


Whipple  
APUSH Pd. 6  
17 Feb 2017

Article Review: "From Shanties to Lace Curtains: The Irish Image in *Puck*, 1876-1910" by John J. Appel


In "From Shanties to Lace Curtains: The Irish Image in *Puck*, 1876-1910", John J. Appel analyzes the emergence and transformation of Irish stereotypes in the political satire *Puck*, a popular magazine which began in 1876 and inspired future media outlets to express ideas through ethnic stereotyping. The work focuses on the development of stereotypes in *Puck* and how these widely circulating ideas infiltrated popular opinion and shaped society, culture, and even the course of politics. Appel examines the specific characteristics of the very complex Irish stereotype depicted in *Puck*, noting the way in which these stereotypes translated into society and created more tension between native-born white middle-class Protestant Americans (of whom were the typical audience of the magazine) and Irish-Americans.

Appel's main thesis is that *Puck* spurred the rapid, ever-changing social movement that was a reaction to the influx of immigrants coming into the United States in the mid to late 19th century. Appel expands by asserting that *Puck* inspired public opinion, especially within the social dynamic between native-born Americans and Irish-Americans, both in its age of circulation and beyond. Another main claim is that *Puck's* stereotypes became less biting over time and instead contributed to an almost elevation of the Irish far above their previous status in society. While the public opinion of Irish-Americans did improve over time, along with stereotypes of other discriminated groups, it is an utter fallacy to claim that stereotypes were




eliminated completely and that all groups were discriminated against. Throughout the piece, Appel provides evidence from the magazine itself and from his own historical knowledge on immigration and ethnic studies. An immigrant himself, Appel devoted most of his adult life to “bring the study of ethnicity into the mainstream of American historical scholarship”. Appel sets up his claim by working chronologically to explain each new stage of the Irish stereotype and how it was represented by *Puck*. In comparison to the Irish depiction in United States History textbook, James Fraser’s *By The People*, “From Shanties to Lace Curtains” focuses more on the social, cultural, and political influence on the public image of the Irish as a result of popularized stereotypes in mainstream media, while the textbook focuses more on the reasons for Irish immigration in the mid 19th century and their objective experience once here. While the analysis of *Puck* magazine does not endorse the stereotypes, it also does not redeem the Irish in any substantial manner like the textbook does.

Appel first describes an overarching theme seen across most Irish stereotypes: the Irish were popularly characterized as “ignorant but harmless drudges, given to drink and emotional excesses, loving a fight, and not above a lie or a bit of minor thievery”. To support this, this author gives two examples of classic Irish stereotypes in “*Puck*’s Best Things About the Great American Servant Girl” and the several cliches surrounding the “Hibernian male”, including the figure that still characterizes the Irish image, “Paddy”. Appel moves on to describe a more harmful stereotype that emerged during the first decade of the magazine’s existence and inspired a new array of stereotypes that called upon the Irishman’s violence: “the riotous Irishman and the dangerous, reckless Irish agitator or Fenian fanatic”.




Appel connects the popular American opinion and ethnic stereotyping of Irish to that of black Americans. He breaks down the eighteen characteristics attributed to “Negroes” by white Americans studied in the 1930s. On the list were “inferior mentality”, “primitive morality”, “given to crimes of violence”, and “lazy”, which were also seen as commonplace Irish qualities. The author mentions that the majority of these traits were influenced by *Puck*’s contributors and editors. Appel also references the complete resistance to an entire ethnic group seen at that time, which he said: “reflected a then common American resentment against the inflamed temper of certain Irish”. While Appel likens this idea to the “white middle-class ‘backlash’ against American Negro militancy in the 1960s”, he fails to go beyond this time period to discuss the significant racial divide still persistent in the year the article was written, in 1971 with the emergence of the Post-Civil Rights era. At this time, social and judicial discrimination prevailed and kept African-Americans in their place as the minority group with the highest rates of incarceration, a new form of slavery post-Jim Crow. While these examples detailing African-American historical stereotypes may seem unimportant in an article primarily discussing Irish stereotypes, they are essential to the author’s thesis development.

Appel concludes the description of each stage in the long-developing journey of Irish stereotypes by remarking that the satires transformed into an eventual identity of “mildly condescending but basically friendly treatment of the American Irish”. The author attempts to support this by recalling the 1904 St. Patrick’s Day, which gave rise to Irish representation as “a whimsical leprechaun, a friendly, pixie-like creature”. However, this doesn’t support the notion that stereotypes suddenly became “ basically friendly”. The methods in which the Irish were discriminated against took a new form but certainly did not disappear when the stereotypes “lost



their sting”. This assertion summarizes a large theme voiced illicitly as well as explicitly in the piece: all ethnic groups are satirized at some point in time, as this is human nature, and should therefore not get too invested in the discrimination they’re facing, as it will eventually pass and become a harmless encounter among friends. This ideology, however, is harmful, even in the context of this time period. The author minimizes the experiences of marginalized groups by normalizing the still-prevalent subtleties of ethnic stereotyping. Past the characterizations of Irishmen as violent and harmful, the so-called purely humorous stereotypes emerged. But Appel himself remarks that these stereotypes featured “comic Negroes, Jews, Dutchmen and Irish” whom lacked “dignity” and were merely there to provide “laughable extremes” for an audience. This ideology perpetuates the ideas of nativism and white supremacy, that marginalized groups are available for the higher race (white Americans) to mimic and degrade, in any form that suits their current taste, whether it be violence or “on the stage”.

In *By The People*, Fraser describes a large Irish motive for emigrating to the United States: The Great Famine of 1845-1850. Starving and desperate, the textbook recognizes the lack of a choice the Irish had. It also depicts Irish-Americans as hard-working, mentioning the “backbreaking” labor they took on, namely to build from the eastern side of the Transcontinental Railroad. This contrasts with Appel’s use of evidence in describing the Irish at that time, namely referring to the draft riots of 1863 in which “New York’s Irish had sacked Negroes’ houses, destroyed their orphan asylum, and lynched, maimed, and molested many more”. The contrast between the textbook and Appel’s work can be seen in their different theses. While the textbook claims that Irish immigrants came to the United States out of necessity, and despite discrimination, worked hard to create better lives for themselves, Appel’s piece focuses on the



discrimination piece and how it subsequently influenced popular culture and common ethnic stereotypes at the time and in the future. The two are similar in their use of details; both address the perspective held by many native-born white Americans at the time who strongly opposed the Irish and even saw them as “another race”, mostly because of the Catholicism they practiced.

In “From Shanties to Lace Curtains”, John J. Appel successfully details the transformation of the Irish stereotypes in *Puck*, and where many of the ideologies expressed were initiated. However, Appel makes several generalizations and fails to address important issues in regards to the subject matter of ethnic stereotyping and cultural discrimination. Although committed to a life’s work of ethnic studies, Appel doesn’t mention nativist white supremacy as a motivation for stereotyping, and even goes as far to say that “hardly any ethnic or religious group was entirely exempted from ridicule at one time or other in the past”, minimizing the vastly disproportionate discrimination faced by marginalized groups in comparison to native-born, white middle-class Americans. A history student may find this source useful in providing a foundation of knowledge of *Puck* magazine and its legacy, but should definitely be wary of normalizing social Darwinism and harmful ethnic stereotypes, as this work alludes to both. This source should be used to fully understand the breadth of the Irish stereotypes prevalent during this time, as well as the depiction encouraged by society. This source, while including undertones that nod at justifications for racism and ethnic stereotyping, does reveal important historical information that essential provides a basis for today’s immigration relations that still divide the nation and inspire conflict.



### Works Cited

Eric L Goldstein, "Project MUSE - Necrology: John J. Appel, 1921-1998," *American Jewish History* 86, no. 4 (December 1, 1998), accessed February 14, 2017, doi:10.1353/ajh.1998.0026, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/476>

John J. Appel, "From Shanties to Lace Curtains: The Irish Image in Puck, 1876–1910," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 13, no. 04 (October 1971), doi:10.1017/s001041750000637x.

"Jim Crow Museum: Civil Rights Era," 2014, accessed February 14, 2017, <http://www.ferris.edu/jimcrow/timeline/postcivil.htm>.

James Fraser, *By The People*, AP Edition edition (2014) ed. (n.p.: Pearson Education, 2015).