

## **An Alternative View to the Propaganda: The Irish-American Press and the Spanish-American War**

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### **Abstract**

*The importance of alternative views on the Spanish-American War has been largely ignored and the discourse of the New York Irish is particularly significant because it frames the debate by equating imperialism with Anglo identity and emphasises the role that many other ethnic communities played in the formation of a more pluralistic US identity. The New York press shaped the course of events of the Spanish-American War. The fierce competition for readers that led the editors of New York Journal and New York World to print exaggerated reports of Cuban sufferings and inspired their reporters to create news to increase sales has been well-documented. These newspapers played a significant role in shaping mainstream public opinion on US involvement and on imperialism in Puerto Rico and the Philippines and dominated the discourse relating to the war. However, the New York/Irish-American press and the syndicated newspaper columns of Finley Peter Dunne presented alternative views of war-related issues and US imperialism which reached a significant audience.*

### **Introduction**

When the United States entered into the conflicts in Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Philippine Islands in the late nineteenth century, it was abandoning its original policies of not becoming directly involved in wars with European colonial powers, and it was aligning itself politically with England (against Spain). This ideological shift transformed aspects of the social structure and culture as well. The US was already a multicultural nation and this attempted homogenisation of identity and the new imperialistic role was problematic for many non-Anglo communities. For Irish/Catholic New Yorkers, the reconfiguration would be more serious. Many had come to the Americas to escape Anglo hegemony and believed that emphasis on Anglo culture would hinder their ability to negotiate a place in the US power structure. US support for England was an overt attempt to downplay the Irish presence in the United States and to justify their marginalisation. The same rationale of Anglo superiority would later be used to deny independence to Puerto Rico and the Philippines after the War.

*...Anglo-Saxon racism was a chic ideology in American Universities, drawing rooms, and private clubs.[...] Survival of the Fittest Social Darwinism, another English import, provided a scientific and sociological framework for Anglo-*

*American nationalists. They not only used it against 'inferior breeds' in the United States, but as a propaganda weapon justifying military and economic imperialism in Latin America and in the Far East, claiming that America was bringing the advantages of a superior civilization to the benighted savages of an underdeveloped world. (McCaffrey 1976: 113)*

This resurgence of kinship with the British would also justify an imperialistic stance to which some of the Irish were vehemently opposed due to their own long history as a British colony.

Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer primarily viewed the war and the occupation of Puerto Rico and the Philippines as a way of promoting their publications. However, Patrick Ford, who ran the *Irish World* from 1870-1913, Patrick Meehan, who edited the *Irish-American* from 1857-1906, and Finley Peter Dunne, whose syndicated column was published throughout the nation, believed that US imperialistic endeavours had important consequences which contradicted their ideas of what the US should represent. Several generations of Irish and US-born Irish (who came from a variety of backgrounds) coexisted in New York; and there was no single Irish viewpoint on all the issues involving the War. However, the majority of these Irish viewed US Imperialism in the

Philippines and Puerto Rico as an 'anti-American' idea and the sympathy that they had for the Cubans, Filipinos and Puerto Ricans stemmed from their own history as a colony of England.

However, the events leading up to the war and the resulting surge of US nationalism which occurred during the battles, split Irish opinion and often challenged the idea that Irish communities could be US citizens and still remain loyal to Ireland. The Irish viewed US imperialism as one of the consequences of an assertion of Anglo traditions and an attempt to negate all other nationalities and ethnicities. The war brought issues of citizenship and human rights to the fore, and forced the Irish in the US to align themselves with other ethnic groups in way that they had not been inclined to do previously.

In the late 1800s many new Irish immigrants were still arriving in the US and by early 1900, the Irish population amounted to nearly five million people (Miller 1985: 493). *The New York, The Irish World and American Industrial Liberator*, and *The Irish-American* were the two newspapers that the New York Irish were most likely to read. By the 1870s *The World* was more widely read than *The Irish-American* (which had previously been the most popular paper among the Irish communities) and 'by the eighteen nineties and early twentieth century the circulation was regularly listed at 125,000' (Rodechko 1967: 525). The paper also had a significant readership outside New York.

Patrick Meehan shared Ford's belief that Ireland should be liberated from England. However, the two men often differed on the methods of achieving liberation, which led them to advocate different causes in the US. Ford supported the US labour movements and believed that social mobility in the US would empower US-Irish to fight England, while Meehan was a Catholic who tried to reconcile Catholic doctrine with Irish freedom movements. Both Ford and Meehan supported the idea that aligned Irish identity with the Catholic Church and reported extensively on Church events in the US and in Ireland; however, the primary focus of these papers was news related to Ireland. They also reported on US-Irish concerns about the

consequences of a war with Spain and their sympathy for the Caribbean and Philippine Islands is apparent. Ford saw the similarities between Irish and Cuban/Puerto Rican history and his extensive coverage reflected on the parallels of the situations.

Finley Peter Dunne was one of the most influential voices of the Irish community during these years. Dunne, who was the son of Irish immigrants, began his career writing about the relevant issues of the Irish in Chicago but later moved to New York to write about national issues. His Chicago columns had been enormously popular, but he gained national recognition with his satirical depictions of events related to the war. Most of his columns featured as their protagonist an Irish bartender from a pub in Chicago called Mr. Dooley who became the voice of many working-class Irish. Dunne wrote about many other topics but these parodies of the General's speeches and war reports gave him national success.

The cynical views of Mr. Dooley, the bartender, were all written in a phonetic Irish-American dialect which was then considered humorous. Dunne's idea was to 'make Dooley talk as an Irishman would talk who has lived thirty or forty years in America' and 'whose natural pronunciation had been more or less affected by the slang of the streets' (Fanning 1987: xvi). In the sketches, one becomes *wan*, when *-whin* and the final /g/ is dropped on words which end in 'ing'. The Spanish names are transformed as well, so Puerto Rico becomes Porther Ricky and Cuba is also given an extra syllable to imitate an Irish language pronunciation and turns into Cubia. This Hiberno-English had a long tradition in English and Irish writing and in the US context, 'writers from the WASP mainstream throughout the nineteenth century made full use of the brogue to help create derogatory pictures of the alien immigrant hordes', which 'were part of the new wave of nativism that swept America in the nineties against the "new immigration"' (Fanning 1987: xvii). However, Dunne's mimesis of a working class Irishman is not meant to be offensive because "he used the brogue in new and salutary ways" (Fanning 1987: xix). Mr. Dooley's humorous naïveté conceals the gravity of the

issue he confronts. Dunne's subversion of English and the conversational tone of the article undermines the serious content of the subjects written about and "the expression of social consciousness ... would never have been printed unless they had been written in dialect" (Ellis 1938: xxii).

**The Threat of an Anglo-American Alliance:  
Irish opinion on the possibility of an  
English connection to the war**

The traditional antagonism of these Irish American communities towards England put them opposition to US/Anglo opinion which supported intervention against Spain. Their first reaction was not to fight Spain because the Spanish government, which was also Catholic, had traditionally been an ally of Ireland. However, because of their own experiences of colonialism they also understood that these Islanders desired and fought for independence. "The contradictory impulses in the hearts of Catholic Americans - of sympathy for Cuba's insurgency, and identification with Spain's Catholicity, - might [have] distanced them from the current of popular passion" (Doyle 1976: 165). Many of these Irish were loyal citizens who had fought for the US army but also recalled their own aspirations towards independence. Some of their resentment surfaced as the Irish saw support for the US in Cuba, the Philippines and Puerto Rico, but not in Ireland.

Thus, there were three positions (that intersected and diverged on various levels) that these Irish-Catholics supported: pro-Spanish, pro-Islander (Puerto Rico, Cuba, Philippine) and/ or pro-US. As Hearst and Pulitzer were producing large amounts of anti-Spanish propaganda at the end of 1897 and the beginning of 1898, the Irish New York/Irish newspaper editors found themselves in an uncertain position. They were not eager to enter into war with Spain because Spain's decline might help maintain England's military supremacy and would give the appearance that the US supported England's colonial policies. There was also a great deal of trepidation in the community that the United States would alienate its other European allies. Thus, the pre-War

coverage of *The Irish World* and *The Irish-American* primarily consisted of connecting the Spanish Caribbean problem with England. One of these links is explained in this letter to the editor of the *Irish World* from 15 January 1898.

*Employing her usual cunning arts, England is working hard through her agents here to defeat the settlement of the Cuban question by the establishment of home rule in Cuba. What does it matter to her that prolonging the insurrection means the prolonging of the hunger and nakedness and destitution of the poor Cubans, the continued devastation of the island and the further sacrifice of human life? With Cuba governing herself, developing her resources, advancing on the path to returned prosperity which has been opened to her by the liberal ministry of Spain discontented Jamaica seeing her Spanish neighbor enjoying the advantages of self-government might again attempt to shake off the English yoke [...] and the other British West Indian Islands might follow in her lead.  
A Home Ruler.*

As this reader points out, pro-war advocates ignored the fact that Cuba and Puerto Rico had already been given limited autonomy by Spain with the *Carta Autonómica* since November of 1897.

Both newspapers also printed several small articles which described the Spanish warships coming to the Caribbean which tempered the daily reports of Spanish troop build up in the mainstream press. However, for Ford and Meehan, the threat of an Anglo-American Alliance was the issue that deserved daily front-page coverage. They were concerned about a US/British agreement that would tentatively facilitate the use of each other's ports and canals in Asia and in Central America in case of war. [2] The Irish editors feared that the US government would align itself with the English and support colonial policy by linking it to US interests. On 15 January 1897, *The World* referred to an editorial in *The London Spectator* 'Boasting of American Alliance' which 'threatens Europe with the Whole Anglo-Saxon Race, United and Resolved' and was the beginning of a series of articles strongly denouncing the Alliance.

The sinking of the US warship the *Maine* in February was a turning point in the conflict; and articles alluding to Spain's culpability appeared in *The New York World* and *The New York Journal*; however, the Irish editors were sceptical about Spain's role in the disaster. Ford remained convinced of English involvement in the campaign to discredit Spain and the *Irish World* quoted another article from *The London Spectator* that cites unrest in the Americas and defined the US as primarily Anglo.

*The difficulties with Spain only served to increase latent sentiment essential to the unity existing among Anglo-Saxons. The possibility that the Spanish quarrel may bring them face to face with a continental coalition made the Americans realize that our race is not beloved on the Continent and that we may some day have to make a common cause. (26 March 1898)*

In "England helped Spain go Broke" (21 March 1898), *The Irish-American* also suggests ongoing concerns about English participation. However, supporting the Spanish and complete abstention from the war would have been perceived as unpatriotic. As a result the articles printed in the *Irish-American* (and to some extent the *Irish World* as well) changed their anti-war tone. On 24 February the *Irish-American* published this opinion.

*Until the result of an official inquiry is known, the proper thing, therefore, for everyone, is to keep cool and rest in the assurance that full justice will be insisted on by the President and congress. It would be premature to attempt to pronounce any judgment as to whether the terrible event was the result of an accident, or an act for which, in any way, the Spanish authorities can be held responsible. Should the latter prove to be the case, in the present state of feeling in the United States, war between the two countries would be inevitable.*

On 2 April, a small article appeared in the *Irish World* that made a more subtle argument that defended the United States without criticising Spain.

*The United States has always been most reasonable in its relations and dealings with other nations and it needs but plain and honest dealings on the side of Spain to have the present unpleasantness reach a*

*satisfactory conclusion for both. The United States is neither a bully nor a grabbing nation.*

At this point, the writer still has faith in the US legal system and believes that US and Spanish diplomats can solve the conflict.

Dunne's Mr. Dooley also provided his opinion on the idea of 'The Anglo-Saxon Race' and the Anglicisation of the US in his column entitled *On the Anglo-Saxon*. He tells his friend and loyal customer, Hennessy, that an 'Anglo-Saxon is a German that's forgot who was his parent and 'They're a lot iv thim in this country.' Dooley also confides that he is 'wan iv the hottest Anglo-Saxons that iver come out of Anglo-Saxony. Th' name iv Dooley has been the proudest Anglo-Saxon name in the County Roscommon fr many years.' (Green 1988: 34) Also, in *The Decline of National Feeling*, Dooley claims that then President McKinley (Mack), was a Scots-Irish who was becoming more anglicised because he supported US/English connections. In the column, Hennessy asks Mr. Dooley about his plans for St. Patrick's Day and he responds:

*Well, said Mr. Dooley, "I may cillybrate it an' I may not. I'm thinkin' iv savin' me enthusiasm fr th' queen's birthday, whiniver it is that blessd holiday comes ar-round. Ye see, Hinnissy, Patrick's Day is out iv fashion now. A few years ago ye'd see the Prisident iv th' United States marchin' down Pinnsylvania Avnoo, with the green scarf iv th' Ancient Order on his shoulders an' a shamrock in his hat. Now what's Mack doin'? He's settin in his parlor, writin' letters to th' queen, be hivins, askin' after her health. He was fr'm th' north iv Ireland two years ago, an' not so far north ayether, - just far enough north fr to be on good terms with Derry an' not far enough to be bad friends with Limerick... (Filler 1962: 46-7)*

Dunne comments on way the colonisation of Irish culture makes it part of English tradition. Dooley calls himself an Anglo-Saxon and supplants the Catholic holiday of Saint Patrick's Day (which celebrates the person who brought Christianity to Ireland) with the Queen's birthday and reminds his readers that many Irish in the US have become "assimilated" into Anglo traditions.

### **The Invasion of Puerto Rico**

Even after the US had invaded Cuba and was preparing to invade Puerto Rico, *The World* still dedicated much of its coverage to linking the push for US involvement in the Caribbean to an attempt by the English to increase their influence. The headlines in the summer 1898 issues attacked 'Anglo' ideas of hegemony more directly and supported a more multicultural approach to defining 'Americanness' by emphasising the necessity for other Americans to fight against Anglicisation. On 11 June they published an article with the headline 'Arrogance of the Anglomanic Gang' which offers an alternative definition to a single US identity.

*What Binds Us as Nation is Not Community of Race, But a Community of Interests, [...] Of all the Races Here That Which Calls Itself the Anglo-Saxon is the Only One That Attempts to Force the Entire Nation into its Allegiance [...] It seems strange that it should be necessary to call attention to the fact that we are not a race, Anglo-Saxon, Teutonic, Latin or Celtic, or any other but a nation made up of many races.*

The article concludes with ideas about ways of defining US citizens and warns against defining them by language or race. *The Irish-American* emphasised a parallel sentiment.

*I would remind this self-complaisant 'Anglo-Saxon': that there are a good many countrymen of the young Emperor of Germany in this country, and many more of this race - All American citizens - who would have a word to say in regard to a combination of the aforesaid 'mother and daughter' against their fatherland. And then what about the Irish and their kindred? And what of the Franco-American element in our makeup, not to speak of the Russians, Scandinavians and Italians, and last, though not least our colored brethren, who owe their former condition of slavery to British colonial institutions? (10 June 1898).*

In this editorial the war is seen as prompting a change in the ethnic understanding of association and creating a civic version of US ethnicity.

However, as an article on 28 March demonstrates, the position of *The Irish-American*

was becoming less inclined to question the logic of the war and began to support US involvement. Neither editor encouraged the involvement but they attempted to convince their readers that their duties as Catholics were related to the responsibilities of US citizenship.

*We avail ourselves of this opportunity; however, to call to mind our Catholic brethren that should war break out between our Republic and Spain, we are obliged in our conscience to be loyal to the flag- the Stars and Stripes. It is the teaching of Catholic theology that the government has a right, binding on the conscience of its subjects, for their money and their arms in the war against their foe. We trust after God and the intercession of the Blessed virgin in the well-known peaceable disposition of the American government and the American people, that war may be averted. But should it come - Catholics, you know your duty...*

The article displays a double speak that could be interpreted as pro-Spanish or pro-War and it is unclear whether their duty as Catholics is to the other Catholic nation or to US interests. A new anti-Spain rhetoric replaces their previous sympathy as they call Spain 'the wreck of a once great nation' (25 April 1898).

*The Irish World* did not undergo such a transformation and was much more restrained in its support of the war. The journalists remained respectful to the Spanish people. However, like *The Irish-American*, they paid homage to the 'Irish boys' such as the well-known sixty-ninth Infantry Regiment of New York and other regiments that were volunteering to go to war. On 7 May they dedicated an entire page to the history of the Sixty-Ninth [3] and reports on the ovation the regiment received as they departed for Florida. Both newspapers emphasised that the Irish that were fighting for the United States and ostensibly for Cuban/Puerto Rican independence.

*The Irish-American* also highlighted the Irish presence in the War and emphasised ideas of race and blood and contended that Admiral Dewey, who played an important role in the Philippines conflicts, was an Irishman.

*The Irish Strain in the American Blood appears to be again asserting itself as it did in the early naval*

*combats of the Republic. The name of Admiral Dewey, of our fighting navy, may have an unfamiliar appearance to some people, but it is only the anglicized form of the old Irish Sept-name of ODuaghtaigh which was one of those described by penal law in the Old Land. (7 May 1898).*

This emphasis on the Irish presence in the US armed forces redefines the War as a US endeavour and not an Anglo one.

Dunne parodies this way of promoting the Irish presence in the military and Mr. Dooley makes a more ironic claim about Dewey's Irish ancestry in his column called *On War Preparations*. He tells Hennessey that "Cousin George is all r-right" and when his friend questions him about his cousin George he says "Dewey or Dooley, 'tis all th' same. We dhrop a letter here an'there, except the haitches, - we niver dhrop thim, -but we're th' same breed iv fighting men. Georgy has th' traits iv th' family"(Green 1988: 14).

Most of Dunne's satire on the battles was directed at US generals and parodied the ideas of masculine bravery portrayed in *The New York Journal* and *The New York World*. Dunne's column on the invasion of Puerto Rico, entitled *General Miles's Moonlight Excursion*, ridicules the entire invasion of Puerto Rico and depicts a party-like atmosphere. Mr. Dooley pontificates on his own inadequacies compared to the "brave" soldiers fighting the war, comments on the velocity of the surrender of the Puerto Rican people, and implies that the real reason that US invaded the island was for capitalistic gain - not the promotion of democracy. In the column, Mr. Dooley explains the valiant efforts of General Miles, who led the Puerto Rican invasion, to his friend, Mr. Hennessey. He tells 'Hinnessy' that he would have liked to participate in the military incursion. He also comments that the biggest decision that the General and his soldiers had to make was deciding where to eat, play croquette and how to dodge the bouquets of flowers being thrown at them.

*Dear, oh, dear," said Mr. Dooley, "I'd give five dollars-an' I'd kill a man fr three - if I was out iv this Sixth Wa-ard tonight, an' down with Gin'ral Miles; gran' picnic an' moonlight excursion in Portber Ricky. 'Tis no comfort in being a cow'rd whin ye think iv thim br-rave la-ads facin' death be*

*suffication in bokays an' dyin' iv waltzin' with th' pretty girls of Portber Ricky. (Filler 1962: 55)*

General Miles was one of Dunne's favourite objects of satire because of his self-aggrandising behaviour. Puerto Rican resistance to the invasion was nominal and in Dunne's columns the officials appear as welcoming hosts, who ask to be taken into a 'glorious an'well-fed raypublic' (Filler 1962: 57). As they arrive, the young women throw flowers at the troops and arrange a party in their honour.

At the end of the "Excursion" sketch, Mr. Dooley reminds Hennessey that there are monetary advantages to be gained by the integration of Puerto Rico. He once again downplays any notion that the United States is a liberating force. The bartender also explains his view on the real results of war when he quotes his version of General Miles's first speech to the Puerto Rican people:

*'Ye will get ye'er wur-kin-cards from the walkin' diligate.'he says; 'an ye'll be entitled,' he says; 'to pay your share iv th' taxes an' to live awbile an' die whin ye get r-ready, 'he says; 'jus th' same as if ye was bor-rn at home, 'I don' know th' names iv ye; but I'll call ye all Casey, fr short. (Filler 1962: 56).*

In this speech the United States is transformed from a liberating force into an imperial one and General Miles tells the crowd that they have nothing to worry about because they will be able to work and pay taxes just like all other US citizens. He goes on to negate their Spanish, African, and Caribbean ancestry by calling them all by an Irish surname.

The force of Dunne's satire is that he appears to support the war, yet he is criticising the real motivations of the Generals and the US government.

*'An so th' war is over?'asked Mr. Hennesy.*

*'On'y part iv it,' said Mr. Dooley. "The part that ye see in the pitcher pa-apers is over, but the tax collector will continue his part iv th' war with relentless fury. Cal'vry charges are not th' on 'y wans in a rale war.'"(58)*

According to Dooley, the spectacle of the war is over, but the most important part has just

begun. He knows that the island will be taken over by the US and they will be forced to pay taxes to a government that will not grant them the same rights as citizens.

### **Reactions to this New Imperialism**

The Irish-Americans' support for the war continued even after the invasion of Puerto Rico.

*It is semiofficially announced that Porto Rico will be held by the United States as a naval and military station, commanding the West Indies. Its possession will go toward making up the heavy expenses of the War to the United States. Our flag -once run up- will float over the islands permanently. (23 July 1898)*

The comparisons to Ireland continue and Meehan attempts to justify US imperialism as a form of assistance and not exploitation. He compares English and Spanish imperialism and claims that England has changed its tactics. England now adopts legal measures to control its subjects while Spain tries to bully them into submission. US imperialism, on the other hand, will be neither brutal nor political, because its principle goal is assisting the Islands.

*The government of Spain, over her colonies, had been, like that of England over Ireland under the Cromwellian conquest; and it produced naturally the same results-insurrections of the people, driven to despair against the irresponsible military tyranny to which they were being subjected [...] But there is a difference. The wily Anglo-Saxon has always adopted the legal and parliamentary method of robbing its victims of their rights; while the Spaniard true to his African instincts relies on his big guns, - and fails. [Now] we shall know whether our example, for the liberty of the human race, has borne its appropriate fruit. In the advocacy of human freedom the United States has always stood alone... (30 July 1898)*

In this framework, the US is obligated to take over these Islands because of a moral obligation to help them.

Spain surrendered to the US in October 1898 and it gave up control of its colonies to the US.

When it became clear that Cuba was to become independent and Puerto Rico was to remain under U.S. control, [4] the debate on the repercussions of the United States becoming a colonising nation reared its head. *The Irish-American* maintained that the Puerto Ricans were better off with their new status than they were under Spanish control and continued to print articles that vilified Spain. However, by 1899, as the US policies of control became more apparent, the *Irish-American* began to speak out against the Government policies regarding Puerto Rico. The paper felt that the government was putting unfair taxes on the Islanders which would hinder economic growth. The 'lower House of Congress, last week, passed a tariff bill inflicting an almost intolerable and unnecessary revenue burden on the island of Puerto Rico' (3 March 1898).

### **Conclusion**

In spring 1900, as the Foraker Act [5] was being debated in congress, *The World* published an article entitled 'Shall Porto Rico be our Ireland?' The article implies that Puerto Rico should be automatically granted the right to statehood. It was one of a number of articles and editorials in both newspapers which question the tariffs that were being levied on Puerto Rican products. Both papers opposed the way the federal government was treating the Puerto Rican colonists and demonstrated empathy for them. They resented seeing the United States follow a British example, by incorporating Puerto Rico the same way they had seen Ireland become part of the British Commonwealth a hundred years before in the Act of Union.

Many of the other headlines referred to Puerto Ricans as 'Colonists' and criticised the McKinley administration for denying the Puerto Ricans their rights. Their empathy and self-identification with the Puerto Rican people is evident and their prediction of what would occur in the island under US occupation was dire.

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### Notes

- [1] The author is a PhD. Candidate at University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She is finishing her dissertation entitled, “Resisting Anglicization: Strategies of Identity Formation in Irish and Puerto Rican Communities in the United States”.
- [2] It also referred to as the British-American Alliance in the Irish World
- [3] A regiment based out of New York that fought in the Revolutionary War and the Spanish-American War. Historically, the men in the unit were of Irish descent.
- [4] Even after the Treaty of Paris, there was still fighting in the Philippines.
- [5] This act established a civilian government in Puerto Rico and put into effect all federal laws of the United States on the island. It was based on the ideas of the British Commonwealth system. It gave the Puerto Ricans limited representation and no voting rights.

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