

Introduction

On those chilly March days when I walked home with the other boys from Mary Queen of Heaven School in the Flatlands section of Brooklyn in the mid-1960s, someone would occasionally shout, “Rumble!” This shout would go out in March because it was the month of Saint Patrick’s Day, and his sainthood naturally needed to be celebrated with a street fight between the Irish kids and the Italian kids. I cast my lot with the Italian kids, for my ancestry is Italian on my mother’s side of the family. There was no percentage, in choosing sides for a scuffle among Catholic schoolboys, in acknowledging that two of my grandparents were Jewish. I kept this fact a secret (rather awkwardly, my last name being Moses).

Nothing ever came of the calls for an Irish-Italian rumble, and all was quickly forgotten as we boys went on our way. What I realize now, however, is that the challenge to duke it out on East Fifty-Seventh Street recalled our collective history in much the same way that we pretended to shoot Germans and “Japs” in World War II combat. It faintly echoed the days when the Irish and Italians of New York rumbled for real—when they fought over jobs or turf, and when they jockeyed for power in the church, in politics, in unions, and in the civil service.

Those battles were mostly forgotten—although not entirely, and by some, not at all—by the time I was growing up in the 1960s.

Intermarriage between Americans of Irish and Italian ancestry in the years after World War II had changed everything.

The story of this unlikely union—how New York’s Irish and Italians learned to love each other after decades of hostility and ethnic rivalry—is told in this book. For me, it is a personal story, since I benefited from its legacy. When I walked down the aisle from the altar of St. Vincent de Paul Roman Catholic Church in Elmont, New York, on August 7, 1976, with the former Maureen Collins at my side in her bridal gown, there was no trace of regret to be discerned from my family that I had married someone who, with her red hair, her lovely freckles, and her name, so clearly had her roots in Ireland. Nor was there any objection from the Collins side of the aisle that the darkly tanned, unemployed student their pretty, twenty-three-year-old registered nurse had just married had his roots in southern Italy and German Jewry. That’s unremarkable, of course, but not so many decades before, a union such as ours could well have provoked anger and hostility in our respective tribes.

To sociologists, this changed attitude is the result of assimilation: the children, grandchildren, or (in Maureen’s case) great-grandchildren of immigrants from once-warring ethnic groups were increasingly likely to intermarry as the new generations lost their attachment to the Old World and Americanized. This was true enough in our case and many others’. But to describe that process solely in such dry terms would miss the human drama of what happens when two peoples learn to put aside ingrained resentment, mingle, blur their social boundaries, and become one.

This book tells that story. Not my story, but the story of millions of people of Irish and Italian ancestry who trace their roots to places like Transfiguration Church on Mott Street—once an Irish Catholic parish—or to the docks of Brooklyn, the tenements of Mulberry Street and East Harlem, or the long lines outside the Bowery office of “Big Tim” Sullivan, the Tammany politician who gave out thousands of pairs of free shoes to both the Irish and Italians. It is a story about people: of Giuseppe Garibaldi, who left his exile on Staten Island to liberate Italy, much to the dismay of

Irish New Yorkers offended that the pope's land was confiscated; of Sister Monica McInerney, an Irish American who warned Italian girls in St. Patrick's School that they'd wind up working in garment factories if they didn't study; of Francis L. Corrao, Brooklyn's first Italian American assistant district attorney, who investigated organized crime in Sicily in 1908 only to return and quit with an angry blast at an Irish American boss he believed treated him as an inferior; and of the radicals Elizabeth Gurley Flynn and Carlo Tresca, whose tempestuous Irish-Italian love affair gave the yellow press something to write about. It is a story of saints and sinners. Among these saints, one is canonized: Mother Frances Xavier Cabrini, who refused to return to Italy after the Irish American archbishop of New York, Michael Corrigan, told her to do so the day after her landing. Among the sinners: Al Capone, who was married to an Irish American woman and who tore the heart out of the Irish "White Hand" gang on the Brooklyn waterfront by murdering Richard Lonergan in 1925.

So many people share Irish and Italian ancestry that it is easy to forget the depth of the bitterness that once existed between Irish Americans and Italian Americans. The great Irish American newspaperman Jimmy Breslin put it this way in his 1970 book *The Gang That Couldn't Shoot Straight*: "Among the most overlooked racial problems in the country is the division between Irish and Italians."¹

The history of this long Irish-Italian wrestling match is plenty colorful, but that story alone would not have been reason enough for me to write this book. What moved me to do so is that in this world of frayed and raw racial and ethnic connections, the Irish and the Italians of New York offer a story of how peace was made. Having spent some two decades in daily journalism in New York and as a lifelong Brooklynite, I'm certainly familiar with the old tribal conflicts that dwell within the shiny steel-and-glass exterior of the city's civic life. Ethnic conflict is part of the urban turf. The news from the Irish and Italians is that it can be overcome.

This peace was achieved through love and intermarriage and because, in the fluid world of American democracy, the Irish and

Italians were so often thrown together, whether or not they liked being near each other. They clashed in parishes, workplaces, neighborhoods, and politics. But over time, these same arenas came to unite them. The Italians had no choice but to deal with the Irish, who were their union leaders, foremen, schoolteachers, cops, and ward heelers. The Irish had to deal with the Italians if they were to raise the status of the Catholic faith in Protestant America.

Glimmers of peace can be glimpsed even in early accounts that note the acrimony between the Irish and Italians. Writing in 1905, the U.S. census official Eliot Lord noted “the jealousy of the Irish at the intrusion and their free-spoken jibes at the ‘Dago,’” a slur once used for Spanish immigrants, apparently based on the common name Diego, and now adapted to Italians. But, he added, “There is less clashing between the two nationalities than might be expected,” owing to their “good nature.” He added that “the common religion is also a bond of union.”²

Lord’s observation about the role of the Catholic Church was an ultimately correct but bravely optimistic statement at the time. The unenthusiastic reception the Irish-run institutional church gave to the Italians when they began arriving in large numbers in the 1880s is reflected in the Reverend John Talbot Smith’s official history of the Archdiocese of New York, also published in 1905: “The Italians showed very little interest in religion after their arrival, and acted as if the Catholic Church did not exist in the United States.”³

Religion plays an important role in the story of the Irish and Italians. They were baptized in the same faith, but clashing senses for the sacred contributed to their conflict. One might expect construction workers to get into brawls to protect their jobs, but an uncivil war of words was also fought between Irish pastors and Italian priests. The construction workers’ battles led to the courthouse, an arena that favored the Irish. The priests’ battles went all the way to the Vatican, an arena that favored the Italians. Yet, in the years after World War II, the church played a key role in bringing the Irish and Italians together, and to the altar in marriage.

While the church took many decades to unite its Irish and Italian members, there were shrewd leaders in other New York institutions—the underworld and politics—who quickly saw the possibilities. The gang leader Paul Kelly, in particular, mastered the art of Irish-Italian deal making. Born Franco Antonio Paolo Vaccarelli, he had his name legally changed to Paul Kelly. Starting in the 1890s, he headed the Five Points gang, which morphed into a supposed sports club, the Paul Kelly Association. Its main event came on election days, when members earned their drinking money by fixing the vote for the Bowery's powerful boss, "Big Tim" Sullivan. Big Tim protected Kelly's gang from the police, allowing its reign of violence on the streets of lower Manhattan. He also was a master at courting Italian voters, wooing them with his own stories of growing up in poverty and passing legislation that made Columbus Day a New York State holiday.

After a rival thug nearly assassinated Kelly, he put aside his gang activities and began a second career as a respected labor leader, organizing Italian waterfront workers and becoming a vice president of the International Longshoremen's Association. He changed his name back to Vaccarelli. When he died in 1936, his obituary in the *New York Times* made no mention of his criminal past as Paul Kelly.⁴ And when Big Tim died under mysterious circumstances in 1913, Italian immigrants were shoulder-to-shoulder with the Irish among the fifty thousand mourners, weeping for their benefactor.

In the same way, the Irish and Italians both wept at the funeral of Lieutenant Joseph Petrosino, a star detective who was assassinated while on a not-so-undercover assignment in Sicily in 1909. Once routinely dubbed "the Dago" when detective bosses called him to crime scenes, the Italian-born detective became the greatest hero in the history of the Irish-dominated New York Police Department after he was slain on his dangerous solo assignment.

But such moments of Irish-Italian reconciliation were not common in those days. The Irish came first. Many arrived in the late eighteenth century. A good number were Protestants from Ulster;

some were Catholics. Then came a huge influx of Catholic Irish in the 1840s and 1850s, fleeing the Great Famine. After struggling for acceptance in New York, the Irish felt they were being invaded when large numbers of Italians began arriving in 1880 to the impoverished Five Points section of lower Manhattan, looking for housing and work. It's natural for sympathy to go to the underdog in such situations, but the Irish were underdogs too—and certainly felt that way. As the *New York Times* declared in 1880 when opposing William R. Grace's winning campaign to become the city's first Irish Catholic mayor, New York was “an American Protestant city”—one that the “average successful Irish Catholic” was not fit to lead.⁵ We cannot understand the Irish reaction to the Italians without considering the enormous obstacles Irish Catholics faced in establishing themselves in Protestant America. The Irish spearheaded the battle for Catholic acceptance.

The early Irish in New York mostly lived in severe poverty. They were the ones hit hardest in time of epidemic or food shortage. After building their church, creating a school system, and seizing control of the city's political machinery, the Irish were finally beginning to make it when the Italians arrived, willing to do their jobs for lower pay and longer hours. Resentment and violence followed.

The old tensions sometimes surface nowadays, usually in the form of jokes and teasing banter on March 17 and 19, when the Irish celebrate Saint Patrick's Day and the Italians mark the Feast of Saint Joseph. In my Brooklyn parish, where people are mostly of Italian or Irish ancestry, a single dance is often held to celebrate both dates, with corned beef and cabbage served along with pasta and meatballs. The parish, Saint Columba, was founded in the 1960s by an Irish American pastor with a stentorian voice. It is said that while he named the parish for an Irish saint, he was careful to choose one whose name ended in a vowel, which pleased his Italian parishioners.

In many ways, the Irish and Italians have become family. But, as in a family, the old hurts can persist. As I worked on this book, I

received more clear-cut warnings to be fair—from friends of either Irish or Italian ancestry—than I have for any other story I’ve told in decades of writing about the subjects once considered too controversial to discuss in polite society, politics and religion.

And so in fairness, we must remember that if the Irish of a century ago treated the immigrant Italians as inferior, so too did the rest of society, and in harsher terms. The southern Italians’ migration from desperate conditions in their homeland coincided with an era when intellectuals endorsed now-offensive theories about superior races and nationalities. Southern Italians were placed near the bottom of this racist hierarchy. Yet despite many barriers, the Irish and the Italians eventually became two of the most intermarried ethnic groups in America.

Other ethnic and racial groups also contributed to the making of a mighty city, of course. For purposes of this book, I’ve focused on important groups such as Jews, blacks, and Hispanics only to the extent that they were a factor in the Irish-Italian relationship. As intermarriage continues to become ever more typical in American life, perhaps more books will be written on relationships between specific ethnic and racial groups and the dual ethnicities that have resulted.

The reason often offered for Irish-Italian intermarriage is that New York was a “melting pot,” at least for the generations of European immigrants who arrived in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. That notion was challenged in the 1963 classic *Beyond the Melting Pot*, in which Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, focusing on blacks, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians, and Irish in New York, argued that ethnicities retained their individual identities from one generation to the next. Other experts have argued that there was a “triple melting pot” based on religion—Catholics, Protestants, and Jews each marrying within their own religion—or that the real determinant for intermarriage is whether people from different ethnic groups live close to each other. New York’s first African American mayor, David N. Dinkins, brought this debate into politics with his multicultural vision of the city. “This city is

not a melting pot but a gorgeous mosaic,” he often said in his 1989 mayoral campaign.

The “melting pot” metaphor is, as many have noted, an imperfect one. The image—a crucible heated to purify metals—makes it sound as if the process of assimilating and mixing immigrants is much more certain and scientific than it really is. The chemical reaction in a crucible is predetermined by the ingredients added and the heat applied. The “melting pot” metaphor leaves out the unpredictable, unscientific, human element—and it is this very human story of how two peoples mixed that I tell here.