The Boston *Pilot* Reports

The Civil War

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It is rather surprising in the face of the considerable body of literature dealing with press coverage of the Civil War period that so little attention has been devoted to immigrant newspapers during those years.\(^1\) Moreover, the few historians who have dealt with the topic have focused on the German-language press or the immigrant press of New York.\(^2\) The result is that nothing is known of the views of the ethnic press of Massachusetts, a state which played such an important role both in the anti-slavery movement and the war and which had been severely impacted by Irish immigration.

One might treat this as an insignificant gap in our understanding of the role of the immigrant press during the war years if Massachusetts had not possessed any major ethnic newspapers. But Boston, in fact, was the home of the most widely read Irish-American newspaper of the nineteenth century: the *Pilot*, the oldest continuing weekly currently published in the United States. George Potter insisted that “no history of the Catholic Irish in the United States can be written without it.” Launched in 1836 by Patrick Donahoe, an Irish immigrant, the paper quickly benefitted from the great wave of immigration in the 1840s, and by 1872 it claimed 103,000 subscribers. Leading all other Irish-American journals in circulation for most of the century, the *Pilot* was known widely as the “Irishman’s Bible” and its owner as the “Apostle of the Irish.”\(^3\)

J. Cutler Andrews has noted that during the war years the “press on both sides was an essential ingredient, not simply of journalism but also of the propaganda effort of the side with which they were identified.”\(^4\) Andrews is correct, but his view of the role of the press during this period is limited by his failure to analyze the immigrant press. In the case of the *Pilot*, the paper remained loyal to the Union throughout the war, or more accurately, to its definition of the Union; it was also devoted to propagandizing the special interests of its readers. In effect, the *Pilot* staff not only reported on the war itself, but the war within the war, the battle to improve the status and position of the Irish in American society.
The *Pilot* had always performed the traditional task of any newspaper, reporting and interpreting the news, but it was also concerned with the psychological security of its readers. Since the paper's growth paralleled the rise of the nativist movement, the *Pilot* had long sought to provide the Irish with a source of support to help them enter the mainstream of American society. As Patrick Donahoe, the *Pilot* 's owner, put it: "We were convinced that such a paper was needed—that the laboring Irish and stranger needed someone to speak for him." Long concerned with defending the loyalty of its readers against nativist attacks, *Pilot* writers saw the slavery controversy and the Civil War as a means of proving Irish patriotism. Recognition of Irish loyalty, they believed, would not only refute nativist charges, but also lead to an improvement in the condition of the Irish-American population. Therefore, every piece of news was viewed through a Celtic prism which magnified and distorted some elements of the story while it reduced or excised others.

Consequently, Abolitionist attacks on American laws and institutions appeared to provide the paper with a golden opportunity to demonstrate Irish-American patriotism. Although well aware of the expression that one could not be "holier than the Pope," *Pilot* writers were convinced that the immigrants in this case could be more American than the nativists. Nor were they reluctant to call their readers' attention to the hypocrisy of those who expressed sympathy for the slaves while they ignored the plight of the immigrant factory workers of the North. As one *Pilot* editorial put it: "There are one thousand Stowes weeping over the woes of an imaginary Uncle Tom, to one who looked after the real Uncle Tom."

John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry was the final proof of abolitionist disloyalty. Presenting the raid as the result of a pro-British conspiracy on the part of native New Englanders, a *Pilot* writer proudly pointed out that "not one single man of Irish birth, thank God," had been involved in the plot. In fact, Irish involvement in putting down the insurrection was just one more example of their fidelity to the laws of the land: "The first man to fall was Burney, a worthy Irishman, and another Sergeant Quinn was the first to seal his patriotism with his blood in the attack on the engine house." A series of articles condemning the "fanatical abolitionists" continued through the fall of 1859, culminating in the warning:

When the Negro shall be free  
To cut the throats of all they see,  
Then this dear land will come to be  
The den of foul rascality.

By 1860 the owner was convinced that the Democratic party led by Stephen A. Douglas was the nation's last great hope of averting disaster. When Douglas was finally nominated at the second Democratic convention, Donahoe and his friends celebrated with a one hundred gun salute from the hill on Boston Common. Donahoe threw himself into the campaign, delivering a number of speeches for Douglas throughout the city. Convinced that
every editorial was a vote for the Democrats, he offered new subscribers special reduced rates for the remainder of the campaign in the hope that the *Pilot* would sway enough undecided readers to secure a Douglas victory.\(^8\)

The campaign for Douglas naturally included a series of attacks on Lincoln’s candidacy. Possessing little information on the Republican nominee, *Pilot* writers portrayed Lincoln as the candidate of the “John Brown clique” in the North. Focusing on the “nativist record” of his party, they reminded their readers that only a year earlier a Republican administration has pushed through an amendment to the Massachusetts Constitution preventing foreigners from voting for two years after naturalization. “Remember,” a *Pilot* editorial asserted, “every vote cast for a Republican is an endorsement of the two year amendment. A naturalized citizen who would vote for a party who proscribes his race, does not deserve the rights of citizenship.” On the eve of the election, Donahoe capped off what had been a major campaign to win the Irish vote by resorting to a favorite stratagem, a warning that “monarchical England” was secretly supporting the Republicans.\(^9\)

The newspaper’s efforts were all in vain, but there was little time for remorse. Lincoln’s victory was quickly overshadowed by the news that Governor Gist of South Carolina had recommended the calling of a secession convention. The only consolation that Donahoe could derive from the mounting crisis was that it proved that the *Pilot* had been correct in warning that the anti-slavery crusade would tear the nation apart. Even the seizure of Forts Moultrie and Pinckney failed to sway Donahoe from his conviction that “all this great sorrow and shame has been evoked by the malign, brutal conceit of the ignorant parvenus of the North.” Nevertheless, in spite of his view that the South had been driven to secession, Donahoe informed his readers that Catholics had only one course of action to adopt: “Stand by the Union; fight for the Union; die by the Union.”\(^10\)

Consequently when Fort Sumter came under fire on April 12, 1861, *Pilot* readers were not surprised by the paper’s wholehearted support of the Union. What was unexpected was the paper’s sudden reinterpretation of the cause of disunion. While still willing to concede that the South had suffered at the hands of Northern fanatics, *Pilot* writers now argued that the seceding states had erred grievously in not attempting to obtain their rights within the framework of the Constitution.\(^11\) President Lincoln’s call to arms on April 15 found a willing response on the part of the Irish and the *Pilot*. It was not a war on slavery, or “Mr. Lincoln’s war,” but a war to preserve the nation. As a consequence, Donahoe promised: “The Irish will stand up for the Union, and surround it like a wall of fire.” Because so many Irish had opposed Lincoln, sympathized with the South, and ignored the evils of slavery, their support of the Union surprised many critics. Their response was all the more unexpected in Massachusetts, a state which had disbanded the Irish militia companies in 1855 and which only two years before the outbreak of the war had passed legislation which had delayed naturalized citizens from voting for a two year period.\(^12\)
Nevertheless, as one Pilot writer declared with self-conscious magnanimity, the Irish were willing to forgive if not forget: "That is how it should be. The flag of the Union is not to be abandoned, because the Know Nothings and Republicans... acted with stupid malignity." Boston alone raised two Irish regiments. In April, 1861 the Columbian Artillery, which had functioned as a fraternal organization since its dissolution in 1855, formed the nucleus of the 9th Regiment under its old commander, Thomas Cass. The following June saw the creation of the Irish-American 28th Regiment. Donahoe played an active role in the formation of both units, serving as treasurer of the campaign to raise funds for the 9th Regiment's equipment and preparation. In honor of the owner's assistance, Company A of the 28th Regiment designated itself the Donahoe Guards.13

As the 9th Regiment departed for the South it was a proud moment for the Pilot staff and their readers. An editorial pointed out that both the Governor of the state and the Mayor of Boston had publicly declared the Irish unit to be an honor to the state, the city, and to "the gallant nation from which it sprang." If the "narrow and dark spirit of Know Nothingism" was present at all, the writer noted, it shrank back "abashed in the presence of the splendid civic and military Celtic presence." Especially heartwarming were the people along the route of march who waved flags "unconscious of any distinction between the loyalty of the Anglo-Saxon and Celtic races."14 Nevertheless, the Pilot staff struck a note of caution and warned its readers to guard against euphoria. They made it clear that although war necessarily made for strange bedfellows, they intended to keep a wary eye on their Republican partners. Forecasting that contractors would grow rich while congressmen and judges confiscated rebel estates, a Pilot writer warned: "Depend upon it, we shall soon see many a loud-mouthed Republican lording it over plantations well stocked with negroes."15

It was with a new sense of self-confidence that a Pilot writer reported on, but "paid no heed" to a Bostonian who had referred to the 9th Regiment as "a load of Irish rubbish." It no longer mattered; "the Irish race in America have now a permanent grip on the soil; and their healthy blood is diffusing itself so rapidly in every direction that nothing can check it... The suppression of the rebellion," chortled the writer, "absolutely requires the Irish arms." Furthermore, the old Know-Nothing charge of Catholic disloyalty could now be laid to rest: "When the base thing crawled to light... the first lie it uttered was that Irish Catholics couldn't be depended on in their oath of naturalization." But all of this had been proven false by Irish volunteers. "What is the principal material in the present national army?", asked a Pilot writer triumphantly. "It is not native—it is foreign—it is Irish—and Irish Catholic at that." The Irish have won many victories, he concluded, but the "squelching of 'Nativism' is the best in their American annals."16

Serialized stories illustrating Irish bravery filled the pages of the paper, and readers thrilled to "The Battle Demon of Manassas," "Rosa Gaery: or the Lady of the Brigade," and "Nora McIvor, or the Heroine of Fredericksburg."
But there was no need to rely on the creativity of novelists. To acquaint his readers with Irish heroism, Donahoe inaugurated a series on September 27, 1862, entitled "Records of Irish-American Patriotism." The object was to demonstrate that although the Celts might be hyphenated Americans in name, they were one hundred percent Americans in deed. "When the next generation records with flushed cheeks...this heroic age," Donahoe declared, "they can say with proud consciousness, 'we too, are Americans, and our fathers bled and died to establish this beloved country.'" With one of the articles in the series noting that four of the six principal military districts were under the skillful guardianship of Catholic officers, many a reader must have shuddered to think what would have happened to the Union if the Irish had not migrated to America.17

The newspaper's enthusiasm for the war remained constant until late in the summer of 1862. Optimism had become the rule at the Pilot office as a result of union victories in the West in the spring of that year. By March, Pilot writers were forecasting the imminent death of the Confederacy: "The rebellion is little less than dead...a few more strokes and its head will be chopped off." Unfortunately for the paper's staff, the abolitionists were not so easily dispatched. Noting the growing prestige and influence of the old enemy, one writer desperately called for the formation of two armies, one of which would be used in the North to put down the "treason" of Garrison and his followers.18

As talk of emancipation mounted, the paper's indictment of blacks grew more vituperative. Before the war, the paper's defense of slavery had always been couched in constitutional terms. The "natural inferiority" of blacks had been treated as axiomatic, and consequently not worthy of any extensive discussion. But as freedom for the slave became something more than the wishful thinking of northern "fanatics," a shrill note of anxiety appeared in the pages of the paper. "It is plain," one writer asserted, "that nature never meant them for high position. It has given them the worst color in its possession; the great majority of them have forbidding facial ugliness—deformity, lameness, blindness, deafness, and the want of speech mark them in a frightful number of cases."19

The early months of 1862 found the Government involved in a variety of plans which would free the slaves through federal or state arrangements. Describing the various proposals as "a direct summons of death to slavery," the Pilot staff strove to prove their impracticability. Compensation contained three fatal flaws: the unwillingness of the South to sell, the great expense of such an undertaking, and the problem of the freed slaves. It was the last issue that appeared to present the greatest difficulty: "The truth is no government suits the negroes of the South, but the domestic government they have." Once again uneasiness about emancipation manifested itself in an abusive assault in an editorial: "The blacks are repulsive in hue, offensive in the odor that emanates from their persons...they have intellect only in essence."20
The issue was further complicated by the ever increasing number of escaped slaves who attached themselves to the Union forces. While conceding that they could not be restored to their traitorous masters, a *Pilot* writer insisted that “expedience and humanity to the black demands their return to bondage.” He went on to suggest that the slaves could either be kept by the federal government or given to the loyal planters of the South once the war was over.\(^21\) As some of the former slaves found their way to the North, a *Pilot* editorial again raised the issue of the danger they posed to white laborers: “The North is becoming black with refugee negroes.... These wretches crowd our cities, and by overstocking the market of labor do incalculable injury to white hands.” The writer went on to suggest that other states should follow the example of Illinois which had passed a law forbidding blacks to cross its boundaries. Such a measure was justified, he argued, by nature's dictum that “when rights collide, it is the stronger that should prevail.”\(^22\)

Nevertheless, Donahoe was heartened by Lincoln's apparent unwillingness to transform the war into an anti-slavery crusade. Each presidential action which confirmed Lincoln's inaugural promise not to interfere with the institution of slavery where it existed drew fresh applause from the *Pilot* staff. When on February 14, 1862, the President granted amnesty to certain classes of state prisoners who were willing to take an oath of loyalty to the United States, the staff became ecstatic. The amnesty was seen as a defeat for both the abolitionists and the secessionists: “The conception that the black Republican President would make war on slavery is now dispelled forever.” To the *Pilot*, the President's willingness to free slaveowners was tantamount to approving the South's peculiar institution. Consequently, after praising Lincoln's countermanding of the order of General Fremont and General Hunter freeing slaves in their areas, a *Pilot* write returned to Lincoln's amnesty offer: “History will vindicate him as having been one of the most constitutional presidents the country has produced.... This document will dispel more treason in the South than 50,000 men.... It will prove that he whom it took to be a 'nigger worshipper' is as true a President as the hero of New Orleans.”\(^23\)

By May, Lincoln had been elevated to “one of the best chief magistrates the Republic ever had.” Conceding that he had not supported Lincoln in 1860, Donahoe went on to declare that in view of his record, it would be a “public sin” not to give him support. August found Lincoln “the most popular man in the United States. He has integrity that cannot be impeached. A more beloved President — excepting Washington — the Republic never had.”\(^24\) Nevertheless, the President seemed unable to immunize the nation against the disease of abolitionism. In September of 1862, an editorial reported that an old friend of the paper, the Catholic convert, Orestes Brownson had spoken in favor of emancipation. With an air of betrayal the editorial noted: “Ten years ago, Dr. Brownson had fair grounds for hoping that he would in time be ranked among the most eminent philosophers of the world...but he has lost his footing.... As he grows older he grows weaker.” The writer warned his readers that to follow Brownson would be to risk the loss of their souls. “Since
negrophily is a religion,” he declared, “to join the abolitionists is to assist in a real heresy.”

The writer’s sense of betrayal by Brownson was nothing compared to the reaction to Lincoln’s issuance of the Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation on September 22, 1862. Seeking to keep his readers’ spirits up, a writer predicted that nineteen out of twenty slaves would reject freedom, because they “love their masters as dogs do.” The Proclamation also led the paper to reverse its view of the cause of the war. Southern firebrands as the major source of disunion quickly gave way to a phenomenon familiar to readers known as “nigger on the brain.”

On November 5 came a new crisis: the removal of General McClellan from command of the Army of the Potomac. “The fate of the Republic is growing darker everyday,” announced a Pilot writer. “A new misfortune has now occurred. The brave general who made the Grand Army . . . has been removed in disgrace.” In view of these setbacks, it was not surprising that Donahoe revised his view of Lincoln. At first he traced the shift in policy to the President’s advisers. By November, he asked, “who considers him to have the capacity which the chief magistracy of the first nation in the world demands. He is honest, but overpowered by dishonest politicians whose talents greatly excel his own.” One month later, another editorial announced that Lincoln was too great a burden for the ship of state to carry. “We gave the President independent support for a good while,” it noted despondently, “not because we had any belief at all that he was a splendid statesman, but from the idea that he had an independent intellect . . . We fear that the longer he remains in office, the worse for the nation.” As the year came to a close, the staff had become convinced that the only hope for the nation was the removal from office of “the exceedingly incompetent Lincoln.”

When the Emancipation Proclamation was issued, a writer noted wearily: “We find ourselves after nearly two years . . . engaged in an abolition war.” Apparently forgetting an earlier assertion in the paper that nineteen out of twenty slaves would reject liberation, he warned that emancipation would lead to a slaughter of their owners. The formation of black regiments added a new threat, causing the Pilot to fear an insurrection along the lines of the revolution in Santo Domingo. By 1863, Donahoe had tired of the war. “We are an emigrant race,” he declared. “We did not cause this war; vast numbers of our people have perished in it. . . . But the Irish spirit for the war is dead! . . . Our fighters are dead.” The owner counseled his readers to withdraw their allegiance from the President: “It is now every man’s duty to disagree with him.”

Disagreement exploded into open violence in the New York draft riot of July, 1863. The Pilot staff had grudgingly accepted the idea of a draft on several occasions before Lincoln’s preliminary proclamation. As late as August 16, 1862, a writer had advised readers that they had no choice but to respond to their government’s call. But when a national conscription law was passed in
the following March, the government's action was bitterly denounced in an editorial: "The foreign element is represented in the Federal Army out of all proportion. . . . The purpose of the order is to inflict punishment on the unnaturalized Irish, because enlistments fell off, on account of the absurd proclamations to emancipate the slaves in the revolted states."  

Completely disenchanted with the administration, the Pilot owner turned to the presidential election of 1864 as the only cure for the nation's ills. He warned that conscription, the suspension of habeas corpus, and the "unconstitutional" Emancipation Proclamation might signal a "Napoleonic coup." If there were a fair contest, the Pilot would have no difficulty in locating a candidate. As early as April, 1862, an editorial had forecast that General McClellan could be the next president. With McClellan's nomination, the campaign became a choice between its candidate, representing "union under the constitution," and Lincoln, whose re-election promised more "war, fierce, bloody, long. . . constitutional rights trampled upon, debt overwhelming and increasing, beggary, ruin, and national death."  

Donahoe spared no effort in promoting his candidate. In his eagerness to elect McClellan, he even published a letter of support from former President Millard Fillmore, once denounced in the paper's pages as a "vile Know-Nothing," but now in an hour of need described as a "true patriot, and a wise and just president." As the campaign drew to a close, the staff revived the usual ethnic appeal: "The Democratic party. . . has been the only hope and refuge to which the oppressed of Ireland could flee." They stood in sharp contrast to the Republicans who had distinguished themselves by their "narrow bigotry and open hatred for the rights of the poor and laboring classes."  

Once again Donahoe found himself on the losing side in a presidential campaign. This time the defeat was easier to endure, for the news from the front told of a series of Union victories. Then came the report that the war was finally over. On April 5, 1865, Donahoe offered his "congratulations to the people of the whole country upon the prospect of a united nation again." The issue had been printed too soon to record the last great tragedy of the war, the assassination of the President. In the following week's edition, tribute was paid to the fallen leader in an editorial: "He sleeps in a bloody grave: what failings he may have had, as a man, sleep with him while we remember the great work to which he gave himself — the salvation of his country."  

With the war brought to a successful conclusion, the Pilot staff looked forward to a new era of rising prosperity for both sections of the nation. There was no longer anything to hold the South back: slavery, "the curse and crime" of that region, had been abolished. Immigrant labor, the necessary leaven for progress, would now feel free to settle in the South. More than a few readers must have been surprised to see emancipation described in such positive terms, but that was not the only change in editorial policy which the war had affected. All memories of past opposition to the government's conduct of the war seemed to have faded with Lee's surrender. One month after Appomat-
tox, an editorial praised the newspaper's steadfastness during the crisis: "From the first moment...we had but one purpose, and that was to stand by the flag...In the darkest hours our faith never wavered." The paper also emerged from the war as a champion of the blacks. When the Prefect of Propaganda in Rome appealed to American Catholics to aid the former slaves, a writer responded: "The Pilot in the past, when considering the position of the colored race...has been very constant in its efforts to break down the walls of prejudice."³⁵

Despite the staff's valiant efforts to shape to their satisfaction the paper's role in the war, its position on the President, government policy, and slavery clearly had shifted on several occasions. Nevertheless, there was one consistent theme which dominated the pages of the paper throughout the war years. From the first hint of disunion to the final surrender at Appomattox, the Pilot had fought for an improvement in the condition of the Irish-American population. Throughout the war, its writers had argued that Irish sacrifices on the battlefield should be rewarded in the political arena. Not all of their lobbying was successful. Try as they did, they were unable to get the state legislature to vote compensation for the Charlestown Convent fire of 1835 as a gesture of appreciation for the Irish volunteers. Nevertheless, a writer was able to report that the winds of change were blowing in the Irish direction as evidenced by the first officially sanctioned raising of their national flag on the Boston Common on July 4, 1861.³⁶

More tangible gains soon followed the showing of the Irish colors. Compulsory Bible reading in the public schools, long a sore point with the Pilot, was revoked early in 1862. It was clear that the impetus for the repeal was to be "found in a disposition to conciliate the Catholics, who have furnished, and probably will continue to furnish so many patriotic soldiers." Pressure was also brought to bear on the legislature to repeal the amendment requiring a two year wait before naturalized citizens could vote. "At no time," a writer declared, "did the Irish have a greater right to call for its repeal than now." When the amendment was finally repealed in the opening months of 1862, a writer expressed satisfaction, but predicted that it would be many years "before the escutcheon of Massachusetts would be wiped clean of such a shameful act."³⁷ Equally encouraging were events in the private sector. In 1861, Harvard College conferred the degree of Doctor of Divinity on Bishop John Fitzpatrick of Boston, the first Catholic clergyman to be honored by that institution. Although the Bishop was forced to decline his election to the Board of Overseers at Harvard, a Pilot editorial interpreted the offer as a favorable omen. "It was a public evidence of a waning of the prejudice against our religion coming from the highest range of Protestant society."³⁸

Although historians differ as to the extent to which the Civil War improved the status of the Irish, the Pilot staff was convinced in 1865 that they would never again encounter the hostility and difficulties which had marked the ante-bellum years. Certainly Irish-Americans marched home from the war with a surer, more confident step than had marked their course in any earlier
period of American history. On April 15, 1865, Donahoe instructed his readers to look back over his paper's series on Irish-American patriotism: "Read and ponder what has become of Anglo-Saxon pluck and mind and patriotism. Irish be proud of your race and religion."39

NOTES


3. George Potter, To the Golden Door (Boston, 1960), 603. The Pilot was the successor to the Jesuit, established in 1829 by Bishop Benedict Fenwick as the voice of the Catholic Church in New England. Retitled the United States Catholic Intelligencer in 1831, it returned to its original title in 1834. The Jesuit's small circulation led to its transfer to Donahoe at the beginning of 1835 when it became the Literary and Catholic Sentinel. It assumed the name of the Pilot in 1836 and functioned as an independent Irish-American journal until its sale to the Archdiocese of Boston in 1908. The Pilot boasted the largest circulation among Irish-American newspapers until Patrick Ford's The Irish World forged ahead in the 1890s.


5. Pilot, July 20, 1839.

6. Pilot, June 18, 1853. A number of historians have called attention to the connection between the anti-slavery movement and nativism. See, for example, David M. Potter, The Impending Crisis (New York, 1976), 251-252; Madeline Hooke Rice, American Catholic Opinion in the Slavery Controversy (New York, 1944), 102-103. Gilbert Ososky argues that the Garrisonians were not anti-Irish, "Abolitionists, Irish Immigrants and the Dilemmas of Romantic Nationalism," American Historical Review, LXXX (October, 1975), 889-912.


10. *Pilot*, November 17, 1860; January 5, 26, 1861; December 1, 1860; January 26, 1861.


17. *Pilot*, January 4 to May 2; July 5 to November 8, 1862; January 2 to February 27, 1864. The series on Irish-American Patriotism in the Civil War ended on January 6, 1866. A new enlarged series covering the deeds of Irish-Americans from the Revolution began the following week. *Pilot*, August 1, 1863.

18. *Pilot*, March 8, 15, April 5, 1862.


25. *Pilot*, September 13, 1862; September 19, 1863.


29. *Pilot*, May 30, January 24, 1863; Richard O. Curry correctly notes the importance of distinguishing Copperhead from conservative but loyal Democrats like Donahoe who opposed the administration, "The Union As It Was; A Critique of Recent Interpretations of the Copperheads," *Civil War History* XIII (March, 1967), 25-39.


31. *Pilot*, November 28, 1863; September 17, 1864.

32. *Pilot*, October 22, October 29, 1864.
33. *Pilot*, April 22, 1865.

34. *Pilot*, January 6, 1866.


37. *Pilot*, February 1, 1862; November 2, 1861; February 22, 1862.
