

Common ground

Yale project examines the links between Irish, African Americans

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It turns out that we're all African American. The mitochondria in human cells suggests that the human race may have descended from a matriarch who lived in present-day Ethiopia or Kenya. And a recent find of skeletons, dated to 160,000 years ago, confirms the final transitions between pre-modern and anatomically modern humans occurred in Africa too.

So the brotherhood of man, then, is not just a right-on utopian ideal; it's also a flesh and DNA reality. But some of us are still a little further ahead on the implications of this than others. Mary Ann Matthews, an Irish-American research affiliate at the Center for the Study of Slavery, Resistance and Abolition at Yale University, is a prime example. An author, academic and a high school English teacher, she used to wonder why she'd respond so deeply to the poetry of African-American writers like Langston Hughes. "When I read his poem 'Dream Deferred,' for example, I immediately and very easily referenced Irish writers, too," she said recently from New Haven.

Some note within the poetry found its echo in the Irish psyche. It was hard to pinpoint, but it was irrefutable.

In her career as a teacher, she observes that her students' explorations of 19th and 20th century American history and literature often lead to discussions about race and interracial relationships. But since these historical interrelationships are still not - in themselves - the subject of a prescribed high school course of study here, she found that she had to devise her own framework to help students discuss the positive and negative ways that people of different races and ethnicities have interacted in America.

Her commitment to creating a space for a dialogue about race and ethnicity in America led to her growing awareness that the forces that fostered prejudice against the Irish in the 19th century did likewise against African Americans. And so the groundbreaking Tangled Roots project - a cultural studies initiative based at Yale - grew out of her and a handful of other academics' enthusiasm for investigating the history of American slaves and immigrants from Ireland and considering the links between them.

"I'm Irish American," said Matthews, "and the more I learned about the history of the

Irish and the African Americans, the more I realized that there was more common ground between us than I had ever been aware of, or certainly had ever been taught in American schools."

Their fortunes, she discovered, were often intimately linked. "As soon as you begin to dig around in Irish history here, you find the other group is always located in the same neighborhood or place," she said. "I wasn't aware of that until I began my research. When the Irish arrived here during the Famine years, they encountered and competed for jobs with freed African Americans. Name a city where the Irish landed and you'll see they were living in close proximity to each other."

The middle decades of the 19th century represent the apogee of anti-Irish, anti-Catholic prejudice - to be Irish at the time was to be portrayed as a menace to national security - and this at a time when the idea of the abolition of slavery was also considered a dangerous and destabilizing element in contemporary life.

Both groups were subjected to similar stereotypes, too: portrayed as lazy, shiftless, uncivilized and inferior, they were both cheated of their full potential in the New World. It was commonly believed, for example, that the presence of too many Irish and African Americans would retard the social progress of the nation. Feared, fetishized and, of course, eritized, both groups found themselves menaced and marked as vulnerable scapegoats for almost every social ill dividing the nation. The fear of foreigners, the hatred of Catholics and the slavery debate all coalesced and created a sense of crisis that would finally erupt during the civil war.

"The libeling of the Irish and African-American character strongly echo each other," Matthews said. She noted that in the South, for example, the Irish were often called "niggers turned inside out" and the slaves were referred to as "smoked Irish." Both were viewed as social outcasts.

"As I studied the parallels between them it led to one of my great moments - which even yet many Americans aren't aware of - my discovery of the great relationship between the two pillars of Irish and African-American emancipation, Daniel O'Connell and Frederick Douglas."

Foreshadowing the Civil Rights in Northern Ireland movement by over a hundred

years, Daniel O'Connell, the Irish patriot, and Frederick Douglas, the African-American slavery abolitionist, recognized and endorsed the justice of each other's causes from the very start.

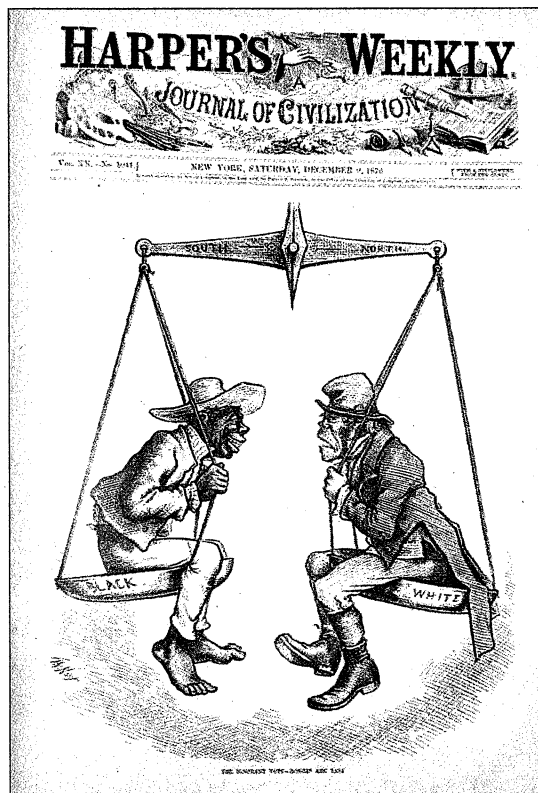
"They clearly understood that they were fighting for the same kind of freedom for their peoples," Matthews said. "Douglas came to Ireland and spoke several times there as a slavery abolitionist and an endorser of Irish Home Rule. And O'Connell was a member of the British anti-slavery movement. Their relationship was rich and full and it's still underappreciated."

Already elderly by the time they met, however, O'Connell's star was waning just as Frederick's was ascending. Both men eloquently lamented the injustices done to their respective peoples in many public addresses, but both were also forced to recognize their own political limitations, and where their agendas separated.

"If you look at the work of the American anti-slavery societies of the period, in both Britain and America, you discover that they were committed to abolition, and yet in both cases they were often absolutely refused to countenance social justice for the Irish in America or the question of Home Rule," Matthews said. "So this remarkable group of abolitionists still remained virulently anti-Irish. Members of the British abolitionist society resigned their posts rather than remain in a society that included O'Connell."

So, from the first it was clear that the rising tide would not lift all boats. That meant, of course, having to pick your battles. By the hot summer of 1863, New York City was a smoldering cauldron of racial, class, religious, and political resentments. And the incident sparking the notorious anti-draft riot in mid-July was the implementation of a military conscription law passed by Congress on March 3, 1863.

"The Irish were being asked to serve in a war for a nation where in many cases they weren't yet citizens," Matthews said. "American men - the sons of the gentry - could buy themselves out of service, and they did so, but Irish men of the period could not, and they were often leaving behind families who could barely eke out a living. There was also a deep confusion among the Irish about which side of the conflict to support. The South was making approaches to Ireland, offering help in return for help. And in the North the Irish barely had a fingerhold on the society yet.



The cover of an 1876 issue of Harper's Weekly editorialized on the wisdom of Irish- and African-American voters.

None of this excuses what occurred, of course, but there were complex social and political forces at work. It's noteworthy that the worst riot of the 19th century was led by the Irish. In the 20th century it was led by African Americans."

In her work for the Tangled Roots project at the Gilder Lehrman Center at Yale, Matthews has arrived at a much greater understanding of our often shared heritage.

"Firstly, the project has taught me that there's a much richer history between us than most of us are aware of," she said. "Secondly, the question of black and Irish relationships is much more complex than we generally want to understand. We have to understand the politics of the period and also acknowledge that the people we in many cases honor or lionize had prejudices in other areas of their political views. And thirdly, the Irish desire for assimilation, for acceptance or cultural respect leads to that moment when natural affinities begin to break down. The imposition of new anti-African American legislation in this country after the civil war

stopped that community in their tracks. Those impositions were not placed on the Irish."

The mutual appreciation of each other's struggle would surface again decades later during the Civil Rights marches in Northern Ireland - 15,000 people stood on Craigavon Bridge in Derry in 1968 singing African-American freedom music including "We Shall Overcome" to demonstrate their right to free assembly. And today African Americans who have been to Northern Ireland acknowledge that many Irish people have a keen knowledge of the Civil Rights struggle in America. (This was confirmed in 1999 when John Hume received the Martin Luther King Peace Prize in Atlanta).

Our shared history is not a recent phenomenon. It now spans centuries. The oppression of the Irish by the English is certainly not the equal of African-American slavery and the Jim Crow laws, but initiatives like the Tangled Roots project can help restore to us the lessons of our common heritage and carry us a little further toward the goal of uniting our still divided nation.

Dream Deferred

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun?

Or fester like a sore - and then run?

Does it stink like rotten meat? Or crust and sugar over - like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags like a heavy load

Or does it just explode?

Langston Hughes (1902 -1967)