Common ground

Yale project examines the links between Irish, African Americans

By Cahried O’Doherty
carolero@irishecho.com

It turns out that we’re all African American. The mitochondria in human cells suggests that the human race may have descended from a matrilineal arch who lived in present-day Ethiopia or Kenya. And a recent find of skeletons, dated to 160,000 years old, suggests that the same group was located in the same neighborhood, or place, “She 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 in a city where the Irish landed and you’ll see they were living in close proximity to each other.”

The mid-1800s decades of the 19th century represent the apex 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, undisciplined, and inferior, and 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, eroticized, 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 climate that would finally erupt during the civil war.

“They really discovered the common ground between Irish and African Americans, character strongly echo each other,” Matthews said. She noted that in the South, for example, the Irish were “called niggers” and “niggers turned inside out” and the slaves were referred to as “smoked Irish.” Both were viewed as social outcasts.

“I am the only one in the United States to find out about this great relationship and to study it in depth.”

Matthews added, “The Irish were being asked to serve in a war for a nation that did not see them, and they did not see them, and they did not see their role as citizens, and they did so, but Irish men of the period could not, and they were often leaving behind families who had barely eked 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. In which the North the Irish barely had a fingerhold on the society yet.

By Cahried O’Doherty

carolero@irishecho.com

None of this excuses what occurred, of course, but there were complex social and political forces at work. It’s noteworthy that he 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 Glider Lehrman Center at Yale, Matthews has arrived at a much greater understanding of our shared history. 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 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 affiliations 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 Craygavon 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?

Langston Hughes

(1902-1967)

Does it stick like rotten meat?

Or crust and sugar over —

Like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just says

Like a heavy load

Or does it just explode?