

# **Not Everything that Glitters is Gold: Political and Social Oppression in the California Gold Rush**

Eli Denmead

Masses of men marching down the street, wielding pitchforks and torches, chanting for the execution of criminals. As they all march down to the city square where their charismatic leaders begin orating grand speeches, an impromptu trial starts that will most certainly find the defendant guilty, resulting in either an execution, or immediate ejection from the city. While this may sound like a newspaper report from the Paris in 1787 or Salem in 1693, it was the reality of life in San Francisco in 1856<sup>1</sup>.

A number of leading businessmen in the city had decided that they needed to take control, or else the city would spiral downwards. Led by a man named William Tell Coleman, the Committee was organized with the goal of clearing the criminal element from the city, or so they said<sup>2</sup>. An interesting pattern would emerge, however. When one hears that they were intending on “clearing the criminal element”, it would not be a stretch to assume they were referring to the various minority groups that had inhabited the area: Native Americans, Mexicans, and the Chinese. However, these men generally ignored these groups, instead focusing on the Irish who had recently moved to the area, as many had, in search of gold<sup>3</sup>. This

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<sup>1</sup> Nancy J. Taniguchi, *Dirty Deeds: Land, Violence, and the 1856 San Francisco Vigilance Committee* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2016), xi.

<sup>2</sup> Taniguchi, *Dirty Deeds*, 17.

<sup>3</sup> Taniguchi, *Dirty Deeds*, 58.

strange occurrence would be the result of various strategic, repressive actions to remove these different groups from the political conversation, leaving the Irish as their only competition.

As with many major periods of American history, our understanding of the causes and lives of those during the California Gold Rush have changed over the course of time. Their history was also predominantly written by those who had succeeded in gaining and maintaining power, which have overwhelmingly been the Anglo-Saxon Protestant majority that has populated America since its inception.

Our initial understanding of the Gold Rush was one that saw these Anglo-Saxon migrants as being noble heroes who conquered the wild lands of the West, and set up these fortuitous societies which would develop into major centers of trade and commerce. “This was followed by the last decade (1850-1860)... during which the surprisingly successful efforts of large numbers of Anglo-Saxon immigrants, sometimes aided, sometimes hindered, by persons of other cultures, built the enduring foundations of a great American state.”<sup>4</sup> Although it is true, and the money and desire to settle the land out west by these Anglo-Saxon immigrants would help usher in the development of California, the idea that the various minority groups simply “helped or hindered” this feat is grossly misrepresenting the trials that these different groups endured under the new rule of the immigrants from the east. As we will explore later, these groups were not simply there, but were forced out of their positions of power and influence by these new, white migrants to the west. This point of view would be dominant as late as the 1970’s, but would eventually be challenged by a movement to remove the romantic lens that had colored the scholarship.

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<sup>4</sup> Richard R. Powell, *Compromises of Conflicting Claims: A Century of California Law, 1760 to 1860* (Dobbs Ferry: Oceana Publications, 1977), 3.

As time went on, however, the scholarship began to evolve. Scholars began to study this period of time as one of lawlessness, which began to explore the social effects of this lack of order. As people began to move west, the need for law and order was far greater than the abilities of those who sought to impose it, and this led extraneous “justice”, carried out by those who saw this vacuum as an opportunity to impose their own law<sup>5</sup>. While this focus on the absence of law was originally to show the dangers of life in the west, it also opened up the debate on the prejudice faced by minorities at the time. Many were victims of this extraneous justice, especially considering the lack of standing many had in the existing courts. Minorities already faced a long history of prejudice in America, and this shift from Anglo-Saxon views of exceptionalism began to introduce these stories to the mainstream.

Within the last two decades we have seen an even greater focus on the social aspect of the Gold Rush, and an increase in visibility for the “alternative plot lines” of the various minority groups who existed within it<sup>6</sup>. The California Gold Rush was one of the most diverse periods in history, with dozens of various racial and ethnic groups- Mexicans, Chinese, and a number of other groups from all over Asia, South America, and Europe- descending on the state in search of fame and fortune. However, this time period has been predominantly viewed through an Anglo-centric, male-dominant lens for the majority of its history. The work of scholars like Susan B. Johnson, Benjamin Madley, and Mark Kanazawa have brought the stories of the different minority groups who lived in and immigrated to the area during the California Gold Rush to the forefront of people’s minds. While many had known that the Chinese had immigrated to

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<sup>5</sup> Kevin J. Mullen, *Let Justice Be Done: Crime and Politics in Early San Francisco* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1989), XIV.

<sup>6</sup> Susan B. Johnson, *Roaring Camp: The Social World of the California Gold Rush* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 2000), 27.

California in search of gold, or that Mexicans and Native Americans had lived in the area for years, few realized the prejudice they faced beyond simply “white people didn’t like minorities”. By introducing these stories to the mainstream, the hope is that these atrocities can be studied, and a deeper understanding of the time period can emerge.

The other major development in the scholarship looked at how gender effected these racial interactions, specifically focusing on masculinity. The scholar Amy Greenberg discusses the ideas of restrained and martial manhood, which separated the classes in California: “Restrained manhood was practiced by men in the North and South who grounded their identities in their families, in the evangelical practice of their protestant faith, and in success in the business world... Martial men rejected the moral standards that guided restrained men... In a period when economic transformations placed increasing value on expertise, their masculine practices still revolved around dominance<sup>7</sup>.” This focus on masculinity is especially important development in the scholarship when looking at class divisions between the traditionally Protestant upper class businessmen, who dominated the merchant class, and the traditionally Catholic Irish, who tended to be less wealthy but extremely politically active in the area. All of these developments created a more nuanced view of the time period, showing a strong evolution from the earlier scholars who peddled American Exceptionalism.

As scholarship has begun to uncover the power struggle between the Protestant upper class and the Irish working class, a troubling pattern has emerged. For the most part, various minority groups, including those who had populated the area for the longest, had their voices silenced in favor of the recently-immigrated Anglo-Saxon majority. When criminals in San

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<sup>7</sup> Amy Greenberg, *Manifest Manhood and the Antebellum American Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 11-12.

Francisco were rounded up to clean up the city and protect the political and business interests of the Protestant leaders, it was not the minorities that were targeted, but the Irish Democrats who had built up a strong power base amongst the working class in these urban areas<sup>8</sup>. The Anglo-Saxons in power in the state had done such a masterful job at oppressing the various minority groups, that when major political discussions came to the table, the only opposition they faced were from those who shared their skin color, and even the Irish would eventually be targeted and subject to oppression to consolidate power at the hands of the Protestant business elite.

Although California was a melting pot of various racial and ethnic groups during the late 1840's and 1850's, it was the Anglo-Saxon majority who emerged victorious in the struggle for power. The story of California and its development is not one of hope and overcoming odds, but one of racial and social oppression of large portions of the population to clear room for the political and financial gains of the Protestant elite that came from the east. Through various means, including the massacre of thousands of Native Americans, the purposeful trampling of Mexican land rights, the imposition of back-breaking taxes on the Chinese, and the execution and deportation of Irish Democrats, the Protestant, Anglo-Saxon business elites in California were able to take control of the state and silence the political voices and power of those who would oppose them.

An important jumping off point when discussing race in the 1850's, especially out west, is the idea of Manifest Destiny. The idea, first coined by David O'Sullivan, encapsulated the feeling of many Anglo-Saxon Americans at the time. "O'Sullivan first used the phrase Manifest Destiny in criticizing other nations for attempting to interfere with a natural process: other nations had intruded, he said, 'for the avowed object of thwarting our policy and hampering our

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<sup>8</sup> Taniguchi, *Dirty Deeds*, 84-85.

power, limiting our greatness and checking the fulfillment of our manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions.”<sup>9</sup> Manifest Destiny was to be the divine right of the American elite who migrated to the west, and this sentiment followed the miners who sought the gold-filled hills of California.

Manifest Destiny was also closely tied to the idea of American Exceptionalism. When one describes the idea of American Exceptionalism, however, especially in the 1850’s, it is more in reference to the superiority of Anglo-Saxon sect of the Caucasian race living in America<sup>10</sup>. This idea that God had ordained Americans to go west and take what was to be their land had a strong racial tinge. Americans had used these two ideas to justify the removal of Native Americans from their land in East in the 1830’s. Through the use of force, Americans had taken the land they believed to belong to them, and this phenomenon would continue as these same people moved west to California. The Americans who truly believed they deserved this land were those that had been at the top for the longest, and they would not be stopped in their pursuit for land in the west, especially by those they considered to be below them, like the Natives who already inhabited the lands they were moving too. God had ordained for them to have this land, and they would take it from anyone who would get in their way by any means necessary.

California is a prime example of the “melting pot” that many have described America to be. With the official announcement of the discovery of gold in 1848, dozens of various ethnic and racial groups descended on the foothills of the Sierra Nevada in search of fortune. These included groups from Western Europe, Central and South America, and East Asia, as well as a massive number Americans coming from the East. For these Americans, they felt the fortune and

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<sup>9</sup> Reginald Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of American Racial Anglo-Saxonism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 219.

<sup>10</sup> Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny*, 1.

gold in the region was their right, and they were willing to do anything to take power of the situation, even if it meant oppressing the other groups who had come to seek gold. One of these groups predated all others in the area.

The history of Native Americans in California is one of strife and prejudice. The Spanish moved north into the area after conquering much of South America and Mexico, built the missions, and began enslaving the local Native American populations under the guise of religious conversion and “civilizing” them. However, as Spanish control weakened, the Natives saw an opportunity, and seized it by aiding the Mexicans who sought independence in 1821. The Mexicans gave their Native allies citizenship in their new country, which was a first for these Natives, who had only experienced oppression and subservience under Spanish rule.<sup>11</sup> The Mexicans were grateful for the help of the natives with the expulsion of the Spanish, and rewarded them with Mexican citizenship and equality under the law, something many Natives had never experienced before. However, Mexican rule over the area would not last long. The Mexican-American War would last from 1845 until 1848, ending with a resounding American victory and the addition of California to the United States<sup>12</sup>. With this result, these Natives were now subjects of the United States, and life would quickly get worse for the Natives inhabiting the fledgling state.

In a now infamous quote, Governor Peter H. Burnett explained to the State Legislature, “That a war of extermination will continue between the two races, until the Indian race become extinct, must be expected; while we cannot anticipate this result with but painful regret, the

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<sup>11</sup> Powell, *Compromises of Conflicting Claims*, 206.

<sup>12</sup> Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 788.

inevitable destiny of the race is beyond the power and wisdom of man to avert”<sup>13</sup> For years, Americans in the east had fought against the natives, slowly pushing them further and further west, killing thousands of them in the process. As these same Americans migrated to California in search of gold, they carried these same prejudices with them, and began the “war of extermination” in the west. This violence would take many forms, from vigilante justice to large scale operations intended to drive out large groups of natives, but the entire period would be later labeled the California Indian Genocide<sup>14</sup>.

Violence against natives by the American government was nothing new. The early 19<sup>th</sup> century saw multiple periods of extreme violence against natives as Americans attempted to free up land for expansion. However, the levels of which this violence occurred was what set it apart from other periods in America’s history. One of the worst examples is known as the Clear Lake Massacre, in which an eyewitness was recorded as seeing, “When we arrived... on the Sacramento River the Indians quickly formed themselves into [a] line of battle.’ Their caution proved warranted. Having effectively surrounded them, Fremont eschewed diplomacy and instead launched a well-planned, preemptive assault of a kind that would later become common in California.”<sup>15</sup> The tragic nature of this event was not just the number of lives that were cut down, or the fact that large numbers of these deaths were women and children attempting to flee; the worst part of this massacre was that the perpetrators were members of the United States Military, who threw aside direct orders to gleefully murder hundreds of innocent people attempting to live their lives in peace. Even more disturbing was the coverage of the incident, in

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<sup>13</sup> Powell, *Compromises of Conflicting Claims*, 209.

<sup>14</sup> Benjamin Madley, *An American Genocide: The United States and the California Indian Catastrophe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 3.

<sup>15</sup> Madley, *An American Genocide*, 46.



which the *San Francisco Herald* not only covered the story and death toll, but heaped praise on the soldiers who massacred the natives<sup>16</sup>. This would set the standard for the period, and kept Native Americans from having any direct power in the formation of the state. At every turn, they were butchered and forced to flee for their lives, leaving them little to think about other than their survival. Violence would be used to oppress Native Americans, but another method was required to subdue those that had a source of power in the new state: land.

The war with Mexico lasted only a few years, but would be instrumental in the development of the United States. It finally gave them legal control over the last major chunk of the continent, finally uniting the two coasts and in essence, opening the floodgates for the manifest destiny that O'Sullivan had described. America not only had a Providential right to this land, but now they had a legal right too. However, they had a problem, and that was the thousands of Mexicans that had legitimate land claims living in the area. To make matters worse, in signing the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo, America had granted the Mexicans living in these newly acquired territories the ability to not only maintain their land claims, but to have a year to decide whether they would return to Mexico or become American citizens<sup>17</sup>. Mexicans now had the choice: become American citizens, or return to Mexico. An overwhelming majority of Mexicans- around 13,000, or over ninety percent of the population of California at the time- would choose to become American citizens<sup>18</sup>. Many were hopeful for prosperity in their new lives as United States citizens, but they would quickly realize that things would not be anywhere near what they had hoped.

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<sup>16</sup> Madley, *An American Genocide*, 140.

<sup>17</sup> United States State Department, "Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo." In *Treaties and Other International Agreements of the United States of America, 1776-1949*, Vol. 9 (Washington D.C.: US Government Printing Office, 1972), 796.

<sup>18</sup> Migration Policy Institute, "Mexican-Born Population Over Time, 1850-Present." (2017).

Once the discovery of gold was announced, Americans in the east realized how valuable land would be, and their sense of superiority over the people that already lived there would only lead to trouble for the Mexicans living there. The moment Americans arrived in the west, arguments over the legitimacy of land claims arose, with Mexicans protesting miners infringing on their lands. This decision from Chief Justice of the California Supreme Court David S. Terry would put to rest any of the controversy, “The Mexican municipal laws, which were then administered, were administered under the authority of the United States, and might be repealed or abrogated at their pleasure; and any Mexican law inconsistent with the rights of the United States... were annulled by the conquest.”<sup>19</sup> Any Mexicans who had hoped that the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo would protect them and give them agency to have a prosperous life under the new government would quickly have their dreams shattered, as the California courts quickly trampled all over their land claims, making room for the Americans who came from the east to set up shop. Now that their land claims were being challenged and annulled, the Mexicans living in California had lost their one source of power. Violence quickly followed, as Americans who had bought up the newly available claims were eager to kick the Mexicans off the land they had inhabited for generations, leaving many homeless and in search of money<sup>20</sup>. Some turned to mining, but some turned to a life of crime, which further strengthened the prejudice that the Americans had against them.

These attacks against Mexicans were brought out by the same racial sentiments that had fueled Manifest Destiny. The land out west was increasingly seen as valuable, and owning was many times more profitable than actually mining the gold on it. It brought out of common

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<sup>19</sup> John Bigelow, *Memoir of the Life and Public Services of John Charles Fremont* (New York: Derby and Jackson, 1856), 385.

<sup>20</sup> Johnson, *Roaring Camp*, 218.

Americans the same sentiments echoed in Terry's decision, "We have conquered Mexico, so whatever rights were claimed to stem from Mexico belong to us."<sup>21</sup> As it was with the Native Americans, and will be for the other ethnic and racial groups that joined them in California, the sense of racial superiority from the Anglo-Saxons Protestants who came west would cause them to abandon the law in order to take political and financial control from the Mexicans who owned a majority of land in the state. Even though the government had signed the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo, and promised this support and protection for the former peoples of Mexico, because they weren't white Anglo-Saxon Protestants, their rights didn't matter, and could be trampled on if it was deemed profitable.

Having now chased Native Americans off their lands and in many cases, massacred them, as well as completely ignoring promises of protected land claims for Mexicans living in the area, the white Protestant immigrants to California had strengthened their financial and political position. They then attacked one of the newest minority groups to come to the region.

Life in China during the middle of the nineteenth century was filled with poverty and famine, as well as conflict and strife. For many who inhabited China's Guandong Province, which was the major source for Chinese immigration to California, their lives had been filled with constant violence and upheaval, especially with the Opium War at the beginning of the 1840's and the Taiping Rebellion at the beginning of the 1850's<sup>22</sup>. At the end of the 1840's, the word of gold in California would reach the province, and the story would become so popular that the name for California in Cantonese, Gam Saan, directly translated to "Gold Mountain"<sup>23</sup>.

Unsurprisingly, this would motivate many young Chinese men to leave home in the hopes of

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<sup>21</sup> Powell, *Compromises of Conflicting Claims*, 168.

<sup>22</sup> Johnson, *Roaring Camp*, 305.

<sup>23</sup> Johnson, *Roaring Camp*, 86.

making a fortune and returning home wealthy. This would put them in direct conflict with not only white miners, but the newly elected state government who, like they had already done with Native Americans, made it known they would not accept the Chinese.

Responding to a strong nativist sentiment in the state, the newly elected third governor of California John Bigler called for restrictions on Chinese immigration, using the argument that the Chinese were unable to properly assimilate to the American culture, as well as referring to all the Chinese as “coolies”, which is similar to a slave<sup>24</sup>. This sentiment was echoed by his supporters across the state as well as in the legislature, who sought to not only infringe upon Chinese immigration, but to control the Chinese already living in the state. They needed to force the Chinese out of the mines to make room for the white miners who had come to California in search of gold, as God had ordained for white Americans. It did not take long for the miners and their supporters in the California Legislature to find a way to force them out.

The Foreign Miner’s Tax of 1850 was imposed to as a method of raising tax revenue for the state, but also had the added benefit of allowing for the direct control of foreign miners in the area<sup>25</sup>. The tax, when originally imposed, was \$20 a month, which, according to historical currency rates, converts to around 650 dollars in present day<sup>26</sup>. This made it nearly impossible for foreign miners to pay the tax. It would be reduced in the years that followed, but its presence was always a major deterrence for foreigners to enter the mines. It also forced many Chinese into jobs in places like laundromats and restaurants, which furthered many of the prejudices whites had against the Chinese. Anglo-Saxon Americans had long seen the Chinese as being an inferior

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<sup>24</sup> Gary Noy, *Gold Rush Stories: 49 Tales of Seekers, Scoundrels, Loss, and Luck* (Rocklin: Sierra College Press, 2017), 303.

<sup>25</sup> Mark Kanazawa, "Immigration, Exclusion, and Taxation: Anti-Chinese Legislation in Gold Rush California," *JEH* 65, no. 3(2005), 784.

<sup>26</sup> Rodney Evinsson, *Historical Currency Converter* (2015).

people due to their generally smaller stature, seeing them as less masculine<sup>27</sup>. They also supported the British in their attempt to gain control in China during the Opium Wars, which, ironically enough, helped drive many Chinese to California<sup>28</sup>. Most Anglo-Saxon Americans supported the oppression of minorities to gain political power for those that looked like them, even if it did not directly benefit them. This feeling did not stop some Americans from aiding these peoples, but not for the reasons that would actually benefit the minority groups themselves.

There were some Americans who attempted to help the Chinese and protect them from the injustice being committed against them, but even that had a tinge of paternalistic racial superiority about it. Reverend William Speer spoke on behalf of the Chinese in California to the State Legislature, asking, “But, gentlemen, had this subject not possessed a moral aspect of the sublimest importance, I would not have felt it to be my calling to utter a word upon it... I can scarce hope for success as a minister of the gospel in leading them to adore our God, or love our Savior, so long as the present state of things continue.”<sup>29</sup> Although he was attempting to cur the favor of the State Legislature in the hopes of providing relief to the Chinese in California, his request was not one based on the right to equality, but one based on pity. Speer did not want relief for the Chinese because he felt they deserved it as equals, but he wanted pity to be taken on what he viewed as a lesser race. It was reminiscent of the diaries of previous missionaries who had seen the atrocities committed against natives in the New World, and begged for lenience not because they deserved equality, but because God did not want these lesser people punished, he wanted them brought into his light. Speer was one of many who attempted to convert the

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<sup>27</sup> Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny*, 156.

<sup>28</sup> Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny*, 227.

<sup>29</sup> Reverend William Speer, *A Humble Plea, Addressed to the Legislature of California, In Behalf of the Immigrants From the Empire of China* (San Francisco: Office of the Oriental, 1856), 40.

Chinese to Christianity, to “civilize” them, and make their lives in California more palatable to the Protestant majority who controlled the state. Although they would get some lenience in the form of reduced taxes, the prejudice against the Chinese would always remain, and they would have little political influence and power over their new home.

These three groups- Native Americans, Mexicans, and Chinese- were by no means the only minority groups to come to California at the time, although they were some of the largest. Gold Fever struck far and wide, and would attract people of all backgrounds. This attracted another ethnic group who would have greater access to political power than the Natives, Chinese and Mexicans. This would place them directly in the middle of the power struggle with the Protestant elites who were so close to consolidating all the power in the state in their hands.

The history of the Irish in America is very similar to that of many other ethnic groups who came seeking respite from terrible conditions at home. Like the Chinese who were escaping turmoil and poverty at home, the Irish had faced terrible strife back home in the form of the one of the worst famines ever recorded in history. The Irish Potato Famine would destroy huge portions of the potato crop, which left many Irish with a tough choice: stay and face untold famine, which would kill millions, or leave for the hope of a better life in America<sup>30</sup>. The choice would split nearly three million people in Ireland down the middle: around half would stay and die from the famine, with the other half leaving their home and settling in America, changing the ethnic makeup of major eastern ports overnight<sup>31</sup>. In fact, from 1820 to 1860, never less than one third of immigrants to America were Irish, with their height being reached in the 1840’s, during

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<sup>30</sup> Roger Daniels, *Coming to America: A History of Immigration and Ethnicity In American Life* (Princeton: Visual Education Corporation, 2002), 135.

<sup>31</sup> Daniels, *Coming to America*, 135.

the famine, with nearly half of all immigrants during the decade being Irish<sup>32</sup>. With this influx of Irish immigration, they tended to stay together, seeking out those with common beliefs and values, as most immigrant groups to America did. Being white, many of these Irish would, unlike most of the other minority groups who immigrated to America at this time, have the ability to vote. Seeing this new wave of potential power, the political machine in New York jumped at the chance to welcome the Irish with open arms<sup>33</sup>.

The Democratic Party in New York was the center of a political revolution in the beginning and middle of the nineteenth century. They had experienced the creation of the political machine, which would be known as Tammany Hall<sup>34</sup>. Tammany Hall would be synonymous with the political machine, with which they would come to dominate the Democratic Party in the state of New York. However, on the way to this political domination, and in order to maintain it, they became well known for ignoring the rules of the political system and using underhanded tactics to ensure political victories<sup>35</sup>. These included intimidating voters at the polls and stuffing ballot boxes, which would make them infamous in the political arena. They had a huge influence in the state of New York, but their influence would travel out west, when one of their own would make the trek to California and set the same kind of system up, ensuring the power of the Democrats in the fledgling state.

David C. Broderick grew up in New York, and after a tumultuous childhood as the son of working class Irish immigrants, would join a fire engine company, which had become a breeding

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<sup>32</sup> Daniels, *Coming to America*, 127.

<sup>33</sup> Terry Golway, *Machine Made: Tammany Hall and the Creation of Modern American Politics* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2014), 41.

<sup>34</sup> Golway, *Machine Made*, 2.

<sup>35</sup> Golway, *Machine Made*, xviii.

ground for leaders in Tammany Hall<sup>36</sup>. He would quickly rise to prominence in the organization, but would come into conflict with the traditional elite wing of the Democratic Party, who resented his working class Irish background, and he would be snubbed in his run for the senate in New York<sup>37</sup>. Angered by the result and the lack of support, Broderick would take everything he learned in Tammany Hall and bring it with him to California, and quickly take his position as the head of the party, earning the ire of the Anglo-Saxon Protestant businessmen who had come west and hoped to take power for themselves.

Although not the first place many would think of when considering the history of the Irish in America, California saw its fair share join the rush for gold. In fact, California had an added benefit for the Irish, which they lacked in their communities back east: in a society where nearly everyone was an immigrant, they were white. While back east, they were seen as the “other” because they were new to the area, everyone in California was new, which meant that they were much closer in standing to the other whites in the region than they would have been in Boston or New York. In fact, the historian Roger Daniels explains this phenomenon when he said, “In the Far West... the Irish experience was entirely different... The presence of a large Chinese population tended to ‘promote’ the status of all whites. Many who came were not workmen at all, but entrepreneurs. James Phelan is the kind of Irish immigrant not usually discussed... Drawn to San Francisco by the gold rush, he made his first fortune selling provisions to miners and then then became a real estate magnate and one of the city’s first millionaires. His son, James D. Phelan, became a United States senator and a leader of the anti-Asian movement.”<sup>38</sup> The Irish were able to build themselves up in California by playing off of

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<sup>36</sup> Taniguchi, *Dirty Deeds*, 20-21.

<sup>37</sup> Taniguchi, *Dirty Deeds*, 21.

<sup>38</sup> Daniels, *Coming to America*, 138.



the same sentiments that had been used against them by other, earlier immigrant groups back east. They were white, and these other groups were not, which gave them more power than most other immigrant groups, but also made them an important target for the Protestant elites who were consolidating power by oppressing the other minority groups in the region.

One thing would separate the Irish and their Protestant counterparts in the region, however. As mentioned previously, the two prevailing views of masculinity at the time were the ideas of martial and restrained manhood<sup>39</sup>. These two opposing views would pit the traditional notion of the “manly man” against the more refined, modern man. There was a major class divide to be found between these two views, which tended to separate the more gruff, martial Irish working class against the more restrained Protestant business elites. This same divide would color the relationships between the two groups even within political parties back east, as seen with Broderick and his failure to win the senate seat in New York, and would follow these two groups as they moved out west. These gruff, working class Irish who worked for Broderick in San Francisco will gain the ire of the Protestant business leaders in the city, and will help spark the remarkable events that occurred in San Francisco in 1856.

1856 saw a strange event occur in San Francisco in which Protestant business leaders rallied together a huge mob to take control of the city and “cleanse it of the criminal element”, as they put it. This Vigilance Committee was not simply created to remove petty thieves, bank robbers, and murderers; it was a political ploy to remove many of the major Democratic players in the city, and cripple the power base of David C. Broderick, whom they all despised for

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<sup>39</sup> Greenberg, *Manifest Manhood*, 11-12.

challenging their power grab<sup>40</sup>. In fact, they were willing to imprison anyone who attempted to challenge their attempt to consolidate power.

One of the strangest stories to come out of this time period involved a man mentioned previously: David S. Terry. In a peculiar set of circumstances, Terry would find himself in San Francisco attempting to rescue a man imprisoned by the Committee and, during the escape attempt, would end up stabbing one of the members of the Committee<sup>41</sup>. To truly understand the absurdity of the situation, one must look at it from a different perspective: the sitting Chief of the California Supreme Court had taken it upon himself to rescue a political prisoner of a vigilante group which had taken control of the city, and had stabbed one of the vigilantes during the escape attempt, leading to his imprisonment by the Committee. Much to the chagrin of many of the Committee's members, Terry would be released<sup>42</sup>. This entire situation demonstrated, however, the willingness of the Committee and its members to do whatever it took to build up their wealth and power in the city, even if it meant imprisoning the sitting Chief Justice of the California Supreme Court.

By the end of the Committee's reign over the city, nearly two dozen of Broderick's supporters in the city would be tried and deported from the state, many of whom were put onto boats heading for either Australia or back to the east coast<sup>43</sup>. An important thing to understand about this situation is that while this situation was an attempt to undermine the Democratic Party in the city and consolidate power amongst themselves, these men were not entirely unjustified in

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<sup>40</sup> Taniguchi, *Dirty Deeds*, 5.

<sup>41</sup> Taniguchi, *Dirty Deeds*, 6.

<sup>42</sup> Taniguchi, *Dirty Deeds*, 6.

<sup>43</sup> Taniguchi, *Dirty Deeds*, 5.

their complaints. Some of the charges levied at the men they deported were in fact true. One of the men deported would later tell his story and help shed light on the truth of the situation.

Charley Duane, or Dutch Charley as he was more commonly known, was by no means a modest or calm individual<sup>44</sup>. He was well known throughout the city of San Francisco and the state of California for aiding in ballot box stuffing and the intimidation of voters in the service of Broderick and the Democrats, as well as being a general ruffian who always seemed to be getting into fights with anyone and everyone<sup>45</sup>. Duane was the prime example of all of the worst parts of the political machine, and was a huge threat to the political influence and power of the Protestant elites. He needed to go, and would be one of the men deported. While there is a debate over the issue of vigilantism in San Francisco and whether or not there is any justification for the actions of the Committee, there is little debate over whether Dutch Charley and his accomplices deserved to be deported from the city<sup>46</sup>. Whether or not the means by which it was done were legal or moral is one issue, but Dutch Charley and his comrades were guilty of a number of crimes and should have been in prison long before the Committee took power.

The Committee had control of the city for a couple of years before they were eventually and quietly disbanded, but not before gaining the political and financial control they had sought. While their enemy Broderick had gained the senate seat he had long desired since his time in New York, the Committee had a firm hold on San Francisco and the land that encompassed it<sup>47</sup>. By the end of the 1850's, less than five percent of the men living in San Francisco controlled

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<sup>44</sup> John Boessenecker, *Against the Vigilantes: The Recollections of Dutch Charley Duane* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999), 3.

<sup>45</sup> Boessenecker, *Against the Vigilantes*, 11.

<sup>46</sup> Boessenecker, *Against the Vigilantes*, 34.

<sup>47</sup> Peter L. Reich, "Dismantling the Pueblo: Hispanic Municipal Land Rights in California since 1850," *AJLH* 45, no. 4(2001), 359.

over seventy-five percent of the land in the city<sup>48</sup>. They had consolidated power and wealth in the city at the very top, and they would continue to have their land claims held up in court over the ensuing years, ensuring their power and wealth for generations to come.

The prevailing idea that the development of California was led by a group of exceptional people who made the hard trek west and overcame war and nature grossly misrepresents the truth of the situation. While many of these white Anglo-Saxon Protestant men did have major roles in shaping the state, it came after they implemented various means of forcing other minority groups in the region to the bottom of society, stripping away their voice and political power. The massacre of Indians, denial of land rights for Mexicans, and imposition of ridiculous taxes that forced the Chinese out of the mines, as well as the rounding up and deportation of Irish politicians meant that the only people left to run the state were the Protestant business elites. They had rigged the system so they held all the cards, as had been done throughout the history of America. So while the development of the state is truly a marvelous accomplishment, it should be accompanied by an asterisk.

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<sup>48</sup> Reich, "Dismantling the Pueblo", 359.

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