

American Slavery, Irish Freedom: Abolition, Immigrant Citizenship, and the Transatlantic Movement for Irish Repeal

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Review

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Murphy, Angela F. *American Slavery, Irish Freedom: Abolition, Immigrant Citizenship, and the Transatlantic Movement for Irish Repeal.* Louisiana State University Press, \$45.00 ISBN 978-0-8071-3639-3

Shifting the Study of Abolition to the Atlantic World

In this well-researched and clearly-written book, Angela F. Murphy challenges readers to consider immigrant identity within the transatlantic nature of reform movements. Murphy expands upon Gilbert Osofsky's 1975 article, "Abolitionists, Irish Immigrants, and the Dilemmas of Romantic Nationalism," to argue that the Irish in the United States rejected abolitionism during the 1840s primarily out of a desire to demonstrate their loyalty to the United States. Murphy shows that the Irish in the United States criticized abolitionism and differentiated themselves from African Americans not to prove their whiteness, as David Roediger and Noel Ignatiev argue, but instead as part of their attempt to assert an American identity. Many Americans during the 1840s feared that abolitionists threatened the Union and Constitution. When strengthening nativism and anti-Catholicism challenged Irish immigrants, Murphy contends, these newcomers rejected abolitionism as part of a calculated demonstration of their support for the Union and Constitution. Murphy also shows that repeal associations in the United States, which advocated for revocation of the Act of Union of 1800 which merged Great Britain and Ireland to form the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, rejected antislavery appeals which came out of Ireland for fear of giving the appearance to nativists that the Irish in the United States were susceptible to continuing foreign influence.

Under Murphy's interpretation, identity primarily motivated the Irish in the United States to reject abolitionist arguments, including calls that emanated from Ireland, and not labor competition with African Americans or preoccupation with their own social and economic plight in the United States. Ironically, by rejecting abolitionism in the course of negotiating their identity in the United

States in the face of nativist criticism, the Irish in the United States helped strengthen the nativist impulse against them, a circumstance which, in turn, bolstered Irish American hostility toward abolitionism. Abolitionists originally anticipated that the Irish in America would embrace their message, especially when the leader of the repeal movement in Ireland, Daniel O'Connell, called for an end to slavery in the United States. Abolitionists soon soured on Irish America, however, when that did not turn out to be the case. Murphy makes a compelling case, though she could have acknowledged with greater depth that economic and social conditions did contribute to tensions between lower class Irish Americans and abolitionists and the African Americans they championed.

In addition to engaging with questions of identity in the United States, Murphy makes a major contribution to identifying the transatlantic nature of the abolition and repeal movements and the dialogue which took place between them on both sides of the Atlantic. Murphy highlights Daniel O'Connell's critique of American slavery as repugnant to the United States's republican and egalitarian ideals, as he argued that "slavery so tainted the republic that its existence would impede the spread of democracy throughout the world" (31). As early as 1829, O'Connell anticipated the global importance of the Civil War that Abraham Lincoln later identified. The repeal movement declined by the mid-1840s and this circumstance defines the time parameters of Murphy's book. It would have been valuable for her to expand on the implications of her findings, and explore further how actions and arguments made during the early 1840s affected the course of nativist, abolitionist, and Irish American thought into the 1850s. Nonetheless, Murphy has written a valuable and sophisticated book well worth reading.

Christian G. Samito teaches history at Boston College and Boston University School of Law. His most recent books are Becoming American under Fire: Irish Americans, African Americans, And The Redefinition Of Citizenship During The Civil War Era (Cornell University Press, 2009) and Law, Society, and Change During the Civil War and Reconstruction: A Legal History Documentary Reader (Southern Illinois University Press, 2009).