

Miles O'Brien

In his book Emigrants and Exiles, historian Kerby Miller described several categories of Irish emigrants. One was the "exiles," those gripped with despair or panic about conditions at home that saw no alternative except to leave. At the opposite end was the group that viewed emigration as voluntary and went "...even eagerly, in order to improve their material condition...and once in North America they often strove for complete assimilation.

Miles Murrough O'Brien was an example of that second group, but beyond assimilation, he would make significant contributions to his adopted county. Born in County Limerick, Ireland, in 1845, he was raised in Newcastle, the son of Miles O'Brien, a physician, and Fannie Casey. His parents wanted him to take up the law, but he set off alone and with only enough money for passage to the United States in 1864.

Once he arrived, he chose a career in dry goods, joining H. B. Claflin & Co., located in downtown Manhattan. It was one of the largest wholesale dry goods houses in the world with annual sales of up to \$72 million. In a thirty-five year career, O'Brien would become a member and senior officer of the firm, representing it and the industry in local and national forums, including the U. S. Congress. He married Thomasina E. Leahy in 1869 and they had four sons.

A Roman Catholic, O'Brien eventually received a degree from the Jesuit St. John's College, now Fordham University, in the Bronx. In 1896, long known as an independent Democrat, he surprisingly added the Tammany Society to his memberships, causing The New York Times, among others, to raise an eyebrow. Perhaps he had no confidence in the powerful opposition Reform movement of the day and believed that, in spite of all its faults, Tammany would be a more democratic influence on the city. In any event, there was never evidence of undue Tammany influence with any of O'Brien's activities. In 1901, the New-York Daily Tribune declared in headline, "Mayoralty Boom for O'Brien," but he dismissed the idea out of hand.

Long before entering city politics, however, O'Brien had honed his political skills elsewhere. He first joined the Clan-na-Gael, a successor organization to the Fenian Brotherhood. In connection with the 1876 *Catalpa* expedition sponsored by the Clan, O'Brien and a small group unsuccessfully challenged John Devoy's leadership, resulting in their expulsion from the organization. But O'Brien continued to be active in many other Irish causes such as secretary of the Irish Parliamentary Fund Association which supported Charles Stewart Parnell's movement for home rule in Ireland.

Public service eventually beckoned O'Brien, a natural call given his increasing prominence. William R. Grace, New York's first Irish born Mayor (considered a reformer and anti-Tammany) appointed O'Brien to the city's board of education in 1885. He would serve on the board for fifteen years. An energetic member, he championed, for instance, an enormously successful free adult lecture program. When he was up for reappointment in 1891, The New York Times editorialized, "Of the rest, if the Mayor should refuse to reappoint any of them, only Commissioners Sanger and O'Brien would be serious losses to the board...he [O'Brien] was one of the most attentive and hard-working members of the board. To his enthusiastic support is due the present excellent organization of the evening school system, and his fight against the patronage abuses of the ward Trustees, and in favor of civil service reform principles in the appointment of teachers are further evidences of the intelligence and independence with which he served in the board."

He favored and fought for the expansion of free education through high school, challenging many of his social peers, who saw no need to educate the masses above their station, or to exceed "...the proper limits of education." Universal education and the right to a free education were not yet taken for granted. Prior to 1897, most public school students wishing to continue their learning after eighth grade had to seek private alternatives.

In 1900, O'Brien was elected first to the presidency of the Manhattan and Bronx board and then, by his fellow commissioners, President of the [Central] Board of Education, the second person to hold the new post and the first Irish born. He was re-elected in 1901. These years were filled with the seemingly intractable problems and obligatory rancor that have continued within the City's education system, whatever its administrative structure at any particular moment. By 1900, the schools' attendance register had jumped to 420,000 from 268,000 in 1880. This growth rate would continue for another thirty years before leveling off, and trying to keep pace with it was a daunting task for any system.

He spoke out on overcrowded classrooms, "I wish the time were at hand when we could limit the number of pupils in the classroom to forty-five. No teacher can do justice to sixty children. The individuality of the teacher is lost in these large classes and the best results cannot possibly follow. It is those who need instruction the most who suffer." An experiment of free baths in public schools was initiated by O'Brien.

Displaying impressive objectivity, he denounced any diversion of public school funds to private or parochial schools. He saw public schools as the answer to assimilation and success, of which he obviously approved. This

view of public funds only for public education clashed with his own Church's belief. It was, after all, still the day when Catholic priests could deny absolution to parents who did not send their children to parochial school.

He forcibly argued for increasing the school budget. When at a public hearing one city official declared, "I submit that it will be impossible for this city ever to keep all its children in school houses unless other important city improvements are abandoned," O'Brien vigorously responded, "Of what avail are public improvements if our children are not educated?"

During his tenure, O'Brien was frequently attacked by the newspapers, parents, teachers, administrators, the reformers and Tammany. He even had to fend off criticism from his peers in the private sector when overall school expenses were criticized by the city's Merchants' Association. That was the nature of the position and the system. His public service career, no doubt, included mistakes, but the overall record reveals a man in step with the times, with an eye toward the future and an appreciation of the past.

In 1901, a revised charter (the instrument by which the city operated) came into effect, providing for still another new central board, revival of local boards (with minimal power) and a centralized professional staff with virtually complete operating authority. This new structure would survive for the next seventy years. Referring to the state legislature, O'Brien reflected, "a lot of men who have no possible conception of the needs of New York schools get together, and the result is legislation as is exemplified here. Just think of it, here we have a school population larger than the population of a whole county in the State, larger even than the population of a dozen states and territories that might be named, and men who have not the faintest conception of what they are doing want to legislate for us. Why, a large number of those Senators would not be able to go through the charter and explain its clauses."

Following his retirement from Clafin's and 1902 resignation from the school board, O'Brien engaged in various other business enterprises and civic pursuits. On December 22nd, 1910, he died at age 65, at his Manhattan home.

Miles O'Brien was one of millions of Irish immigrants who came to the United States in the nineteenth century. An extraordinary number met the challenge of a new life here and contributed to the greatness of the country as we now know it. O'Brien was not unique, but he demonstrated the best of what an immigrant could bring to and do in a new land. Kerby Miller wrote "...emigration ideally demanded all the features or virtues of 'action' - individual initiative, personal responsibility, independence from traditional

constraints...," and O'Brien met the ideal. He furthered his education and took advantage of opportunities to improve himself. He started and nurtured a family. He chose and stayed with a highly respected business for over three decades. He never forgot his roots and actively supported causes that benefited Ireland. But he recognized the responsibilities of citizenship here and fully participated in the democratic system. He chose education to make his mark. While others argued about immigration, O'Brien dealt with the issue head on with compassion and probity. He could easily have remained an observer, but he chose to be a part of our American system and give what he could to improve his new country and he did so with honor.

(Used with permission: This is an extract from a forthcoming book, Fenian Faces, by Philip A. Fennell & Marie M. King.)

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