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Celebrating St. Patrick's Day in Irish Manchester, 1825-1922

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Abstract

Between 1825 and 1922 Irish migrant celebration of St. Patrick's Day in Manchester became notably less boisterous, more respectable and more Catholic and Irish Nationalist in tone. These changes reflected the growing cultural and political confidence of a migrant population increasingly attuned to the mores of the city and developments in Ireland.

Key Words

St. Patrick's Day. Manchester. Convivial. Sober. Catholic. Irish Nationalist.

Introduction

The data used in this research project were culled from the *Manchester Guardian* (MG), *Manchester Courier* (MC) and *Catholic Herald* (CH). During the period under study celebrations of St. Patrick's Day by the Manchester Irish were recorded sporadically from 1825 and then much more regularly from 1877 onwards. It is quite possible that celebrations were still being held in the interim but were not deemed worthy of mention. During the period under study it is clear that celebrations underwent considerable shifts in format and emphasis in response to changes in the circumstances of the Irish migrant population and the affairs of Ireland.

Origins

From the seventh century 17th March was accepted as the date of St. Patrick's death, though the early history of how it was celebrated is obscure. However, by 1607 it was listed as a saint's day in the Irish legal calendar, implying some form of official recognition. In 1631 this was formalised when Pope Urban added 17th March to the list of church feast days and in 1687 Pope Innocent VII confirmed its status (Cronin 2002). Subsequently it evolved into a day of both religious observance and popular celebration, dimensions which could collide on occasion. Initially in Ireland 17th March, like the birthday of King William III on 4th November carried no overt sectarian or political overtones, but by the 1790s the latter was increasingly taken over by loyalist Protestant elements and their highly partisan celebrations caused liberal Protestant and official government circles to give added emphasis to 17th March as a non-contentious national festival (Hill 1984).

The festival was carried abroad into the Irish diaspora; the first celebration recorded in Boston (Massachusetts) was in 1737. Such early events were organised by Irish Protestant officers in the British army, but given the status of the day in the Catholic Church calendar, celebrations became deeply embedded in migrant popular culture and took on a form and emphasis which reflected the changing nature and preoccupations of the migrant population and its circumstances.

From Irish Rowdiness to Irish Respectability

From the mid 1820s to the mid 1840s newspapers recorded only occasional formal celebrations in Manchester, but noted quite frequent popular rowdiness. Boisterous processions, drunkenness and fist fights were often mentioned, escalating in 1830 into a riot, one newspaper remarking that '... the anniversary day of the patron saint of the Emerald Isle, did not pass over in this town without some of the disturbances common to the day.' (MC, 20 March 1830). Shortly afterwards public processions seem to have been abandoned until the early twentieth century and subsequent reports focused on indoor events, particularly a dinner. As early as 1825 it was remarked that 'The dinner and wines were furnished in Mr. Wilson's best style.' (MG, 19 March 1825) and a meal became the most enduring part of the celebrations.

Throughout the period symbols of Irishness were prominently displayed, including shamrock, green ribbons, scarves, flags and banners. In the early years of the twentieth century branches of the Irish National Foresters, a nationally minded mutual insurance organisation, were set up in Manchester, and members joined the celebrations dressed in green and white costume and carrying bright halberds (CH,

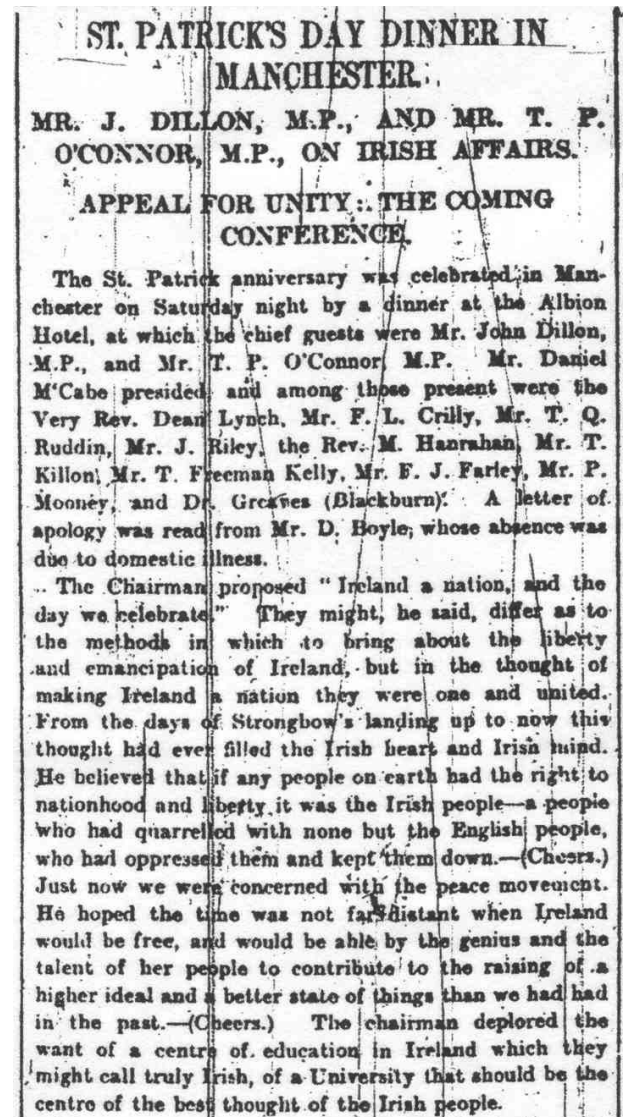
20 March 1903). Musical entertainment featured from the earliest days, though the repertoire underwent significant changes. A glee club with piano-forte accompaniment performed in 1842 (MC, 19 March 1842), but from the late 1870s the format closely conformed to the evolving structure of the Victorian concert, though with a distinctively Irish twist. In 1879 a soprano, contralto, tenor and bass sang, a pianist led and conducted, and bands representing the Salford Roman Catholic crusade '... walked into the hall playing various national airs.' (MC, 18 March 1879). In 1909 *A Nation Once Again* and *The Wearing of the Green* featured, and the evening ended with *'God Save Ireland'* (CH, 20 March 1909).

Religion and Politics

The changing musical offerings indicated the shift of emphasis in the day's celebrations. In the early period the dinners were inclusive and convivial. In 1842 toasts were offered to the Queen and the royal family, the national anthem was sung, one speaker expressed the hope that neither politics nor religion would intrude and the Rev. Daniel Hearne, parish priest of St. Patrick's Catholic Church was a guest speaker (MG, 23 March 1842). By the 1880s however the event was acquiring an increasingly Catholic tone. Lists of distinguished guests strongly featured local Catholic clergy; 20 were present at the dinner in 1889 (CH, 23 March 1889). Clergy often featured as guest speakers; in 1882 Bishop Vaughan and the Revs. Byrne and O'Callaghan spoke and Canon Kershaw presided. (MG, 18 March 1882). In the speeches which occupied a growing part of events, issues of particular concern to Catholics were often aired, notably the need to support Catholic education, temperance and church charities. In 1886 Bishop Vaughan strongly urged support for the Roman Catholic Protection and Rescue Society to ensure that Catholic orphans from the workhouse were placed with Catholic families (MG, 18 March 1886). 'The Clergy' became a regular toast, a cleric usually replying. By the early twentieth century it was customary for the Foresters to hold a church parade to Mass on the Sunday closest to St. Patrick's Day. In 1913 the Lancashire County Board of the Ancient Order of Hibernians, a Catholic and nationalist mutual aid society with strong political overtones, held a ball and reception as part of the celebrations, with their national chairman Joe Devlin M.P. as guest speaker (CH, 22 March 1913).

Speeches became increasingly political in content, focusing on contemporary Irish concerns, including amnesty for political prisoners, education, economic development and, above all, the demand for home rule. It became

customary for at least one of the speakers, often the chief guest, to be a Nationalist Member of Parliament, and leading personalities of the Irish Parliamentary Party, including Tim Healy, John Dillon, T.P. O'Connor and party leader John Redmond addressed these gatherings, appealing for continued support of the party and Irish self government.



Manchester Guardian, 20 March 1899

By this time celebrations normally took the form of a dinner with musical entertainment and guest speakers on the Saturday evening closest to St. Patrick's Day followed by a public meeting, with political speeches, often at the Free Trade Hall, on the Sunday afternoon. John Dillon had just stood down as Irish parliamentary leader in light of ongoing and ultimately successful negotiations to re-unite the parliamentary party following the split over Parnell's leadership in 1890. T.P. O'Connor was M.P. for Liverpool Scotland Road and President of the Irish National League of Great Britain.



Manchester Evening Chronicle, 28 January 1907
Alderman Sir Daniel McCabe J.P., son of Irish migrants, was a Liberal and Irish Nationalist member of Manchester City Council. Shrewd, affable, highly competent, Manchester's first Roman Catholic Lord Mayor, he presided over and spoke at many of the St. Patrick's Day celebrations in the 1890s and the early twentieth century.

Changing Context

By 1913 celebrations had evolved into a quite protracted and elaborate festival, but war in 1914 and the conflict in Ireland from 1919 to 1921 curtailed them. In 1915 Redmond spoke in support of his controversial policy of urging Irish enlistment in the British army and attended a reception in the town hall, but there is no mention of a dinner or concert (MG, 15 March 1915). Celebrations were confined to a dinner in 1917 (CH, 24 March 1917) and 1919 (CH, 15 & 23 March 1919), though it was notable that there were two dinners in 1920, one organised by the Irish Self Determination League, the British support group for Sinn Fein, which ended with the singing of the I.R.A. marching anthem 'The Soldiers' Song', symptomatic of new Irish nationalist militancy (CH, 20 March 1920). By March 1922 the War of Independence had ended and it was reported that the day '...was celebrated by Irishmen and women throughout the world with greater feelings of joy than ...for many hundreds of years past.' In Manchester there were concerts and dances, the shamrock was blessed in church services, sermons were preached on the life of the patron saint but there was no mention of politics (CH, 25 March 1922).

Conclusion

The Irish celebration of St. Patrick's Day in Manchester changed notably in format and content in the hundred years from the mid 1820s. During that time the celebrations became increasingly respectable, structured and in every sense more sober. Dinner, musical entertainment and speeches became standard elements, and the events became increasingly Catholic and Irish Nationalist in emphasis. The First World War and the Irish War of Independence somewhat curtailed the celebrations, but on 17th March 1922 peace was celebrated with enthusiasm. Clearly St. Patrick's Day celebrations evolved in response to a changing social, cultural and political context, but they were always used by the Manchester Irish as an occasion for both enjoyable socialising and for the public affirmation and celebration of their distinctive identity and their ongoing concern for Ireland.

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