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How The Irish Became White (Routledge Classics)



Synopsis

'âfrom time to time a study comes along that truly can be called âpath breaking,â
âseminal,â âessential,â a âmust read.â How the Irish Became White is such a study.'

John Bracey, W.E.B. Du Bois Department of Afro-American Studies, University of Massachusetts, Amherst

The Irish came to America in the eighteenth century, fleeing a homeland under foreign occupation and a caste system that regarded them as the lowest form of humanity. In the new country â a land of opportunity â they found a very different form of social hierarchy, one that was based on the color of a personâs skin. Noel Ignatievâs 1995 book â the first published work of one of Americaâs leading and most controversial historians â tells the story of how the oppressed became the oppressors; how the new Irish immigrants achieved acceptance among an initially hostile population only by proving that they could be more brutal in their oppression of African Americans than the nativists. This is the story of How the Irish Became White.

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Customer Reviews

Wow. When the best argument your reviewers can come up with for disliking your book are "[the author] is a Jew" and "blacks weren't discriminated against [even at the time covered in the book, during which black people could legally be bought and sold in the South, disenfranchised and barred from most jobs in the North; apparently being legally defined as property doesn't qualify as discrimination], the Irish just worked harder," you know you've struck a nerve.As a Canadian of

Scots-Irish ancestry, I found this book fascinating. The history of the Irish in Canada is a bit different from the history of the American Irish; overall I'd say it's less painful. This book shed a lot of light on issues that I didn't expect it to touch, like black-white relations, abolitionism, and the contrast between the antebellum North and South (now I understand a little better why Southerners say they have been unfairly demonized; the Philadelphia and Boston described in the book were hardly freemen's paradise). When the author says he wants to get rid of the "white race," he doesn't mean that he wants to get rid of white PEOPLE; he means that he wants to get rid of the category, "white," which is neither traditional nor especially meaningful. (I note that the reviewer below refers to the pale-skinned author of the book as "a Jew" rather than as "white" - demonstrating the author's point about race quite handily. "White" clearly refers to something beyond skin colour.

This was a difficult book for me. The author says much the same thing in the Introduction; yet, as an American whose grandparents came from Ireland in the 60s to escape crushing poverty, it had a personal sting. Nobody likes to hear criticism of his own race or people, which is why we all, whether Irish, black, Jewish, Italian, etc., react strongly to critiques of our peoples, and try to point out the minute flaws in critics' reasoning, or justify these flaws in light of oppression suffered. I certainly don't believe Ignatiev to be an anti-Irish bigot, especially as such bigotry now rarely exists outside the UK. Yet we Irish-Americans need to face up to the facts. We, like any other group, are far from perfect, and, sad as it is to say, many of our blood perpetuated the crimes against us by becoming cruel toward other peoples whom we could, unconsciously or not, trample to step higher. It is understandable that Irishmen would do so, in light of the circumstances, but that does not make it excusable. Ignatiev presents a solid case, showing how this process worked historically. [One sentence in the conclusion struck me in particular. The author notes that in his research, he realised that "nobody gave a damn for the Irish," observing that even slaves had abolitionists and religious groups caring for them. Though I, like most of Irish decent, do not care much for self-pity, it has irked me somewhat that almost nothing is taught of the plight of Irishmen in Ireland and abroad; perhaps a sentence or two on the "famine"--which was, of course, closer to a genocide than a famine--and that's that.

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