

that many noninheriting sons lacked the resources to marry and that their own possibilities for marriage were extremely limited unless they had dowries. Marriage rates declined: by 1841, 44 percent of the men and 36 percent of the women aged twenty-six to thirty-five were single. Many young women felt gloomy about their futures in terms of marriage and family. "There is no fun in Ireland at all," lamented a young woman; "the times are very lonesome... there are no one getting married."<sup>38</sup>

The times were also hard on women economically. The commercialization of agriculture and the decline of Irish cottage manufacturing, such as weaving, left thousands of women excluded from the economy. "Laws made by men shut them out of all hope of inheritance in their native land," an observer noted. "Their male relatives exploited their labour and returned them never a penny as a reward, and finally, when at last their labour could not wring sufficient from the meagre soil to satisfy the exertions of all, these girls were incontinently packed across the ocean."<sup>39</sup>

To these daughters of Erin, possibilities for marriage and money were waiting for them across the ocean. "Every servant-maid thinks of [America as] the land of promise," the *Cork Examiner* announced, "where... husbands are thought more procurable than in Ireland." A dowry was not necessary here. "Over in Ireland people marry for riches," a woman wrote from Philadelphia, "but here in America we marry for love and work for riches." On this side of the Atlantic, women could find jobs, especially as maids. Guidebooks for prospective Irish immigrants announced that servant girls in America were paid from eight to sixteen dollars a month and offered enticing prospects: if a domestic worker saved half her wages and its accumulated interest, she would be rich within ten years. Indeed, many maids had "in the course of twenty or thirty years, by faithful industry and moderate economy become owners of from three to five thousand dollars."

*She being inclined to Emigrate her wages  
did demand,*

*To seek a situation in America's FREE  
LAND.*

*This undaunted Female hearing that a ship  
at Dublin Quay,*

*Had advertised for Servants to go to  
America,*

*She bid farewell to all her friends....<sup>40</sup>*

Irish immigrant women became ubiquitous as maids. In the 1850s, they represented 80 percent of all female household laborers in New York City. Irish women went west to San Francisco where they, like many Chinese men, became servants. In California, Dennis Kearney led an anti-Chinese labor movement, charging that the Chinese threatened the employment of Irish women. "The Chinese Must Go!" shouted Kearney. "Our Women Are Degraded by Coolie Labor."<sup>41</sup>

Irish women entered domestic service in greater numbers and proportions than women of other immigrant groups. In 1900, 54 percent were classified as "servants and waitresses," compared to only 9 percent for Italian female workers. A Boston study reported that more than two-fifths of the immigrant women who entered the city in 1905 and 1906 became servants and that they were almost all Irish. Jewish and Italian women seldom became domestic workers. "Italian women were more likely to take in boarders because the men rarely permitted their wives to work as maids, cleaning women, or factory hands," explained historian Virginia Yans-McLaughlin. "The Italian ideal was to keep women at home."<sup>42</sup>

Unlike Italian women who came to America with their husbands or fathers, Irish immigrant women tended to be unmarried and unattached to families. Hence, they were attracted to work that offered housing and meals. "Single women can get along here better than men as they can get employment more readily than men," an Irish laborer in Philadelphia wrote home to his sisters. "For instance liveing out girls or as the[y] are called at home servant girls gets from eight to twelve shillings per week and keep, that is from two to three dollars of American money.... Labouring mens wages averages from six to nine dollars per week.... But their work is not near so steady as womens."<sup>43</sup>

For these women, service work offered more than shelter, sustenance, and money: it also provided an introduction to American culture. Irish women had come to settle permanently, and had to adapt to American society. "Certainly, they had to begin immediately the process of acculturation on their own terms," historian Hasia Diner noted, "and domestic service provided perhaps the most intimate glimpse of what middle-class America was really like."<sup>44</sup>

Some servants became attached to their employers and their families. "I got a place for general housework with Mrs. Carr," said an Irish woman. "I got \$2 till I learned to cook good, and then \$3 and then \$4. I was in that house as cook and nurse for twenty-two years.... Mrs. Carr's interests was my interests. I

took better care of her things than she did herself, and I loved the children as if they was my own." But, while they lived inside middle-class American homes, Irish maids were still outsiders. Their relationship to the family was a hierarchical one of upstairs and downstairs, masters and servants. They were present but invisible in a very intimate setting. Far from their own parents in Ireland, many of them hungered to belong to the families of their employers. "Ladies wonder how their girls can complain of loneliness in a house full of people, but oh! it is the worst kind of loneliness—their share is but the work of the house," a domestic servant said. "They do not share in the pleasures and delights of a home. One must remember that there is a difference between a *house*, a place of shelter, and a *home*, a place where all your affections are centered." Another servant echoed: "What I minded... was the awful lonesomeness. I went for general housework, because I knew all about it, and there were only three in the family." But the family members, "except to give orders," had "nothing to do with me. It got to feel sort of crushing at last."<sup>45</sup>

Moreover, the work itself was demanding and often demeaning. As they cooked, cleaned, laundered, and took care of the children, servants were required to wear caps and aprons, badges of social inferiority. Most worked as live-in servants, available on a beck-and-call schedule around the clock, usually for seven days a week. Their employers "bossed" them "everlastingly" and wanted them to be "on tap from six in the morning to 10 or 11 at night." One servant complained about her employer: "She had no more thought for me than if I had been a machine. She'd sit in her sitting-room on the second floor and ring for me twenty times a day to do little things, and she wanted me up till eleven to answer the bell, for she had a great deal of company." The servants felt like "prisoners," always "looked down upon." The daughter of a maid protested: "I hate the word service. We came to this country to better ourselves, and it's not bettering to have anybody ordering you around! If there was such a thing as fixed hours and some certain time to yourself, it might be different, but now I tell every girl I know, 'Whatever you do, don't go into service.'<sup>46</sup>

The nature of domestic service involved what sociologist Stephen Steinberg termed "the exploitation of the whole person." The servant lacked privacy, for she lived and worked in her employer's home. Her character and manners were scrutinized for approval. In this sense, it was not just her labor that was purchased but the laborer herself. This lack of personal freedom was the reason why

one Irish woman chose to work in a factory rather than in "the service":

It's freedom that we want when the day's work is done. I know some nice girls... that make more money and dress better and everything for being in service. They're [house servants] and have Thursday afternoon out and part of every other Sunday. But they're never sure of one minute that's their own when they're in the house. Our day is ten hours long, but when it's done it's done, and we can do what we like with the evenings. That's what I've heard from every nice girl that ever tried service. You're never sure that your soul's your own except when you are out of the house, and I couldn't stand that a day.<sup>47</sup>

On the other hand, the factory worker had her labor appropriated only at the workplace. "Though the textile worker might be reduced to a commodity, paradoxically, her inner self was left intact." Factory work, however, was also difficult to "stand." Denouncing such labor as "especially fatal to women," Archbishop John Lancaster Spalding declared that there were "few sadder sights than the poor women of the cotton mills of New England," so many of them "Irish girls, whose cheeks once bloomed with health as fresh and fair as the purity of their hearts." Irish women were preponderant in the New England textile mills of Lawrence, Holyoke, Fall River, and other towns. In Lowell, the City of Spindles, they represented 58 percent of the total textile workforce. "The gray mills in Manchester [New Hampshire]," remembered Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, "stretched like prisons along the banks of the Merrimac River. Fifty percent of the workers were women... Many lived in the antiquated 'corporation boarding houses,' relics of when the mills were built. Our neighbors, men and women, rushed to the mills before the sun rose on cold winter days and returned after dark. They were poorly dressed and poverty stricken."<sup>48</sup>

In the dusty and noisy mills, the women felt their heads had become "empty of sense and their ears... deaf." Constantly standing and tying knots, they suffered backaches "until they lost their minds and ran amuck." Far from the rural countryside of Ireland, they had become tenderers of machines, their activities routinized and measured by the clock.

*When I set out for Lowell,  
Some factory for to find,*

*I left my native country  
And all my friends behind.*

*But now I am in Lowell,  
And summon'd by the bell,  
I think less of the factory  
Than of my native dell.*

*The factory bell begins to ring  
And we must all obey,  
And to our old employment go,  
Or else be turned away.*

*Come all ye weary factory girls,  
I'll have you understand,  
I'm going to leave the factory  
And return to my native land.*

The "factory girls" also worked in dangerous conditions. On January 10, 1860, a terrible tragedy occurred at Lowell's Pemberton Mill. A building suddenly collapsed, trapping nine hundred workers, mostly Irish women; then a fire broke out, adding to the terror and destruction. One hundred and sixteen women were seriously hurt while eighty-eight were killed. The list of victims included many daughters of Erin.<sup>49</sup>

Irish women were heavily employed in the sewing trades. "No female that can handle a needle need be idle," a young woman in Philadelphia wrote home. By 1900, a third of all seamstresses and dressmakers in the United States were Irish women. Work in the garment industry was repetitious and dirty, and the wages were pitifully low. "I am a good seamstress and work hard," one woman explained. "I try but I can not make over \$1 per day. I pay rent for my machine, \$2.50 per month. Am not able to afford to ride on street cars, therefore I have to walk, and if I happen to be one minute late, I have to walk up long flights of stairs and am not allowed to go on the elevator."<sup>50</sup>

Still, for many Irish women, America was a land of opportunity. "My dear Father," a daughter wrote from New York in 1850, "I must only say this is a good place and a good country.... Any man or woman without a family are fools that would not venture and come to this plentyful Country where no man or woman ever hungered or ever will and where you will not be seen naked...." Similarly, in the

same year, Margaret McCarthy wrote home to her family: "Come you all Together Couragiously and bid adieu to that lovely land of our Birth" where there was so much misery, oppression, and degradation. She enclosed twenty dollars, urging her father to clear away from "that place all together and the Sooner the Better."<sup>51</sup>

For these women, America represented not only jobs and wages but also economic self-sufficiency—freedom from dependency on fathers or husbands. "I am getting along splendid and likes my work...it seems like a new life," one of them wrote to her younger sister in Ireland. "I will soon have a trade and be more independint.... You know it was always what I wanted so I have reached my highest ambition." Thomas McCann wrote home about his sister: "Maggie is well and likes this Country. She would not go back to old Ireland for any money." What Maggie especially valued was the "independence" she had found in America.<sup>52</sup>

#### *"Green Power": The Irish "Ethnic" Strategy*

Immigrant women were mainly confined to domestic service and factory work. Their daughters, on the other hand, did not follow in their occupational footsteps. In 1900, only 19 percent of the Irish women born in America worked as servants or laundresses, compared to 61 percent of the immigrant generation. An employment agent reported that most immigrant Irish women were illiterate: "In fact they are the only class I know of that cannot read or write." But their daughters, he added, were educated and shunned domestic service. Increasingly, young women were entering white-collar employment as secretaries, nurses, and teachers. By 1910, Irish-American women constituted one-fifth of all public school teachers in northern cities and one-third in Chicago alone.<sup>53</sup>

These advances for Irish women reflected a broader pattern of Irish success—a rise out of the ranks of "the giddy multitude." By 1900, two-thirds of the Irish were citizens by birth, and they were better educated and had greater occupational mobility than their parents. In Boston, for example, 40 percent of those born in America had white-collar jobs in 1890, compared to only 10 percent for the immigrants. The family of John Kearney of Poughkeepsie, New York, represented this pattern. After arriving in America, Kearney worked as an unskilled laborer and then became a junk dealer; one of his sons rose from postal clerk to superintendent of city streets, and another son went from grocery clerk to inspector of the city's waterworks. "My children [are] doing first rate," an

Irish immigrant proudly declared, but "if they were back there [in Ireland] what would they be?"<sup>54</sup>

By the early 1900s, Irish Americans were attending college in greater proportion than their Protestant counterparts. They had even begun to enter Harvard University in substantial numbers. Initially, the students at this elite school resented the Irish presence, but gradually they came to accept the newcomers. President Abbott Lawrence Lowell viewed the Irish favorably and highlighted Harvard's role in assimilating them into American society. "What we need," he had explained earlier, "is not to dominate the Irish but to absorb them." We want them to become "rich," he added, "send their sons to our colleges, and share our prosperity and our sentiments." In his opinion, however, such inclusionism should be reserved for certain groups. The "theory of universal political equality," he argued, should not be applied to "tribal Indians," "Chinese," or "negroes under all conditions, [but] only to our own race, and to those people whom we can assimilate rapidly." Lowell added that the Irish were unlike Jewish immigrants: they were Christian as well as culturally similar to Americans of English origin. The Irish could, therefore, become "so merged in the American people" that they would not be "distinguished as a class."<sup>55</sup>

What greatly enabled the Irish to "merge" into the mainstream was the fact that they were "white" and hence eligible for naturalized citizenship. Their rates for becoming citizens and voters were the highest of all immigrant groups. They wanted to become Americans, for they had come here as settlers rather than as sojourners: only 10 percent of them went back to Ireland, while Italians had a return rate ranging from 40 to 60 percent. "The outstanding fact" about the Irish "return tide was its minuteness," observed historian Arnold Schrier. "Compared with the vast numbers who left Ireland it was a mere trickle." The Irish entry into citizenship and politics was facilitated by their language skills. "The Irish had one advantage which other immigrants did not share—they did not have to learn to speak English," recalled Elizabeth Gurley Flynn. Thus "they more easily became citizens."<sup>56</sup>

Unlike the Chinese immigrants who were barred from naturalized citizenship and the blacks who were largely disenfranchised, the Irish possessed the suffrage. The rise of Irish political power was rooted in their pattern of settlement. A rural people in Ireland, they became urban in America. In 1850, one in three Irish immigrants lived in fifteen cities, including 134,000 in New York City, 72,000 in Philadelphia, and 35,000 in Boston. Thirty years later, one-third of

New York City's population was Irish. By 1885, Boston's Irish Catholic children outnumbered white Protestant children. This city was no longer the "Boston of the Endicotts and the Winthrops" but had become "the Boston of the Collinses and the O'Briens."<sup>57</sup>

As voters, they consciously cultivated and promoted their "Green Power." Led by politicians like John Kelly, New York's Tammany Hall helped elect the city's first Irish Catholic mayor, William R. Grace. By 1890, the Irish had captured most of the Democratic party organizations in northern cities. In New York, Boston, Chicago, and San Francisco, Irish political machines functioned like "Robin Hoods," taking taxes from the Yankee middle class and giving revenues to the Irish through the public payrolls. By 1900, the Irish represented 30 percent of the municipal employees in these cities. Through political machines, the Irish were able to get jobs in the fire and police departments as well as municipally owned utilities, subways, street railways, waterworks, port facilities, and in city hall itself. The "Irish cop" and "Irish fireman" became ubiquitous at this time. Irish political bosses also awarded public works projects to Irish building contractors. As early as 1870, Irish building contractors constituted a fifth of all contractors in the country. An "Irish ethic" led these contractors to give preferential treatment to compatriot subcontractors and workers.<sup>58</sup>

Meanwhile, ethnic associations like the Ancient Order of Hibernians and the Clan na Gael functioned as networks for employment, while skilled Irish workers monopolized many trades and shared job opportunities only with their countrymen. Emigration was no longer "like going into a City where you don't know anybody," a worker wrote to a relative in Ireland. "Should your Brother Paddy Come to America, he can rely on his Cousins to promote his interests in Procuring work." Heavily concentrated in the building trades, Irish workers became highly unionized. Many of the prominent leaders in the labor movement were Irish—Terence Powderly of the Knights of Labor, Mary Kenny O'Sullivan of the American Federation of Labor, and Cork-born Mary Harris, the legendary labor activist known as "Mother Jones." Through this leadership and the unions, many Irish were able to experience what historian David Montgomery described as "the much celebrated rise from rags to riches."<sup>59</sup>

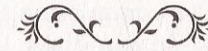
By 1900, the Irish occupied a significant niche in the skilled labor market: 1.2 million were employed in the blue-collar trades, representing 65 percent of all Irish workers. Most of these blue-collar laborers—78 percent—were skilled. While the Irish composed only 7.5 percent of the entire male workforce, they were disproportionately

represented in the elite construction and industrial occupations—one-third of the plumbers and steamfitters, one-fifth of the stonecutters and brass workers, and one-sixth of the teamsters and steelworkers. Once they became members of the privileged stratum of the workforce, they monopolized the better jobs. Irish workers campaigned to make American labor equal “white” labor. Irish “ethnic solidarity” and influence in the unions enabled them to exclude the “others” such as the Chinese and blacks. This Irish exclusion of racial minorities from the skilled and high-waged jobs represented what historian David Roediger called “the wages of whiteness.”<sup>60</sup>

Ironically, Irish social and economic success challenged their ethnicity and sense of group unity. “How shall we preserve our identity?” asked an Irish immigrant in 1872. “How shall we preserve our faith and nationality, through our posterity, and leave our impress on the civilization of this country?” The *Irish American* urged its readers to learn Gaelic so they could “feel more proud and manly as Irish, and be more respected as American citizens.” Even as the Irish immigrants took possession of America, many of them reaffirmed their Irish identity by telling and retelling stories about British oppression in the homeland. Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, for example, remembered how in the 1890s “the awareness of being Irish came to us as small children, through plaintive song and heroic story. The Irish people fought to wrest their native soil from foreign landlords, to speak their native Gaelic tongue, to worship in the church of their choice, to have their own schools, to be independent and self-governing. We drew in a burning hatred of British rule with our mother’s milk. Until my father died at over eighty, he never said *England* without adding, ‘God damn her!’”<sup>61</sup>

The immigrants had hoped to return to their beloved Emerald Isle, but most of them stayed and struggled to make America their new homeland. Working as “factory girls” and railroad builders, entering politics and businesses, and speaking English with an “American accent,” they transformed themselves into Americans. “The second generation here are not interested in their ancestors,” an immigrant stated, because “we have never told them of the realities of life [in Ireland], and would not encourage any of them to visit. When we left there, we left the old world behind, we are all American citizens and proud of it.” For them, the ocean was a psychological border, protecting them from bitter memories. “We have too many loved ones in the Cemetary here to leave them,” an immigrant wrote to her brother in Ireland. “We have been here a long time—and it is home to us now.”<sup>62</sup>

## 7



## “FOREIGNERS IN THEIR NATIVE LAND”

### *The War Against Mexico*

AS IRISH WOMEN were working in Lowell’s textile mills and as Irish men were helping to build a national system of transportation, America’s frontier was advancing westward toward the Pacific Ocean. The Market Revolution was setting in motion forces that would lead to the violent acquisition of territory from Mexico. During the war against Mexico in the 1840s, many Irish immigrants served in the U.S. Armed Forces. Ironically, the Irish had been pushed from their homeland by British imperialism, and here they found themselves becoming Americans by participating in the conquest of Mexico. Jefferson’s vision of a continent covered with “a people speaking the same language, governed in similar forms, and by similar laws” was being realized. In the expanding American empire, however, the “people” were actually becoming more diverse: added to the blacks, Indians, and Irish were Mexicans.<sup>1</sup>

*“We Must Be Conquerors or We Are Robbers”*

The Market Revolution stimulated the expansion of the Cotton Kingdom into Mexico, a sovereign nation bordering the United States