

## Irish Stereotypes

The American President refers to the Irish in the North as two drunks; an attorney in Orlando, Florida sues an auto rental company for negligence for renting a car to Irish citizens, known abusers of alcohol; a tour company advertises a “pub crawl” excursion to Ireland: The stereotype of the Irish drunkard is quite obviously alive in the year of 1999. The Irish community will have to work on driving that characterization of the Irish out of public consciousness just as it successfully drove from public discourse other vicious stereotypes of the Irish in 19th century English publications.

The 19th century was to have been a time of progress for Ireland . In 1801 the Act of Union finally gave Ireland representation in Parliament, but Ireland did not thrive under Union . Policies enacted in London continued to treat Ireland as a colony, and the Irish continued to chafe under British rule. Irish discontent led to the Young Irelanders, the Fenians, and the Repeal Association movement of Daniel O’Connell. Why would anyone with any sense, many Englishmen thought, want to disassociate from the greatest nation on Earth, the United Kingdom of England and Ireland ? One of the answers to this vexing question offered to the English public was that the Irish are different from the English and, perhaps, less than human.

Scholars who study colonialism find that colonial regimes often violate the norms of behavior which they value in the home land. In doing so, the government creates a tension in its people that can be unbearable. Such was the case in England in the era of Union . At the very time when England was becoming more democratic at home-- extension of the right to vote, prison reform, Poor Laws, an anti-slavery movement, the recognition of the state’s responsibility for the well-being of its people, it was still using force and coercion in Ireland and failing to deal with Ireland’s legitimate needs, such as famine relief during the Great Hunger in the middle of the 19th century. The same journals, such as *Punch* and the *Times*, which advocated for reforms to improve the conditions the English poor blamed poverty in Ireland on the character deficiencies and moral lapses of the Irish: “... Ireland and the Irish have, in a great measure, themselves to thank for their poverty and want of capital.... It is by industry, toil, perseverance, economy, prudence, by self-denial, and self-dependence, that a state becomes mighty and its people happy.” (*Times*, 1843)

By word and cartoon illustration, these journals helped to justify the disparity between England’s home values and its colonial behavior in Ireland . Here is the philosopher Jean Paul Sartre’s analysis of colonial behavior: “How can an elite of usurpers... establish their privilege? By one means only: debasing the colonized to exalt themselves, denying the title of humanity to the natives, and defining them as simply the absences of qualities- animals, not humans.

Much of the discourse about Ireland in Victorian England fits the classical model of colonial behavior toward a subjugated people. Colonizers often couch their goals in laudatory terms, such as the Spanish asserting that their murderous actions toward the American Indians was intended to bring the heathen to Christianity. So too the portrayal of the Irish in English publications was intended to show that the English were justified in their actions in Ireland to bring order to a people who could not rule themselves: “The Irish have no feeling for law and order. If someone is killed or injured their sympathies are for the perpetrator of the deed and not the one who suffers.” (*Times*, 1845) Violent outbursts of the Irish against landlords were seen as an Irish proclivity toward violence rather than as an expression of outrage against injustices. We note how prevalent is the image in the cartoons in 19th century English publications of a shillelagh in the Irishman’s hand.

Colonial regimes commonly see the indigenous people as backward children to whom the moral code does not apply. There is a sad uniformity of attribution which the Irish share with such diverse colonized populations as Indonesians, Algerians, Nigerians, Burmese, Black Americans, and many more. They have been characterized as indolent, complacent, cowardly, rash, violent, uncivilized. The Irish were said to “love violence and hate quiet,” and even the eminent historian Thomas Macaulay fed into the stereotyping in his opinion of the Celtic peasant: “He loved excitement and adventure. He feared work more than danger.” Characterizations such as these helped the English public to accept its government’s aggression in Ireland and its indifference to Ireland’s needs. Social stereotyping, sociologists suggest, help to reduce the tension caused by the disparity between home values and the behavior of the colonizer toward colonial people.

Also helpful in reducing tension in the general public is the establishment of a differentiation between the home population and the colonized population. The common Briton was lauded and the Irishman debased: *Blackwood’s* magazine (1846) asserted that the English poor were distressed by their condition and aspired to improve their circumstances, but that the Irish poor were less miserable because they had a “natural taste” for filth and raggedness; the *Times* (1847) asked these rhetorical questions, “What is an Englishman made for but for work? What is an Irishman made for but to sit at his cabin door, read O’Connell’s speeches and abuse the English?”

It is helpful for colonizers to establish that the colonized people are outside the realm of the moral code of the home country. The simianization of the Irish in cartoons reinforced for the English public that the Irish were not to be considered by the norms of civilized society. The prognathous jaw of the Irishman in the cartoons of Victorian publications suggested to the Englishman that the Irish had to be dealt with as if they were animals. The awesome Britannia and the round, jovial but fearless John Bull stood boldly against the apelike Irishman. The Irish, according to *Punch*, had much in common with the Black man, a comparison carried over to American publications as in the cartoon printed here from *Harper’s Weekly* (1876). *Punch* refers to the Irish as the “Missing Link” (1862): “A creature manifestly between the Gorilla and the Negro is to be met with in some of the lowest districts of London and Liverpool by adventurous explorers. It comes from Ireland, whence it has contrived to migrate...” I-low much more easily it is for colonizers to suppress a people whom they have recharacterized as animals.

A Belgian political economist studying Ireland in the 1880’s said that England’s largest newspapers, “...allow no occasion to escape them of treating the Irish as an inferior race-- as a kind of white negroes....” Stereotyping facilitates our thinking about and acting towards those who are different from us in a manner that clashes with our ethical norms. We of Irish heritage have been and still are victims of stereotyping. Would that our success in blunting the effects of stereotyping will help others who too are victims of the knife-like joke and the dehumanizing cartoon.

#### Further Study:

*Apes and Angels: the Irishman in Victorian Caricature* by L. Perry Curtis

*White Britain and Black Ireland : the Influence of Stereotypes on Colonial Policy* by Richard Ned Lebow

(Written by John Walsh, November 1999)

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