



IRISH VS. YANKEES

A SOCIAL HISTORY OF THE BOSTON SCHOOLS

JAMES W. SANDERS

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the Boston Schools*

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Preface

This work is intended to be a social history of the conflict over education in Boston between the so-called native Bostonians, whom I have chosen to call the “Yankees,” and the immigrants who flocked into Boston mainly during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, of whom the overwhelming majority were Irish. The story of education in Boston during this period of roughly a century was admittedly more than a struggle between the Irish Catholics and the Yankees, and my contention is that this struggle marked a defining aspect of the city’s educational history.

Given that the work is intended as a social history, it may appear strange that the chapters are divided according to the tenures of the several Roman Catholic bishops who occupied the Boston episcopal see during these roughly one hundred years. Such a division might suggest that the work is an ecclesiastical rather than a social history. On the contrary, my intention is to establish the fact that each bishop, while representing the official Catholic Church, was in his own unique way very much a part of the social history that was unfolding in Boston. Thus, the first bishop, Jean-Louis Cheverus (who served from 1810 to 1818), was an unassuming Frenchman whose nationality enabled him to benefit from the post-Revolutionary good will that Americans extended to the French, who had helped so much in the Revolution. The second bishop, Benedict Fenwick (who served from 1825 to 1846), was a Southern gentleman of Anglo-Saxon stock, a descendant of the English Catholics who founded Maryland, and a member of the noted but sometimes controversial Jesuit religious order. His pedigree strongly colored his interface both with the Boston Yankees, who admired his learning but not his religious affiliation, and his

unlettered Irish flock, who complained that he “did not know the way to the Irish heart.”

The third bishop, John Fitzpatrick (who served from 1846 to 1866), was born in Boston of Irish immigrant parents but was sponsored as a youth by proper Bostonians into the renowned Boston Latin School because of his natural abilities. After his return from a Catholic seminary in France, he soared into the upper reaches of Boston society. He became, in a sense, their “window dressing” Irishman, in public acting as one with them, ever careful not to offend, but in private deeply resenting what he considered their arrogance.

The fourth bishop, John Williams (who served from 1866 to 1906) was also born in Boston of Irish immigrant parents but followed a more reclusive path: he associated neither with proper Boston society nor with his Irish compatriots. He left social developments, including schooling, largely to the interplay between the Yankees, who were now fighting a sort of rearguard action to maintain control of “their” city, and the up-and-coming Irish politicians who were emerging from the Irish-dominated local wards and were now staging to take over the city.

The fifth bishop, William O’Connell (who served from 1906 to 1944), was also born in New England of Irish Catholic immigrant parents, and grandly announced at his inauguration ceremony that “the Puritan has passed; the Catholic remains.” In many ways he typified the brash Irish usurpers who were taking over the city’s political institutions at the same time. Though personally dedicated to providing parochial schooling for all the children of his diocese, he succeeded only modestly because Boston, including its public schools, was now a Catholic-controlled city and its schools posed no threat to Catholic children.

In his own way, each bishop functioned as a key player in the social dynamic that fashioned life in Boston during this fascinating century. Each was a part of those social forces. Thus, the division of the book based on the bishops’ tenures would seem to be justified as long as one remembers that these men, though each certainly influential, were far from omnipotent in determining the Roman Catholic response to the educational issues of the day.

The gestation period for this book has been considerably—in fact, unusually—longer than most. In fact, it took well over forty years to develop from the germ of an idea to the reality that now lies in front of me. The question that started it all popped into my mind way back in the late 1960s, when I was still doing research at the University of Chicago for my PhD dissertation, which was eventually published in 1977 as *The Education of an Urban Minority: Catholics in Chicago 1833 to 1930*. It was part of the Oxford University Press’s “Urban Life in

America” series, edited by my mentor at the University of Chicago, Professor Richard C. Wade.

I still remember that moment, as I was sitting in the University of Chicago library archives reading the transcript of a debate almost a century earlier in the Illinois State Legislature about a petition from Chicago Catholic leaders to provide tax money for their rapidly developing parochial schools. As one legislator delivered an impassioned speech against the petition, he asked a rhetorical question to the effect that “Why can’t Catholics in Chicago send their children to public school as the Catholics in Boston do? In Boston, Catholic children attend the public schools.” That statement seemed passing strange to me at the time, since I knew that Boston was heavily Irish Catholic, quite militantly so, and presumably not likely to allow its children to attend the public schools that Catholics in the nineteenth century so vehemently railed against as allegedly discriminatory. But I tucked the statement away in memory anyway, intending to check the legislator’s contention at a later date.

After finishing my degree and taking a faculty position with the City University of New York, and after being encouraged by my mentors to pursue the line of research that my dissertation had begun, it naturally enough occurred to me that perhaps Boston would be worth investigating, at least to see if it indeed was different from Chicago. Sure enough, a couple of hours looking into old editions of the *Catholic Directory* confirmed that, while there had been Catholic schools in Boston since the 1820s, in comparison to Chicago and other urban dioceses in the East and Midwest, the Boston church’s parochial school effort had been minimal, and most Catholic children had gone to public school.

The big question, then, was: Why? What was different about these two cities that might account for the divergence? Fortunately, in 1976, with the generous help of a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities and a sabbatical from my college, I was able to move my young family to Boston for two years to pursue that question. In 1978 I returned to New York City and my position with the City University of New York, with an entire filing cabinet full of notes and copies of documents gleaned from archives large and small, libraries illustrious and relatively unknown, and from many conversations with scholars as well as school and church functionaries. All of these, taken together, had helped me develop a satisfying and persuasive answer to my fundamental research question: Why did Boston not develop a comprehensive parochial school system? I was ready to write.

That was forty years ago! What happened? Well, I did write much of the book in the handful of years immediately after 1978, using time left over from my teaching and other professorial duties as well as time from being a

husband and father of young children. But then, in the mid-1980s, a friend and colleague enticed me into partnering on a small project introducing four “burned-out” public high school teachers to a more creative and, we hoped, renewing approach to teaching called “Discovery Learning.” The tiny project worked amazingly well; we applied for and got a federal grant to continue and expand the program; one success led to another, and within four years we were operating on a multimillion-dollar annual budget with more than twenty full-time professional employees. Twenty-five years and some 50 million grant dollars later, I finally retired and began dusting off the old semi-finished Boston manuscript, incorporated data from previously unused notes and files, and researched at least some newer historical records and work that had been produced in the intervening quarter-century. The result is what I present here.

But before proceeding, I think it necessary to elaborate somewhat on my method of presentation. I consider myself a social historian, not a church historian. As a PhD student, I concentrated on American urban and ethnic social history. In writing my previous book on Chicago I tried to avoid not only the boosterism that had characterized most previous scholarship about the Catholic church enterprise in the United States, but also the tendency to write Catholic history from the viewpoint of the Church’s hierarchy, based largely on the assumption that Catholic history was determined exclusively by hierarchical decrees and policies that were simply passed down and followed by the faithful masses. My research had convinced me that this had not been the case.

Accordingly, I have tried to explain and interpret events and trends as resulting largely from the interplay of social forces and not just hierarchical decrees. Thus, I had found that development of parochial schooling in Chicago initially gained momentum not from a decision made by the bishop but from German Catholic immigrants who were already familiar with church schools in Germany. Then the Chicago Irish joined the parochial school movement so the Germans would not get ahead of them. Then the later-arriving Poles wanted to outcompete the Germans and Irish, while the later Italian immigrants, who were not accustomed to having to support the Catholic institutions in Italy, did not at first develop even their own parishes, let alone parochial schools. In short, hierarchical decrees were always mediated and their efficacy most often was determined not by the decree itself but by the social forces as well as the individualities at work in the Catholic population, and, for that matter, in the general population as well. Further, the Catholic bishops of Boston differed among themselves with regard to the possibility and desirability of developing a parochial school system. They were not at all homogeneous in their commitment to parochial schools.

I wish to make this point as strongly as possible, especially because the very organization of the present book would seem to undermine the notion that this is a “social” history and not simply a “church” history. In fact, it will be apparent that, though the reigning bishop was indeed always a key player in determining Catholic educational policy, he was by no means the only key player; he was always hugely influenced, and sometimes controlled completely, by the various social forces that impinged on Catholic life in Boston. Nor was every bishop of the same mind with regard to the education of Catholics, and certainly none had the kind of absolute control over the Catholic flock that has often been imagined.

The various bishops were by no means equally involved in the education of Boston Catholics, nor were they equally effective in shaping the direction that education took. Thus, though it might appear at first glance that I have written a “church” history of the education of Boston Catholics, this is in fact meant to be and I hope will be read as a social history, in which Catholics, including their hierarchical leaders, were simply a part of the social fabric that made up Boston and shaped its educational endeavors during the critical formative decades covered by this book.

Irish vs. Yankees

1

Hopeful Beginnings, 1808–1823

On March 4, 1822, after some forty years of concerned discussion, the voters of Boston, by a solid majority, ratified the Massachusetts General Court's proposal to change the town's official status to that of a city. The decision signified more than a mere change in nomenclature. It meant that Boston would now no longer be governed by the informally direct democracy of the town meeting with its will executed by an equally informal board of selectmen. That system of direct democracy had worked quite well for almost two centuries. But now, by decision of Bostonians themselves, a new, more centralized, representative form of government would take its place—an elected mayor and a city council constituted by eight aldermen elected at large and forty-eight councilmen elected by wards.¹

The decision to change governmental machinery indicated merely that a majority of Boston voters now recognized what some had seen for years past—the need for more effective ways to cope with the new issues that increasingly confronted this growing center of New England population. Boston, after all, counted almost 50,000 inhabitants in 1822, all jammed into the same tiny peninsula roughly three miles long by a mile and a half wide that had comfortably housed only a third of that number just thirty years before.² The very growth of population in such a confined space had aroused anxious concern for ways to deal with the welter of issues that had not existed in simpler days—how to dispose of wastes in a sanitary way; how to provide clean and adequate water; how to control the congestion by regulation of buildings, streets, and sidewalks, and through adequate transportation; how to protect the crowded buildings from the ever-present danger

of mass conflagration; how to police the growing incidence of drunkenness, vagabondage, assault and battery, and other crimes; how, even, to perhaps relieve the congestion by further expanding the town's geographic limits and its usable space. Not the least of these new concerns—actually the paramount one—was the weighty issue of how to cope with the increasingly heterogeneous composition of Boston's population.

To deal with such weighty and pressing matters, the occasional meetings of citizens at Faneuil Hall would never do. That old and revered system of direct government by the citizens that, among other contributions, had played such a vital role as a forum for promoting the Revolution could not be jettisoned lightly. Before Bostonians could move themselves to the decision of 1822, they had engaged in years of careful consideration, so congenial to the reflective Yankee-Puritan temperament. The decision itself marked a turning point in the dominant Boston mentality, the terminus of a long reflection upon the great river of events that was sweeping what Bostonians considered the "Hub of the Universe" into the modern era.

True, the decision neither initiated the move to modernity nor ushered it in overnight. The Boston of 1822, despite the many changes of the past several decades, still no doubt looked and felt more like the Boston of 1722 than it did like the Boston that was soon to be. Even geographically, the modern Bostonian would hardly recognize the newly designated "city" of 1822. One could still look out to sea from the Common, as well as inland to the rolling, tree-covered hills. Charlestown, Roxbury, Dorchester, Brighton, future sections of Boston, all remained independent country towns. The South End and Back Bay still lay under water. And the city proper joined the mainland only via the narrow neck of land that stretched down what is now Washington Street to Roxbury.

But by the 1820s, with its population growing at twice the rate of the 1790s, and the rate increasing each year, Boston had for some time been struggling to expand its land mass and to establish more viable connections with the surrounding territories—the Charles River bridge to Charlestown in 1785; the West Boston bridge to Cambridge in 1792; the West Cove land fill project west of Charles Street begun in 1803; the annexation of South Boston in 1804; the cutting down of Beacon Hill to half its height begun in 1804, both to create development on the hill and to fill in the large Mill Pond separating the North and West Ends; completion of the Mill Dam, which cut off the Back Bay and connected Boston to Brookline via a highway on top of the dam; and in 1823 the project to fill in the Town Cove that lay at the foot of Faneuil Hall. Though all these projects paled in comparison to the later reclamation of areas like the South End and Back Bay from the sea, they nevertheless handily demonstrated that Boston had engaged itself in the process of rapid physical change.

Social change, too, was now rapidly overtaking Boston's vaunted stability. Despite generations of commercial contact with the most exotic corners of the globe, and despite the broadening effects of its engagement with the other colonies as well as with the colonies' French allies to win independence from England, Boston had remained very much a city unto itself. In view of that, one prominent citizen later nostalgically remembered the Boston of his 1820s youth: "with a population of wellnigh [*sic*] purely English descent, . . . with ancestral traditions and inspiring memories . . . both by its history and position, the town had what the French call a solidarity, an almost personal consciousness, rare anywhere, rare especially in America."³ And the son of Boston's first great mayor of the 1820s described the city of his youth as "singularly homogeneous . . . eminently English in its character and appearance, and probably no town of its size in England had a population of such unmixed English descent as the Boston of forty years ago."⁴

Much of what these nostalgic Bostonians remembered was rooted in fact. The city's population *did* still consist overwhelmingly of English stock. And the homogeneous culture, stemming perhaps from the original exclusionary Puritan theology and the founding fathers' conscious desire to build here a harmonious, homogeneous "City on a hill," a "Zion in the Wilderness," did still mark Boston off as unique, with a distinctive character and personal consciousness rooted now in long tradition (long at least for America).

On the other hand, such reminiscences also betrayed a wisp of wishful thinking, the vision of a Boston that once had been, as proper Bostonians liked to remember it, but that even well before the 1820s had already been slipping into history. Judged through the spectrum of later years, perhaps, the Boston of the 1820s looked idyllic. But much had changed already then, and Bostonians recognized this when they accepted the fact that their home was no longer a town but a city.

And many must also have recognized that the changes in physical characteristics, the newly filled land and bridges and annexations, even the substantial growth in population itself, all taken together were not the only and probably not even the chief reasons for becoming a city. Compared to other centers of population in the fledgling United States at the time, the pace of growth in Boston would have to be considered relatively modest. Boston lacked the industries that were attracting immigrants to other American cities like New York. It didn't have navigable waterways that would make possible trade into the interior, nor did it even have the water power that was beginning to fuel the Industrial Revolution in other New England towns like Lowell, Lawrence, and Fall River. Its earlier wealth had been made on the trade routes to the West Indies and Far East, which had now diminished largely because of English

obstruction on the high seas. It was this earlier accumulated wealth that now made possible the physical civic improvements and that was now being turned to financing the development of the new textile industry in the Massachusetts river towns like Lowell and Lawrence and to building up Boston as a financial center. But none of this produced a great need for common labor in Boston itself, except for jobs on the civic improvement projects such as filling land, building bridges, and the like.

Thus, Boston was not situated to attract huge numbers of immigrants as certain other American cities were. The immigrants who came to Boston increasingly came during this period not because they heard of job opportunities but because they could get cheaper passage, sometimes even as ballast on lumber ships returning from Liverpool to the Canadian Maritimes, from which they literally walked down the coast and drifted into Boston.

As a result, while it may have seemed disturbingly gigantic to some old-line citizens, Boston's growth rate remained modest in comparison to some other population centers in the new nation, even though it was admittedly robust enough to create the need for governmental response to expand land availability and provide at least basic social services. All of this contributed to recognition of the need to reorganize the governmental structure from the traditional informal town format, creating instead a city.

But, more fundamentally than that, it was not so much the numbers but the peculiar characteristics of the new immigrants themselves, especially the ethnicity and religious affiliation of the vast majority who arrived in Boston during the early decades of the nineteenth century that began to threaten the very essence of what Boston had always been. This new immigration threatened to destroy the centuries-old sociocultural homogeneity that had so characterized Puritan New England, and in particular, its hub: Boston. The new immigrants were mostly neither Anglo-Saxon nor Protestant, the two foundations on which the Massachusetts Bay Colony, with Boston as its center, had been founded two centuries earlier, and which the descendants of the Puritan founders had striven so mightily to preserve.

But now, the newcomers were not Anglo-Saxon but mostly Irish, and they were not Protestant but mostly Roman Catholic. This flew in the face of what many Bostonians still considered, even after two centuries, essentially Bostonian. The Puritan founders of the Massachusetts Bay Colony had gone to great lengths to ensure that their colony would remain forever as it was at its founding.

But very gradually throughout the eighteenth century, and then with shocking rapidity as the nineteenth century took hold, both the ethnic and religious purity were rapidly fading into the past. In Boston the religious factor

predominated, but the ethnic was not far behind; and to many Bostonians the two could not be distinguished. Together, they constituted a disruption that called for a drastic response that could only be possible with the modernized governmental structure that status as a city could provide.

On the religious front Boston's original founders had intended it as a haven for a small, totally homogeneous group of English dissidents bound together by fervent adherence to a very specific form of Christian Protestantism. They had almost immediately passed laws that outlawed the practice of any religion other than their own. In the beginning that meant not just the hated Roman Catholicism but non-Puritan Protestant religions as well. As time wore on, and the colony was gradually exposed to outside influences, the restrictions originally placed on other Protestant bodies were gradually relaxed. By the early 1800s, not only did most Protestant denominations have a foothold in Boston, but its most liberalized expression, Unitarianism, had become the dominant religion at least in influence if not in numbers. Many prominent, old-line Bostonians had gone over to Unitarianism, and almost every one of the town's major church congregations, together with their architecturally notable church buildings, had converted to this liberal form of Protestantism, so liberal that many opponents did not recognize it as even Christian. As the final insult to the Puritan founders, the very institution they had originally founded to educate young men for their ministry, Harvard College, by the early 1800s had been taken over by a majority of Unitarian professors.

Other, more evangelical, more fundamentalist Protestant denominations, too, thrived in Boston by the early 1800s. Most of them sponsored religious newspapers that warred with one another, but especially against the more recently noticeable arrivals, the hated Roman Catholics. While they might differ violently with one another over particulars, all, except the more liberal and accepting Unitarians and to some extent the Episcopalians, who had retained many features of the Roman church, were united in their angry rejection of Roman Catholicism, which was just beginning to emerge as a serious threat as the nineteenth century dawned.

Indeed, it had taken much longer for Roman Catholicism to take root in Massachusetts, largely because of the extreme measures the colony's founders had taken to exclude it. While the founders shunned non-Puritans of any stamp, they positively abominated Roman Catholics. The Royal Patent of 1620 had banned Catholics from the New England colony unless they were willing to take the Oath of Supremacy. As early as 1647 the colony had passed a law outlawing priests, with banishment for the first offense and death for the second. In 1678, when non-Puritan Christians were first formally tolerated in Massachusetts, Papists were explicitly excluded. By 1685, in opposition to the

ascendancy of the Catholic James I of England, Bostonians began their long tradition of Pope's Day celebrations, with the annual desecration of the pope's effigy on Boston Common. Under the Royal Charter for Massachusetts in 1692 Catholics were explicitly excluded from all rights, and by 1700 the laws banishing priests were tightened to mandate perpetual imprisonment for the first offense and death upon escape and recapture. Death for the priests does not appear to have been entirely unheard of, for in 1724 there was "great shouting and triumph" in Boston when a French Jesuit's scalp was brought back along with those of twenty-four Indians.⁵

By 1731, when the presence of Irish and French Catholics, attended by a priest, was rumored in Boston, the governor issued a warrant to the sheriff and constable of Suffolk County "to make diligent Enquiry after and search for the said Popish Priest and other Papists of his Faith and Perswasion [*sic*] and (if need be) in order to apprehend them or any of them, you are Directed and Impowered to break open any Dwelling house, shops, or other Places or apartments, where you shall suspect they or any of them are kept concealed."⁶ The zeal for preventing Catholicism from taking root in Boston and its environs was considerably fortified in 1750 when Judge Paul Dudley left a sizeable bequest to Harvard College for a quadrennial lecture "for the detecting and convicting and exposing the Idolatry of the Romish Church."⁷ Out of the Dudleian lectures came some of the most colorful anti-Catholic literature of the period.

Anti-Catholicism in Massachusetts had over the years lost some of the theological purity grounded in genuine differences between Puritan and Catholic belief. It had also gotten mixed up in politics and affairs of state, especially efforts to restrain the Catholic French Canadians from proselytizing Indians in Massachusetts territory. But by the 1760s and the annexation of Canada by England, the basis of anti-Catholicism began shifting from fear of French Canada to sentiments supporting the beginnings of revolutionary fervor in America. Thus, the English Crown, both for its friendly toleration of Catholicism in Canada and for its official Anglicanism, which many New Englanders saw as within the papal tradition, increasingly came under attack as soft on Catholicism and even allied with the tradition of papal tyranny. In the Boston celebration of Pope's Day one found by the 1760s the fusion of attacks on papal tyranny with attacks on the tyranny of George III. It was tyranny in all its forms that the New England revolutionaries came to loathe; and for many the prime example, the mother of tyranny at whose breast every tyranny sucked, was the Whore of Babylon herself, the Church of Rome.

Even the younger John Adams fused his opposition to England with his ancestral Puritan loathing for the Church of Rome. The Roman Catholic

Church, argued Adams, had chained human nature “for ages in a cruel, shameful and deplorable servitude to him [the Pope] . . . who, it was foretold, would exalt himself above all that was called God.” Civil despotism, thought Adams, had its roots in the canon law of the Church.⁸

With the coming of the American Revolution, though, attitudes toward Roman Catholicism had changed somewhat in Massachusetts, for a variety of political and human reasons. Indeed, in unforeseen and unintended ways the Revolution opened the door for the future of Catholicism in the Puritan state. The colonies, especially the New England ones, now had to cultivate friendship and aid from the Canadians, who were mostly Catholic. They also had to rely on help from Catholic Indians in their territories, who insisted on religious freedom, among other amenities, in exchange. The American government, in an early breach of the wall of separation between church and state, actually paid to supply priests for the Indians. Even more important, Catholic France came to the colonists’ aid. During the war, units of the French fleet harbored in Boston, and Bostonians, among other concessions, had to cancel the celebration of Pope’s Day for fear of offending the French.

Then too, for some Boston leaders, contact during and immediately after the Revolution with other American colonies where religious toleration had advanced much further came as a cultural shock and surprise. The experience of John Adams serves as perhaps the clearest and most meaningful example. Adams, who had worried seriously about the possibility of papal tyranny in America, met Maryland’s Charles Carroll at the Continental Congress of 1774 and found him to be “a very sensible gentleman, a Roman Catholic, and of the first fortune in America.”⁹ It took several more years, including other acquaintanceships with Catholics and an official stay in France, to more thoroughly dissipate Adam’s almost inbred suspicion of Catholicism. But by 1779, when he wrote the draft for a new Massachusetts constitution, the recently liberated Adams wrote into it the guaranteed freedom of worship for all, including Catholics.¹⁰

Thus, the American Revolution had proved an unexpected boon to Catholics in Massachusetts, in ways that the early New England revolutionaries had never intended. The new state constitution, ratified in 1780, guaranteed freedom of public worship, though in denying to Catholics the right to hold public office and in imposing on them the duty of contributing to the tax support of Protestant ministers only, it did not go as far as Adams intended or Catholics must have hoped.¹¹ The meaning of genuine equality was to dawn more slowly on the people of Massachusetts, and the removal of first legal and then real barriers to equality would entail a long, step-by-step process, often marked by acrimony and grudging concession.