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Enclave in a Small Town: The Irish in Norwood, Massachusetts

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Enclave in a Small Town
The Irish in Norwood, Massachusetts

by Patricia J. Fanning

The increase of the Irish population in suburban Boston has often been attributed to natural migration patterns after World War II as the children of immigrants who served in the war took advantage of the G.I. Bill and moved to affordable locations in the suburbs. Then, common wisdom says, the “white flight” of the 1970s increased their numbers further. But these assumptions overlook the influx of Irish immigrants directly into less urban locations surrounding Boston. The story of the Irish in one such community, Norwood, brings to light a unique migratory trend and experience.

Norwood began life as South Dedham part of the town of Dedham, which was founded in 1636. By the mid-nineteenth century, it was an almost exclusively Anglo-Saxon Protestant, primarily Congregationalist, community of approximately 1,500 residents. But, as fate would have it, just as the Norfolk County Railroad was being built and industrial factories—tanneries, printing mills, and ink works the largest among them—sought laborers in South Dedham, the Irish were being driven from their home country by a disastrous multi-year potato blight and subsequent famine. Upon their arrival, there was little in the way of housing for the Irish and experience. They became the mainstay of St. Catherine of Siena Catholic Church, founded in 1863 when a building was purchased from the Universalist Society. In 1890 the parish obtained its first resident pastor and by 1910 a new church building, still one of Norwood’s architectural landmarks, had been constructed. Appropriately, the first baptismal ceremonies held in the new church on December 25, 1910 were those of Joseph Conley, John Horgan, and Christopher O’Neil. The first marriage in St. Catherine’s was that joining Ellen Donovan and Cornelius Cleary on April 17, 1911.

In addition to their dominance of St. Catherine’s parish, the Norwood Irish started their own neighborhood. Upon their arrival, there was little in the way of housing for the Irish community. Consequently, many of these Irish pioneers, arriving primarily from Counties Clare and Mayo in southwestern Ireland, found themselves without a place to live until Moses Guild converted his old wagon barn into a tenement. According to legend, both floors of the building were divided into 12 by 12 foot rooms, lighting was from whale oil lamps and lanterns, a bucket-well provided water, and the sanitary facilities consisted of a sole privy for several families. After a few years of steady employment and frugality, however, most tenants moved into homes of their own.

Initially encountering discrimination and the disdain of some of the town’s residents, the Irish kept to themselves and quickly developed a distinct and flourishing community. They became the mainstay of St. Catherine of Siena Catholic Church, founded in 1863 when a building was purchased from the Universalist Society. In 1890 the parish obtained its first resident pastor and by 1910 a new church building, still one of Norwood’s architectural landmarks, had been constructed. Appropriately, the first baptismal ceremonies held in the new church on December 25, 1910 were those of Joseph Conley, John Horgan, and Christopher O’Neil. The first marriage in St. Catherine’s was that joining Ellen Donovan and Cornelius Cleary on April 17, 1911.

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Moses Guild’s converted wagon barn: home to the first Irish immigrants to arrive in Norwood.

Within these districts, various organizations emerged. Casey Hall, built by Thomas Casey behind his store, became the rallying place for members of local trade unions as well as the headquarters for Norwood’s chapter of the Ancient Order of Hibernians, founded in 1880. As a charitable society whose purpose was “to give aid to widows and orphans, to provide for the sick, and to befriend the stranger,” the A.O.H. distributed sick and death benefits and acquired a substantial plot in the town’s Highland Cemetery for those in need.
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Norwood began life as South Dedham, part of the town of Dedham, which was itself founded in 1636. By the mid-nineteenth century, it was an almost exclusively Anglo-Saxon Protestant, primarily Congregationalist, community of approximately 1,500 residents. But, as fate would have it, just as the Norfolk County Railroad was being built and industrial factories—tanneries, printing mills, and ink works the largest among them—sought laborers in South Dedham, the Irish were being driven from their home country by a refugee and experience.

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In 1912, the Norwood Gaelic Club, an organization whose chief purposes were to promote a United Ireland, spread a knowledge of Gaelic, and perform other beneficial activities for the community, was founded by Patrick Kelly, Michael Lydon, Peter Flaherty, and Daniel Collins. Like the A.O.H., the Gaelic Club promoted the unity of local Irish and Irish-American residents. The group met in Coogan Hall, on the second floor of a commercial building which bordered the Dublin and Cork City neighborhoods. It was officially renamed Gaelic Hall in 1927 and the club continued to meet there until the 1960s.

Well into the twentieth century, the Norwood Irish fostered a rather remarkable chain migration. Family and neighbors from Ireland, particularly from the Gaelic-speaking villages along the South Connemara coast, emigrated not just to America, but to Norwood in particular. This migratory pattern was confirmed anecdotally by Gaelic scholar Maureen Murphy and statistically by the 1950 U.S. Census. Murphy recounted that when she was learning the language in the mid-1960s in Ireland, she would ask people if they’d ever been to Dublin, and many times the reply would be (in Gaelic, of course) “I haven’t been that far, but I’ve been to Norwood.” Furthermore, an analysis of the 1950 U.S. Census statistics, completed by Frank Sweetser of the Boston University’s Department of Sociology, disclosed that, with the exception of the expected groupings of Irish-born residents in portions of Boston, the Dublin and Cork City neighborhoods of Norwood held the highest concentration of foreigners-born Irish in the entire Metropolitan Boston area. Norwood’s Irish neighborhood, in fact, had such distinctive social and economic characteristics that they were allotted their own census tract number. Gaelic was often heard around the neighborhoods and in such local spots as the Irish Heaven, a barroom housed in a small, two-story clapboard building next to the municipal light department on Central Street. There, the most accomplished twentieth century writer of fiction in the Irish language, Máirtín Ó Cadhain, spent many hours. Norwood even figured in Ó Cadhain’s 1949 masterpiece work Cre na Cille, translated as “Churchyard Clay,” in which one of the novel’s main events is a key character’s immigration to Norwood.

For nearly 100 years, then, from the time of the Great Famine until after the Second World War, Norwood was a prime destination of Irish-born immigrants. As their ranks swelled, the Irish maintained their dominance in St. Catherine’s parish, which came to be known locally as the “Irish Church.” Irish dancing, music, and festivities were immensely popular and Irish and Irish-American owned businesses flourished. As the decades passed, the community’s Irish immigrants remained, along with their children and grandchildren. By the 2000 Census, a full 37.4 percent of the town’s population reported Irish ancestry. It appears that Norwood’s Irish enclave has deep and sturdy roots. Far from being the result of a Boston Irish migration, Norwood’s Irish population has a distinctive and continuing history of its own.

—Patricia J. Fanning is Associate Professor of Sociology and Associate Editor of the Bridgewater Review.

## Cultural Commentary

**Ted, Terrell and Angie and The Limits of Sociopathy**

by William C. Levin

What do Ted Bundy, Terrell Owens and our Aunt Angie have in common? Give up! The answer is that none of them has ever given a hoot about you. In fact, they seem never to have given a hoot about anyone but themselves, and it seems to me that this is a growing problem in our culture. Among the many people who could be used to illustrate extreme selfishness, I chose them because I think they cover nicely the full range of the condition of sociopathy. Let’s start with Mr. Owens because he has been so much in the news recently.

Terrell Owens, the star receiver for the Philadelphia Eagles football team, was suspended for four games this fall for “conduct detrimental to the team.” Owens, who is famous for his flamboyant celebrations on the field of his own catches, had apparently put the spotlight on himself once too often for his coaches and teammates. The tipping point was reached when Owens said that the Eagles showed “a lack of class” for not publicly recognizing his 100th career touchdown. Owens’s subsequent apologies to his teammates, the team’s decision not to play him for the rest of the season and the hearings on the case between the players’ union and the league. Fans have been in an uproar. Much ado about not so much, do you think? I think not. You don’t have to be a Philadelphia Eagles fan to find this story fascinating. It would have legs solely because of the amount of money involved. Once you include all sources of revenue, from television and product endorsements to concession sales and stadium construction, professional football in America is a multibillion dollar business. Owens will lose money, but so will his team. A National Football League team with a winning record can count on much more income from a range of these sources than one that does not make the playoffs. But I want to make the case that the story here is much bigger than sports fanaticism or even big bucks can justify. This is a story of the individual versus the group. Here is an athlete of exceptional talent and accomplishments who could well make the difference between a successful or failed season for his team. Everyone who cares about the sport agrees that he is that good. But his coaches, teammates and team owners have said publicly that they will be better off without him. The team’s quarterback put it in terms that coaches use all the