the minds of Englishmen [wrote Topp] that the Irish are not a mere variety of their own race [...]”.² Topp’s article did indeed cause the stir that the *Argus* reviewer had anticipated. Widely reported in the inter-colonial press, it was characterised as “startling” and “sensational”,³ while Irish Catholic sources responded to it with

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¹ A. M. Topp, “English Institutions and the Irish Race”, *Melbourne Review*, Vol. 6, 21 (January 1881), pp.10-11.

² *Ibid.*, p.19, quoted in *Argus*, 7 January 1881, p.6.

³ Some newspaper reviewers were more critical of Topp’s praise for the Germans than of his attack on the Irish. See, for example: *Northern Argus* (Clare, SA), 11 February 1881, p.4; *Mercury* (Hobart), 20 January 1881, p.3; *Inquirer and Commercial News* (Perth), 28 July 1880, p.2; *South Australian Advertiser* (Adelaide), 6 November 1880, p.1.

furious rebuttals.⁴ Topp, however, appears not to have been troubled by such criticism, for he quickly published an even more strongly-worded rejoinder, entitled “A Few More Words on the Irish Question”; and later that same year he paid to have his first article re-printed in pamphlet form.⁵

While some historians of the Irish and of race in Australia have noted Topp’s articles in passing, on the whole his work has been ignored, apparently being considered out-of-step with colonial opinion.⁶ Yet Topp was by no means an unrepresentative figure in the political and literary worlds of the early 1880s. His work on the Irish appeared in a leading intellectual journal and it elicited numerous responses: some very negative it is true, but others generally positive. Topp’s two articles are evidence of widespread fears prevalent during the last quarter of the nineteenth century throughout the English-speaking world. Economic recession in some countries, mass migration often of “coloured races” to others, developments in race theory, coupled with the rise of new political movements representing previously disadvantaged classes, led many to question how increasingly democratic governments could be made to work effectively, without succumbing to the threat of demagoguery, corruption or even tyranny.⁷ An examination of Topp’s 1881 articles, the thinking that went into them and the contexts that shaped them, offers insights into the complexities of race in colonial Australia and especially how heterodox groups of English, Scottish, Welsh and, in particular, Irish settlers had been melded together by the time of Federation to create an imagined homogenous “white” Australia.⁸

Race and “Whiteness”

Nineteenth-century theorists of race investigated and described the physical, cultural and moral differences they perceived amongst groups within the British Isles and Europe, as well as differences encountered at the outer reaches of empire.⁹ There was intense debate and much disagreement as commentators attempted to make sense in racial terms of both their home countries and the rapidly expanding world. Even the very word “race” was loaded with shifting meanings since physiology, anatomy, biology, history, culture, class and morality were all deployed by different writers, to

⁴ Topp’s own brother, the barrister Samuel St John Topp, was quick to dissociate himself from the article in a letter to the editor of Melbourne’s *Catholic Advocate*, 15 January 1881, p.9.

⁵ A. M. Topp, “A Few More Words on the Irish Question”, *Melbourne Review*, Vol. 6, 22 (April 1881), pp.195-214; A. M. Topp, *English Institutions and the Irish Race* (Melbourne, 1881).

⁶ Patrick O’Farrell, *The Irish in Australia* (Sydney: New South Wales University Press, 1986), p.247. For other Australian historians who have mentioned Topp, see: Geoffrey Serle, *The Rush to be Rich: a History of the Colony of Victoria, 1883-89* (Melbourne, 1971), p.363; Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds, *Drawing the Global Colour Line: White Men’s Countries and the Question of Racial Equality* (Melbourne, 2008), pp.52, 79.

⁷ Marilyn Lake, “The White Man under Siege: New Histories of Race in the Nineteenth Century and the Advent of White Australia”, *History Workshop Journal*, 58 (2004), pp.41-62.

⁸ Recent studies of race in Australia that have addressed the racialisation of the Irish in different ways include: Ann McGrath, “Shamrock Aborigines: the Irish, the Aboriginal Australians and their Children”, *Aboriginal History*, Vol. 34 (2010), pp.55-84; Michelle Elleray, “Hell for White Men: Masculinity and Race in *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*”, *Postcolonial Studies*, Vol. 13, 1 (February 2010), pp. 71-90; Jon Stratton, “Borderline Anxieties: What Whitening the Irish has to do with Keeping out Asylum Seekers”, in Aileen Moreton-Robinson, ed., *Whitening Race: Essays in Social and Cultural Criticism* (Canberra, 2004), pp.222-238.

⁹ Kenan Malik, *The Meaning of Race: Race, History and Culture in Western Society* (New York, 1996), pp.80-81; Richard McMahon, “Anthropological Race Psychology, 1820–1945: a Common European System of Ethnic Identity Narratives”, *Nations and Nationalism*, Vol. 15, 4 (October 2009), pp.575-596.

varying degrees, in an attempt to explain perceived human diversity at home and abroad.¹⁰ In colonial Australia, the settler population was characterised by terms such as “British”, “English” and “European”, frequently used interchangeably, alongside the more racialised terms “Anglo-Saxon”, “Saxon” and “Teutonic”. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, however, “white” was being increasingly employed as a term marking homogeneity; and, as such, it became imbued with notions of power and privilege.¹¹

Recent studies of nineteenth-century race theories have focused increasingly on the concept “whiteness”. The origins of the concept lie in the widely-accepted idea of a hierarchy of races. “Whiteness” also owes much to long-held beliefs about the racial character of the English and the supposed superiority of Anglo-Saxon political and legal institutions.¹² The process whereby the concept “white” emerged has been fruitfully interrogated by scholars through an examination of racial boundaries between, on the one hand, those considered Anglo-Saxon, British and “white” and, on the other hand, racialised “others”, increasingly labelled “coloured” and including in particular indigenous peoples and the Chinese.¹³ But, by using terms like “Anglo-Saxon”, “British”, “European”, “white” — or even the later “Anglo-Celtic” — as though they encompassed the whole settler population, scholars have papered over an array of major ethnic, religious and cultural differences amongst those who immigrated to Australia from England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland.¹⁴ Such differences were very real and meaningful to contemporaries and, moreover, they were underwritten by an impressive body of scientific and historical literature, some of which explained these differences in racial terms.

Dr Robert Knox’s influential *The Races of Men*, published in 1850, drew heavily upon physiology, as well as history, in order to champion the theory of polygenesis: the separate creation of multiple races structured into a rigid hierarchy that precluded hybridity. And in this hierarchy, the civilized “Saxon” ruled at the top, while the “dreaded” Irish Celt subsisted far below.¹⁵ Dr John Beddoe spent decades studying the hair and eye colour of the inhabitants of the British Isles in order to generate what he called his “Index of Nigrescence”, which pointed to the origins of the Irish actually lying in north Africa.¹⁶ On the other hand, the poet and essayist Matthew Arnold, writing in 1867, rejected the notion of an “impassable gulf” existing between “Teuton” and “Celt”, choosing instead to see them as “brothers in the great Indo-European family”. Nevertheless, for Arnold the Celtic Irish were, at the same time, a “primitive”, “passionate” and “turbulent” race, existing close to nature’s

¹⁰ Malik, *The Meaning of Race*, pp.91ff.

¹¹ Ann Curthoys, “White, British and European: Historicising Identity in Settler Societies”, in Jane Carey and Claire McLisky, eds, *Creating White Australia* (Sydney, 2009), pp.14-15; Tracey Banivanua Mar, “Reading the Shadows of Whiteness: a Case of Racial Clarity on Queensland’s Colonial Borderlands, 1880-1900”, in Leigh Boucher, Jane Carey and Katherine Ellinghaus, eds, *Re-Orienting Whiteness* (New York, 2009), pp.149-151.

¹² H. A. MacDougall, *Racial Myth in English History: Trojans, Teutons and Anglo-Saxons* (Montreal and Hanover, NH, 1982), pp.89-103.

¹³ Among many studies, see: Warwick Anderson, *The Cultivation of Whiteness: Science, Health and Racial Destiny in Australia* (Melbourne, 2002); Russell McGregor, *Imagined Destinies: Aboriginal Australians and the Doomed Race Theory, 1880-1939* (Melbourne, 1997).

¹⁴ For a study of the racialisation of the Irish in the United States, see Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York and London, 1995).

¹⁵ Robert Knox, *The Races of Men: a Fragment* (Philadelphia, 1850), pp.213-221, 253-254; see also Malik, *The Meaning of Race*, p.89.

¹⁶ John Beddoe, *The Races of Britain: a Contribution to the Anthropology of Western Europe* (1885; London, 1971), pp.10-12.

“secrets”. As their “idiosyncrasy” was “feminine”, they were in “rebellion” against “fact” and therefore “lamed” and unfitted for the “world of business and politics”.¹⁷ In much of this literature, the English as Saxons and Teutons were located on the highest branch of the racial tree of man, distinct from and significantly above the Celtic Irish.¹⁸ Exactly how far above the Irish the English were was a matter for debate; and even more debatable was how low the Irish sat and especially how close they were to the bottom of the tree where were located the so-called “black” or “negro” races.¹⁹

Writers in early and mid nineteenth-century Australia often referred to the Catholic Irish, not only in sectarian terms, but in racial ones as well, drawing in part upon contemporary works of racial science, but also upon a centuries-old English colonial discourse that stressed the barbarity of the Irish, their aggressiveness, laziness and stupidity.²⁰ In Melbourne in the 1840s, for example, new Irish arrivals were described by the *Argus* as “useless and lawless savages”.²¹ During the 1850s, and later, concerns were voiced about miscegenation between Irish women and Chinese men. As one British visitor to the goldfields put it: “the Celtic and Mongolian character combined will be something new in the history of mankind”.²² Irish female servants and male labourers were often excluded from employment by the use of phrases like “English preferred” or “No Irish need apply” in newspaper job advertisements.²³ Even when they found employment, the Irish could still face ridicule and vilification from their employers. The English-born journalist, Richard Twopeny, in his widely-read 1883 account of *Town Life in Australia*, summed up his own Irish domestic servants succinctly as “liars and dirty”.²⁴ And, as late as 1918, the Ulster-born professor of physiology at the University of Melbourne published a pamphlet ranking the Catholic Irish “very low among the white races for their contribution to civilisation”.²⁵ By then, however, though still considered “low” in terms of civilisation, even their severest critics had at least acknowledged that the Irish belonged, without question, “among the white races”.

¹⁷ Matthew Arnold, *On the Study of Celtic Literature and Other Essays* (1867; London, n.d.), pp.23, 27, 82-86, 103, 116, 118, 133.

¹⁸ Robert Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (London and New York, 1995), pp.71-73; Tony Ballantyne, *Orientalism, Racial Theory and British Colonialism: Aryanism in the British Empire* (London, 2001).

¹⁹ S. G. Morton in his influential 1839 *Crania Americana* placed the “Native Irish”, in terms of brain capacity, about half way between the top “Teutonic Family” and the bottom “Negro Group”, with indigenous “Australians” being last among the latter. Kay Anderson, *Race and the Crisis of Humanism* (London and New York, 2007), pp.134-137.

²⁰ See, among many studies: James Muldoon, *Identity on the Medieval Irish Frontier: Degenerate Englishmen, Wild Irishmen, Middle Nations* (Gainesville, FL, 2003); Joep Leerssen, “Wildness, Wilderness and Ireland: Medieval and Early-Modern Patterns in the Demarcation of Civility”, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 56, 1 (January 1995) pp.25-39.

²¹ *Argus*, 18 February 1848, p.2.

²² P. Just, *Australia; or, Notes Taken during a Residence in the Colonies from the Discovery of Gold in 1851 till 1857* (Dundee, 1859), p.209.

²³ Paula Hamilton, “No Irish Need Apply”: *Aspects of the Employer-Employee Relationship in Australian Domestic Service, 1860-1900* (London, 1985). For debates surrounding discrimination against the Irish in American job advertisements, see Rebecca A. Fried, “No Irish Need Deny: Evidence for the Historicity of NINA Restrictions in Advertisements and Signs”, *Journal of Social History* (Advance Access 4 July 2015), pp.1-25: doi:10.1093/jsh/shv066, accessed 1 September 2015.

²⁴ Richard Twopeny, *Town Life in Australia* (1883; Melbourne, 1973), p.51.

²⁵ W. A. Osborne, *What We Owe Ireland* (Melbourne, 1918), p.42. For Osborne’s “subdividing” of “whiteness” into three different types, see Anderson, *The Cultivation of Whiteness*, p.219.

“Civilisation” was a key concept in the creation of racial hierarchies.²⁶ The term embraced many attributes, but prominent amongst them was stable and orderly governance. Topp’s Irish articles were written at time when there was much debate about exactly who — in terms of race, class and gender — should be able to participate in the electoral system. The self-governing settler colonies lauded the mixed British model of a hereditary monarchy combined with a bicameral parliament composed of property-holding males, with the lower house elected by such men. In the United Kingdom itself the size of the male electorate was expanded hugely by a series of reforms acts in 1867-68 and 1884-85. But intense debate had preceded these acts, especially concerning the fitness of working-class men and also of Irish men to exercise the vote.²⁷ Colonial Australia had been more radical as regards the franchise with, for instance, Victoria introducing virtual manhood suffrage for its lower-house elections in 1857. But, since property qualifications continued for all those elected, as well as for upper-house electors, while members were not initially paid and property-owners enjoyed multiple votes, the franchise remained a controversial political issue well after the 1850s, and especially so when, during the 1880s, a campaign for women’s suffrage commenced.²⁸

In the Australian colonies and, indeed, throughout the British Empire, indigenous peoples were generally considered as lacking the skills necessary to exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship, to vote and to stand for parliament.²⁹ On occasion, however, indigenous groups challenged this assessment. Beginning in the late 1870s, the Kulin people of Coranderrk mission near Healesville in Victoria, under the leadership of William Barak, appropriated the “coloniser’s political forms and tactics — the use of influential people and the press, the protest letter and petition, the protest march” — to assert their right to manage their own community. This campaign reached its height in 1881, but, as the Kulin were to discover, such initiatives rarely resulted in substantial or sustained improvement.³⁰ Questions about political competence also sometimes emerged during controversies about “coloured” labour, whether Chinese, Indian or Pacific Islander. Again in 1881, the year of Topp’s articles, the parliaments of Victoria and New South Wales imposed tighter restrictions on Chinese immigration and civil rights. In Victoria there was an unsuccessful attempt to disenfranchise Chinese voters, who it was argued were poorly equipped because of their race to participate in British-style democracy. The Chinese merchant community, however, challenged the bill, basing its case on recent Anglo-Chinese treaties and, in addition, on China’s long history of civilisation. Nevertheless,

²⁶ McGregor, *Imagined Destinies*, pp.19-59. For the history of racial theory, see among many studies: Nancy Stepan, *The Idea of Race in Science: Great Britain, 1800-1960* (Oxford, 1982); Edward Beasley, *The Victorian Reinvention of Race: New Racisms and the Problem of Grouping in the Human Sciences* (New York, 2010).

²⁷ K. T. Hoppen, *The Mid-Victorian Generation, 1846-86* (Oxford, 1998), pp.237-253, 651-653.

²⁸ Serle, *The Rush to be Rich*, pp.322-323; Geoffrey Serle, *The Golden Age: a History of the Colony of Victoria, 1851-61* (Melbourne, 1963), p.148.

²⁹ Before the 1902 *Commonwealth Franchise Act* formally deprived Aborigines of the vote, Queensland in 1885 had actually been the only colony to pass legislation explicitly excluding them from the franchise. Helen Irving, “Making the Federal Commonwealth, 1890-1901”, in Alison Bashford and Stuart Macintyre, eds, *The Cambridge History of Australia*, Vol. 1 (Cambridge, 2013), pp.259, 248-249.

³⁰ Richard Broome, *Aboriginal Victorians: a History since 1800* (Sydney, 2005), pp.166-181; Diane Barwick, *Rebellion at Coranderrk* (Canberra, 1998), p.67.

in 1887-88 both colonies barred the Chinese from naturalisation, thereby excluding from the vote the many men not already naturalised.³¹

The Irish as a Race

Topp, in terms of his views about race, acknowledged a particular intellectual debt to the writings of the English medieval historian, E. A. Freeman. Reviewing a recent book by Freeman in 1881, Topp claimed that the Teutonic race had been dominant throughout European history; in fact, according to him, “no European state now exists whose formation and development is not owing to Teutonic rulers”. While hailing the recent unification of Teutonic Germany and its rising power in Europe, Topp dismissed those who suggested that the United States would also be a future great power. On the contrary, he believed that, “with its yearly increasing swarms” of diverse immigrants, it was losing its Teutonic character and as a consequence sliding into “social anarchy and disorganization”.³² To the fore among the immigrants causing this decline were the Irish.

Topp drew upon the work of other historians for evidence of the long history of Irish racial inferiority. He cited in particular Theodor Mommsen’s mammoth *The History of Rome*, first published in German in 1856.³³ Mommsen was struck by how, among the Celts of Gaul, there existed “almost every one of the characteristics which we are accustomed to recognize as marking the Irish” today. Both groups remained “at all times and places [...] indolent and poetical, irresolute and fervid, inquisitive, credulous, amiable, clever, but — in a political point of view — thoroughly useless”. Julius Caesar had had to destroy the Celts, Mommsen argued, in order “to civilize the West”.³⁴ Topp’s implication was that, like their Celtic forebears, the modern-day Catholic Irish too had to be eliminated so as to preserve Western civilisation. But, lacking a Caesar, how this was to be done was the key problem that Topp sought to address in his articles.

The racial inferiority of the Irish was most evident in their “primitive and rudimentary” morality, which did not extend much beyond “personal and family aggrandisement”. They displayed “an inherent inability to perceive what is true and what is false”, as well as “an innate facility for low cunning”. When faced with a weak adversary they were “aggressive and domineering”, but no people were “so easily ruled by a display of firmness and authority”. Topp concluded by calling the Irish, “the child-race of the European world”. Trying to placate them was counter-productive, as concessions merely transformed them into “spoilt children”, who were even more turbulent and intractable.³⁵

It was their race-based moral failings that made the Irish unfit to participate in “English institutions”, especially an elected parliament. But, for Topp, “English

³¹ Marilyn Lake, “Chinese Colonists Assert their ‘Common Human Rights’: Cosmopolitanism as Subject and Method of History”, *Journal of World History*, Vol. 21, 3 (September 2010), pp. 375-392; Serle, *The Rush to be Rich*, pp.295-302; T. A. Coughlan, *The Wealth and Progress of New South Wales 1894*, Vol. 2 (Sydney, 1896), pp.970-974.

³² A. M. Topp, “Freeman’s Historical Geography of Europe”, *Melbourne Review*, Vol. 6, 24 (October 1881), pp.402-404. See also Marilyn Lake, “‘Essentially Teutonic’: E. A. Freeman: Liberal Race Historian. A Transnational Perspective”, in Catherine Hall and Keith McClelland, eds, *Race, Nation and Empire: Making Histories, 1750 to the Present* (Manchester, 2010), pp.56-73.

³³ Topp, “English Institutions”, pp.10, 15; Topp, “A Few More Words”, p.201, 211.

³⁴ Theodor Mommsen, *The History of Rome*, trans. W.P. Dickson, Vol. 4, Part 1 (London, 1866), pp.386-388.

³⁵ Topp, “English Institutions”, pp.15-16, 24; Topp, “A Few More Words”, pp.204-205.

institutions” included as well trial by jury and a free press. He marshalled much evidence to show how the Irish had corrupted and abused the political and justice systems in Ireland itself, as well as in the countries to which so many of them had recently immigrated. For him “Catholic Emancipation”, which he wrongly thought meant the restoration of the vote to Catholic men in 1829, had been a “disastrous failure, and would have been better resisted, even at the cost of civil war in Ireland”.³⁶

Mass Irish migration, triggered by famine during the 1840s and on the rise again in 1880-81 due to recession, Topp considered a threat to the whole English-speaking world. He compared the spread of the “alien” Irish to a “deadly poison” coursing “unchecked through our system” and “eating into the heart of a healthy and noble political fabric”. The result would be racial degeneration combined with political decline.³⁷ By destroying the fundamentally Teutonic character of the peoples of England, the United States and Australia, the Celtic Irish were in effect racially separating the Anglo-Saxons from their Germanic cousins. Such a division, according to Topp’s reading of history, would inevitably lead to war; and, just as inevitably, this was a war in which the racially superior Germans would prevail.

Yet, rather surprisingly perhaps, Topp did in fact have a solution to the Irish conundrum of how “to reclaim and civilize a degraded and demoralized race”. This solution was assimilation through secular education. A “uniform system of state Education” offered, he argued, “in the long run”, a “gradual and subtle method of sapping [...] the baneful influence” of the Celtic Irish. Topp strongly defended Victoria’s 1872 *Education Act* because, to his way of thinking, it held out hope of the racial salvation of the Australian colonies. Should education fail though, then Topp predicted total catastrophe, for “the Irish difficulty may yet prove the ‘rock ahead’ upon which the noble vessel that bears along the fortunes and destinies of the English people will be hopelessly and irretrievably wrecked”.³⁸

Unlike British racial theorists, such as Knox and Beddoe, Topp did not draw attention to the bodies of the Irish as evidence of racial inferiority, although other critics in Australia, notably cartoonists, helped disseminate this approach.³⁹ He emphasised instead history and culture and, following the evolutionary theories of Herbert Spencer, psychology, sociology and biology. Spencer, in his first major book *Social Statics*, published in 1850, had argued that the “Moral Sense” was fundamental to the achievement of “social equilibrium”, but this sense differed markedly according to how evolved a particular race was. Spencer suggested that there was a crucial relationship between individual character and social institutions: “the social organism, the seemingly fixed framework of law and institutions”, he wrote, is “moulded by [...] character”. The aggregation of individual characters — or “social atoms” as Spencer called them — determined the nature and stability of society, which he

³⁶ Topp, “English Institutions”, pp.10-11, 19, 22. The 1829 act in fact restored the right of Catholic men to sit in the Westminster parliament, while simultaneously disenfranchising many Catholic voters in Ireland by raising the property qualification for voting.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p.23.

³⁸ Topp, “A Few More Words”, p.214.

³⁹ During the 1860s and 1880s *Melbourne Punch* contained cartoons on Irish political events that physically racialised nationalists, depicting them sometimes as sub-human. For examples, see: *Melbourne Punch*, 26 March 1868, p.101; 8 June 1882, p.225; 8 March 1883, p.94. See also Dianne Hall, “‘Now Him White Man’: Images of the Irish in Colonial Australia”, *History Australia*, Vol. 11, 2 (August 2014) pp.167-195.

conceived of in organic terms. As George Stocking has pointed out, Spencer didn't just secularise morals, he "biologicalized" them.⁴⁰

Topp, a great admirer of Spencer, could also be said to have "biologicalized" morality. He was haunted by fears of degeneration: that the inferior race would corrupt the morally superior one, reduce it to a lower level, and thus ensure its downfall.⁴¹ Topp envisaged this as largely occurring through miscegenation. The "great nations of the world that have decayed and vanished", he wrote, were brought down through the "blood of the original conquering race becoming deteriorated by admixture with that of a large inferior population". Rome had fallen in this way, and Topp feared that the English too, "one of the ruling peoples of the world, may dwindle and disappear from a similar cause".⁴² Large-scale Irish migration was at the root of Topp's concerns about racial degeneration, and it seemed to him that already contemporary political events were bearing out his worst fears.

The Irish and Politics, 1879-82

Topp's articles were certainly informed by the Lamarkian theories of Herbert Spencer and by the post-1850 writings of various leading British and German scholars who identified race as a factor crucial in explaining the rise and fall of nations. But, for further evidence in support of his arguments, Topp turned to recent and current political events in the United Kingdom, the United States and also Victoria, in all of which he detected the baneful influence of the Irish. His repeated references to such events, especially in his second April 1881 article, lent his writings an air of urgency.

The years 1879-82 are widely recognised by historians as a critical period in Anglo-Irish relations. They witnessed sustained Irish campaigns for both devolved government, known as Home Rule, and land reform, known as the Land War.⁴³ In his first article, Topp expressed his strong opposition to the Irish Home Rule movement and its then leader Charles Stewart Parnell, whom he accused of having led a campaign during the 1870s to subvert the Westminster parliament — the premier "English institution" — through systematic obstruction.⁴⁴ Like many English critics of Home Rule, Topp predicted that a self-governing Ireland, "if it ever got beyond a state of chronic anarchy and civil war", would probably emerge as a corrupt South American-style military dictatorship.⁴⁵ During the course of 1881, violence escalated in Ireland, spreading to England itself. The Liberal government responded by ordering

⁴⁰ Herbert Spencer, *Social Statics: or the Conditions Essential to Human Happiness Specified, and the First of Them Developed* (London, 1850), pp.29-31, 264; George W. Stocking Jr, *Victorian Anthropology* (New York, 1991), p.132.

⁴¹ Other contributors to the *Melbourne Review*, notably H.K. Rusden, had similar eugenicist concerns. Diana Wyndham, *Eugenics in Australia: Striving for National Fitness* (London, 2003), pp.285-286. See also Daniel Pick, *Faces of Degeneration: a European Disorder, c.1848-c.1918* (Cambridge, 1993), p.177.

⁴² Topp, "English Institutions", p.23. In this he was echoing fears expressed by Thomas Carlyle, among many others. See A. E. Martin, "Blood Transfusions: Constructions of Irish Racial Difference, the English Working Class, and Revolutionary Possibility in the Work of Carlyle and Engels", *Victorian Literature and Culture*, Vol. 32 (2004), pp.83-102.

⁴³ For Home Rule and the Land War, see Philip Bull, *Land, Politics and Nationalism: a Study of the Irish Land Question* (Dublin, 1996), pp.116-142.

⁴⁴ Similar tactics, known as "stonewalling", were used in the Victorian parliament in 1875-76 by the liberals after they had lost office. Topp may well have intended his readers to conclude that colonial liberals were copying the extreme political tactics of Irish nationalists. Stuart Macintyre, *A Colonial Liberalism: the Lost World of Three Victorian Visionaries* (Melbourne, 1991), p.64.

⁴⁵ Topp, "English Institutions", p.21.

the internment of Parnell and other leading members of his party. Topp's friend, the writer A. Patchett Martin, was later to claim that the expulsion of the Home Rulers from parliament and their imprisonment in 1881 had a profound influence on Topp's thinking about the Irish.⁴⁶

In his second article, Topp drew parallels with Guy Fawkes and Russian nihilists when deploring the bombing campaign being carried out in London at the time by Irish republicans, or "Fenian assassins" as he called them.⁴⁷ Topp had been reading an account of the Land War written by a County Cork landlord, William Bence Jones, who had fallen victim to a new method of intimidation called the "boycott" and who labelled the land reform campaign "terrorism".⁴⁸ The fact that the Irish in the Australian colonies were raising funds to support this land struggle, Topp considered particularly alarming. Success in Ireland, he feared, would embolden Catholics in Victoria to seek "to undermine the Education Act" so as to restore state aid. As will be discussed below, Topp's anxiety was undoubtedly exacerbated by local political developments for, from July 1881, Victoria had a government headed by an Irish-born Catholic premier, who in his youth had supported radical nationalism. Given Topp believed "innate lawlessness" was fundamental to the Irish racial character, he feared that Victoria too might soon see the sort of "terrorism" currently being employed by Irish "assassins" on both sides of the Irish Sea.⁴⁹

Political events in the United States as well during 1880-81 alarmed Topp. In his first article he had made disparaging general remarks about "half-civilized hordes" of Irish immigrants "sapping the vitals of the great republic".⁵⁰ The second article, however, was far more specific as to the dangers that the Irish posed to the American political system. Topp quoted from a report in the London *Pall Mall Gazette* dealing with recent elections held in New York, contrasting this account with how these same elections had been reported by the Melbourne *Advocate*, the voice of Irish Catholic opinion in Victoria.⁵¹ The *Advocate* hailed New York Catholics for pioneering the boycotting of an anti-Catholic newspaper and suggested that, if Catholics adopted a similar tactic against their "journalistic traducers in Victoria, we would have fewer attacks on our race and creed".⁵² Of course, to Topp, this was just further evidence of the "innate lawlessness" of the Irish. The new tactic of the boycott, which was pioneered in Ireland in 1880 against the legitimate rights of property, had been quickly adopted by the Irish in New York and there used against free speech. Now, in 1881, the Irish in Australia were openly advocating it, with the intention of intimidating and silencing their critics. "Like children, playing with edge tools, unwitting of the danger, [Topp warned] the Irish are everywhere playing with treason and rebellion."⁵³

The Irish and Politics in Victoria, 1879-81

While overseas events during 1879-81 lent urgency to Topp's concerns about the threat the Irish posed to increasingly democratic political systems, to lawful property

⁴⁶ F. S. L. Lyons, *Charles Stewart Parnell* (London, 1977), pp.168-175; A. Patchett Martin, *Australia and the Empire* (Edinburgh, 1889), p.121.

⁴⁷ Topp, "A Few More Words", p.199.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.205-206.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp.199-200.

⁵⁰ Topp, "English Institutions", p.21.

⁵¹ Topp, "A Few More Words", pp 207-208.

⁵² *Advocate* quoted in *ibid.*, pp.206-207.

⁵³ Topp, "A Few More Words", p.198.

rights and to freedom of the press, it was problems closer to home that undoubtedly had the most profound impact upon his thinking. During the late 1870s Victoria experienced an economic recession, combined with a bitter struggle for power between liberals, radicals and conservatives that disrupted colonial governance — a phenomenon conservatives dubbed “Berry blight”.⁵⁴ During 1880, there were two elections in the colony, with a further change of government in 1881, the year Topp’s articles were published. Frequent changes of ministry had characterised Victoria since self-government in 1855, but by 1879 these changes appeared to be accelerating and there was concern that the colony’s political system was becoming dangerously unstable.

Conservatives and liberals alike were agreed that the “Catholic vote” was a particular problem. In Topp’s opinion, ever since the 1850s, the Irish “at the dictation of their priestly leaders” had used their “voting strength” to “render any stable and lasting government impossible”.⁵⁵ Irish immigration to Victoria during the 1850s and 1860s had been substantial, but it began to decline after assisted migration schemes were curtailed in 1872. However, with a higher birth rate, the number of Catholics in the population continued to increase at a faster rate than the number of Protestants, nearly doubling in the twenty years after 1861. According to the 1881 census, 24 per cent of the colony’s total population was Catholic, with the Irish-born comprising 10 per cent. Catholics were distributed widely, although unevenly, across Victoria’s fifty-five electoral districts, ranging from a low of 12.5 per cent of residents to a high of 53 per cent. Therefore the “Catholic vote” was important in many electorates.⁵⁶

Topp considered it vitally important to resist political campaigns mounted by the Catholic Church for the restoration of state aid to church schools, however, when in 1880-81 he attacked the “Irish race” for poisoning “English institutions”, he probably also had in mind some of Victoria’s leading Irish-born Catholic politicians. The premierships of John O’Shanassy (1857, 1858-59 and 1861-63), a strong proponent of state aid, had sparked intense conservative opposition.⁵⁷ O’Shanassy’s first 1857 ministry lasted for only seven weeks, yet, as a later Irish-born premier, Charles Gavan Duffy, pointed out in his memoirs, it was truly ground breaking, for no one “had ever seen Irish Catholics in Cabinet office under the British Crown” before — not in fact since the seventeenth century.⁵⁸ The liberal Alfred Deakin, echoing many of his friend Topp’s anti-Irish political stereotypes, described O’Shanassy as a “peasant in build, gait and habit”. He was, continued Deakin, “uncouth in manner” and an “impatient intriguer”, having an “ungovernable appetite for power”; “arrogant in victory”, he was “truculent when brought to bay”.⁵⁹ O’Shanassy was still politically active in 1879-81, trying desperately to recapture the premiership with a view to restoring state aid to Catholic schools.

By this time, however, the most prominent Irish Catholic politician in Victoria was not O’Shanassy, nor Duffy either, but the barrister Sir Bryan O’Loughlen. An active nationalist in Ireland during the 1840s, O’Loughlen had secured employment in

⁵⁴ H. G. Turner, *A History of the Colony of Victoria*, Vol. 2 (1904; Melbourne, 1973), pp.182, 217-218.

⁵⁵ Topp, “English Institutions”, p.23.

⁵⁶ Oliver MacDonagh, “The Irish in Victoria, 1851-91: a Demographic Essay”, in T. D. Williams, ed., *Historical Studies VIII* (Dublin, 1971), pp.83-84.

⁵⁷ S. M. Ingham, “O’Shanassy, Sir John (1818-1883)”, *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/oshanassy-sir-john-4347/text7059>, published first in hardcopy 1974, accessed online 17 May 2013.

⁵⁸ Charles Gavan Duffy, *My Life in Two Hemispheres*, Vol. 2 (London, 1898), p.169.

⁵⁹ Alfred Deakin, *The Crisis in Victorian Politics 1879-81: a Personal Retrospective*, eds J. A. La Nauze and R. M. Crawford (Melbourne, 1957), pp.63-64.

the colony in 1863 as a crown prosecutor during O'Shanassy's third premiership. Elected in 1878 to the Legislative Assembly for a Melbourne working-class electorate with a population that was around one-third Catholic and nearly one-fifth Irish-born, he served as attorney general under the radical premier Graham Berry until 1880, also acting as premier during Berry's six-month absence in England in 1878-79.⁶⁰ In both capacities O'Loughlen was deeply engaged with the problem of law-and-order.

In his second article, while dwelling generally upon Irish "lawlessness", Topp devoted several pages specifically to crime rates in Victoria, attempting to demonstrate that the Irish had a "tendency to acts of violence", which was "an obvious characteristic of an imperfectly civilized man".⁶¹ Crime and the Irish was a much-discussed topic in Victoria during 1878-81 and, in his stress on crime, Topp was undoubtedly reflecting this fact. These were the years of the Kelly outbreak: in October and November 1880, when Topp was writing his first Irish article, Ned Kelly was convicted and executed in Melbourne; while in March 1881, when the second article was being written, a royal commission began a major enquiry into the Victorian police force and particularly why it had been so slow to bring the Kelly gang to justice. Conservatives deplored the fact that the hunt for the Kellys had taken two years and had cost the colony huge sums of money during an economic recession.⁶² Some blamed police incompetence; others suspected connivance between bushrangers and police, especially as most of the colony's police force was Irish-born.⁶³ Still others chose to draw parallels between the illegal actions of Kelly and what they regarded as the illegal actions of the Berry ministry. Kelly was finally captured in June 1880 during the term of the short-lived first Service ministry (March-August 1880). When campaigning for re-election in July 1880, the conservative James Service was at pains to point out in his speeches that it was he and not Berry or O'Loughlen who was "entitled to [...] credit for catching the Kellys".⁶⁴

The conservative *Argus* was naturally intensely hostile to the whole Berry cabinet, but it targeted Bryan O'Loughlen in particular, charging him not only with failing to catch Kelly, but also with introducing into Victorian electoral politics corrupt Irish practices, "unheard of before".⁶⁵ Topp did not join the staff of the *Argus* until 1882, but his attacks on the Irish for corrupting "English institutions" find an echo in many of the denunciations of O'Loughlen that appeared regularly in the newspaper between 1878 and 1880. The *Argus* began by alleging that O'Loughlen had "managed to creep in for [the seat of] West Melbourne" in a "disreputable way" in 1878 by employing "every kind of trick", from "government assistance on the one hand" to "terrorism on the other"; and it continued to attack him vigorously throughout 1879.⁶⁶ In particular it accused him of blocking an enquiry into the police

⁶⁰ S. M. Ingham, "O'Loughlen, Sir Bryan (1828-1905)", *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/oloughlen-sir-bryan-4331/text7029>, published first in hardcopy 1974, accessed online 10 September 2015. For Graham Berry's premierships, see Paul Strangio, "Broken Heads and Flaming Houses: Graham Berry, the Wild Colonial", in Paul Strangio and Brian Costar, eds, *The Victorian Premiers, 1856-2006* (Sydney, 2006), pp.51-73.

⁶¹ Topp, "A Few More Words", pp.210-211.

⁶² Turner, *A History of the Colony of Victoria*, Vol. 2, p.229.

⁶³ Robert Haldane, *The People's Force: a History of Victoria Police* (Melbourne, 1986), pp.78-90. It was alleged that, when in power, O'Shanassy had appointed "none but Irishmen to the police". C. W. Dilke, *Greater Britain: a Record of Travel in English-Speaking Countries during 1866 and 1867* (1869; New York, 2005), p.313.

⁶⁴ *Argus*, 2 July 1880, p.6.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 12 February 1880, p.9.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 15 April 1879, p.4.

force's failure to catch the Kelly gang and of causing a "sensation in the land" in February 1879 by rigging a by-election for West Bourke so as to ensure Alfred Deakin's return.⁶⁷

During the course of these repeated attacks on O'Loughlen as a minister, the *Argus* on occasion turned also to highlighting his disloyal past in Ireland with, for example, mention of "widow Cormack's cabbage garden" — a sneering reference to the site of the 1848 Irish rebellion.⁶⁸ And the paper was in no doubt that the corruption it alleged O'Loughlen had introduced into colonial politics had Irish roots. With "shameless audacity", O'Loughlen had overseen a regime in which elections were "tampered with; the course of justice was obstructed; public bodies were crippled; the press was subsidized and corrupted".⁶⁹ So O'Loughlen, in the eyes of the *Argus* in 1880, was the perfect embodiment of the unfitness of the Catholic "Irish race" for "English institutions" that Topp was to argue so strenuously in his 1881 articles.⁷⁰

During 1880-81 most Catholic members of the Legislative Assembly, including O'Loughlen, opposed Berry's third ministry due to the premier's repeated failure to restore state aid to Catholic schools. In July 1881, however, with the help of the conservative Thomas Bent, O'Loughlen succeeded in bringing down Berry's weak government in a no-confidence vote and in forming a ministry of his own, which Deakin reckoned was "one half [...] Catholic in policy".⁷¹ O'Loughlen did not actually command a majority in the Assembly, but nonetheless he survived as premier for nearly two years, until February 1883. Bent, the son of an English convict father and an Irish immigrant mother, was a corrupt and unscrupulous political operator who, Deakin was convinced, was the real power in the O'Loughlen ministry.⁷² It is not hard to imagine what Topp must have thought of his fellow conservatives supporting a government led by the likes of O'Loughlen and Bent. Late in 1881, J.B. Patterson, an English-born Orangeman and former minister under Berry, summed up the political condition of the colony in alarmist terms, reminiscent of Topp, by claiming: "The Catholics have the whole power of the State in their hands at the moment".⁷³

Topp's articles were widely noted in the colonial press. The main Catholic newspapers in both Melbourne and Sydney naturally attacked them, denying the existence of racial inferiority and accusing Topp instead of sectarian bigotry. The most sustained critique, however, appeared in the *Melbourne Review* itself, written by a Sydney-based former Irish soldier, Joseph O'Brien. He challenged Topp's assertion of English moral superiority by pointing to the policies pursued by the British in

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 15 October 1879, p.6; 12 February 1880, p.9. For Deakin's rejection of this allegation, see Deakin, *The Crisis*, pp.36-38.

⁶⁸ *Argus*, 26 January 1878, p.6.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 4 March 1880, p.4.

⁷⁰ Cartoonists too liked to link O'Loughlen's Irishness with political malpractice: showing him either as a farmer selling a pig labelled the "Catholic vote", or as a pig himself, wearing a bishop's mitre and thus obviously a puppet of the Catholic Church. See, for example: *Melbourne Punch*, 22 March 1883, p.114; 15 December 1881, p.235.

⁷¹ Deakin, *The Crisis*, pp.63-65.

⁷² *Ibid.*, pp.78-79. Most historians have accepted Deakin's analysis, portraying O'Loughlen's ministry as a "stopgap" one, supported by conservatives only to prevent Berry's return to power. Serle, *The Rush to be Rich*, p.17.

⁷³ A cartoon, illustrating this remark and entitled "The Catholic Vote", showed Patterson, a former butcher, sharpening his knives in preparation for slaughtering O'Loughlen caricatured as a pig. See *Melbourne Punch*, 15 December 1881, p.235.

India, where as in Ireland they had created devastating famines.⁷⁴ And, as with the Catholic press, he too tried to shift the main basis of the controversy away from race and onto religion. The Scots and the Welsh were Celts like the Irish, O'Brien argued, but Topp did not consider them racially inferior. This was obviously because they were Protestant, which demonstrated that Topp's animus against the Irish was not really because they were Celts, but because they were Catholics.⁷⁵ Adopting a slightly different line, a writer in Sydney's Catholic *Freeman's Journal*, dwelt upon the violence and repression inflicted upon the Irish over the centuries by the English. When "taken from under the incubus of 'the dominant race'" in Ireland and settled in America or Australia, claimed this anonymous correspondent, the "Catholic Celt [...] succeeds and often succeeds brilliantly".⁷⁶ Topp had in fact explicitly denied that his main objection to the Irish was their religion.⁷⁷ But it is clear from responses to his articles that, by the 1880s, the Irish Catholic community saw itself as an essential element in the success story of "white" Australia: its contribution shortly to be celebrated in J. F. Hogan's laudatory pioneering history, *The Irish in Australia*.⁷⁸ According to this way of looking at attacks on Irish Catholics, race was simply not relevant; therefore it followed that the critics could not be racists and must instead be religious bigots.

Conclusion

A. M. Topp's racial strictures against the Irish were certainly outspoken for the time. Yet it would be a mistake to view him as an isolated and unrepresentative figure in colonial political and cultural life, which is how previous historians have tended to portray him. On the contrary, highly educated, well informed and known for his wit and erudition, he mixed with Victoria's social and intellectual elite.⁷⁹ He was on the inaugural editorial committee of the *Melbourne Review* and he enjoyed membership of some of Melbourne's leading clubs and debating societies, such as the Athenaeum Club and the Eclectic Association.⁸⁰ After the publication of his 1881 articles, he left the family business to join the *Argus*, where he worked as a sub-editor and leader writer until shortly before his death in 1916.⁸¹

If Topp was no mere eccentric, it is also true that his racialised reading of the dangers posed to English-style governance by mass Irish immigration is more interesting than previously thought. His articles reflected contemporary anxiety about the growing political power of the organised Irish "Catholic vote", not only in Australia, but in Britain and America as well. At the same time, his portrayal in 1881 of the Celtic Irish as a "child" race clearly echoed current attitudes towards

⁷⁴ Joseph O'Brien, "English Institutions and the Irish Race: a Reply", *Melbourne Review*, Vol. 6, 22 (April 1881), pp.113-114.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, pp.112-113.

⁷⁶ *Freeman's Journal*, 22 January 1881, p.12.

⁷⁷ Topp, "English Institutions", p.17.

⁷⁸ J. F. Hogan, *The Irish in Australia* (London, 1887).

⁷⁹ Jill Eastwood, "Topp, Arthur Maning (1844–1916)", *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/topp-arthur-maning-4734/text7857>, published first in hardcopy 1976, accessed online 20 December 2011; A. D. Mickle, *Many a Mickle* (Melbourne, 1953), pp.98-100.

⁸⁰ Paul de Serville, *Pounds and Pedigrees: the Upper Class in Victoria, 1850-80* (Oxford, 1991), pp.444-445.

⁸¹ See his obituary in *Argus*, 19 January 1916, p.10.

indigenous peoples.⁸² The *Argus* in March of that year, when reporting Barak's campaign for greater autonomy at Coranderrk, characterised the Kulin as a people given to "childishness, simplicity and [an] easy readiness to fall into temptation" — in other words, rather like Topp's Irish.⁸³ The year 1881 also witnessed, as we have seen, efforts in various colonies to impose further restrictions on Chinese immigration and to exclude Chinese men already in Australia from politics by depriving them of the right to vote. And again parallels are easy to find between the racialised accusations levelled against the Chinese and Topp's diatribe against the Irish. Both groups were characterised as "alien hordes", arriving in "limitless numbers", congregating together "in misery and squalor", "lowering the rate of wages" and, even worse, threatening racial degeneration through miscegenation.⁸⁴ Indeed, after his tour of the United States and Australia in 1866-67, the English radical politician, Sir Charles Dilke, had called the Chinese "the Irish of the Pacific", while warning the Australian colonies not to follow the American example and destroy their "rising nationality" by allowing the "importation of mixed multitudes of negroes, Chinamen, Hill-coolies [Indians]" and the "Irish".⁸⁵

Patrick O'Farrell considered that Topp's polemic marked the end of a period of unrestrained vilification of the Catholic Irish in Australia.⁸⁶ Yet attacks on them continued long after 1881. The basis for these attacks, however, shifted away from race and settled more upon religion, perhaps partly because by 1881 the Catholic community had become a majority Australian-born one. As pointed out, Topp was applying to the Irish racial tropes commonly used at the time against indigenous peoples and the Chinese. But the Catholic Irish, unlike the Aborigines, could not be confined to mission stations and left there to meet their widely anticipated racial doom; nor, like the Chinese, could they be excluded or disenfranchised. Warwick Anderson has claimed that the Irish, like southern Europeans, were needed to develop and defend the frontiers of northern Australia and so had to be accorded "white" status, even if the exact nature of that status remained a focus of scholarly dispute into the 1930s.⁸⁷

For all his intense anti-Irish prejudice, Topp was enough of a realist to appreciate that neither confinement nor exclusion was practical and so, somehow, the "Irish race" had to be equipped to make productive use of "English institutions". His blueprint for this task was assimilation through secular state education. Like Herbert Spencer, Topp believed that defective morality was racially inherited, but also like Spencer he considered that in time it could be corrected by education. Topp's 1881 articles therefore highlight an important boundary of "whiteness" that was perceived by many contemporaries to exist inside the colonial settler community itself. Yet, even critics as fierce as Topp saw the Catholic Irish, unlike the Aborigines and the Chinese, as ultimately redeemable and thus as eligible for inclusion within borders of "white" Australia.

⁸² Lake explores such attitudes in other colonial contexts, notably Cuba and the Philippines. See Marilyn Lake, "White Is Wonderful: Emotional Conversion and Subjective Formation", in *Re-Orienting Whiteness*, p.125.

⁸³ *Argus*, 18 March 1881, p.4.

⁸⁴ Topp, "English Institutions", pp.18, 21; for similar Chinese stereotypes, see *Illustrated Sydney News*, 26 April 1888, pp.5-7.

⁸⁵ Dilke, *Greater Britain*, pp.189, 332.

⁸⁶ O'Farrell, *The Irish in Australia*, p.247.

⁸⁷ Warwick Anderson, "Traveling White", in *Re-Orienting Whiteness*, p.67; *idem*, *The Cultivation of Whiteness*, pp.148-149.