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Q & A: Meagher on Mansfield

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Distinctly Catholic

This week at Q & A, we are focusing on the contributions made to America, and to the Catholic Church in the United States, by those whose parents were immigrants and who might, therefore, lose their citizenship if this ridiculous tinkering with the 14th Amendment were actually to be enacted. Yesterday, we looked at Cardinal James Gibbons. Today, Catholic University Professor Timothy Meagher, a fellow at CUA's Institute for Policy Research and Catholic Studies, examines the case of Senator Mike Mansfield:

Mike Mansfield was born in 1903 in Greenwich Village to Irish immigrant parents. His father, Patrick, came to America from Ireland in 1897. It's not clear when his mother, Josephine, left Ireland.

Americans fresh from a depression were not happy about immigrants or foreigners then. Inspired by Boston Brahmin patricians, Congress had passed a literacy test, aimed at restricting immigration the year before Patrick came, in 1896. The President vetoed it. It wouldn't have kept Patrick and Josephine or the Irish out; Ireland had among the highest literacy rates in the world by 1900. It would, however, bar most southern and eastern Europeans, Italians, Greeks, Poles, Serbs and the like, thought by the Brahmins and others, to be racially inferior, unassimilable, with little regard for America and its ideals. These immigrants came, so their enemies argued, just to make money, and once they made enough took their earnings home. Of course, there were many in the country - some of those Brahmins included - who would have been happy if Patrick and Josephine had never come and doubted that they or theirs could ever become good citizens because they were Catholics, pawns of the Pope. Just a few years before Patrick arrived, an anti Catholic movement, the American Protective Association, had swept through the Midwest, enrolling millions of members and dominating the region's politics.

Patrick had more practical problems to face than people carping about his religion, however. If he was

literate like most Irish immigrants at the time, he - again like most Irish - had no other skills, no money, no prospects when he arrived in the United States. Life in rural, small farm Ireland offered little useful preparation for urban industrial America. Most Irish immigrants at the turn of the twentieth century started at the bottom and made only inching progress up, never escaping manual labor. Patrick was no exception. He was construction worker when Michael was born and fifteen years later had moved 'up' to become a hotel porter.

Irish immigrants like Patrick and Josephine were not just ill equipped for an industrial world but stunningly vulnerable to urban accidents and diseases. In the early 1900s, Irish immigrants had among the lowest average life expectancies of any people in America - much lower than Italian immigrants and Jews, almost as low as African Americans. Patrick survived a fall on a construction site due to the charity of some good nuns, but Josephine died in 1910, when Mike was seven.

With no one to take care of young Michael, his father shipped him all the way to Montana to some relatives who ran a general store in Great Falls. Mike hated it there, got into fights, hopped a freight train and ran away from home when he was eleven, was caught and spent a night in jail. In 1917, at the ripe old age of fourteen, filled with stories of American military victories in France and eager just to go, he decided to join the Armed Forces. Mike jumped another freight to New York City, hoping to cajole his father into lying about his age on his application to the navy. When his father refused, Mike forged Patrick's name and was soon off as a sailor on a cruiser in the North Atlantic looking for German subs and raiders.

He liked military service, so when he finished with the Navy in 1919, he joined the Army, and mustered out of the Army in 1920, he went around the corner to the Marines recruiting station and joined them. As a Marine he was sent to Asia, to the Philippines and China. It left a life long impression. He returned to Montana a world wide traveler but without a high school diploma, and so the best job he could find was in the copper mines as a 'mucker', keeping the mine shafts clean and shoring up the timbers.

But he went to school, to the School of Mines and then to what later became the University of Montana in Missoula. He became an expert in Far Eastern history and taught courses in Latin American and Asian history at Montana. In 1940, he lost an election for Congress but he won in 1942 and never looked back. He served ten years in the House of Representatives and then moved to the Senate for twenty-four years (He was the third senator in Montana history who was the son of Irish immigrants). He was the Senate Majority leader for fifteen years, longer than anyone in American history. In 1977 he became the Ambassador to Japan, and remained so until 1988. He died in 2001.

It had been a long road, the child of impoverished immigrants from western Ireland, orphaned, school dropout, stubborn child, runaway, mine worker, a certain loser in almost all respects. But he became an expert in Chinese and Japanese history, Congressman, Senator, Majority Leader, a few heartbeats from the White House, and finally Ambassador. If those Boston Brahmins or the leaders of the American Protective Association could have gotten all that they dreamed, something like a change in the 14th Amendment, would he have been able to make that journey? would he have wanted to? would he have gloried in the triumphs or American arms enough to lie his way into the military at age fourteen? Would he think enough of himself to go to school? And, of course, we know he would never have been able to run for office, nor even vote for that matter.

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