



## *Introduction*

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**T**he Irish came in significant numbers, making their way to the Pacific Coast by ship or overland. They came from their first American homes along the Atlantic seaboard, from Midwestern settlements, from Australia, and from the mother country itself. The lure of gold, a taste for adventure, confidence in their own physical stamina and good luck, and the enticing dream of lifelong prosperity drew the Irish, along with other immigrant groups, to San Francisco and the promising California hinterland beyond.

Virtually all these Irish passed through the burgeoning city of San Francisco; many returned to it after succeeding, failing, or breaking even in the gold fields. Some of the shrewdest and most enterprising never made their way to the Sierra foothills. They found in the new city, spreading aggressively from the harbor into the surrounding hills and sandy wastelands of the peninsula, a place of promise. Gold could be made in the streets, shops, banks, and saloons of the instant city, which seemed to have an insatiable demand for labor and offered wages only dreamed of elsewhere. Those who arrived with money, and some Irishmen did, found a greedy market for goods and an environment in which capital investment paid rich rewards.

These adventurers were not the first of the Irish to arrive in California. Even earlier, a small number of Irishmen had made their way west, when Alta California was still Mexican territory, and found economic opportunities, a hospitable community, and the possibility of integrating into Mexican society. The same factors that had drawn the Irish Wild Geese to Spain and its American empire in earlier centuries played a part in their advent—the comfort of a shared Catholic religion, a place offering promise rather than limitations and discrimination, and an equal chance at success. Some of them married into old Californio families; others negotiated, purchased, or bribed their way into property and position. A handful enjoyed spectacular success and presided over vast acreage formerly in the hands of Hispanic settlers.

The fast-spreading news of the gold strike at Sutter's mill, however, made California—the visionary land of milk and honey—the necessary destination for the major influx of Irish adventurers. Wealth from the Sierra hillsides was elusive and fortune proved as fickle and whimsical as ever, but, unlike their

fellow countrymen settling in eastern cities, these Irishmen were blessed in the timing of their arrival and in the social, economic, and political environment awaiting the Irish. The Irish were California pioneers, newcomers like the rest of the fortune hunters. Other than Native Americans and thinly spread Hispanic settlers, no other ethnic groups preceded the Irish to the San Francisco Bay Area.

Unlike the immigrant experience in East Coast cities, there was no dominant and exclusive propertied elite, axiomatically predisposed to anti-Irish prejudice, awaiting them. A social and economic hierarchy would soon be created through hard work, talent, thrift, cleverness, and good fortune, but it was not a birthright. The playing field was relatively level and, with one notorious exception, open to all comers. The Irish did not hesitate to enter the game.

San Francisco, the mushrooming metropolitan center of the new state, like the mining communities of the Sierra foothills, soon reflected a fascinating mixture of nationalities and races—all freshly arrived from somewhere else—a unique *mélange* of diverse and competing workers, dreamers, and schemers. Among the immigrant groups, the Irish were in many ways well positioned to succeed. Self-selection undoubtedly played a part. Before the opening of the transcontinental railroad in 1869, only the hardy and resourceful could successfully undertake the arduous overland or sea travel to California. The Irish who made it to the Bay Area had already obtained some financial resources, and they had to possess strong motivation, considerable self-confidence, and, often, prior urban experience. The utterly impoverished could not afford the expense, nor was it probable that their health could endure the hardships of the journey. Virtually all the Irish who arrived were comfortable with the English language and familiar, in some fashion or other, with American or British culture and institutions. Those who followed during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century came with the skills and education needed to prosper.

Given these advantages, the Irish fared quite well in both cooperation and competition with other ethnicities and races. The Irish soon formed a substantial and influential element in the city and the surrounding areas. By the end of the nineteenth century, San Franciscans of Irish birth or descent represented a quarter of the city's population and formed the sixth largest urban concentration of the Irish in America.<sup>1</sup> Numerically, working-class families were long the core of the Irish community in San Francisco. In the depressed decade of the 1870s, when their precarious financial well-being was endangered by fluctuations in the building trades, the demand for public services, and the amount of traffic of goods and people through the ports and rail stations of San Francisco, Irish workers militantly and successfully defended their economic turf against Chinese competitors. This unhappy episode lends no credit to the Irish, whose integration into Bay Area society was so much easier than that of Asian immigrants. The exclusive attitudes of the Irish reflect both the ethnic intolerance of the era and the facile assumption by the Irish that they, but not the Chinese, were naturally qualified to be Americans. By inference, this labor-led confrontation is also a reminder that, in addition to success stories, there were also examples of failure and poverty in the San Francisco Irish community. During the city's first decades, first-generation Irish sometimes constituted a third of

the inmates of the city almshouse and nearly a quarter of those in the house of correction, and Irish children made up as much as half the population of the city's various orphanages.<sup>2</sup>

Despite these statistics, the overall pattern for Irish and Irish Americans in the Bay Area was undeniably one of upward mobility and increasing prosperity. This overriding theme of successful adaptation and progress dominates the essays in this volume. The Irish became mainstays in virtually all middle-class professions. The names of successful Irishmen and Irishwomen in labor organizations, literature, music, dance, finance, engineering, law, the church, politics, and education are sprinkled liberally throughout the following pages. Some Irish-American families—the Phelans, Sullivans, Donnellys, Tobins, Floods, Fairs, and Murphys, among others—became leaders of the newly created commercial and financial elite of San Francisco. The regional economy, generally if not consistently buoyant and expanding, created opportunities for accruing wealth as well as conditions for labor to thrive. From the scramble for gold to the entrepreneurial and technological adventures of Silicon Valley, the pattern has continued, to the benefit of many Irish and Irish Americans.

Throughout the history of the Bay Area, the Irish were involved at all levels of its political life and generously represented in the civil service. Often well in advance of their fellow Irish Americans along the Atlantic seaboard, Irishmen served as state governors, legislators, and judges, as well as senators and representatives in Washington, D.C. Never a dominant majority or an aggrieved minority seeking retribution, the Irish shared and continue to share political life with other ethnicities without the political machines or ethnically exclusive politics that characterized the East Coast.

The urban life of San Francisco was the magnet drawing most Irish settlers, but there were other choices for some of the hardest and most self-reliant. The hinterland beyond San Francisco—the greater Bay Area from Marin County to the Santa Clara, Livermore, and San Joaquin Valleys—had the attraction of sprawling and relatively inexpensive acreage and the promise of agricultural bounty. Here, a sturdy minority of Irish men and women settled in the small market towns or attempted to achieve the agricultural success denied their parents in the old country. A fortunate few, such as the Murphys, Reeds, Coopers, Berrys, and Martins, fulfilled the dream and controlled sweeping landscapes that a swaggering Ascendancy landlord might have envied.

One of the undoubted advantages for the Irish in California, and a major element in their success throughout the San Francisco Bay Area, was the relative absence of the debilitating and demeaning religious prejudice that pervaded other regions of the country. Catholicism in California was not a new, suspicious, and despised import, the hallmark of ragged foreign immigrants. Since 1769, long before the arrival of Anglo-Saxon Protestants, Catholicism had been a vital part of California life. Manifestations of religious bigotry were certainly not unknown, and anti-Catholic newspapers, such as Frank Pixley's *Argonaut*, flourished briefly. But in the main, these were ephemeral. With the arrival of the Irish in California, the Catholic Church was not only enlarged in numbers and revived, it was transformed. Within a few decades, the presence of an Irish-American archbishop and a coherent structure

of “Irish” parishes and parochial schools in San Francisco testified both to the enduring identification of Irish immigrants with the Catholic Church and to the material affluence of the Irish community that paid for the building and maintenance of the Church. The parish, along with Irish social clubs, dance halls, shops, boarding houses, pubs, and funeral parlors contributed to a valuable and comfortable informal infrastructure that helped preserve many aspects of Irish culture and values.

Irish immigrants and their descendants integrated successfully, even easily, into the California environment, and this process of acculturation is undoubtedly the major historical impetus in the story of the San Francisco Bay Area Irish. But within that greater pattern of assimilation, the neighborhood Irish social network and, most particularly, the parish and the parish school helped maintain a sense of ethnic community and perpetuate a healthy cultural identification. One twentieth-century Irish immigrant maintained that he found more Irish people and more “Irishness” in the city of San Francisco than in his native County Laois—more “Irish activities, more Irish music, song, and dance, more festive parties sparkling with Celtic merriment, and every Sunday the round of Gaelic sport and celebration.”<sup>3</sup>

As a noted historian of the Irish experience in California reminds us, all immigrant groups face similar problems of cultural adjustment in a new environment. The resulting series of choices—what elements of the traditional ways to retain, what to reject—produces a subculture of both shared and exclusive values.<sup>4</sup> Some Irish Americans modified the traditional spelling of their Irish surnames, adopted distinctly secular attitudes, or lapsed from Catholic practices. Most, however, remained faithful to their religion and other significant aspects of their heritage. Over the generations, they kept abiding ties to the home country, personally sustaining Irish family members through their generosity. Many retained a lively interest in Ireland’s struggle for political autonomy and made financial contributions to Home Rule and Irish Republican causes. They turned out in large numbers to welcome W. B. Yeats, Douglas Hyde, Eamon de Valera, and other distinguished Irish visitors to the Bay Area. Along with the annual St. Patrick’s Day parade, the Robert Emmet Commemoration was for many years a highlight of Bay Area popular culture.

Like their compatriots everywhere, Bay Area Irish immigrants might pen nostalgic amateur poetry lamenting their distance from the land of their birth, or sing songs redolent of the Irish countryside, but they did so from the comparative affluence acquired by their own hard work and the advantages of a society quite literally open to talent. In the San Francisco Bay Area and throughout all of California, nostalgia was more a sentimental literary style for members of a comfortable and well-established community, rather than a cry from the exiled, the dispossessed, or the marginalized.

Over time, Irish Americans followed the general pattern of demographic migration from South of Market to the Mission, from the Mission to the Richmond and Sunset Districts, or into the constellation of Bay Area suburban communities. Modern sociological studies of San Francisco, understandably reflecting the dramatic post-World War II ethnic restructuring of the city, now tend to

exclude the Irish from their analyses of the city's current ethnic communities.<sup>5</sup> But many Irish Americans from throughout the San Francisco Bay region have maintained their sense of ethnic identity and considerable cultural solidarity over time.

The essays collected in this volume do not pretend to be a comprehensive compendium or narrative of the Irish experience in Northern California. Rather, they address diverse aspects of the Irish-American story and provide fresh insights into the role of the Irish community within the multi-ethnic San Francisco Bay Area. The essays are by both American and Irish contributors brought together by Professor Donald Jordan. The topics and approaches range from an intimate personal memoir exploring Irish-American identity by the distinguished historian of California Kevin Starr to a comprehensive historical evaluation of the Irish experience by James Walsh, whose pioneering work has shaped the standard scholarly interpretation of the subject. That interpretation informs most of the essays in this collection, and it is evident in Matthew Jockers' analysis of Irish identity as it was depicted by a number of California's early Irish-American novelists. Irish cultural expression through the creative arts is also taken up in essays on Irish music and dance. In his essay addressing perhaps the most continuously popular manifestation of San Francisco's Irish cultural heritage, Gearóid Ó hAllmhuráin traces the city's enduring tradition of Irish music. Complementary to the musical theme, Lynn Lubamersky focuses her contribution on the role of Irish dance. Her essay emphasizes the particular importance of dance in the personal and professional lives of young Irishwomen. The role of Irishwomen in a very different area of public life, the San Francisco public school system, is explored in another article by Janet Nolan. She demonstrates that a considerable number of Irish women took advantage of these career opportunities and made an important contribution to education in San Francisco. One particular Irishwoman, the proprietor of a San Francisco boarding house, is the central figure in Daniel Walsh's essay examining that often overlooked but significant institution.

Three essays explore various facets of Irish-American association with Catholicism and the Catholic Church. Steven Avella provides a close study of a prolonged and animated press controversy between San Francisco's most outspoken Irish-Catholic cleric and the Irish-American editor of a major regional newspaper. Timothy O'Keefe focuses his contribution on the Irish connection with the three Bay Area men's colleges, while Jeffrey Burns examines the history of San Francisco's quintessential Irish parish. All these essays address the issue of Irish attitudes toward the region's other ethnic groups, but the volatile ethnic and economic interplay of Irish and Chinese immigrants in San Francisco provides the central theme of Daniel Meissner's contribution.

The Irish mother country continued to play a significant role in the imaginations and affections of the immigrant and Irish-American population. Irish historian Dermot Keogh and former San José mayor Tom McEnery address two important twentieth-century links between Ireland and the Bay Area Irish. Dermot Keogh's essay, drawing on the correspondence of an Irish consular official long resident in San Francisco, provides a diplomat's view of the Irish community in the years before and

during the Second World War. Tom McEnergy, both an observer and an active participant in regional political and business affairs, addresses the recent development of the economic and technological ties between Silicon Valley and Ireland.

Several significant themes appear and reappear as leitmotifs, weaving in and out of the entire collection: the difference between the Irish experience in California and the stereotypical pattern of the East Coast Irish; the success enjoyed by Irish Americans in the egalitarian and open environment of California; Irish attitudes toward and relations with other ethnic communities; the importance of Catholicism, Catholic institutions, and the Catholic clergy—particularly that clerical gadfly and Irish hero, Father Peter C. Yorke; the multiplicity of expressions of Irish community culture and personal Irish identity; the changing nature of the Irish-American experience from the 1840s to the present; the enduring links between the Irish community and the homeland.

The Bay Area Irish experience offers a positive and encouraging profile of one ethnic group's integration into American society and a positive model of acculturation. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the Bay Area is witnessing the creation of another and quite different bond between Ireland and the Bay Area—the now famous nexus between California's vibrant multi-ethnic land of microchip technology, startups, and dotcoms and the dynamic, expanding Celtic Tiger. Grounded in shared entrepreneurial spirit and mutual financial self-interest, this represents perhaps the most attractive face of modern globalization. The success enjoyed by skilled and adventurous nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Irish pioneers is being replicated in quite different circumstances by contemporary Irish arrivals enjoying modes of travel, advanced education, cosmopolitan attitudes, and ease in navigating comfortably in cyberspace unknown to their predecessors. The genesis and success of these recently forged and highly publicized economic partnerships certainly go well beyond ethnic solidarity or romantic sentiment. However, the globe-trotting Irish entrepreneur and the confident young Irish engineer arriving in the Bay Area can easily and quickly discover an environment of mutual interest, cultural familiarity, shared respect, and, not infrequently, common heritage. Like the Bay Area as a whole, they are the beneficiaries of a rich, century-and-a-half-long tradition of Irish immigration and success.

## Notes

1. Séamus Breatnac, "The Difference Remains," and Moses Rischin, "Introduction: The Classic Ethnics," in James P. Walsh, *The San Francisco Irish, 1850–1976* (San Francisco: Irish Literary and Historical Society, 1978), 6, 147.
2. R. A. Burchell, *The San Francisco Irish, 1848–1880* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 155, 158.
3. Patrick J. Dowling, *California: The Irish Dream* (San Francisco: Golden Gate Publishers, 1988), xvii.
4. Burchell, 175–178.
5. See, for example, Brian J. Godfrey, *Neighborhoods in Transition: The Making of San Francisco's Ethnic and Non-conformist Communities* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).