The Irish in America (1867)

The Irish were weighed down by many woes in the nineteenth century, prime among them British dominion and the famine wrought by the potato rot. The weight buried many at home and squeezed others out to find freedom and food abroad. These Irish immigrants, who by 1860 composed the largest foreign-born group in America, faced perhaps the greatest prejudice. John Francis Maguire, looking back on decades of Irish migration, tried to explain why to both Irish and American readers in his book, *The Irish in America*.

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Irish emigrants of the peasant and labouring class were generally poor, and after defraying their first expenses on landing had little left to enable them to push their way into the country in search of such employment as was best suited to their knowledge and capacity: though had they known what was in store for too many of them and their children, they would have endured the severest privation and braved any hardship, in order to free themselves from the fatal spell in which the fascination of a city life has meshed the souls of so many of their race. Either they brought little money with them, and were therefore unable to go on; or that little was plundered from them by those whose trade it was to prey upon the inexperience or credulity of the newcomer. Therefore, to them, the poor or the plundered Irish emigrants, the first and pressing necessity was employment; and so splendid seemed the result of that employment, even the rudest and most laborious kind, as compared with what they were able to earn in the old country, that it at once predisposed them in favour of a city life. . . . Then there were old friends and former companions or acquaintances to be met with at every street-corner; and there was news to give, and news to receive—too often, perhaps, in the liquor-store or dram-shop kept by a countryman—probably 'a neighbour's child,' or 'a decent boy from the next ploughland.' Then 'the chapel was handy,' and 'a Christian wouldn't be overtaken for want of a priest;' then there was 'the schooling convenient for the children, poor things,'—so the glorious chance was lost; and the simple, innocent countryman, to whom the trees of the virgin forest were nodding their branches in friendly invitation, and the blooming prairie expanded its fruitful bosom in vain, became the denizen of a city, for which he was unqualified by training, by habit, and by association. Possibly it was the mother's courage that failed her as she glanced at the flock of little ones who clustered around her, or timidly clung to her skirts, and she thought of the new dangers and further perils that awaited them; and it was her maternal influence that was flung into the trembling balance against the country and in favour of the city. Or employment was readily found for one of the girls, or one or two of the boys, and things looked so hopeful in the fine place that all thoughts of the fresh, breezy, healthful plain or hill-side were shut out at that supreme moment of the emigrant's destiny; though many a time after did he and they long for one breath of pure air, as they languished in the stifling heat of a summer in a tenement house. Or the pioneer of the family—most likely a young girl—had found good employment, and, with the fruits of her honest toil, had gradually brought out brothers and sisters, father and mother, for whose companionship her heart ever yearned; and possibly her affection was stronger than her prudence, or she knew nothing of the West and its limitless resources. Or sickness, that had followed the emigrant's family across the ocean, fastened upon some member of the group as they touched the soil for which they had so ardently prayed, and though the fever or the cholera...
did not destroy a precious life, it did the almost as precious opportunity of a better future! the spring of that energy which was sufficient to break asunder the ties and habits of previous years—sufficient for flight from home and country—was broken, and those who faced America in high hope were thenceforth added to the teeming population of a city—to which class, it might be painful to speculate.

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This headlong rushing into the great cities has the necessary effect of unduly adding to their population, thereby overtaxing their resources, however large or even extraordinary these resources may be, and of rudely disturbing the balance of supply and demand. The hands—the men, women, and children—thus become too many for the work to be done, as the work becomes too little for the hands willing and able to do it. What is worse, there are too many mouths for the bread of independence; and thus the bread of charity has to supplement the bread which is purchased with the sweat of the brow. Happy would it be for the poor in the towns of America, as elsewhere, if the bread of charity were the only bread with which the bread of independence is supplemented. But there is also the bread of degradation, and the bread of crime. And when the moral principle is blunted by abject misery, or weakened by disappointments and privation, there is but a narrow barrier between poverty and crime; and this, too frequently, is soon passed. For such labour as is thus recklessly poured into the great towns there is constant peril. It is true, there are seasons when there is a glut of work, when the demand exceeds the supply—when some gigantic industry or some sudden necessity clamours for additional hands; but there are also, and more frequently, seasons when work is slack, seasons of little employment, seasons of utter paralysis and stagnation. Cities are liable to occasional depressions of trade, resulting from over production, or the successful rivalry of foreign nations, or even portions of the same country; or there are smashings of banks, and commercial panics, and periods of general mistrust. Or, owing to the intense severity of certain seasons, there is a total cessation of employments of particular kinds, by which vast numbers of people are flung idle on the streets. . . .

The evil of overcrowding is magnified to a prodigious extent in New York, which, being the port of arrival—the Gate of the New World—receives a certain addition to its population from almost every ship-load of emigrants that passes through Castle Garden. There is scarcely any city in the world possessing greater resources than New York, but these resources have long since been strained to the very uttermost to meet the yearly increasing demands created by this continuous accession to its inhabitants; . . .

As in all cities growing in wealth and in population, the dwelling accommodation of the poor is yearly sacrificed to the increasing necessities or luxury of the rich. While spacious streets and grand mansions are on the increase, the portions of the city in which the working classes once found an economical residence, are being steadily encroached upon—just as the artisan and labouring population of the City of London are driven from their homes by the inexorable march of city improvements, and streets and courts and alleys are swallowed up by a great thoroughfare or a gigantic railway terminus. . . .

As stated on official authority, there are 16,000 tenement houses in New York, and in these there dwell more than half a million of people! This astounding fact is of itself so suggestive of misery and evil, that it scarcely requires to be enlarged upon; . . .
It is not at all necessary that an Irish immigrant should go West, whatever and how great the inducements it offers to the enterprising. There is land to be had, under certain circumstances and conditions, in almost every State in the Union. And there is no State in which the Irish peasant who is living from hand to mouth in one of the great cities as a day-labourer, may not improve his condition by betaking himself to his natural and legitimate avocation—the cultivation of the soil. Nor is the vast region of the South unfavourable to the laborious and energetic Irishman. On the contrary, there is no portion of the American continent in which he would receive a more cordial welcome, or meet with more favourable terms. This would not have been so before the war, or the abolition of slavery, and the upset of the land system which was based upon the compulsory labour of the negro. . . . The policy of the South is to increase and strengthen the white population, so as not to be, as the South yet is, too much dependent on the negro; and the planter who, ten years ago, would not sever a single acre from his estate of 2,000, or 10,000, or 20,000 acres, will now readily divide, if not all, at least a considerable portion of it, into saleable quantities, to suit the convenience of purchasers. . . .

Were I asked to say what I believed to be the most serious obstacle to the advancement of the Irish in America, I would unhesitatingly answer—Drink; meaning thereby the excessive use, or abuse, of that which, when taken in excess, intoxicates, deprives man of his reason, interferes with his industry, injures his health, damages his position, compromises his respectability, renders him unfit for the successful exercise of his trade, profession, or employment—which leads to quarrel, turbulence, violence, crime. I believe this fatal tendency to excessive indulgence to be the main cause of all the evils and miseries and disappointments that have strewed the great cities of America with those wrecks of Irish honour, Irish virtue, and Irish promise, which every lover of Ireland has had, one time or other, bitter cause to deplore. Differences of race and religion are but as a feather's weight in the balance; indeed these differences tend rather to add interest to the steady and self-respecting citizen. Were this belief, as to the tendency of the Irish to excess in the use of stimulants, based on the testimony of Americans, who might probably be somewhat prejudiced, and therefore inclined to judge unfavourably, or pronounce unsparingly, I should not venture to record it; but it was impressed upon me by Irishmen of every rank, class, and condition of life, wherever I went, North or South, East or West. It was openly deplored, or it was reluctantly admitted. I rarely heard an Irishman say that his country or his religion was an effectual barrier to his progress in the United States. . . .

The question here naturally arises,—do the Irish drink more than the people of any other nationality in America? The result of my observation and inquiries leads me to the conviction that they do not. How then comes it that the habit, if common to all is so pernicious to them? There are many and various reasons why this is so. In the first place, they are strangers, and, as such, more subject to observation and criticism than the natives of the country. They are, also, as a rule, of a faith different to that of the majority of the American people; and the fact that they are so does not render the observation less keen, nor does it render the criticism more gentle. Then, be it constitution, or temperament, or whatever else, excess seems to be more injurious to them than to others. They are genial, open-hearted, generous, and social in their tendencies; they love company, court excitement, and delight in affording pleasure or gratification to their friends. And not only are their very virtues leagued against them, but the prevailing custom of the country is a perpetual challenge to indulgence. This prevailing custom or habit springs more
from a spirit of kindness than from a craving for sensual gratification. Invitations to drink are universal, as to rank and station, time and place, hour and circumstance; they literally rain upon you. The Americans are perhaps about the most thoroughly wide-awake people in the world, yet they must have an 'eye-opener' in the morning. To prepare for meals, you are requested to fortify your stomach and stimulate your digestive powers with an 'appetizer.' To get along in the day, you are invited to accept the assistance of a 'pony.' If you are startled at the mention of 'a drink,' you find it difficult to refuse 'at least a nip.' And who but the most morose—and the Irishman is all geniality—can resist the influence of 'a smile?' Now a 'cocktail,' now a 'coblur'—here a 'julep,' there a 'smasher,' or if you shrink from the potency of the 'Bourbon,' you surely are not afraid of 'a single glass of lager beer!' To the generous, company-loving Irishman there is something like treason to friendship and death to good-fellowship in refusing these kindly-meant invitations; but woe to the impulsive Irishman who becomes the victim of this custom of the country! The Americans drink, the Germans drink, the Scotch drink, the English drink—all drink with more or less injury to their health or circumstances; but whatever the injury to these, or any of these, it is far greater to the mercurial and light-hearted Irish than to races of hard head and lethargic temperament . . .

It must be admitted that, in some cities of America—by no means in all, or anything like all—the Irish element figures unenviably in the police records, and before the inferior tribunals; and that in these cities the committals are more numerous than they should be in proportion to the numerical strength of the Irish population. . . The deadly crimes—the secret poisonings, the deliberate murders, the deep-laid frauds, the cunningly-masked treachery, the dark villany, the spider-like preparation for the destruction of the unwary victim—these are not common to the Irish. Rows, riots, turbulence, acts of personal violence perpetrated in passion, are what are principally recorded of them in the newspapers; and in nine cases out of ten, these offences against the peace and order of the community, and which so deeply prejudice the public mind, not only against the perpetrators, but, what is far worse, against the race and country, are attributable to one cause, and one cause alone—drink . . .

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. . . Whatever estimate Americans may form of their Irish fellow-citizens, be that estimate favourable or unfavourable, there is but one opinion as to the moral character of Irish women. Their reputation for purity does not rest on the boastful assertions of those who either regard all matters concerning their race or country from a favourable point of view, or who, to gratify a natural feeling, would wilfully exaggerate, or possibly misstate a fact: it is universally admitted. . . Prejudices, strong prejudices, there are in the States, as in all countries in which diversity of race and religion exists; and where this diversity comprehends race and religion in the same individuals, these prejudices are certain to be the stronger and the more deeply rooted. The Irish Catholic has to contend against this double prejudice, which nevertheless is not powerful enough to interfere with the conviction, indeed admission, as to the moral character of the women of that country and that faith. The poor Irish emigrant girl may possibly be rude, undisciplined, awkward—just arrived in a strange land, with all the rugged simplicity of her peasant's training; but she is good and honest. Nor, as she rapidly acquires the refinement inseparable from an improved condition of life, and daily association with people of cultivated manners, does she catch the contagion of the vices of the great centres of wealth and luxury. Whatever her position,—and it is principally amongst the humble walks of life the mass of the Irish are still to be found,—she maintains this one noble characteristic: purity. In domestic service her merit is
fully recognised. Once satisfied of the genuineness of her character, an American family will trust in her implicitly; and not only is there no locking up against her, but everything is left in her charge. Occasionally she may be hot tempered, difficult to be managed, perhaps a little 'turbulent'—especially when her country is sneered at, or her faith is wantonly ridiculed; but she is cheerful and laborious, virtuous and faithful.

An instance of very legitimate 'turbulence' occurred not long since in one of the most rising of the great Western cities. There lived, as a 'help,' in the house of a Protestant family, an intelligent and high-spirited Irish girl, remarkable for her exemplary conduct, and the zeal with which she discharged the duties of her position. Kate acted as a mother to a young brother and sister, whom she was bringing up with the greatest care; and a happy girl was Kate when she received good tidings of their progress in knowledge and piety. Kate, like many other people in the world, had her special torment, and that special torment was a playful-minded preacher who visited at the house, and who looked upon 'Bridget'—he would call her Bridget—as a fair butt for the exercise of his pleasant wit, of which he was justly proud. It was Kate's duty to attend table; and no sooner did she make her appearance in the dining-room, than the playful preacher commenced his usual fun, which would be somewhat in this fashion: 'Well, Bridget, my girl! when did you pray last to the Virgin Mary? Tell me, Bridget, when were you with Father Pat? What did you give him, Bridget? What did the old fellow ask for the absolution this time? Now, I guess it was ten cents for the small sins, and $1 for the thumpers! Come now, Bridget, tell me what penance did that priest of yours give you?' Thus would the agreeable jester pelt the poor Irish girl with his generous pleasantry, to the amusement of the thoughtless, but to the serious annoyance of the fair-minded, who did not like to see her feelings so wantonly wounded. The mistress of the house mildly remonstrated with her servant's lively tormentor, though she did not herself admire 'Bridget's' form of prayer, and was willing to regard 'Father Pat's' absolution as a matter of bargain and sale. But the wit should have his way. 'Bridget' was a handsome girl, and the rogue liked to see the fire kindle in her grey eye, and the hot blood mantle over her fair round cheek; and then the laughter of his admirers was such delightful incense to his vanity, as peal after peal told how successfully the incorrigible wag 'roasted Bridget.' On one memorable day, however, his love of the humorous carried him just too far. A large company was assembled round the hospitable table of the mistress of the house. The preacher was present, and was brimming over with merriment. Kate entered the room, bearing a large tureen of steaming soup in her hands. 'Ho, ho, Bridget!—how are you, Bridget? Well, Bridget, what did you pay Father Pat for absolution this time? Come to me, Bridget, and I will give you as many dollars as will set you all straight with the old fellow for the next six months, and settle your account with purgatory too. Now, Bridget, tell us how many cents for each sin?' The girl had just reached the preacher as he finished his little joke; and if he wished to see the Irish eye flash out its light, and the Irish blood burn in the cheek, he had an excellent opportunity for enjoying that treat. It was Bridget's turn to be playful. Stopping next to his chair, and looking him steadily in his face, while she grasped the tureen of rich green-pea soup more firmly in her hands, she said: 'Now, sir, I often asked you to leave me alone, and not mind me, and not to insult me or my religion, what no real gentleman would do to a poor girl; and now, sir, as you want to know what I pay for absolution, here's my answer!' and,suiting the action to the word, she flung the hot steaming liquid over the face, neck, breast—entire person—of the playful preacher! . . . The sentiment—the generous American sentiment—was in Kate's favour, as she might have perceived in the manner of the guests. For the poor preacher, it may be said that the soup 'spoiled his dinner' for that day. He did not make his appearance again for some time; but when he did, it was as an altered and much-improved
gentleman, who appeared to have lost all interest in the religious peculiarities of Kate, whom, strange to say, he never more called by the name of Bridget. The warm bath, so vigorously administered, had done him much service—Kate said, 'a power of good.' ***