Irish-American nationalists, the *Playboy* controversy, and the development of American free speech ideology

In September, 1911, Dublin's celebrated Abbey Theatre embarked upon a tour of the United States. Managed by William Butler Yeats, who was already known and respected by Irish-Americans and connoisseurs of modern literature alike, representing a radical new style of naturalistic acting, and performing plays by such Irish literary luminaries as Yeats, George Bernard Shaw, and John Millington Synge, the Irish Players, as they billed themselves, might have expected to be welcomed by Irish-Americans and especially by those involved in the organized movement to liberate their ancestral homeland. After all, the Irish literary revival established Ireland as a center of modern letters, something that could only burnish the country's image and enhance its qualifications for independence.[1] Yet Irish-American nationalists greeted the Irish Players not with a warm welcome but with boycotts, protests, threats of violence, and riots. Irish-American nationalists saw the Players' repertoire, and especially John Millington Synge's comedy *The Playboy of the Western World*, as insulting, libelous, and threatening to Ireland's aspirations for independence.

If Irish-American nationalists were virtually united in their opposition to *The Playboy of the Western World*, however, they were considerably more divided about how to confront the offending play. Some argued that the best policy was to ignore the play and let it fail on its own merits. Others urged a boycott that would force theater owners to halt performances of the play. Some argued that Irish-Americans should disrupt the play non-violently by making so much noise that the performers were forced to stop, and

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[1] On the nationalist claims of Anglo-Irish literary figures, see David George Boyce, *Nationalism in Ireland.* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press), chapter 8. See also interview with Yeats quoted in "Yeats Slanders American Irish," *Gaelic American*, March 30, 1912, p. 4.

some called for organized violence. Finally, some argued that the state should protect public morals by censoring the play. Discussion about how to deal with *The Playboy* took place on the pages of Irish-American nationalist periodicals such as *The Gaelic American* and *The Irish World*, at meetings of associations, in the mainstream press, in city councils and mayors' offices, and in the theaters in which the play was performed. This discussion revealed that Irish-Americans had two different conceptions of free speech: they alternated between stressing the right of individuals to free expression and stressing the right of the state to suppress speech that endangered the public. This paper suggests that these conceptions would influence post-World War I ideas about the boundaries of free speech.

Scholars of civil liberties agree that the modern free speech regime can be traced to the era immediately after World War I.[2] Prior to that, according to legal historian David Rabban, most American courts, and most American citizens, held that there were significant restrictions on the right to free expression. Speech could legitimately be punished if it had a bad tendency to create disorder or to threaten public morals. Bad tendency doctrine was invoked to justify punishing a broad range of speech, including political expression that could be very loosely interpreted to incite violence or treason, as well as subversive discussions of sexuality in art, popular medical tracts, or almost any other venue. This conception was challenged by radical libertarians who asserted the right to free speech as part of a broad defense of individual liberty and autonomy, but before World War I, they were not able to convince the courts or the wider public to embrace their views. According to Rabban, American courts only began to uphold the

[2] Paul L. Murphy, *World War I and the Origin of Civil Liberties in the United States*, (New York: Norton, 1979). David M. Rabban, *Free Speech in its Forgotten Years* (Cambridge, U.K.; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

right to free speech after World War I, when progressive legal scholars reacted to the excessive curtailment of civil liberties during the war and the Red Scare by arguing that political speech should be protected. They rejected the broader agenda of the radical libertarians, however, which would have extended the same protection to non-political speech. In the 1920s, the Supreme Court issued a series of judgments upholding the right of political expression, but other forms of speech remained much more vulnerable. Indeed, it was not until 1952 that the Supreme Court ruled that movies were protected by the First Amendment.[3]

Rabban focuses on the changing views of "progressives," whom he takes to be elite intellectuals and legal theorists. I want to suggest another route to this compromise, one that is rooted in the ethnic politics of big cities rather than in law schools and the pages of *The New Republic*. As this chapter will show, during the debate about *The Playboy of the Western World* in 1911 and 1912, Irish-American nationalists focused both on the rights of individuals to speak freely and on the rights of the community to suppress dangerous or immoral speech. However, in the *Playboy* controversy, free speech strategies failed them: their protests only generated publicity for the play and enhanced the Irish Players' reputation. Moreover, appeals to the state were no more successful, as big city mayors and prosecutors reported that they lacked the legal capability to suppress the play. When Irish-American nationalists faced off against another offensive depiction in 1927, they abandoned arguments about individual liberty and instead demanded a more robust censorship regime. Meanwhile, in a development that will be covered in another chapter of my dissertation, the suppression of Irish

[3] Burstyn v. Wilson 343 US 495 (1952)

nationalist newspapers and the prosecution of prominent Irish-American nationalists under the World War I-era Espionage Act pushed nationalists towards a theory of individual rights when it came to political speech. Irish-American nationalists held important positions in labor unions, big city political machines, and especially the Catholic Church; at least two prominent nationalist leaders subsequently argued cases for the ACLU.[4] Their conception of free speech influenced the broader American debate. And in the years surrounding World War I, Irish-American nationalists came to believe that the rights of the individual should be protected when it came to free speech and the rights of the community should be paramount where artistic expression was involved.

The Playboy of the Western World: the Problem

The Irish Players set sail for America in September, 1911, hoping to raise funds to support the cash-strapped Abbey Theatre. Their six-month tour took them to Boston, Providence, New Haven, Washington, D.C., New York, Philadelphia, Indianapolis, and Chicago, with shorter stops in smaller cities such as Lowell, Massachusetts and Reading, Pennsylvania.[5] The outcry against *The Playboy of the Western World* began almost immediately upon the Irish Players' arrival in their first stop, Boston. Nationalists in Ireland had objected to *The Playboy* and had rioted when it was first performed in Dublin in 1907, so Irish-Americans were already alert to the controversial nature of the play. On October 4, 1911, nine days after the players' first performance in Boston, Dr. J.T. Gallagher wrote a letter to the *Boston Post* condemning the play as anti-Christian and

[4] These were John Finerty, a lifelong ACLU activist, and John Larkin Hughes, who argued cases for the ACLU in the 1920s.

[5] Edward Abood, "Reception of the Abbey Theater in America," (Ph.D diss., University of Chicago, 1962); Adele Dalsimer, "Players in the Western World: The Abbey Theatre's American Tours," *Eire-Ireland* 16, no.4 (winter 1981): 75-93; Ida G. Everson, "Young Lennox Robinson and the Abbey Theatre's First American Tour," *Modern Drama* 9 no.1-4 (May, 1966): 74-89.

anti-Irish.[6] Three days later, the *Gaelic American* reported that the New York Philo-Celtic Society, an organization chiefly devoted to promoting the Irish language, had condemned the play as "vulgar and a libel on our people."[7] Within weeks, discussion of the play dominated Irish-American nationalist publications.

Irish-American nationalists conceived of their efforts to suppress *The Playboy* as part of a larger, long-term campaign to banish "the stage Irishman" from American theaters and eventually movie screens. In the 19th century, Irish and Irish-American characters were depicted on the popular stage as comic figures who were funny because they were incapable of sobriety, forethought, and Victorian propriety. "Stage Irishmen" were fond of drinking, dancing, and fighting, and their Catholicism acted as a spur to rather than a check on their raucous behavior. Like African-American stage figures, therefore, they were objects of both envy and scorn: they were freed from the difficult economic and social demands of "respectable" society, but they were also not entitled to the rewards for meeting those demands. For upwardly-mobile Irish-Americans, and especially for nationalists who needed to prove that the Irish were capable of self-government, this stereotype was not funny at all. In incidents that Irish-American nationalists took to be important precedents for the *Playboy* controversy, members of the Ancient Order of Hibernians and other Irish societies organized riots in New York and Philadelphia in 1903 and 1907 to drive offensive caricatures off the stage.[8]

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[6] Dalsimer 77-78.
[7] "Against the Playboy," *Gaelic American* Oct. 7, 1911, p. 7.
[8] William H.A.Williams *Twas Only an Irishman's Dream*, Urbana and Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 1996. Kathleen Donovan, "Good Old Pat: An Irish-American Stereotype in Decline." *Eire/Ireland* 15, no. 3 (fall, 1980) pp.6-14.. On the earlier protests as precedent, see "Irishmen will stamp out The Playboy," *Gaelic American*, October 14, 1911.

Unlike the earlier and later depictions to which Irish-American nationalists objected, *The Playboy of the Western World* was not a lowbrow comedy aimed a popular audience. Accompanied initially by William Butler Yeats and then by Lady Augusta Gregory and robustly defended by George Bernard Shaw, the Abbey Theatre embodied the Irish literary revival and the Anglo-Irish intelligentsia responsible for that movement. *The Playboy of the Western World* is set, however, among the Catholic peasantry of Western Ireland, not among the Protestant elite to which Synge, Yeats, Gregory and Shaw belonged. In the play, a young man named Christy Mahon arrives in a remote village and reluctantly reveals to the local people that he is on the run from the police because he has killed his tyrannical father. The townspeople, and especially a young woman named Pegeen Mike, are impressed by his daring and ruthlessness, and Pegeen decides that she prefers the brave rogue to her timid, respectable fiancé, a man who lives in terror of the judgment of the parish priest. Christy is hardly the heroic outlaw the townspeople take him for: he was considered dimwitted and pathetic in his home village, and he wrongly believes he killed his father, who is still very much alive. However, as the local women compete for his affections, his confidence soars, and he becomes a stellar athlete and a smooth talker. His popularity is threatened, however, when his father shows up and reveals that Christy is not the parricide he claimed to be. Pegeen, humiliated that she has fallen for a fraud, turns on Christy, and he tries to regain her respect by killing his father for real this time. He succeeds only in injuring the old man, but Pegeen is horrified by the scene and realizes that real violence is considerably less glamorous than imagined crime. Christy and his father eventually leave town together, but it is clear that the balance of power between them has changed and that Christy is no

longer cowed by his father's authority. Pegeen, however, is left bereft, denied her romantic fantasies of ruthless yet dashing villains. Although there is no evidence that Irish-American nationalists recognized this possible interpretation, the play is sometimes taken to be an allegory for Irish people's attitudes towards physical-force nationalism, with Pegeen romanticizing parricidal violence until she is forced to confront its ugly reality.[9]

Because *The Playboy* was billed as high art and appealed to an elite audience, critics were inclined to dismiss Irish-American nationalists as philistines and prudes and to attribute their antipathy to sentimentalism and a need to see only relentlessly positive depictions of Irish characters on the stage. For the most part, modern scholars have affirmed their judgment.[10] It is certainly true that most Irish-American nationalists, like most early-20th century Americans in general, were hostile to new literary trends and believed that the purpose of art was to accurately depict reality, to edify the public, and to be beautiful.[11] *The Playboy of the Western World* seemed grotesque to them on all counts. It was coarse rather than beautiful. By showing immoral people whose immorality was not punished, it tended to debase rather than edify. And most problematically, it was an inaccurate depiction of rural Ireland. Synge, an elite, Protestant Dubliner, had taken it upon himself to portray rural Catholic peasants, and Irish-American nationalists thought his depiction was inaccurate and insulting. That the play was put on by a theater company that styled itself the "Irish Players" added insult to injury, since other Americans might get the impression that this demeaning portrayal of

[9]J.M. Synge, *The Playboy of the Western World*, ed. Malcolm Kelsall (London: W.W. Norton, 1994.)
[10] Dalsimer "Players in the Western World," p. 81; Abood, "Reception of the Abbey Theater in America," 7-15.
[11] Michael J. Jordan, "Coarse, Vulgar, Brutal," *Irish World*, Nov. 4, 1911, p. 7. "Washington is Cold," *Gaelic American* Nov. 25, 1911, p. 5.

the rural Irish had the imprimatur of the Irish nation.[12] To literary modernists who did not believe that art should uphold conventional morality, these objections seemed to reveal Irish-American nationalists' aversion to contemporary literary standards.

Yet to depict Irish-American nationalists as prudes incapable of understanding modern art is to miss the substance of their objections to *The Playboy*. Nationalists were by no means universally opposed to the Gaelic Revival or to modern literature, and in fact many felt betrayed that Yeats, whom they admired, condoned plays that they believed defamed Irish peasants. They objected to *The Playboy* not just because it was unedifying, immoral and inaccurate, but also because it inaccurately depicted the Irish as uncivilized and incapable of self-government.[13] It was, according to the United Irish American Societies of New York, "a gross libel on the Irish people, depicting them as barbarians of a very low type, with ideals and manners little removed for those of the savage."[14] As one letter to the editor of the *Irish World* put it "the one intention of the crowd engaged in this nasty affair seems to be to cast discredit on the ability of the Irish people to rule themselves."[15]

Irish-American nationalists objected to several specific aspects of the play. First, they believed that it depicted Irish peasants as people who condoned senseless violence and made heroes of criminals. They believed that this was part of a British plot to depict the Irish as pathologically violent, a smear that simultaneously delegitimized support for

[12] Adele Dalsimer has examined reviews of *The Playboy of the Western World* and concluded that many Americans did believe that the play accurately depicted rural Irish culture. Dalsimer, "Players in the Western World," 82-83.
[13] Dalsimer realizes that nationalists' objections stemmed from fears that the *Playboy* would harm the cause of Irish independence, but she depicts this objection as absurd.
[14] "Irishmen will stamp out the Playboy," G.A. October 14, 1911, p. 1.
[15] Daniel J. Dwyer, "Not a single redeeming feature," *Irish World*, Nov. 11, 1911, p. 7.

physical force nationalism and allowed anti-nationalists to depict the Irish as irrational and incapable of self-government. According to *The Gaelic American:*

> The whole purpose of this is to confirm and present a striking instance of the old English slander that the Irish sympathize with murder and are by nature uncivilized, barbarians and law breakers.[16]

Second, they held that *The Playboy* suggested that the Irish did not respect the importance of family and made light of parricide, something that was particularly appalling to people who believed that the family was the cornerstone of Christian civilization. Third, they believed that Synge's play portrayed Irish women as "brazen strumpets who would put Indian squaws to shame."[17] Since they believed that Irish women's chastity was evidence of Ireland's high degree of civilization and therefore suitability for self-government, this seemed like a political as well as a moral affront. Fourth, they thought that Synge mocked Catholicism by depicting wakes as drunken parties and by having characters invoke religious figures in a blasphemous way. Finally, they were particularly horrified by a humorous suggestion that an Irish woman had suckled a ram at her breast, since the Irish were frequently depicted as being overly familiar with beasts and therefore as being slightly subhuman themselves.

In short, the problem was not just that Irish-American nationalists clung to moral standards that avant-garde writers rejected, although that was certainly true. The problem was also that nationalists functioned in a culture in which adherence to those standards was considered a prerequisite for full citizenship and for self-government. Both the "stage Irishman" of the popular theater and the peasants of Synge's imagined Western Ireland failed to meet those standards, and it mattered little to Irish-American nationalists that the

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[16] "Yeats's Anti-Irish Campaign" *Gaelic American*, November 18, 1911, p. 4.
[17] "The 'Playboy' Must Be Suppressed," *Gaelic American*, October 28, 1911, p. 4.

popular depiction was meant to mock the Irish while Synge intended to celebrate them. For this reason, nationalists often used racialized language to protest *The Playboy*: it depicted them as people "with ideals and manners little removed for those of the savage" which is to say as people not thought to be capable of political autonomy.[18] Irish-American nationalists were not consoled by assurances that *The Playboy* was great art: in fact, that just made the affront worse. It was bad enough to be denigrated in front of working-class vaudeville audiences, but *The Playboy* would smear the Irish in front of culturally and politically powerful people who already thought themselves the social and moral superiors of Irish people and Irish-Americans. To be depicted as outsiders to Victorian morality in front of highbrow audiences was both humiliating and politically dangerous.[19] Nearly all Irish-American nationalists, regardless of their disagreements on Irish and American politics, agreed that the *Playboy* was a serious insult to the Irish people.[20]

Suppressing *The Playboy*

If Irish-American nationalists were nearly united in their opposition to *The Playboy*, however, they were considerably more divided about what to do about it. In the pages of Irish nationalist publications, Irish-Americans debated the best strategy for

[18] "Irishmen Will Stamp Out the Playboy," *Gaelic American*, Oct. 14, 1911, p. 1. The phrase is from resolutions passed by the United Irish-American Societies of New York.
[19] "Yeats's Anti-Irish Campaign," *Gaelic American*, Nov. 18, 1911, p. 4.
[20] A few articles refer to "Irish bohemians" who let their desire to adhere to literary trends override their patriotism and artistic judgment. See Jeremiah O'Leary, "An Irish-American's View," *Gaelic American*, Dec. 16, 1911, p. 3. However, the only Irish-American nationalist I have found who defended the play was moderate nationalist John Quinn, now better known as a patron of modernist writers and artists. See John Quinn, "Lady Gregory and the Abbey Theater," *The Outlook*, Dec. 16, 1911 pp. 916-919. Quinn's literary taste was unusual among Irish-American nationalists and probably among Irish-Americans more generally: Christine Stansall claims that Irish-Americans were significantly underrepresented among New York's "American moderns."

suppressing the offensive play, revealing their differing ideas about free speech and the role of the state in regulating expression.

A number of nationalists advocated strategies that would bypass the state and take matters into their own hands. These included boycotting the play, rioting, and protesting at the theater. Ultimately, however, none of these strategies proved effective.

In a letter published in both *The Gaelic American* and *The Irish World*, Dr. Gertrude B. Kelly, a representative of the far left wing of Irish-American nationalism, suggested that

> All we have to do is stay away from Daly's [theater] and Synge's plays will lack an audience. They are so deadly dull that nothing short of an inverted Irish sentiment could possibly make them of interest to the general public for more than two nights… Again, I say, boycott the box office. Synge, living or dead, is not worth good Irishmen quarrelling over.[21]

Kelly, a former anarchist and consistent defender of the right to dissent, balked at any attempt to silence the play and assumed that, if left alone, it would fail on its merits. Similarly, Chicago nationalist John A. McGarry told the *Chicago Daily Tribune* that

> A play which depends upon Irish scenes, Irish characters, and Irish players must fail unless it is patronized by the Irish. The Irish of this city will not dignify by their presence a play which so grossly misrepresents the chief characteristics of the men and women of their race. [22]

The *Chicago Citizen*, an Irish nationalist publication, urged Chicago's Irish community to "show their disapproval by declining to patronize the company in any shape or form."[23] This strategy had the great merit of not requiring state intervention or even concerted action on the part of Irish-Americans, but it was doomed to failure. Irish-Americans

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[21] "Dr. Gertrude Kelly's View", *Gaelic American* , November 18, 1911, p. 1; "A Good Advice 'Boycott the Box Office', *Irish World*, November 18, 1911, p. 7.
[22] "Paid to Incite Riot at 'Playboy'?" *Chicago Daily Tribune*, January 28, 1912, p. 2.
[23] "The 'Playboy of the Western World." *Chicago Citizen*, Nov. 11, 1911, p. 4.

initially assumed that the Irish Players would appeal to ethnic audiences and that Irish-American patronage would be necessary if the plays were to succeed. In fact, the Players had much broader appeal: their naturalistic style of acting and unembellished sets and costumes appealed to theater-goers of all ethnicities who rebelled against Victorian theatrical conventions.[24] On the pages of the highbrow weekly *The Outlook*, Theodore Roosevelt claimed that

> In the Abbey Theater Lady Gregory and those associated with her… have not only made an extraordinary contribution to the sum of Irish literary and artistic achievement, but have done more for the drama than has been accomplished in any other nation of recent years.[25]

The list of the Players' patrons in Chicago reads like a who's who of local high society, including Mrs. Potter Palmer, Mrs. George M. Pullman, and Mrs. Julius Rosenwald.[26] Because they were recognized as leaders of an international literary movement, the Players did not rely on Irish-American support, and the play's defenders did not seem particularly distressed by threats of an Irish nationalist boycott.[27]

If the Irish Players could ignore a boycott, many Irish-American nationalists advocated staging a protest that they could not so easily overlook. This strategy, too, had the merit of depending on private initiative rather than state action. Many Irish-American nationalists referred to the precedents of the 1903 and 1907 protests, which supposedly drove the "stage Irishman" from American theaters, and argued that Irish-American nationalists should stage riots at the theater, or at least should pelt the actors with rotten produce. One letter to the editor of the *Irish World* suggested that if the Irish Players

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[24] Abood, "Reception of the Abbey Theater in America, 20-44; Dalsimer, "Players in the Western World," 83.
[25] "Theodore Roosevelt, The Irish Players," *The Outlook*, Dec. 16, 1911, p. 915.
[26] "Mayor to Hear "Playboy Pleas," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Jan. 31, 1912, p. 15.
[27] "Chicago Doesn't Want 'Playboy,' *Gaelic American*Feb. 3, 1912, p. 1.

refused to listen to reason, "the company might properly be given a forcible hint in the way of a shower of rotten eggs and decayed felines."[28] The *Gaelic American*, although hesitant to overtly condone actions that could be seen as riotous, seemed to tacitly support such actions in an editorial that said:

> The opposition has been so polite and decorous so far that Lady Gregory thinks she can afford to sneer at it. But, then, as they say in Ireland, "It's a long lane that has no turning," and the rotten eggs which Lady Gregory invites the newspaper men to bring to the New Haven theatre, may not be so scarce in other places as in Boston and Providence.[29]

Nationalist publications continued to advocate this strategy when New York theater-goers actually carried it out. *The Irish World*, reporting on protests in New York, lauded Irishmen who hurled projectiles at the actors:

> From beginning to end the actors and actresses were hissed and hooted. Whilst a storm of hisses and groans was beating in upon the stage, the air was filled with decayed vegetables and eggs of uncertain age which kept the performers busy dodging from side to side. It was the fitting reception given to the vilest anti-Irish play ever staged.... We have in the past driven the vulgar "stage Irishman" from the theatre. We will not tamely submit to our race being misrepresented by his still more disgusting successor "The Playboy of the Western World." A good beginning was made last Monday. Let the work go on.[30]

In a front-page article, the *New York Times* described the scene on opening night as a "riot" and "a Donnybrook Fair" and noted that ten men were arrested and many others ejected from the theater.[31] There were also riots in Philadelphia and Washington, D.C.[32]

However, there was real risk in a strategy that involved actions that could be portrayed as tantamount to riot. Part of what Irish-American nationalists objected to

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[28] Gearoid MacCarthaigh, "A Shameless and Mercenary Crew," *Irish World*, November 11, 1911, p. 7.
[29] "Lady Gregory's Moral Victory, Moryah," *Gaelic American*, Nov. 11, 1911, p. 4.
[30] "Rebuking Indecency", *Irish World*, December 2, 1911, p. 4.
[31] "Riot in Theatre Over an Irish Play," *New York Times*, Nov. 28, 1911, p. 1.
[32] "Philadelphia Spanks "The Playboy," *Gaelic American*, Jan. 10, 1912, p. 1.; "More Theatre Riots Greet 'The Playboy'," *New York Times*, Jan. 17, 1912, p. 2. "Riot at Irish Play," *Washington Post,* Nov. 28, 1911, p. 1.

about *The Playboy* was the implication that Irish people were violent and lawless. It did not serve their purposes to confirm this impression. Members of Chicago's Irish Fellowship Club went so far as to suggest that any violence was actually perpetrated by the play's backers, who hoped that reports of riots would garner publicity and sell tickets to curious members of the public.[33] The editors of *The Gaelic American* were particularly anxious to emphasize that the protests were sober and dignified and to deny reports of riotous and violent behavior:

> Had the opponents of the play wished to resort to violence, or to use missiles, there were enough of them there to send several barrels of potatoes flying on the stage, to have flooded it knee deep with rotten eggs, or to have bruised and maimed the actors so that their mothers would not have known them. And if they had wanted to wreck the theatre, as the future leaders of the country, the Yale students, did in New Haven a few days before, because a play was not "hot" enough to suit them, it could have been easily done before the police reserves arrived. No violence was used; no violence was intended, so it had to be invented in order to justify abuse…[34]

"I maintain that the protest against the 'Playboy' was dignified," wrote the pseudonymous author of a letter to the editor in *The Gaelic American.*

> I was within a few feet of the stage and all I could see in the shape of missiles was a small package which probably contained some sneezing powder which did not work and one potato. The vegetables, rotten eggs, potatoes, apples, Walthams and "stink pots" which "rained on the stage," are only the coloring of the reporters who prefer exaggeration to accuracy…..I ask again, why is the minor diversion at the Maxine Elliott's Theatre magnified into a disgraceful riot? [35]

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[33] "Paid to Incite Riot at 'Playboy'?" *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Jan 28, 1912, p. 2.
[34] "Jew Papers and Irish Readers," *Gaelic American,* December 9, 1911. The anti-Semitism suggested by the article's title was endemic to the *Gaelic American's* coverage of the *Playboy* protests and will be discussed in greater detail below.
[35] "Iveragh," "Protesters were right," *Gaelic American*, December 16, 1911, p. 3.

The Gaelic American, therefore, denied that what had taken place was a riot and suggested that instead Irish-Americans had used their voices to disrupt the play *without* resorting to violence. The newspaper described one such non-violent protest:

> [The actors] were prevented from presenting the first scene after the dirty part was reached. They made a brave attempt to stick to their work, but were howled down by more than half the audience, who drowned the efforts of the claque and a number of claw-hammer coated Englishmen to applaud them….And it was not until fully a hundred were put out and a large part of the city's police force brought on the scene, leaving the thieves to ply their trade uninterrupted, that it was possible to give the first act all over again, and then with constant interruptions, protests and expulsions.[36]

Because it involved shouting rather than hurling objects at the stage, Irish nationalists considered this kind of protest non-violent.

However, in order to protest non-violently at the theater, Irish-American nationalists had to assert their right to free speech. In New York, six protestors were convicted and fined because they had, according to the *New York Times* "hooted and jeered and stood upon the seats in their efforts to show their resentment at the staging of the play."[37] This was exactly the sort of non-violent protest that the *Gaelic American* advocated. Even if the police refrained from arresting and charging protesters, theater managers could simply eject them from the theater. This posed a problem for Irish-American nationalists: how could they mount effective protests in privately-owned theaters, protests which were intended to harm the interests of the theaters' owners?

Shouting Down the Playboy: The Rights of the Individual

In order to solve this problem, they needed to argue not just that the state should refrain from prosecuting protesters but also that it should take positive steps to defend

[36] "New York's Protest Against a Vile Play," *Gaelic American*, Dec. 2, 1911, p. 1.
[37] "Riot in Theatre Over an Irish Play," *New York Times*, Nov. 28, 1911, p. 1.

their right to free expression. The first step was to argue that they, and not the defenders of "freedom of the theater", were the real champions of free speech. "'Freedom of the Theatre' means denial of the right to criticize a play or a playwright," according to *The Gaelic American*, and in America the right to criticize was sacred.[38] Irish-American nationalists, including many who attempted to convince the government to censor the play, used the language of individual rights to assert their own entitlement to disrupt the performance.

Irish-American nationalists argued that Yeats and Gregory, the Irish Players' managers, had a flawed conception of free speech, which stemmed from their experiences as members of a privileged elite in an unequal, colonial society. To the managers of the Irish Players, nationalists claimed, free speech meant their right to avoid being criticized by Irish and Irish-American people. Nationalist newspapers consistently referred to Yeats and Gregory's Protestant background, implying, for instance, that Gregory underpaid the company's actors because she had "a heart trained in the pitiless school of Galway landlordism, accustomed to trample on Irish feeling and treat the mere Irish with contempt and cruelty."[39] The author of a letter to the *Irish World* was even more blunt: "these people are not Irish; they are the effete spawn of the intruders, who by the arts of the poisoner, the swindler and the robber obtained, and ever since have held, a foothold!"[40] Nationalists also frequently asserted that "the really un-Irish and thoroughly anti-Irish character of this work is clearly shown by the fact that it could be produced in the capital city of Ireland only through the use of the batons of the police to suppress all

[38] "High English Approval," *Gaelic American*, October 21, 1911, p. 10.
[39] "The Playboy is as Dead as a Nail in a Door," Gaelic American, Dec. 9, 1911, p. 1.
[40] MacCarthaigh, Gearoid, "A Shameless and Mercenary Crew," *Irish World*, Nov. 11, 1911, p. 7.

attempts to give expression to Irish public opinion."[41] Such methods would not work in America, where, they claimed, a more genuine and democratic conception of free speech prevailed. According to *The Gaelic American,*

> Mr. Yeats is playing with fire. He might do it with safety under the protection of Dublin Castle, but there is no Castle in New York. The people control the police here and a very large number of those people are Irish Nationalists, jealous of the good name of their race and fully able to defend it.[42]

According to Irish-American nationalists, among the more robust rights to which Americans were entitled was the "right to hiss," which is to say the right to vocally disrupt objectionable plays. Moreover, they frequently suggested that such a right would be upheld by the courts and threatened to sue theater managers who ejected them for exercising their right to free speech. Writing in *The Irish World,* F. O'Neill Larkin asserted that

> I learned that one or two men were ejected from the theatre for hissing certain portions of the play, but that game can be blocked by thoughtful men who know that they posses the legal right to express their disapprobation as freely and fully as their right to applause. A suit for damages by men ejected for hissing "The Playboy of the Western World" would be backed up financially by nationalists.[43]

Joseph McGarrity, a Philadelphia nationalist who was widely identified as the leader of efforts to get the state to declare the play obscene, also threatened to sue for violation of his rights:

> A Theater Official gave orders that I be removed a Police Official then caught me by the shoulder and told me I must leave the theater I stated that if ejected I should sue the management of the theater claiming my right as before to remain and show my disproval by hissing the production.[44]

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[41] Resolutions of the Brooklyn Philo-Celtic Society, quoted in "Condemns the Playboy," *Gaelic American*, Oct. 28, 1911, p. 2.
[42] "Irishmen will stamp out 'The Playboy'," Oct. 14, 1911, p. 1.
[43] F. O'Neill Larkin, "F. O'Neill Larkin pronounces "The Playboy" a Despicable Picture of Irish Life," *Irish World*, Oct. 28, 1911, p. 7.
[44] N.d. [1911], McGarrity Papers, National Library of Ireland, MS 17644.

The *Gaelic American* claimed that

> At least thirty-five lawsuits will be brought for illegal expulsion from the theatre, and a sworn complaint has been lodged against a thug who wears the uniform of a police captain. That is the difference between New York and Dublin. The King's Writ doesn't run here and the City Hall is not Cork Hill. And if they go farther they'll fare worse.[45]

Far from rejecting free speech or individual rights doctrines, Irish-American nationalists depicted themselves as champions of free expression and "the right to hiss" as the real right that needed to be upheld.

Ultimately, however, Irish-American nationalists were unable to use theories of individual rights to suppress *The Playboy of the Western World*. First, there is no evidence that the courts recognized "the right to hiss," and many Americans seem to have supported theater-managers' right to expel disruptive patrons.[46] To modern readers, their position seems slightly incoherent: why should the courts uphold Irish-American nationalists' right to speak freely without interference from theater owners but not the Irish Players' right to speak freely without interference from Irish-American nationalists? Even more problematically, their demonstrations seem to have had the opposite effect from what they intended: instead of driving people away from the theaters, they generated publicity for the plays and roused the public's curiosity. *The Outlook*, a consistent defender of the Irish Players, crowed

> the little crowd of denaturalized Irishmen who tried to prevent the performance of "The Playboy of the Western World" by the Irish Players in New York City have succeeded in doing precisely what was needed to bring the play into public attention; they perpetrated an Irish bull by giving a very effective advertisement to something they wanted to drive from public attention.[47]

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[45] "Playboy Dead as a Nail in a Door," *Gaelic American,* Dec. 9, 1911, p. 1.
[46] "The Playboy Row," *New York Times*, Nov. 29, 1911, p.10.
[47] "A Great Irish Play and Some Irishmen," *The Outlook*, Dec. 9, 1911, p. 843.

The Outlook was hardly a neutral observer, but modern historians have generally concurred with their judgment that the protests helped rather than hurt the Players' tour. [48] Arguing for the right to protest had little efficacy if the protests ended up aiding the people whom they were aimed against. Although they never conceded that the protests were bad strategy, in January, 1912, the *Gaelic American* suggested that "nobody would bother about the 'rotten show' but for the thrills supplied by the audience."[49] By the time the Players reached Chicago, their final stop, Irish-American nationalists seem to have decided that protesting in the theater was an ineffective strategy: they insisted that any protests were the work of the Irish Players' publicists and they instead concentrated on petitioning the city council to suppress the play.

Censoring *The Playboy*: The Rights of the Community

If many Irish-American nationalists used the language of individual rights to argue for their own freedom of expression, they also argued, sometimes in the same article, that the community was entitled to suppress dangerous speech. They did so using the prevailing arguments of the day: that there was a difference between liberty and license and that people should not be permitted to speak in ways that had a bad tendency to corrupt public morals or to provoke violence. They consciously aligned themselves with progressive reform in order to depict themselves not as reactionaries but as up-to-date advocates of a rational, well-ordered society.

Using a standard pre-World War I argument for limits on free expression, advocates of censorship argued that there was a difference between legitimate free speech

[48] Abood, "Reception of the Abbey Theater in America," 7; Dalsimer, "Players in the Western World," 77.
[49] "Real Comedy Off the Stage," *Gaelic American*, Jan. 27, 1912, p. 4.

and "license," which could be prohibited. As the arts columnist for the *Irish World* wrote:

> We are as much in favor of a free stage and free speech as any body….But some persons are not fit for freedom; they mistake it for license, and they abuse it. A man may not use indecent or even provocative speech on the street; if he does, he will find he is not free in the sense he thought he was. The "Abbey" people abused the right of a free stage and free speech, and employed libelous incidents and vulgar, indecent, and grossly disrespectful speech of things which our people hold in respect.[50]

The Gaelic American expressed similar sentiments when it asked rhetorically

> But it is the freedom of the theatre that Mr. Yeats is most concerned about. What is the freedom of the theatre? Is it freedom to outrage public decency, to present falsehood on the stage, so that people may be influenced by it, to libel and malign a whole people for the purpose of creating prejudice against them, or to undermine public morality? Are there any limits to its freedom and who are to mark those limits?[51]

Many nationalists claimed that *The Playboy* was outside the bounds of protected speech because it was indecent, but others suggested that it represented a kind of group libel. According to *The Gaelic American*,

> Every man or woman who is a competent judge and who is not blinded by prejudice, or by a false conception of "art," knows that "The Playboy" is an atrocious libel on the Irish people… The whole play is a monstrosity. It is an attack on the character and the good name of the Irish people-- an attack of such an atrocious nature that mere words cannot answer. Such an attack addressed to any average American would in the North result in an appeal to the law, and in Kentucky, Tennessee or Georgia to the revolver or the rifle.[52]

By painting *The Playboy* as obscene and libelous, categories of speech that few Americans believed should be protected, Irish-American nationalists hoped to build a case for government censorship of *The Playboy*.

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[50] Currai an Tsaogail, *Irish World*, April 19, 1912, p. 7.
[51] "Paints the Playboy in Glowing Colors," *Gaelic American*, Oct. 21, 1911, p. 1
[52] "Stamp Out the Atrocious Libel," *Gaelic American*, Oct. 14, 1911, p. 4.

Others argued that the very vehemence of nationalists' protests to the play should be enough to justify its suppression, because the riots proved that the play had a bad tendency to provoke violence. Jeremiah O'Leary, a young lawyer who during World War I would become one of Irish-American nationalisms' most controversial figures, claimed that

> It cannot be possible that William A. McAdoo reported the play to be "harmless," in view of the section of the Penal Code which says that no play shall be permitted which tends to create disorder; considering also the manner in which the play has been received in every city where it has been produced. It must be clear to Mr. McAdoo as to where his duty lies as the Chief Magistrate of this city. It is clearly to suppress this performance, and save a great majority of our people, of which he is one, the humiliation and indignation they naturally feel at its public presentation. Hissing is the right of every man. The hissing should be sufficient to put Mr. McAdoo in motion.[53]

According to this argument, every citizen was a potential censor, since the mere act of loudly objecting to speech was enough to justify state intervention.

These arguments might sound reactionary to modern readers, but Irish-American nationalists did not see themselves that way. In fact, they rhetorically aligned themselves with progressive reformers, who frequently argued that the common good should trump individual rights. The author of a letter to *The Irish World*, for instance, compared the campaign against the *Playboy* to attempts to ensure truth in advertising:

> Under the false brand of "Made in Eirinn" they are palming off French nastiness upon the American public. In this country there is a statute against selling goods under a false label; the conscienceless quack who tries to fill his purse by

[53] Jeremiah O'Leary, "An Irish-American's View," *Gaelic American*, Dec. 16, 1911, p. 3. It is perhaps ironic that O'Leary spent two years in prison during and after World War I charged with violating provisions of the Espionage Act that prohibited speech that had a tendency to interfere with the draft. The experience turned him into an advocate for political speech, but it does not appear to have dampened O'Leary's enthusiasm for censorship of the arts: in 1927, as a New York City alderman, he came out strongly in favor of censoring movies offensive to Irish-Americans. See "Ald. O'Leary for Ordinance," *Gaelic American* Oct. 29, 1927, p. 1.

> imposing upon public ignorance soon finds himself in the grip of the law; it is a pity this law does not extend to literary wares.[54]

Similarly, the *Gaelic American* portrayed itself as the protector of the female actors in the Irish Players' company, depicting Lady Gregory as a heartless employer and the actresses as exploited workers.

> there has been trouble with the contracts, and the trouble was about "The Playboy." Some of the girls objected to the production of "The Playboy" and refused to appear in it. They appealed to Lady Gregory, but their appeals fell on a heart of stone....It might be a legal question whether the case of these players is a violation of the foreign contract labor law.[55]

All of the female members of the Irish Players signed a letter denying that they were forced to appear in the play, but the *Gaelic American* implied that their signatures might have been coerced.[56] Both the specific mention of the foreign contract labor law and the broader appeal to protect vulnerable women from labor exploitation were in keeping with mainstream progressive ideas about the limits on individual rights.

Nationalists did not just argue for their right to censor the play: they also made concerted efforts to convince local governments to shut down *The Playboy*. These efforts were no more effective than attempts to boycott or shout down the Irish Players. This failure, however, could more easily be blamed on the deficiencies of the current laws, rather than on the underlying efficacy of the strategy.

In both Boston and New York, Irish-American outrage convinced the city's mayor to send a representative to assess whether *The Playboy* was indecent. In each case, the representative determined that the play was not obscene and could not be suppressed

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[54] MacCarthaigh, Gearoid "A Shameless and Mercenary Crew," *Irish World*, Nov. 11, 1911, p. 7. The reference to "French nastiness" reflects the widespread belief that Synge's literary imagination reflected the time he spent in the fleshpots of bohemian Paris.

[55] "Playboy Dead as a Nail in a Door," *Gaelic American*, Dec. 9, 1911, p. 1.

[56] "Denial from Irish Girls," *Gaelic American,* Dec. 30, 1911, p. 5

under the current laws. *The Gaelic American* took comfort from chief magistrate William A. McAdoo's report to New York's mayor, in which, according to *The Gaelic American*, he suggested that he found the play personally offensive but that the courts would not censor it, given their past decisions about what comprised obscenity. The paper characterized McAdoo's stance thus:

> He admits that it is offensive and provocative, but says that because of a decision of the court in the case of another play which he had suppressed when he was Police Commissioner, "The Playboy" "is not such an immoral or salacious play as would call for any action on the part of the public authorities.[57]

Whether McAddo was commenting on the underlying merits of censoring the play or merely on the possibility of doing so under the current laws, it was clear that calls for government censorship were not going to be effective in New York or Boston. In other cities, the situation seemed more promising.

The most serious attempt to censor *The Playboy* occurred in Philadelphia in January, 1912. After several nights of rioting at the theater, all of the members of the Irish Players were arrested, charged with violating a statute that prohibited the presentation of "lascivious, sacrilegious, obscene, indecent plays, or plays of an immoral nature or character, or such as might tend to corrupt morals", and released on $500 bail. According to the Associated Press report, the offense with which they were charged was punishable with up to a year's imprisonment. News reports, sympathetic and otherwise, agreed that the arrest was instigated by Joseph McGarrity, a Philadelphia liquor merchant and prominent member of the Irish nationalist secret society the Clan na Gael. McGarrity provided two priests who testified that the play was blasphemous and immoral. The

[57] "Robinson Cables Lie to Dublin," *Gaelic American* Dec. 16, 1911, p. 1.

court, however, does not appear to have seriously considered the charges: several days later the charges were summarily dismissed.[58]

In Chicago, where Irish nationalists were anxious to avoid the riots and attendant publicity that had been so evident in the cities where the Players had previously performed, the anti-*Playboy* campaign focused on petitioning the city government to suppress the play. After ten thousand residents signed a petition demanding that the play be suppressed, the city council voted to order the mayor to prevent the play from being performed. This put Mayor Carter Harrison in a difficult position: while the elected representatives of Chicago's citizenry voted to suppress *The Playboy*, the social elite rallied around it, and Harrison faced pressure from powerful people to permit the play. The office of the corporation council then weighed in, advising the mayor that he was only entitled to censor the play if it was immoral or indecent, which it was not. Assistant corporation council William Dillon, in a written report, suggested that the play was offensive and libelous and likely to provoke riots, but he rejected bad tendency doctrine, suggesting that "it does not follow that because the delivery of a speech or the acting of a play is liable to lead to a breach of the peace it is such an abuse of the right of free speech as to justify the authorities in preventing it." The mayor opined that the play's "chief fault [was] stupidity rather than immorality," and that he was powerless to stop it. To offset the possibility of riots, the elite patrons of the Anti-Cruelty Society offered to host a benefit for their organization on opening night, and tickets were sold to acquaintances of the society's members, not to the general public. Barred from the theater, Irish-American

[58] "Irish Players Held in Bail," *Chicago Daily News*, Jan. 19, 1912, p. 1; "Irish Players Discharged," *New York Times,* Jan. 23, 1912, p. 20; "Irish Actors are Released," *Chicago Daily News*, Jan. 23, 1912, p. 3; "'Irish' Players Arrested," *Irish World*, Jan. 27, 1912, p. 2; "Pennsylvania Air Bad for 'Playboy,'" *Gaelic American*, Jan. 27, 1912, p. 1

nationalists could not protest during the play even had they wanted to. The Irish Players finished their run in Chicago without significant incident.[59]

None of Irish-American nationalists' strategies proved effective, therefore, in suppressing *The Playboy* or even in dampening its popularity. The problem with the individualist strategies, however, was inherent: organized protests would always generate publicity, as the front page stories on major daily newspapers made obvious, and attract curiosity-seekers to the theaters.[60] Unless nationalists could continue to buy tickets for the entire run of the play and generate so much noise that the actors could never be heard, their strategy was likely to backfire. Censorship, which would assert the rights of the community to prevent offensive performances altogether, was potentially a more effective strategy and one to which Irish-American nationalists would turn the next time they were faced with offensive caricatures.

The Callahans and the Murphys: the triumph of the rights of the community

It would be fifteen years before Irish-American nationalists again participated in a campaign to stamp out what they saw to be demeaning depictions of Irish characters. The controversy over depictions of the Irish in movies began in late 1926, when Irish nationalist organizations got wind of plans to make a movie of *McFadden's Row of Flats*, the play that had caused such offense in 1903.[61] Nationalist organizations were able to intervene before the movie was filmed, and the studio changed the script to remove any

[59] "Nullifies Order to Stop "Playboy," *Chicago Daily Tribune,* Feb. 1, 1912; "Council Can't Stop 'Playboy'," *Chicago Daily News*, Feb. 1, 1912, p. "Mayor to Hear 'Playboy' Pleas," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Jan. 31, 1912, p. 15; "Mayor Ordered to Bar 'Playboy'; Irish Back Move, *Chicago Daily Tribune,* Jan. 30, 1912, p. 1; "Paid to Incite Riot at 'Playboy'," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Jan. 28, 1912, p. 2.

[60] Walsh notes that this was an ongoing fear among Catholic movie reformers, who went so far as to refuse to condemn movies for fear of giving them publicity. Walsh, *Sin and Censorship: The Catholic Church and the Motion Picture Industry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).

[61] "Offensive 'Funny' Films," *National Hibernian*, January, 1927, p. 4; "M'Fadden's Flats," Vile Play, Filmed,"*Gaelic American,* Dec. 4, 1926, p. 1.

material that would offend Irish-American. *The Gaelic American* reported that the film was "passable, as such productions go, and had scarcely any resemblance to the original monstrosity known as 'McFadden's Row of Flats.'" The paper warned that "[c]ontinued vigilance, however, for screen and other productions derogatory to Irish character, is most advisable."[62]

In June of 1927 the paper saw more cause for concern in the movie *Irish Hearts*, which, it said, "depicts the Irish as a low, ignorant, vulgar, drunken and disorderly race, and the women are as unsavory as the men."[63] Already primed to be sensitive to anti-Irish depictions, Irish-American nationalists were enraged the next month, when MGM released *The Callahans and the Murphys*. Although Irish-American nationalists believed that there was a widespread campaign on the part of filmmakers to malign the Irish, most of the controversy focused on *The Callahans and the Murphys.*

Although no prints of the movie survive, historian Frank R. Walsh has pieced together a description of the film from the shooting script, reviews, and articles attacking the film. To Hollywood, the movie was significant because it was the first film to feature a female comedy team, and nobody, including Irish-Americans involved in the film, realized that it would offend Irish-American audiences. Yet to anyone familiar with earlier "stage Irishman" controversies, it is clear that it would be unacceptable to Irish-American nationalists. The movie depicts Irish people, and especially Irish women, as drunken and violent. It makes light of, and arguably mocks, Catholic religious practice and associates it with immoral behavior. It depicts Irish women as having loose sexual morality, since the characters are not particularly upset about what appears to be an

[62] "The McFadden's Flats Film," *Gaelic American*, Feb. 19, 1927, p. 4.
[63] "'Irish Hearts,' Vulgar Play Should Not Be Patronized," *Gaelic American,* June 4, 1927, p. 3.

unwed pregnancy. (At the end of the movie, it is revealed that the baby's parents were secretly married all along.) One of the main male characters is a bootlegger, which emphasized Irish criminality. All of the objectionable themes come together when the two female main characters meet at a St. Patrick's Day celebration, get roaring drunk, come to blows, throw beer down the front of each other's dresses, and drunkenly make the sign of the cross backwards. It would have been hard to come up with a more offensive scene to Irish-American nationalists if the film's producers had tried.[64]

In the fifteen years between the *Playboy* controversy and the fight over *The Callahans and the Murphys*, Irish-American nationalism had gone through profound transformations. In 1911-12, the movement was just beginning to emerge from a period of dormancy, and the *Playboy* controversy may have represented a step towards its reinvigoration.[65] The next decade would see the high-point of 20th century Irish-American nationalism: between 1916, when nationalists in Ireland staged a doomed rebellion which galvanized Irish nationalists, and 1921, when Irish nationalists and the British government signed a treaty granting Ireland a measure of independence, the movement took on mass proportions in the United States. However, Irish-American nationalism suffered two devastating splits in the early 1920s, one over whether Irish or American leaders would determine the policies of Irish nationalist organizations in America and one over whether to accept the treaty or continue fighting for full independence. In 1927, these rifts had not yet healed. Moreover, for the majority of Americans who accepted the treaty, it was not clear whether Irish-American nationalism

[64] Walsh, Frank, "'The Callahans and the Murphys' (MGM, 1927): a case study of Irish-American and Catholic Church censorship," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 10, no. 1 (1990), pp. 33-45.
[65] On the revival of Irish-American nationalism, see F.M. Carroll, *American Opinion and the Irish Question* (New York, St. Martin's Press, 1978], pp. 14-54.

continued to serve any purpose. If Ireland was free, what was left for Americans to do other than wish Irish citizens the best in governing themselves? A renewed "stage Irishman" fight provided a solution to both of these dilemmas: it had the potential to unite Irish-Americans regardless of their differences over Irish or American politics, and it gave purpose to a movement that was no longer called upon to support an armed struggle for Irish independence.

If Irish-American nationalism had changed, so had Irish-American nationalists' attitudes towards the activist state. After the founding of the Irish Free State, nationalists who looked to Ireland now saw a benevolent, rather than an oppressive state, and they paid attention when that state outlawed indecent literature. *The National Hibernian*, the national organ of the Ancient Order of Hibernians, reported on Irish efforts to outlaw indecent literature:

> While other nations are floundering and hesitating amid the welter of bawdy books, Ireland has decided to apply an Irish index expurgatorious. All unclean literature is to be seized and destroyed. The publishers and disseminators are to be drawn within the penal code. The public is to be protected from contagious diseases of the mind just as a board of health guards it from physical contagion. Doubtless, we shall hear wails about the "freedom of the press" and the "arbitrary exercises of authority," etc. But sensible people do not confuse facts, and no publisher has a right to demoralize the youth for his own profit."[66]

Moreover, the 1924 immigration act, which Irish-American nationalists protested vigorously, as well as the World War I-era prosecutions of pro-German nationalists forced members of the movement to focus on the power of the state, for good or ill. Therefore, when faced with another controversy over offensive depictions, they argued almost unanimously for increased state intervention to censor movies and plays. Ultimately, they did not succeed in convincing the Federal government to enact national

[66]"Ireland Expurgates Nauseous Literature," *National Hibernian,* Feb. 1927, p. 4.

movie censorship. Their arguments about the need to protect the community did, however, galvanize the Catholic Church and usher in a regime of Catholic movie censorship which would regulate American movies' morality for decades to come.

Irish-American nationalists did advocate the individualist strategies that failed them in 1911 and 1912. They advocated a boycott:

> Perhaps one of the most effective weapons against the caricaturing of the Irish is the boycott. Every film producer and every theatre proprietor who perseveres in caricaturing the Irish should be black-listed.[67]

They suggested violence:

> Rotten-egg the Stage Irishman and punch the theatre manager who produces the vile thing. It is the only way to get rid of him. Peaceful protests are unavailing.[68]

They even occasionally argued that courts should uphold their right to protest by refraining from prosecuting them when they rioted in theaters, as when the *Gaelic American* asked: "Why should magistrates be allowed to punish good citizens for protesting against blackguardism and immorality?"[69]

Overwhelmingly, however, they saw these methods as temporary measures that would serve until the accomplishment of the ultimate goal: national movie censorship. Moreover, they almost never referred to individual rights such as the right to free speech; instead, they focused on the right of the community to be free from the noxious influence of immoral art. As the editors of the *Gaelic American* put it:

> To exploit depravity, drunkenness, rowdyism and obscenity is a misuse of the film. The perverts who conceived the two vile plays are not fit to be members of

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[67] "War on Indecent Films to Continue until Monstrosities Are Banished From the Screen," *Gaelic American*, Aug. 27, 1927, p. 1

[68] Rotten-Egg the Stage Irishman, *Gaelic American* Aug. 6, 1927, p. 4

[69] Drive Out the Stage Irishman," G.A. Sept. 3, 1927, p. 4

> any decent society. The producers who persist in exploiting those depraved representations are a menace to civilization.[70]

By employing the concept of "a menace to civilization," they moved away from arguments based on individual rights and towards one based on the good of the community.

In order to depict Hollywood as a menace to society that justified legislation, and not just an affront to the sensitivities of Irish-Americans, nationalists relied heavily on anti-Semitic language and stereotypes. Anti-Semitism was not new to anti-stage-Irishman campaigns: during the *Playboy* controversy, the *Gaelic American* implied that Jewish theater managers and Jewish-owned newspapers were conspiring to denigrate the Irish and accused Jewish leaders of hypocrisy for protesting defamatory depictions of Jews but ignoring equally-offensive portrayals of the Irish.[71] Yet Irish-American nationalists were far from universally or consistently anti-Semitic: in 1927, for instance, the *National Hibernian* denounced Henry Ford's attacks on Jews, and nationalist publications occasionally stressed cooperation between Irish nationalists and Jewish Americans.[72] In the campaign for movie censorship, anti-Semitism served a tactical purpose: it allowed Irish nationalists to depict movie morality as a problem with far-reaching implications. This was no longer an issue of anti-Irish prejudice. It was, according to nationalists, part of a far-reaching campaign to undermine the Christian basis of American culture. The Gaelic American pronounced that

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[70] War on Indecent Films to Continue until Monstrosities Are Banished From the Screen Aug. 27, 1927, p. 1

[71] See for instance "Playboy as Dead as a Nail in a Door," *Gaelic American*, Dec. 9, 1911, p. 1," "Jew Papers and Irish Readers," *Gaelic American*, Dec. 9, 1911, p. 4.

[72] "Henry Ford, The Jews, and the Ku Klux Klan Necrology," *National Hibernian* April, 1927, p. 4. See, for instance, "When the British Flag Came Down," *Sinn Feiner,* Nov. 27, 1920, p. 3; "Big Los Angeles Meeting," *Gaelic American*, July 1, 1916.

> The Jews control the film industry and they are using their power to demoralize this Christian country. What they are doing to-day against the Irish they will do to-morrow against every other element in the American population with the exception of the "chosen people" who must not be ridiculed in the movies or criticized in the press.[73]

Following the sudden death of movie mogul Marcus Leow, the newspaper claimed that:

> The Jewish film trust in its war on the Irish has aimed a dagger at the family circle—the very citadel of Christian civilization. Christians are still in a majority in this country. Will they allow the country founded by the Revolutionary Fathers to be turn [sic] into a Sodom and Gomorrah?… there is a lesson in [Leow's] life for the American people and it is that the movie evils must be checked by National Censorship. The money grabber must not be allowed to contaminate the morals of the American people or overthrow the Christian conception of family life.

Not all nationalists took to the theme with the zeal exhibited by *The Gaelic American*, but others did both use anti-Semitic language and assert that the offensive movies were part of a campaign to undermine the Christian foundations of American civilization. Martin Sweeney, national president of the Ancient Order of Hibernians, wrote in *The National Hibernian*

> Just why the Jews, who control the Motion Picture Industry, should align themselves on the side of Intolerance and Prejudice is somewhat of a mystery… Is it possible that the Jew is an opportunist for revenue only and devoid of gratitude?[74]

The same publication had suggested that the movie threatened American morals:

> The photoplay which degrades the Irish character and mocks the Catholic religion destroys reverence for Christian civilization—and when that reverence and that Christianity are destroyed all American institutions will crumble.[75]

Although the *National Hibernian* hesitated to connect the two themes, the paper acknowledged that many other people did.[76]

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[73] Widespread Indignation Against Pictures Caricaturing Irish Race and Catholic Church", *Gaelic American*. Aug. 20, 1927, p. 1

[74] Martin Sweeney, National President, "National President's Letter," *National Hibernian,* Nov., 1927, p. 1

[75]"Movie Caricatures and Anti-Irish Prejudice," *National Hibernian*, Nov., 1927, p. 3.

If America was menaced by an anti-Christian campaign to undermine the country's morality, nationalists argued, the best solution was government censorship. According to the *Gaelic American:*

> While the Campaign is being directed in particular against the Metro-Goldwyn-abomination "The Callahans and the Murphys," which Loews Theatrical Enterprises is distributing, and "Irish Hearts," a production of Warner Brothers of New York, there is every indication that the forces now at work to end these wanton insults to Irish men and women will not rest with this but will devote their energies to calling the country's attention to the need of National censorship to end the sinister propaganda against Christian ideals.[77]

The National Hibernian also took up the cause:

> The principle of censorship has been recognized both by law and ethics… The Christian morality, as well as the Christian theology, has long been contemptuously insulted by the movie corporations… Whatever degrades high sentiments, whatever besmirches purity, whatever makes a mockery of holy things, are seized upon by the film producers as proper subjects for films… The organized Irish societies of America are aroused by the danger which threatens Christian civilization. Twenty millions of Catholics cannot be insulted without an explosion. The Irish will defend the honor of the race with determined tenacity and seem fated to lead the movement now taking form to defend all that is vital to Irish prestige and all that is sacred in the Christian faith. Some form of movie censorship must come. But it must be National….[78]

Ultimately, Irish-American nationalists failed in their attempts to achieve national movie censorship. Moreover, their key local goal, a New York ordinance that would outlaw movies offensive to any race or ethnicity, also failed after MGM retreated and withdrew *The Callahans and the Murphys*. Irish-American nationalists did not, in fact, managed to strengthen government censorship of films. Nonetheless, this final campaign to stamp out the "stage Irishman" profoundly affected the history of American cinema and ushered in a regime of Catholic movie censorship that would persist into the 1950s. The Catholic church had participated in earlier "stage Irishman" protests: in 1911, the

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[76] "Movie Caricatures and Anti-Irish Prejudice," *National Hibernian*, Nov. 1927, p. 1.
[77] "Jewish Film Firms War on Irish Race," *Gaelic American*., Aug. 13, 1927, p. 1.
[78] "Censorship of Movie Plays Needed," *National Hibernian*, Nov. 1927. p. 4.

Vice President of Georgetown University penned a circular denouncing *The Playboy of the Western World* and had it distributed at every parish in Washington, D.C., and priests affiliated with Catholic University and Gonzaga College, as well as the pastors of several parishes, condemned the play.[79] In 1927, however, the Catholic hierarchy embraced the campaign in a much more concerted and organized fashion. According to Frank Walsh, the fight against *The Callahans and the Murphys* represented a significant moment in the history of Catholic movie censorship: it was the moment when the Church recognized that it had the power to bring Hollywood to terms. Soon after, an Irish-American Chicago priest, Daniel Lord, would pen the production code that regulated movie morality; an Irish-American layperson, Joseph Breen, would be in charge of ensuring that Hollywood adhered to that code, and a Catholic organization, The Legion of Decency, would provide insurance against laxity, threatening mass boycotts of movies that violated Catholic standards of morality. If *The Callahans and the Murphys* represents the culmination of a decades-long struggle to ensure that Irish-Americans were respectfully depicted in American theaters, therefore, it also represented the start of a regime of Catholic film regulation which would take for granted the right of the community to be protected from immoral or dangerous art.[80] The successful effort to stamp out *The Callahans and the Murphys* would be the last major campaign over "the stage Irishman," mostly because Hollywood decided not to produce any more movies that relied so blatantly on negative stereotypes about the Irish. Influenced by "stage Irishman" struggles, however, the Catholic hierarchy would attempt in a much more systematic fashion to protect the community from the dangers of offensive art.

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[79] "Washington Condemns It," *Gaelic American,* Oct. 18, 1911, p. 1.

[80] Gregory D. Black, *Hollywood Censored: Morality Codes, Catholics and the Movies* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994.) Frank Walsh, *Sin and Censorship.*

Conclusion

I hope, in this chapter and my dissertation, to suggest that we cannot distinguish between ethnic history and American intellectual or political history. Ethnic Americans, and particularly Irish-Americans, were not merely acted upon in debates about free speech, the role of the state, or the boundaries of American citizenship: they also helped shape the discourse and influence the compromises that would emerge from that discussion. I hope to suggest that it is important to examine specific ethnic experiences, not just to generalize about "ethnics" or "members of the urban working class," in order to understand the ethnic origins of American politics. Irish-American nationalists were differently positioned than members of other ethnic nationalist movements: because Irish immigration was an earlier phenomenon, they had more of a foothold in multiethnic institutions like labor unions and the Catholic church; they conducted their campaigns in English and therefore had more access to and were subject to more scrutiny by the general public; the country they saw as their enemy had close ties to the American government and to many elite Americans. It matters that these people were Irish, and not just urban, Catholic, or people who were not members of the social and economic elite.

If Irish-American ethnicity mattered, however, I also want to suggest that Irish-American attitudes and beliefs were flexible and that nationalists developed their ideology in response to the challenges they faced. This is a point that has been made by many ethnic historians who have studied how local contexts affected ethnic culture.[81]

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[81] See for instance Donald H. Akenson, *Small Differences: Irish Catholics and Irish Protestants 1815-1922: An International Perspective* (Kingston, Canada: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1988). Samuel L. Bailey *Immigrants in the Land of Promise: Italians in Buenos Aires and New York City, 1870 to 1914 (*Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1999). Timothy J. Meagher, *Inventing Irish America: Generation, Class and Ethnic Identity in an American City* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001).

Indeed, my study might benefit from more attention to local context and to the ways in which nationalists from a variety of locations struggled to construct a coherent national and transnational movement despite their differences. While I have not carefully examined local contexts, I want to suggest that Irish-American nationalists shaped their arguments and their attitudes in response to the demands of the particular moment. They were not inherently opposed to individual rights, wary of (or trusting towards) the state, or inclined to use violently anti-Semitic rhetoric. Their choices were often strategic, but those choices also caused them to work out ideas that influenced their wider actions. By looking at the ways in which Irish-American nationalists influenced the broader discourse about free speech, I hope that I have suggested that further study into ethnic political activism and ideology can contribute to our understanding of American political development.