

THE ETHNOLOGY OF THE POLICE.

BY THEODORE ROOSEVELT.

The former president of the New York police commission draws interesting comparisons between the chief elements of our population—The Irish, the Germans, the native Americans, and the Jews, their characteristics as officers, and how men are selected for the force.

THE New York police force, in its ethnic make up, is a very fair representative of the city of New York, and indeed of the whole United States, for it includes masses of men of very distinct national origin.

Even in Revolutionary days, the population of the United States, and especially of the Middle and the Southern States, was of mixed origin. The dominant strain was English, but there were large German, Dutch, and French elements, and a considerable Celtic element, both Scotch and Irish. Since then there has been an enormous growth by immigration, as well as by natural increase, and among the immigrants the Germans and Irish have furnished the largest proportion, with plenty of English, Scandinavian, and French extraction, and in later years great masses of Italians, Slavs, and Jews. All these races, and notably the Germans and Irish, have contributed to the upbuilding of New York, which has also drawn heavily on the country population. For a long time the leading race elements in the New York police force have been, as they are now, Irish, German, and native American, with a sprinkling of almost every other race under the sun.

The majority of the adult males of voting age in New York are of foreign birth. As might be expected, this means that a large number of the police force are also of foreign birth. The proportion is by no means so large, however, as many people seem to think. During the last days of Tammany rule, before the present board came into power, it rose as high as one third, and in special batches of appointments as high as one half. After the advent of the present board the pro-

portion of native born increased steadily, until on our last lists it grew to be about ninety out of the hundred. Of course, however, a very large percentage of these were of foreign parentage. The ordinary working man, skilled mechanic, and the like, in New York, is apt to be of foreign parentage, even though of native birth, and he is also the ordinary recruit of the police department. Under the present board a very large number of appointments were made—more than sixteen hundred all told, this being about four times as many as have ever previously been made in a corresponding period. As we raised the requirements, moral, mental, and physical, we found it difficult to fill these vacancies as quickly as we wished, and we had to draw on the country districts to make up the deficiency in applicants of the proper caliber from the city itself.

Ever since the civil war, men of Irish birth and parentage have furnished a larger number of recruits to the New York police force than any other nationality. At one period they very much exceeded those of all other races combined. This was partly due to the fact that the dominant party in New York included the bulk of the Irish vote, and had as leaders men who were mostly of Irish extraction. In consequence, there did at one time grow up a feeling that men of German or American origin had no chance of getting on the police force. I don't think that this feeling was justified, even under Tammany. Tammany looked upon all races of mankind with a broad and genial tolerance, provided only that they came up (or rather down) to its standard. If a man had political influence behind him, he would be appointed, no matter whether

he was a native American, a German, or a Jew, just as quickly as if he were an Irishman. The reason that the Irish so overwhelmingly predominated was because their race furnished the great mass of active political workers of the party. During the latter days of Tammany rule, when the police department literally seethed with corruption, promotions and appointments went by purchase as a matter of course. Men had to furnish money even though they had political backing, and if the money was furnished the scoundrels who drove the bargains cared nothing as to the source from which it came.

All this was changed during our administration. The civil service law was enforced in the letter and spirit, and no heed whatever was paid to the politics or religion of applicants, or anything else except their qualification for the place they sought. The fact that even under the changed conditions the people of Irish birth or parentage continued to lead in point of numbers, shows the need of some other explanation. I think this explanation is to be found partly in the fact that men of Irish birth seem to have a natural tendency to seek public office, and partly because they furnish excellent material out of which to make policemen. Of the men of foreign birth appointed on the force, four fifths are Irish. The Irishman coming to our shores is not hampered by the necessity of learning a new language. Unlike the German, he does not come from a country which has been thrifty and materially prosperous, and he has not been accustomed to the sharp competition of modern industrial and commercial life. Serving the government appeals to him as something which is attractive in itself, and which confers dignity upon him. Among New Yorkers of Irish parentage the boy is rather more apt than among New Yorkers of other parentage to grow up among people who take a great deal of interest in ward politics and in the local precinct heroes, among whom some of the policemen are sure to figure. The boy hears from his earliest days a good deal about the "force," and he wants to get on it.

Besides, when he does get on he makes a very good policeman. No man who

has studied the civil war needs to be told that men of Irish blood fight well; and the career of the policeman necessarily implies in those who would successfully follow it the presence of the soldierly virtues—courage, daring, and alert resolution. If to these qualities the young fellow of Irish parentage joins intelligence, he has a chance of rising very high indeed. A very large percentage of those whom I was instrumental in getting promoted to the higher places were of Irish origin. It is needless to say that I did not take this into account in making promotions. If men earned promotion, I tried to see that they got it, without the slightest reference to whether they were of Irish, German, or American parentage, or whether they were Catholic or Protestant, Jew or Gentile, or of no recognized faith at all. The inspectors, captains, sergeants, and roundsmen whom I joined in making were made because we believed in their capacity, integrity, and courage; and on the whole I think a larger number were of Irish extraction than of any other.

Of course, the men we thus got were widely different in stamp from those who had formerly been accustomed to enter the service. In the old days more than half the appointees had at one time or another served as bartenders or keepers of liquor saloons. Under us, not more than one in a hundred had so served. We appointed a great many men from the various societies, notably temperance societies, of the different churches, both Catholic and Protestant.

I remember one Catholic priest, whom I came to respect very highly during my service; he told me that nearly thirty of his parishioners had been appointed to the police force during my term. They were appointed simply on their merits; they were young fellows of fine physique and good character, who possessed fair intelligence and school training. It was largely a matter of chance that we happened to get them at first. One or two of them entered our examinations, although without much hope of appointment. They passed. Their characters were investigated, and it was found they were trustworthy, honest, and hard working, and they were forthwith appointed. As he afterwards informed me, the priest made the discovery

that the word of some saloon keeper or professional politician was no longer necessary to secure an appointment, and he encouraged the young men of his church to apply. I found that when he said a man was of good character, it meant that he really thought so, and that he knew about it, and had good reason to believe that what he said was the exact fact—which was important, for too many citizens, including too many clergymen, will cheerfully recommend any man, wholly without regard to the facts. Accordingly, I began to lay great stress upon Dr. W.'s recommendations, and in return the young men of his church began to wake up to the fact that if they applied for the force it rested purely with themselves whether they got on.

We drew on the east side college settlement; and on various churches. I remember in particular one Methodist church, in the country district which was annexed to New York. Its pastor took the trouble to examine for himself into our system, concluded we were honest, and advised his parishioners to enter the examinations. They did, and we appointed in the neighborhood of twenty; native Americans of a very good stamp, boat builders, ship carpenters, mates of coasting schooners, and the like—for the church was on Long Island Sound.

Some Catholic priests, like some Protestant clergymen, and like a great many laymen of all creeds or none, would seek to get men advanced for improper reasons. I soon found out who these men were, and then simply disregarded whatever they said. Others, like my very dear friend, the late Father Caserly of the Paulist Fathers, I speedily found to be absolutely sincere, upright, and trustworthy. Men who were prompt to tell me of the good deeds of a man not of their own faith, and who never vouched even for a parishioner unless they were convinced that he really was what they said—with these I could work hand in hand.

For the professional "know nothing" I soon grew to feel much distrust. I always endeavored to keep my temper with every one, and to listen patiently to every complaint, but when one man attacked another because of his creed or his birth-

place, I got rid of him in summary fashion. I treated with equal shortness those who sought to have a man advanced because of his creed. I remember that on one occasion I received, on the same day, a letter from a certain agitator much given to attacking Catholics, urging the promotion of a certain man because he was a Protestant, and, as he asserted, had been kept down by Catholic influence; and two other letters, one from a priest and one from a professional politician, urging the promotion of another man because he had weight in "Catholic Irish circles," and because they thought the Catholic Irish entitled to "recognition." For a moment I thought of refusing to investigate the record and capacity of either man. Finally I did investigate, and found that they were both bad. I took the utmost pleasure in writing to their various backers that the men were unfit for promotion, and that even if they were fit, I should certainly decline to promote them when they relied on such arguments for advancement. I added that I should positively refuse to "recognize" any creed, or any nationality, or anything else except fitness. In other words, if there were ten promotions, and the best ten candidates were Jews, they would secure all the prizes, but if they were not the best, then none of them would be promoted; and no consideration as to "recognizing" any body of men, or any nationality, would enter into the matter one way or the other, whether they were Jews, Catholics, or Protestants.

Next to those Americans of Irish parentage, the two leading elements on the police force are the Americans of old native American stock, and the Americans of German parentage. The representatives of both of these, but especially of the former, increased very much during our term of service; towards the last, when a good many applicants came from the country, more than ninety per cent of the appointees were men of native birth, and half of these of the old native American strain.

There were, of course, not nearly as many men of German as of Irish birth appointed on the police force, because the Germans have to learn a new language. Of the Germans appointed some have

been soldiers or sailors in the German army, or have served their term in our own army; these all make excellent officers—indeed, the best we got were honorably discharged soldiers of the United States army or navy. Of the Germans who have not had this advantage, a certain proportion always display a slight hesitancy in time of crisis, which probably comes from the fact that they never get thoroughly habituated to their strange surroundings. The Americans of German parentage are usually entirely indistinguishable from the men of old native American stock. Of course, if they have lived in a German speaking community, they still retain certain traits of their parentage. Otherwise they are generally like their fellow Americans of the old native stock; if they come from the country, they are like other countrymen—if they come from the city, they have the stamp of the city upon them.

The native Americans furnish, relatively to their numbers, the largest proportion of both the best and the worst men in the service. They are, on the average, men of superior intelligence to any other class, and this intelligence tends to make them either better or worse than their fellows, accordingly as their course is shaped for good or for evil. Most of the native Americans of are country birth, although not all. A great many of them, though born on a farm or in a small town, have lived for some time in the city, working as drivers of milk wagons or express carts, as clerks, as mechanics, gripmen, and so forth. Next to the men who have been in the United States army or navy, the best, on the average, are the railroad men—engineers, firemen, conductors, and brakemen.

The man fresh from the country always needs some breaking in. If he is a weedy, run-to-seed sort of a fellow, he goes to pieces under the strain. If he has the right stuff in him, he becomes one of the best men on the force. At first he has to learn to be quick and alert, and obey orders instantly, instead of following out his natural bent, which is to reach the object at which he supposes his superior aims by his own methods. For the first few months he is not as well able to handle a tough as is the policeman of city

birth, and notably the policeman of Irish parentage. The countryman is not accustomed to fight, or to the sudden emergencies of city life, and in the first crisis or two in which he finds himself involved is apt to show hesitancy at just that fatal moment which decides whether the matter shall go one way or another. After he has once been knocked down by a gang of toughs and soundly thrashed, or has had some similar mishap befall him, all his troubles are at an end. When he again gets on duty he is a made man, and from that time on he can be depended upon for any kind of rough or dangerous work.

We have representatives of many other nationalities. One of the best roundsmen whose promotion I secured, was of Italian parentage. We appointed a number of men of Polish and Bohemian ancestry on the force; we also appointed a number of Frenchmen, some of whose parents came from France and some from Canada. We appointed one Greek, who horrified some of his fellow officers, notably those of Irish birth, by his cheerful readiness to tell about them when they had done wrong.

But next to the three leading strains, the most important is the Jewish. Few people have any idea of the fact that there are a large number of Jewish policemen on the New York force. The great bulk of the Jewish population, especially the immigrants from Russia and Poland, are of weak physique, and have not yet gotten far enough away from their centuries of oppression and degradation to make good policemen; but the outdoor Jew who has been a gripman, or the driver of an express wagon, or a guard on the Elevated, or the indoor Jew of fine bodily powers who has taken to boxing, wrestling, and the like, offers excellent material for the force. He is very intelligent, and, like the native American, is apt to be very good or very bad. Not only did we appoint a number of Jewish policemen, but we promoted a number, sometimes for marked proficiency in the discharge of their ordinary duties, sometimes for conspicuous gallantry in saving life or in arresting armed and dangerous criminals.

There was one amusing incident which I recall in connection with our Hebrew

policemen. It was at the time when the German Anti-Semite, Ahlwardt, came over to New York to preach a crusade against the Jews. A great many of the Jews became alarmed and incensed about his speaking here, and called upon me to prevent it. Of course I told them I could not—that the right of free speech must be maintained, and that unless he incited to riot, he would be allowed to speak against the Jews, just as we should let Jews speak against Christians. On thinking it over, however, it occurred to me that there was one way in which I could undo much of the mischief which he was trying to do, and I directed that so far as possible the policemen detailed to protect him at his meetings should themselves be Jews. This was done, and Herr Ahlwardt delivered his violent harangues against the men of Hebrew faith, owing his safety to the fact that he was scrupulously protected by men of the very race which he was denouncing. I doubt if this could have been done in most cities, and I felt it spoke very well for New York that we could do it.

On another occasion, when a former Catholic priest came to New York to

make a series of attacks upon the Catholic church, I had him protected by a body-guard composed as nearly as possible only of Catholic policemen. In the same way we protect with equal impartiality the Orangemen's and the St. Patrick's Day processions, and German, French, and Italian national celebrations.

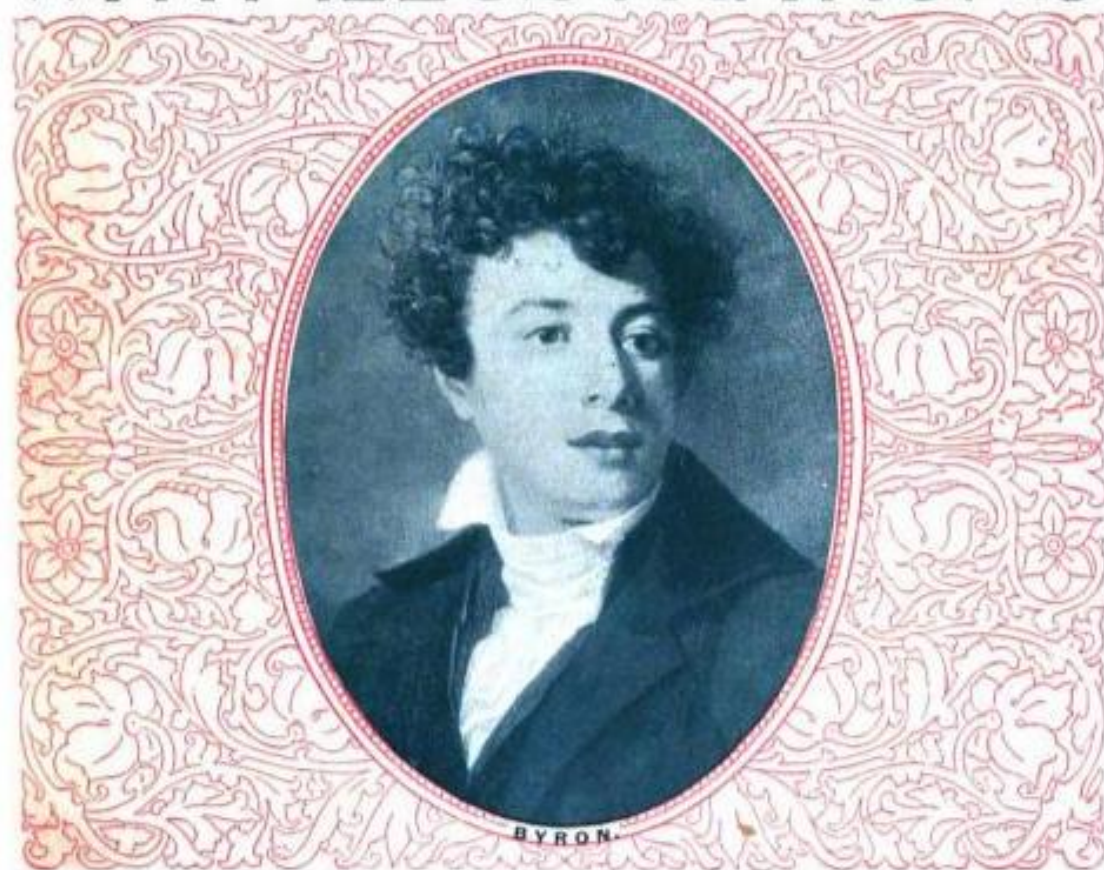
In short, in spite of their wide diversity of race origin, and in spite of some very evident shortcomings, the New York police as a body are a first class set of men, and Americans through and through. They are brave, well disciplined, and efficient, and they have a very strong esprit de corps. In time past they have been corrupt, but this was because of the system under which they worked, and we accomplished an enormous amount towards putting a complete stop to this corruption. The prime reason why we succeeded so well in our efforts to improve a body of men who had been terribly demoralized was because we treated them on their merits, wholly without regard to their creed or the birthplace of their parents, rewarding the good man and punishing the bad, without heeding anything save the virtues or faults of either.

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