Paul Moses

An Unlikely Union: The Love-Hate Story of New York's Irish and Italians. New York: New York University Press, 2015. Pp. vii + 380. Hb, \$35.

An Unlikely Union is a difficult book to classify, an indication of its strengths and weaknesses. Author Paul Moses frequently refers to his Irish-Italian family's roots in New York City, and the author's more than two decades of experience as a journalist in New York are apparent in his vivid portraits of the city. As a result, the book often reads as part memoir and part autobiography, but it would be a mistake to label *An Unlikely Union* as such. At its core, Moses seeks to explain the evolution of Irish-Italian relations in New York from the mid-1800s to the mid-1900s. Thus, the book is primarily a social history of immigration and ethnicity, a history, the author adamantly insists, best understood through the stories of individual Irish and Italian Americans whose paths crossed.

Moses also draws from sociological theories of assimilation in presenting the Irish-Italian story as a potential bellwether for how today's minority communities in New York City might fare in the coming decades. Historians may be suspicious of claims that the history of Irish-Italian relations in New York offers "a story of how peace was made" and can be "instructive for easing conflicts" today (3, 327). At the same time, Moses provides a thorough overview of the institutions that shaped the contours of Irish and Italian life in New York City, and offers rigorous analysis of the decisions that helped define the limits and possibilities of relations between the two groups.

The book is structured chronologically in four parts that cover the origins of Irish-Italian conflict in the American Catholic Church; the escalation of tensions between the two groups in the workplace; the genesis of a rapprochement in politics and popular culture; and the familial and political ties that, Moses argues, ultimately cemented the union between Irish and Italians in New York. Throughout the book, the author concentrates on stories of individual Irish and Italian New Yorkers whose lives offer a glimpse of what he describes as the "human drama," something too often missing from sociological analyses of assimilation (2). Many of these figures—Giuseppe Garibaldi, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, Al Capone, Al Smith, and Bing Crosby, to name but a few—will be well known to most readers. Others, like the martyred mafia-fighting detective Joseph Petrosino and Father Thomas Lynch of the Transfiguration Church in the infamous Five Points neighborhood, are less familiar but no less deserving of Moses's keen eye for a rich story. Regardless of his subject's notoriety or lack thereof, Moses deftly uses each figure to shine a

light on the deeper cultural, economic, political, and social forces that shaped the trajectory of Irish-Italian relations in New York.

An Unlikely Union will not be of significant interest to scholars of the Society of Jesus. The book, however, touches upon a few Jesuits who were embroiled in the Irish-Italian rivalry that shaped the development of Roman Catholicism in late nineteenth-century New York. More than any other institution, Moses argues, the church was fertile ground for Irish-Italian animosity in the nineteenth- and early twentieth centuries. Not only did Irish immigrants and second-generation Irish Americans dominate the American hierarchy at the expense of the Italians, but also the severe anti-clerical streak among Italian nationalists in both Europe and America cast a long shadow on how Irish American Catholics welcomed (or failed to welcome) Italian newcomers. Thus, Italian priests chafed at the figurative green ceiling that blocked their advancement up the hierarchy: Father Nicholas Russo, S.J. and Father Philip Cardella, S.J. were even led to the actual door to the basement when in 1889 the two Jesuits requested permission to preach a mission in the increasingly Italian neighborhood that surrounded St. Patrick's Old Cathedral. Ultimately, however, Moses sees the twentieth-century church as a bonding agent that brought young postwar Irish and Italian New Yorkers together as students in parochial schools, worshippers in mixed Irish-Italian neighborhoods, and finally as husbands and wives.

Moses's analysis of "conflict" between Irish and Italian New Yorkers occasionally becomes overly determinative. For instance, the author describes the playful rivalry between crooners Bing Crosby and Frank Sinatra as "a contest steeped in the imagery of Italian-Irish conflict" (266). Crosby was descended in part from *Mayflower* families; his closest Irish immigrant ancestor was a great-grandfather who immigrated to New Brunswick, Canada in 1831. Moses also admits that "among young people, the [Crosby-Sinatra] dispute was not drawn along ethnic lines" (268). Here, as well as in parts of Moses's coverage of mid-twentieth century New York City politics, some readers may quibble over his tendency to interpret ethnicity as a decisive influence.

It should also be noted that Moses's emphasis on the importance of inter-ethnic relations to immigrant assimilation is not new. Historians such as James Barrett, David Roediger, and Nancy Foner have chronicled the vital part played by Irish Americans in the "Americanization" of southern and eastern European immigrants during the late 1800s and early 1900s. Barrett's *The Irish Way: Becoming American in the Multiethnic City* (New York: Penguin Press, 2012) offers the most authoritative account of this process and covers the same

themes as *An Unlikely Union* with a scope that extends far beyond New York City. But Moses's deep intimacy with New York and his unique blend of social history, sociology, biography, and autobiography distinguish this book from the otherwise excellent historical scholarship with which it engages. Historians of New York City, Irish and Italian immigration, and American Catholicism should seek out *An Unlikely Union*.

Ian Delahanty

Springfield College (MA)

idelahanty@springfieldcollege.edu

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