

The AOH in History

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I want to thank the AOH for the opportunity to be with you tonight, and I want especially to thank Roger Walsh for having extended that invitation.

As Roger said in his introduction, I am a member of the history faculty at Marquette University, which is one of only a handful of universities in this country that grants graduate degrees in Irish studies. In fact, the first such school was the Catholic University of America, which established a chair in Gaelic in the late 1890s, thanks to a gift of \$50,000 from the Ancient Order of Hibernians—an enormous gift at the time, a landmark moment for Irish scholarship, and a genuine example of your order's motto of "Friendship, Unity, and Christian Charity."

Now – Roger has asked me to speak with you about the history of the AOH, a daunting task in the twenty or so minutes allotted me tonight. Many of you are—no doubt—familiar with some of the details of this history already. Your website contains much useful information, particularly in the section prepared so well by Steve Michaels about the Hibernians in Milwaukee. However, I also want to put in a plug for the skeptical review of aspects of that history, especially what we might call the "pre-history of the AOH," that is, the period before the foundation of the order in New York in 1836. And I want to highlight two other things, as well. First, that the AOH as it developed in the United States did not necessarily follow the same pattern as its development back in Ireland. Local conditions—and especially the experience of immigration—shaped the Hibernian experience in the U-S and, indeed, in Wisconsin, to be different from, say, the experience of Hibernians in County Armagh or County Monaghan back in Ireland. A

second point I'd like to make is that the role of the AOH—even in a single community—can change over time to fit the perceived needs of the locality. So my comments to you this evening can be boiled down to answering a few basic questions: what were the origins of the AOH? How did the Order seek to meet the needs of its members? And how did local circumstances—including local political rivalries—shape the AOH?

Let me begin with origin stories. According to several early published histories of the Order, including especially the three-volume history by John O'Dea (in 1923), the AOH can trace its foundations to centuries before that official start date of 1836, indeed all the way back to 1565.¹ At that time, so the AOH's national historian writes, Ireland became one of many battlefields between the forces of the Protestant Reformation and the Catholic Counter-Reformation in Europe. As the English Tudor monarchs asserted greater control over the island, their agents seized the lands of Gaelic septs and began the process of plantation—that is, bringing in English and Scottish Protestant colonists who would dispossess the Catholic natives and control the island into the twentieth century. In the first of these planted areas—in the counties of Laois and Offaly in the Irish midlands—a Gaelic prince of the O'More family—known as Rory Oge—put together a band of men, known as “Defenders” who fought to retain his Gaelic inheritance and to preserve the Catholic faith under the banner of “Friendship, Unity, and True Christian Charity.”² From which, obviously, you all have derived your modern-day motto. Through the next two hundred and fifty years, secret societies (including the eighteenth-century Whiteboys and the nineteenth-century Ribbonmen) carried on this tradition of underground resistance to the English monarchy and its Protestant faith.

¹ John O'Dea, *History of the Ancient Order of Hibernians and Ladies' Auxiliary*, 3 vols. (South Bend, Indiana, 1995, 2nd ed.).

² AOH national website.

But before one assumes too direct a line of development from the Reformation era through the eighteenth century to the foundation of the AOH, let me offer up a few notes of caution. First, the early accounts of your organization were written in an era when historians, especially historians with a nationalist agenda, drew connections to the past by reading backward from their present conditions. And don't get me wrong: I'm not bashing nationalist histories as an Irish phenomenon. These were—and to some extent—still are written. (As someone who teaches graduate students about the study of nationalism, I'm especially aware of this in the case of German historians who wrote in Germany immediately after the second German Empire was declared in 1871.) In the case of Ireland, late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century writers saw the nationalist movement of their time dominated by Catholics and often demanding civil and human rights for Catholics in a British state. They believed that all past resistance to English or British authority was necessarily “national” in origin, including being rooted in religion, whether this involved Rory Oge resisting Queen Elizabeth I or the Whiteboys lashing out against Protestant landlords and tithe collectors, who collected taxes on behalf of the Anglican Church.

But more recent research has raised questions about such assumptions. For instance, Rory Oge—apparently—wasn't opposed to doing business with Elizabeth or her deputies at all: as late as 1575, ten years after he was supposed to have founded his Defenders, he was willing to cut a deal with Lord Deputy Sidney in exchange for the restoration of his family's historic land rights. His strong resistance, which led Sidney's subordinates to engage in some very ugly mass murders, was apparently motivated—at

least in part—by the Tudor state having promoted some of his family’s former clients (such as the O’Dempseys) at the expense of the O’Mores.³

Meanwhile, eighteenth-century secret societies associated with what is known generically as “Whiteboyism” were not primarily motivated by religious concerns or nationalist programs. Just to be clear: what is called “Whiteboyism” was a form of rough justice, in which local groups gathered at night—taking oaths of mutual loyalty and secrecy and sometimes wearing costumes, such as the long white shirts that gave the Whiteboys their name—and attacked their enemies in an effort to enforce community norms. They would threaten violence unless certain demands were met. From the 1760s until the 1830s, every decade witnessed at least one substantial outbreak of agrarian violence. But, as we have come to learn in the last twenty years or so, Whiteboys and their counterparts were primarily motivated by localized economic grievances, not some pre-nationalist program to get the English landlords out of Ireland. More often than not, their members were from the lower end of Ireland’s very complicated social ladder. These small tenants and agricultural laborers only paid rent indirectly to Protestant landlords. There were often two or three tiers of middlemen, many of them wealthier Catholics, between them, and it was these middlemen who were actually the direct targets of Whiteboy violence. They were targeted because they extorted higher rents from their subtenants or paid their laborers lower wages than the subtenants and laborers believed to be right. And even when there were religious aspects to such violent outbursts—tithe collectors were often attacked by Whiteboys (some accounts talk about bits of their ears being chopped off or the collector being buried up to neck in brambles)—the aim seems

³ Vincent P. Carey, “The End of the Gaelic Political Order: The O’More Lordship of Laois, 1536-1603,” in ed., Pádraig G. Lane and William Nolan, *Laois: History and Society* (Templeogue, Co. Dublin, 1999).

to have been at least partially economic. Attackers usually demanded that tithes be lowered NOT done away with, which one might expect if the motivation for the attacks was purely religious.

At the same time, the above points shouldn't lead anyone to discount entirely the secret society origins for the AOH. By its very nature, evidence of society activity is, well, SECRET. But there is sufficient circumstantial evidence to suggest that the AOH may have grown out of traditions that were contemporaneous with the Whiteboy activity I just mentioned. In southern Ulster in the 1770s and 1780s, land tensions overlapped with religious tensions, mainly because the population of Catholics and non-Catholics who were among the poorer and middling sorts was more equivalent than in other parts of the island. As such, Protestant agrarian groups, such as the Peep-o'-Day boys—a precursor to the more famous Orange Order—led to the growth of a Catholic group known as the Defenders.

To my knowledge, there is no credible, direct link between this group and the Defenders of Rory Oge. Still this group WAS self-consciously designed to protect Catholics from Protestant aggression, and their ideology also became increasingly laced with French revolutionary republicanism. Code words, signs, and catechisms were drawn up to help identify friend from foe, and Defender lodges provided social outlets as well as rudimentary political education for their members. Ultimately, the Defenders linked up with the society of the United Irishmen and were at the center of the bloodiest Irish rebellion of them all: the Rebellion of 1798. Increasingly, historians such as Ruan O'Donnell in Ireland and Jim Patterson here in the States, are showing that anti-English, pro-republican ideologies did not die but went underground after 1800. Their evidence

remains patchy, but it has been growing over the course of the last decade, and I find it persuasive. Meanwhile, referring to a slightly later period of time and one that more directly speaks to the AOH, Tom Garvin has outlined the activities of a group known as the Society of the Ribbonmen through the 1810s through the 1830s. This shadowy organization seems to have been strongest in Ulster, the north midlands, and in Dublin—in short, in the very same areas where the Defenders were concentrated, and they seemed to espouse a similar ideology. It is quite possible that it was from this tradition, as O’Dea and others wrote decades ago, that Hibernianism emerged.

Whether it was the Ribbonmen or some other shadow group, we know that the organizers of the first Hibernian society in New York received a letter dated 4 May 1836 from their Irish, Scottish, and English counterparts sending “to our few brothers in New York full instructions with our authority to establish branches of our society in America.”⁴ And it is from this point and this point only that we can truly trace the development of the AOH.

Interestingly, it developed very differently in Ireland from how it developed in the USA, and we can explain these differences partly because of the societies in which the organization grew. In Ireland, for instance, there was little growth of the AOH until the 1860s and ‘70s, but its real heyday didn’t come until after 1900. It remained largely an Ulster phenomenon, and it was especially prevalent in border counties such as Monaghan, Cavan and Armagh, but gradually spreading into Antrim and Down, especially as the industrializing center that was Belfast mushroomed in size with migrants moving toward town from outlying counties. One reason for its slow initial growth, I suspect, was that its origins in the secret society tradition put it at odds with the most

⁴ AOH website.

powerful social institution in nineteenth-century Ireland: the Catholic Church. As one journalist noted in 1917, the powerful Archbishop of Armagh, Michael Cardinal Logue, had denounced the Order around 1900 as “a pest, a cruel tyranny, and an organized system of blackguardism.”⁵ One might think that this attitude was based on the Church’s general opposition to underground revolutionary nationalism. From the mid-1800s, the Church was especially leery of any oath-bound organization that practiced violence, and this attitude found its most vocal expression when Paul Cardinal Cullen denounced the Fenian movement in the 1860s. But even though the AOH associated itself with Irish nationalism, we shouldn’t confuse the Irish AOH with the Irish Republican Brotherhood. In fact, the two groups were often rivals within nationalist communities during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, with the Hibernians taking the side of the more moderate Home Rule nationalists against the somewhat more radical Sinn Feiners. Some of the Church’s attitude against the AOH seems to have been based in its being a lay-controlled group—rather than under the specific direction of priests—and in lingering uncertainties about its intentions. As members proved themselves to be in the main respectable, as members provided each other with the kinds of sick benefits and death benefits for which the organization was noted, and as the controlling Board of Erin came under the direction of the Belfast politician Joseph Devlin, the Church lifted its public ban on the AOH. This was in 1904. Thereafter, it became a major force within the ranks of the Home Rule party, with the number of members jumping from only 5,000 in 1900 to 64,000 in 1909.⁶ Gradually, AOH divisions spread to the south, though there were never many in the neighborhood in which Mr. Heggarty grew up in West Cork. In

⁵ Turner, *American Political Review*.

⁶ Tom Garvin, *The Evolution of Irish Nationalist Politics* (New York, 1981), p. 96.

nationalist circles, that was still largely the province of Devlin's rival, William O'Brien, who had founded two organizations that rivaled the AOH within the party—the United Irish League, which was especially powerful in Connacht, Leinster, and northern Munster, and the All for Ireland League, with its base in County Cork. Its strength remained in the Ulster heartland, where tensions between Orange and Green were increasingly high as Home Rule became a hot electoral topic, especially after 1910.

In the USA, meanwhile, the Order had become a model of the nineteenth-century self-help organizations which are usually called Friendly Societies. It offered a refuge for new immigrants, especially those who were members of the organization on the other side of the Atlantic. It provided them with sick benefits and death benefits for members, and planned social gatherings including ceilidhs, parades, and concerts. Membership waxed and waned, but it was at its highest in the early 20th century, with more than 127,000 members in 1908.⁷ Given its functions, the AOH in the U-S grew because of three primary factors. First, it gained considerable strength from the influx of Famine-era immigrants: it may well be that this was what prompted the earliest incarnation in Milwaukee, which seems to have had at least one branch by 1848.

A second factor that led to the organization's growth was also related to immigration: these were the periodic outbursts of anti-Catholic and Nativist sentiment, often aimed at "alien" immigrants, such as the Know-Nothing Party of the 1850s, the American Protective Association of the 1890s, or the KKK in the 1920s. (Sometimes, anti-nativist actions took on the old character of an Irish faction fight, as when the AOH in New York helped to defend the original St. Patrick's Cathedral from a torch-bearing mob in the 1850s or when Wisconsin Catholics attacked the Commercial Hotel in

⁷ Ibid.

Waukesha to get at a rally of Ku Klux Klan organizers in February 1924. Indeed to the immense credit of the AOH, the organization was one of several groups that foiled Klan recruitment in Wisconsin between 1922 and 1928, and not always through the use of violence.⁸)

The third factor leading to membership growth was the desire of immigrants and ethnic Irish to demonstrate respectability in their new country. Often, as in Worcester Massachusetts in the 1880s and 1890s, the AOH would sponsor activities like St. Patrick's Day parades and 4th of July picnics in order to show that the Irish had arrived and that they were becoming even more American than the Americans themselves.⁹

Ironically, this search for respectability—and specifically the effort to press for greater access to power in the States—led to friction within the AOH and sometimes between the AOH and other Irish organizations. (I'm sure that none of you is familiar with this type of thing.) You see, in spite of its professed desire to strive for “Friendship and Unity,” there's an awful lot of Hibernia in the Hibernians who are subject to that curse of Irish curses—the “Split.” Thus, we find that in the 1880s, there were factions who wanted to limit membership only to people of Irish birth (which would necessarily mean immigrants), while others wanted to open the doors to the more numerous people of Irish parentage. So divisive was this issue that the AOH in America split for almost two decades, finally reuniting in 1898. Interestingly, in some localities, such as the aforementioned Worcester, Mass., the split itself wasn't much of an issue. First-generation Irish-Americans were not that interested in joining the AOH, preferring

⁸ Fr. Steven M. Avella, *In the Richness of the Earth: A History of the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, 1843-1958* (Milwaukee, 2002), p. 433.

⁹ Timothy J. Meagher, “Why Should We Care for a little Trouble or a Walk through the Mud?: St. Patrick's and Columbus Day Parades in Worcester, Massachusetts, 1845-1915,” *New England Quarterly*, lviii, 1 (March 1985): 5-26.

instead to express their American identity and respectability through joining temperance societies and adopting American dance forms and games. It was only as nativist sentiment rose again in the '90s that they sought entrance into the AOH in any kind of numbers, and this occurred at about the time that the split was patched up.

As Catholics became more accepted in American society, and as the need to defend the Church from attacks declined, the AOH's mission became more focused on its political and social ends. This meant a greater focus on its charitable works as well as on local politics—working in this country on behalf of candidates of Irish descent, and working through open and secret means to achieve Irish independence. Early in the century, the American AOH and the Irish AOH were, in fact, not on the same page politically—with the Americans pushing for a more complete separation from the UK than Devlin's men were. (In fact, it was Devlin's AOH that helped to convince northern nationalists to accept partition in the 1910s, when it was still merely a discussion point among parliamentarians. His expectation—and the expectation of the Home Rule Party leader, John Redmond—was that partition would not and could not last.)

But in the twentieth century—as throughout its history—the AOH has provided a haven for those of Irish blood and Irish sympathy to express their mutual concerns and to pool their resources for the common good. Your own division, which as I understand it, was only reorganized in the mid-1980s, and it is a model for what the organization can become with its unique blend of social and charitable activities. You've grown from a rich and varied tradition, and I hope that my all-too-brief remarks this evening can give you a sense of that tradition as you look to the future. Thank you for your attention.