

The Irish in Early Baseball Poetry and Song

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Starting in March 2015, the Tokyo Metro played an unusual “train departure song” as a part of the renovation of the Nanboku Line Kourakuen Station, near Tokyo Dome, home of the Tokyo Yomiuri Giants of the Nippon Professional Baseball Central League (“南北線の発車メロディ” 2015). Whenever the metro car left the station, passengers heard an instrumental version of the chorus of a baseball song known around the world:

*Take me out to the ball game,
Take me out with the crowd...*

Many who sing the lyrics—baseball fans or otherwise—may not realize that the song dates from a 1908 Broadway musical and has two stanzas not normally sung at baseball games that show the rise of the Irish in American society and their place in the women’s voting rights movement. However, there were many more lyrics, in both poetry and popular song, that reflect the influence of Irish immigrants in the 19th century on early baseball, and on American society and history, as well. This paper will give an overview of Irish Americans in the US both prior to and after the turn of the 20th century, with a particular focus on the beginning of the professional game of baseball and the Irish role in its ascension as America’s “national pastime.”

Here Come the Irish: The U.S. Civil War

The rise of baseball’s popularity after the U.S. Civil War (1861-1865) coincided with the rise of second-generation Irish Americans in politics, popular entertainment, education, and the homes of the wealthy. Although the Irish had already influenced American culture from the late 1820s, huge numbers of poverty-stricken Irish Catholics fleeing the Great Famine of the 1840s led to a population explosion by the end of the war in the cities of Boston, Philadelphia, and especially New York, where in 1865 one-fifth of the city residents were Irish-born (161,334 out of a total population of 726,386; Rosenwaike 1972: 67). Even before the Civil War, 80% of all domestic helpers in New York City were Irish by 1850, and by the 1870s 20% of all schoolteachers were Irish women (Kenny 2000: 152). The influx of Irish immigrants just prior to and during the Civil War period enormously influenced songs and ballads of the time (Milner 2019). In the 1860s, “a vast number of Irish American songs...

focused on the military and, whether journalistic, poignant, or humorous, were serious in nature” (134). Their fluency in English allowed the Irish more than any other 19th century immigrant group to immediately bring a long tradition of singing and storytelling into American culture.¹⁾

The Irish contributed greatly to American theater as well as song. The years leading up to the Civil War had already established the stereotype of the Irish in American culture thanks to generally risqué “variety theater productions” that included single-act plays, acrobats, jugglers, singers, dancers, animal acts, and comic skits (Moloney 1994). From the years 1830 to 1860, the “paradigm of the stage Irish” (384) depicted the Irish as ignorant, stubborn, illiterate, and superstitious, with the most common type of song—the “Irish fight song”—depicting Irish as drunken boxers. When the children of Irish immigrants reached adulthood in the 1870s and 1880s, the number and type of immigrants in major US cities had increased exponentially. New York City became one of the most diverse cities on Earth, and 35% of its residents in 1880 were first- or second-generation Irish Americans (423,159 out of a total population of 1,206,299; Rosenwaike 1972: 73). Wishing to attract multiethnic families of the rising lower-middle class, owners of bawdy variety theaters replaced them with alcohol-free vaudeville theaters featuring “cleaner” material that was dominated by Irish American songwriters such as William Scanlon, Joseph Flynn, and John W. Kelly.²⁾ There were so many songwriters, publishers, and performers practicing on their pianos all day and night in the fledgling pop music industry between 28th Street and Broadway that a newspaper columnist compared the noise to the banging of tin pans against each other, giving the area the name “Tin Pan Alley” (Gammond 1991).

Although live music was played by marching bands at early baseball games and popular baseball-themed polka songs were written and performed as early as 1858, the idea of writing comical lyrics about individual players was new to the post-war game. Since Irish Americans dominated the newly professionalized sport of baseball in the 1870s and 1880s, as well as vaudeville, it is not surprising that they are found in music about baseball at that time. Over 100 baseball songs were written from 1858 to 1944. Early polka songs such as “The Base Ball Polka” (1858) and “Home Run Quick Step” (1861) were often dedicated to specific amateur baseball clubs (Mott 1950: 527). “Comic songs” such as Pat Rooney’s 1878 “The Day I Played Base Ball” (528) appear after the major leagues are established and while vaudeville is in full swing, reflecting Irish musical influence.

Early baseball and the Irish

Baseball (spelled “base ball” or “base-ball” in the 19th century) was not a new sport that emerged after the Civil War ended, but rather had existed in some form since at least the mid-18th century in England as well as in the British Colonies in North America (Block 2019).³⁾ Before, during, and after the Civil War, hundreds of amateur teams existed throughout the US, with most concentrated around the population centers of the industrialized Northeast. Semi-professional teams emerged after the war, with the 1869 Cincinnati Red Stockings generally considered the first fully professional baseball team. Major League Baseball was established with the foundation of the National League in 1876 and the American League in 1903.⁴⁾ The spread of baseball and its development from independent amateur clubs in the 1860s to professional league teams in the 1870s and 1880s thus coincides with the increase in the numbers of Irish Americans.⁵⁾

By the late 1800s, more Irish immigrants and their children found their way into mining towns and mill towns throughout New England (Maine, Massachusetts, Connecticut, New Hampshire, Vermont, Rhode Island), the Mid-Atlantic States (New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Maryland), and via the Erie Canal to the Midwest (e.g., Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio). As baseball spread from its origins in the New York City – Newark area east to Boston and west to Chicago and St. Louis, Irish Americans in those areas eagerly took to the sport. Some even claimed that baseball had its roots in the ancient Gaelic sport of *Iomain*, and playing baseball fed their desire to retain a separate ethnic identity in a multiethnic country (Wilcox 1994). Teams with Irish names sprang up across the US, such as “The Shamrock” in three different towns in Massachusetts and “Fenian” in Georgia and Louisiana. The Irish became so renowned that players from other ethnic backgrounds used Irish-sounding nicknames to promote their own careers (Wilcox 2006: 447).

From 1876 to 1884, the year the “color line” banning non-white players was established,⁶⁾ 41% of all new players in the major leagues were Irish American, making them the largest ethnic group of professional ballplayers (Fleitz 2009: 24-25).⁷⁾ In the era of the “player-manager,” with many older players becoming full-time managers or umpires at the end of their playing days, it should come as no surprise that by the mid to late 1890s several umpires and a majority of major league baseball managers were also Irish American (Fleitz 2009: 82). Three of the most well-regarded managers were Connie Mack, who represented the “rags to riches” story of the Irish in America; John McGraw, a hard drinker and compulsive gambler who represented the Irish working class; and Charles Comiskey, whose name for nine decades decorated the park of the team he founded single-handedly—the Chicago White Sox (Tygiel 2000: 55). The early game thus became closely associated with Irish Americans and Irish culture and particularly with teams in Boston, Chicago, Philadelphia, and New York City,

an association that lasted well into the 1940s.⁸⁾

One of the earliest known poems or songs referring to an Irish American baseball player appears to have been a children's nursery rhyme.⁹⁾ The exact date of the poem is unknown, but it refers to baseball's "first homerun king," in a time when the ball was much heavier and homeruns few and far between (the so-called "dead ball era").

The pitcher was lazy.
The catcher was a bum.
But here comes Roger
To hit a home run.

"Roger" denotes Roger Connor, who played on a semi-professional team in Waterbury, Connecticut, at the start of his career (Kerr 2011). Since Connor played there only briefly before joining the professional Troy Haymakers in 1876, the poem likely dates from 1870 or 1871. Connor's parents had immigrated from Ireland to Waterbury, where his father worked in a brass-making factory. Connor found the "manly" sport of baseball more attractive than working acid vats and quickly discovered his ability to hit the ball farther than almost anyone at the time. After Troy joined the National League as a founding member in 1876, Connor became the first to hit a grand slam—and a walk-off "ultimate" grand slam—in professional baseball history on September 10, 1881. He had already become the only one to hit a ball completely out of the original Polo Grounds stadium in New York City (Kerr 42).

But it wasn't the taciturn Connor who set the stage for music about the Irish. That honor belonged to the dashing Mike "King" Kelly, born in Troy, New York, one of the earliest baseball "superstars" of the late 19th century. His flamboyant style—both on and off the field—endeared him to fans everywhere, and he was a huge crowd pleaser as well as admired by the media, who dubbed him "King of the Diamond" (hence "King" Kelly). After his contract was sold by the Chicago White Sox to the Boston Beaneaters in early 1888, he earned the additional nickname "The \$10,000 Beauty" (the then-unheard of price tag). Upon arriving in Boston, well-known for its universities, Kelly reacted to his "bookish" new fans by writing a memoir called *Play Ball* (1888). It was the first such autobiography by a professional athlete.¹⁰⁾

His reckless running on the base paths inspired the first recorded baseball song, "Slide, Kelly, Slide," (**Fig. 1**) written by John W. Kelly (no relation) based on a poem published by Frank Harding in 1889. The oldest existing recording of the song is currently available online (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K6ykGDmrgJI>), a recording made possible thanks to historical happenstance: the Edison Phonograph Company established in 1887 in order to sell Thomas Edison's newly improved phonograph. The song was initially recorded on an "Edison cylinder" by George Gaskin in 1893 and immediately became a huge hit, the earliest recorded bestselling popular song in the U.S. A silent movie by the same name was later

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SLIDE, KELLY, SLIDE !

COMIC SONG

Written & Composed by J.W.Kelly, for
MISS MAGGIE CLINE.

Moderato.

The sheet music is arranged in three systems. The first system shows the piano introduction with a 'Moderato' tempo marking and a dynamic of *f*. The second system continues the piano accompaniment, ending with a 'Fine.' marking. The third system contains three verses of lyrics with corresponding vocal notation. The lyrics are:

1. I play'd a game of base-ball, I be-long to Ca-sey's Nine! The
2. 'Twas in the sec-ond in-ning They call'd me in, I think, To
3. They sent me out to cen-tre-field, I did-n't want to go; The

The bottom of the page shows the beginning of the chorus: "crowd was feel-ing in-ter-est in. And the way they it was fine."

Fig. 1. Sheet music of the song "Slide, Kelly, Slide!" In the song, Kelly plays for "Casey's Nine," a reference to "Casey at the Bat." Source: Library of Congress.

filmed in 1927, using "Jim Kelly" as the name of the main character, a player (ironically) for the New York Yankees, Boston's great rival then and now. The expression "Slide, Kelly, Slide!" became so popular at the turn of the 20th century that it was used as a slang expression to mean something dangerous was near (Appel 1999).

Much of the song refers to the fact that Mike Kelly spoke with an Irish "brogue," despite having been born in the US, to emphasize his Irishness. He was famous for casually joking with umpires and fans during games and for nocturnal fraternizations at a time when ballplayers were expected not to drink or carouse late at night (and often fined by managers when they did so anyway). Although it usually appears online as a short 8-line poem, the full poem and song are 12 stanzas long with a repeated chorus. In the interests of space, below are presented the first four stanzas and the chorus:

Slide, Kelly, Slide (1889)

I play'd a game of baseball
 I belong to Casey's Nine!
 The crowd was feeling jolly
 And the weather it was fine

A nobler lot of players
 I think were never found
 When the omnibuses landed
 That day upon the ground

The game was quickly started
 They sent me to the bat:
 I made two strikes, says Casey,
 "What are you striking at?"

I made the third, the Catcher muff'd
 And to the ground it fell;
 Then I run like a divil to first base,
 When the gang began to yell:

(Chorus)

Slide, Kelly, Slide!
 Your running's a disgrace!
 Slide, Kelly, Slide!
 Stay there, hold your base!
 If some one doesn't steal you,
 And your batting doesn't fail you,
 They'll take you to Australia!
 Slide, Kelly, Slide!

"They'll take you to Australia"—i.e., as a prisoner—is a theme of exile common to Irish poems and songs of the time, while the reference to "Casey's nine" (i.e., the nine ballplayers on a baseball team) shows the influence of the Irish on the early game. "Casey," of course, is the main character in the most famous baseball poem ever written, performed on stage, and recited in movies: "Casey at the Bat," originally published in *The San Francisco Examiner*

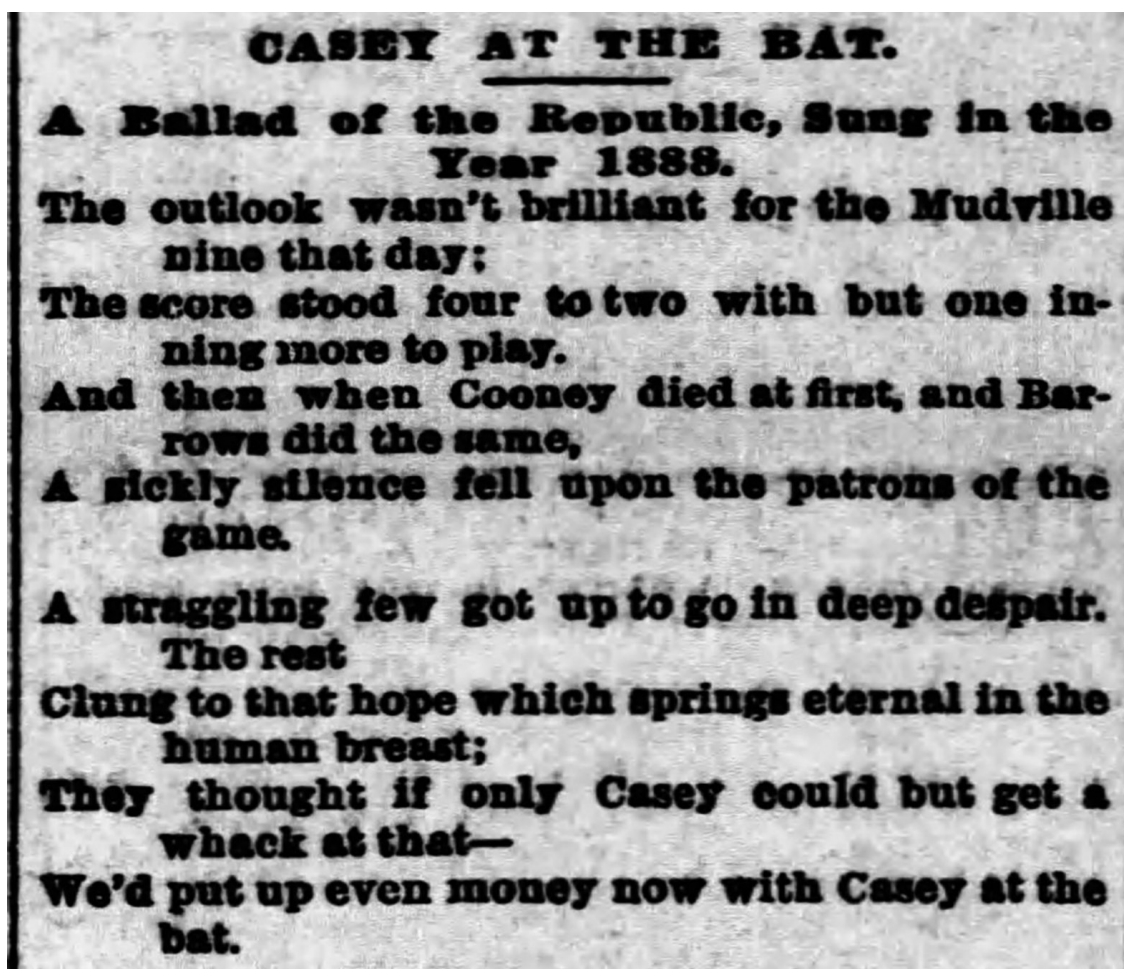


Fig 2. The first two stanzas from "Casey at the Bat," by "Phin" (Edward Thayer).
Source: *The San Francisco Examiner*.

on June 3, 1888, subtitled "A Ballad of the Republic, Sung in the Year 1888" (Fig. 2). *The Examiner* was run by William Randolph Hearst, a Harvard University dropout who had written for *Harvard Lampoon*, a humorous college publication that to this day satirizes and mocks patricians and plebeians alike. Hearst's father bought *The Examiner* in the spring of 1885, and when Hearst was expelled from Harvard for playing practical jokes on several faculty members, he took three former *Harvard Lampoon* staff writers with him to run *The Examiner* (Gardner 1967). One named Ernest Thayer, son of a wealthy Boston mill owner, frequently published under the pen name Phin (short for Phinney, his college nickname), who was listed as the author of the initial publication in *The Examiner*. A few days later, the final eight stanzas of the poem were reprinted as written by "Anon," in *The New York Sun*. No one thought much of it, and it may have been completely forgotten except for a series of accidental circumstances.

The New York writer Archibald Gunter had visited San Francisco in June, looking for inspiration for a new novel, just when “Casey at the Bat” was published. Gunter clipped the poem for future reference, thinking it might be a good basis for a story. He had the clip in his jacket pocket when he went to Wallack’s Theater on Broadway and 30th Street in August to see the comedian William De Wolf Hopper, a friend of his who had been asking around for new material. Several ballplayers from the New York Giants and Chicago White Stockings, including Kelly, had been invited by the theater management, and in a moment of inspiration Gunter thought Hopper might find the poem useful. Hopper recited the poem aloud, changing his voice and ending in a dramatic flair with “mighty Casey has struck out!” There was a moment of stunned silence, then the audience “shouted its glee” (Hopper 1927: 81).¹¹ From then on, “Casey at the Bat” became one of the most popular poems in the US. It took little convincing to arrange for a stage adaptation of the poem starring in the lead role the flamboyant Kelly, who had wanted to perform on the stage since youth to make a name for himself as an actor (Wilcox 2006: 448). Some of the stage performances even used the title “Kelly at the Bat.” Kelly and some of his teammates would act out the parts of the poem as Hopper recited it dramatically. Kelly later claimed he was the inspiration for the main character of Casey, but even after Thayer admitted that he was the author, he repeatedly denied that Casey was based on anyone (Gardner 1967).¹²

The obvious Irish references in the 13-stanza poem are the names Casey, Flynn, and Cooney. The author was of upper class, English Protestant extraction; the tone of the poem evinces the stereotype of Irish Catholics as easy-going and lackadaisical (“That ain’t my style,” said Casey; stanza 8, line 4) while paradoxically also being unable to control their emotions (“Defiance gleamed in Casey’s eye, a sneer curled Casey’s lip,” stanza 7, line 4; “He pounds with cruel violence his bat upon the plate,” stanza 12, line 2). The final stanza is what made the poem stand out among others of the time. While fans of Casey “clung to that hope which springs eternal” in the beginning of the poem, the hero Casey comes crashing down at the end (stanza 13):

Oh, somewhere in this favored land the sun is shining bright;
The band is playing somewhere, and somewhere hearts are light,
And somewhere men are laughing, and somewhere children shout;
But there is no joy in Mudville - mighty Casey has struck out.

Hopper claimed he performed “Casey at the Bat” more than 10,000 times over 45 years (Bresler et al 1997: 92), a testament to its popularity. The poem was later immortalized by Disney (1946) as one cartoon in a series of short animated films; various readings of the poem, recited by a wide variety of performers from stage magicians Penn & Teller to James Earl Jones and even “The President’s Own” US Marine Band, have been collectively viewed on

YouTube over two million times.

This Irish stereotype of being unable to control one's temper yet enjoying a good time while overdrinking has been identified by musicologist and folklorist Jerry Silverman (2007) in three further popular songs of the early 1890s. In "Finnegan, the Umpire," the Irish character is depicted as having "lost his nerve" due to the crowd's berating him. The violent lyrics depict a brawl on the field as the audience physically attacks the "Mick" (a derogatory term for Irish). "McGuffin's Home Run" and "O'Grady At the Game" both depict Irish players as powerful hitters who immediately go drinking after the game is over. All three songs use only Irish names (O'Mara, Duffy, Mulligan, McCann, Reilly) to portray the rough and tough players as simultaneously comical and foolish. As historian Kevin Kenny (2000) points out, "the much-lampooned comic Irishman of the late nineteenth century was widely believed to have a thinly concealed savage side as well" (147), and this buffoonish, out of control stereotype was exemplified by the image of the 19th century Irish baseball player in baseball songs.

Into the 20th century

But the violent image and attitudes toward the Irish would change. With the emergence of the Irish middle class in the early 1900s, the continued reliance on derogatory and offensive ethnic stereotypes of the 1880s and 1890s vaudeville scene were no longer accepted by theater audiences, which now consisted primarily of 2nd and 3rd generation descendants of the immigrants that vaudeville mocked (Barrett 2012: 172). Groups such as the Ancient Order of the Hibernians organized boycotts and encouraged written protests to newspapers about plays that featured stereotypical language and images of poor Irish Catholics.¹³⁾ In response, popular vaudeville songwriters such as George Cohan used songs to depict the Irish as patriotic Americans, nostalgic about their homeland but loyal to their new home (174). Indeed, vaudeville eventually became responsible for the one of the most popular baseball songs in history, which may not have happened but for an exciting 1908 pennant race between the Chicago Cubs, with star player and third generation Irish American John Evers, and the New York Giants, managed by the second generation Irish American John McGraw.

Tinkers to Evers to Chance

One of the first professional sports teams in the world, the Troy Haymakers (known as the Lansingburgh Unions until 1871) came to fame after tying the Cincinnati Red Stockings 17-17 in 1869. The team became a starting member of the National Association (1871-1872) and was the first professional sports team in North America to have a Jewish player/manager (Lip Pike) and Latino player (Steve Bellan, from 1869 to 1872; Laing 2015: 67, 71). All in all, sixteen 19th century major league baseball players came from Troy (including

future Hall of Famer Mike “King” Kelly), and several members of the Troy team (1879-1882) included future Irish American Hall of Famers Dan Brouthers, Roger Connor, Buck Ewing, Tim Keefe, and Mickey Welch.¹⁴

Early 20th century Troy produced one major league Hall of Famer: Johnny Evers, who is known in the US sporting world for a single event near the end of a tightly contested 1908 pennant race. After a runner on third scored the Giants’ game-winning walk-off run in a late September game that could have given the Giants the league championship, rookie player Merkle failed to properly advance from first base to second base as the excited crowd invaded the playing field. Evers alerted his player-manager Chance, who called for the ball to be thrown to Evers at second so that he could step on second base for the final out of the inning. In a chaotic sea of players and fans, the Giants’ pitcher McGinnity grabbed the ball and threw it as far as he could into the crowd. Evers and Chance complained to the umpire O’Day, and after an official protest by the Chicago owner, the game was declared a tie (Aulick 1908). As a result, when Chicago beat the Giants in their final game a week later, they won the league championship and after that the World Series. The media labelled the play “Merkle’s Boner,” an event that cemented Evers’ reputation as an intelligent, quick-witted athlete (Snelling 2014).

Although he helped Chicago win the World Series in 1907 and 1908, Evers is mostly remembered today thanks to a short poem now known as “Baseball’s Sad Lexicon.” Originally published in the *New York Evening Mail* (12 July 1910) as “That Double Play Again,” the poem was written by popular columnist Franklin P. Adams, a Chicago Cubs fan living in New York City. The eight-line poem summarizes the feelings of New York Giants’ baseball fans watching the slick double-play combination of Joe Tinker (shortstop), Johnny Evers (second base), and Frank Chance (first base), who between 1906 and 1910 helped the Chicago Cubs to win four National League championships and two World Series (Rapp 2018).¹⁵ Less than a week later, the poem was printed again in the *Chicago Tribune* (which retitled it “Gotham’s Woe”), together with another poem in answer including Kling, the team’s catcher (Fig. 3).

Throughout the 1910 season the poem was published repeatedly in multiple newspapers, with other reporters adding additional verses. Eventually, some 29 poems were written in response to what became known as the most famous poem about a baseball player ever written (Snelling 2014: 96-97). Ironically, while the poem is still used in the US as metaphor for working together harmoniously, Tinker and Evers did not actually get along. They even got into a fistfight on the baseball field in September 1905, because Evers had taken a cab to the ballpark, leaving his teammate behind in the hotel. After the incident, they refused to speak to each other off the field for over 30 years (Myers 2007).

Evers has one last connection to music and the Irish. At the peak of Evers’ career as the player-manager of the “Miracle” Boston Braves, a game at Fenway Park in Boston on

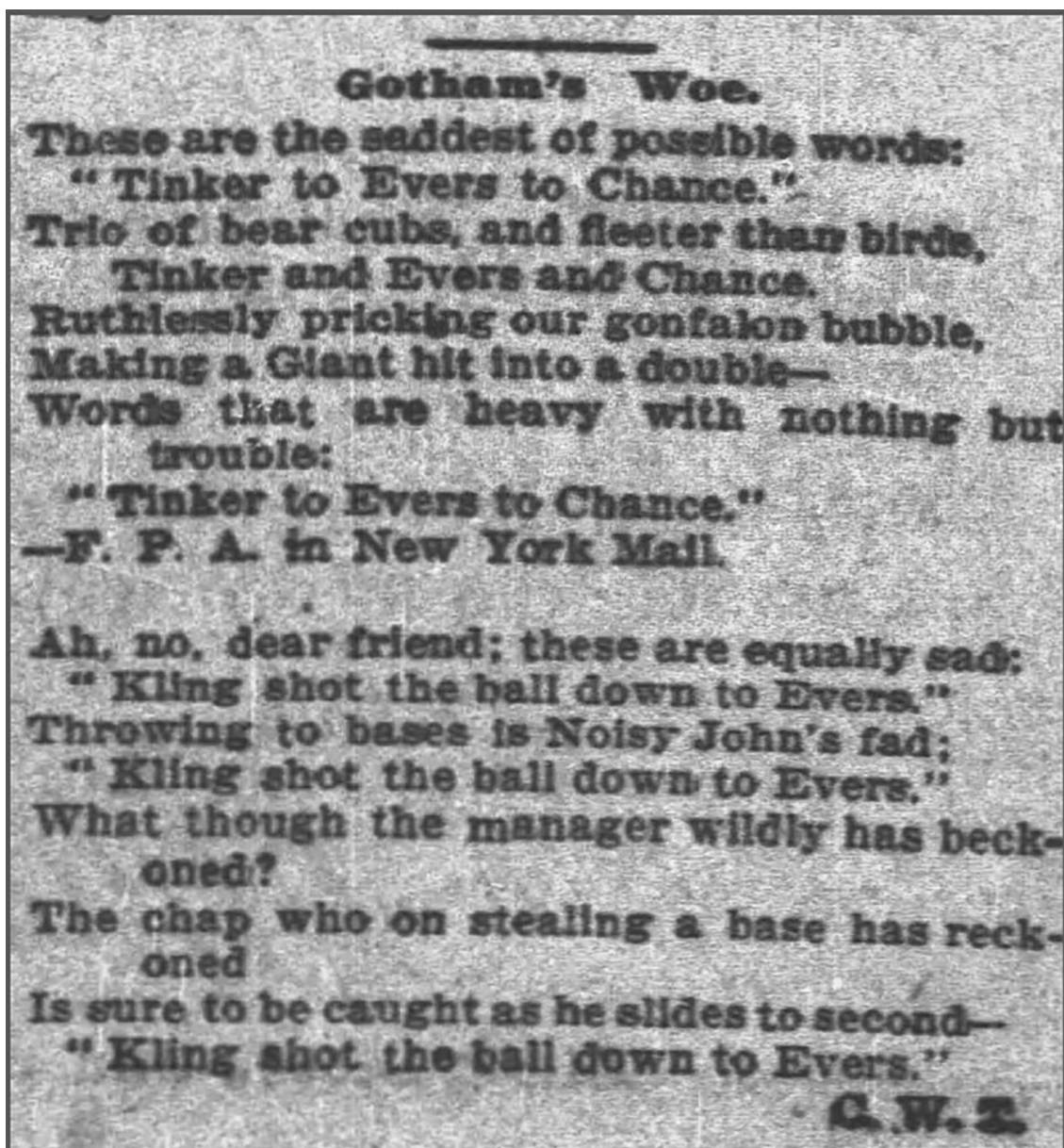


Fig. 3. The poem "Baseball's Sad Lexicon ["Gotham's Woe" at the time]," followed by a "response" poem from the editor. Source: *The Chicago Tribune* (15 July 1910), page 4.

September 16, 1914, was called "Johnny Evers Day." The Ninth Regiment Band of the US National Guard was present in the stands as part of a pre-game concert event and remained to watch the game. After Evers scored what proved to be the winning run, the band struck up the popular Civil War tune "When Johnny Comes Marching Home" (Snelling 2014: 136)—a song written in 1863 by Patrick Gilmore, an Irish immigrant to New York, under the pen name "Louis Lambert" (Lighter 2012).

Take Me Out to the Ball-Game

Phrases in baseball poems such as “Tinkers to Evers to Chance” and “Mighty Casey has struck out” are often used in US childhood education to emphasize teamwork and how to cope with losing (Bresler et al. 1997). Baseball songs, on the other hand, are often used to encourage unity and even “American uniqueness.” The most obvious example of this unity and sense of purpose is the crowd-pleasing song “Take Me Out to the Ball Game,” first played during an actual game in 1934. The chorus is now played at baseball games across the US, in the “7th -inning stretch” when between the top part of the inning (when the visitors bat) and the bottom part of the inning (when the home team bats), fans are encouraged to stand up and sing along, generally substituting the home team’s name for the phrase “home team.”¹⁶ However, the use of the chorus to give a sense of unity has led to the most important part of the most popular baseball song being left out—the stanzas, where the Irish inspiration for the song is evident.

“Take Me Out to the Ballgame” was written by songwriter, singer, and Tin Pan Alley vaudeville performer Jack Norworth in 1908. Inspired by a sign for the Polo Grounds (the original location for the New York Giants and now San Francisco Giants), he thought up the lyrics while on the subway, scribbling them down on a scrap of paper (McGuiggan 2009). Fellow songwriter Albert Von Tilzer wrote the music, and the song was first sung by Nora Bayes, a vaudeville performer and Norworth’s wife at the time. The song turned into a musical and became immediately popular—despite the fact that neither of the songwriters had actually been to a baseball game.

Part of the song’s popularity was no doubt due to the thrilling 1908 pennant race between the New York Giants, Pittsburgh Pirates, and Chicago Cubs, with the fan attendance topping over 25,000 each game in an era where 5,000 was the norm. As noted by an approving *New York Times* Editorial, “It is a clean and wholesome sport...and a well-played match is an inspiring spectacle.” (21 September 1908: 6). Photos of the games at the Polo Grounds days before “Merkle’s Boner” depict crowds overflowing onto the field; areas of the outfield were roped off, and up to 200 police patrolled the crowd to prevent rowdiness (“Giants’ lose,” 20 September 1908: 10).¹⁷ No wonder Katie Casey is described as “base ball mad” with baseball “fever”!

Take Me Out to the Ballgame (original 1908 version)

Katie Casey was base ball mad,
Had the fever and had it bad.
Just to root for the home town crew,

Ev'ry sou
 Katie blew.
 On a Saturday her young beau
 Called to see if she'd like to go
 To see a show, but Miss Kate said "No,
 I'll tell you what you can do:"

(Chorus)

*Take me out to the ball game,
 Take me out with the crowd;
 Buy me some peanuts and Cracker Jack,
 I don't care if I never get back.
 Let me root, root, root for the home team,
 If they don't win, it's a shame.
 For it's one, two, three strikes, you're out,
 At the old ball game.*

Katie Casey saw all the games,
 Knew the players by their first names.
 Told the umpire he was wrong,
 All along,
 Good and strong.
 When the score was just two to two,
 Katie Casey knew what to do,
 Just to cheer up the boys she knew,
 She made the gang sing this song:

(Chorus)

To publicize the song, Von Tilzer commissioned a set of hand-painted "glass lantern" illustrated photograph slides, which were used in hand-operated slide show devices in the nickelodeon theaters to amuse audience members between vaudeville performances. Actors were filmed at various locations, including the Polo Grounds, depicting the action of the song (Bosiwick 2012).¹⁸⁾ Even as the era of vaudeville was winding down, replaced by the Silent Era of early Hollywood black and white movies, Norworth decided to rewrite the stanzas and publish it again. The 1927 version was later sung in the 1949 movie of the same name, starring Gene Kelly and Frank Sinatra.¹⁹⁾ The song has since appeared countless times in

movies and TV shows, children's books, and novels, and has been covered by countless pop and rock bands. And, of course, it is sung at hundreds of baseball games every year.

Take Me Out to the Ballgame (1927 version)

Nelly Kelly love baseball games,
 Knew the players, knew all their names,
 You could see her there ev'ry day,
 Shout "Hurray," when they'd play.
 Her boy friend by the name of Joe
 Said, "To Coney Isle, dear, let's go,"
 Then Nelly started to fret and pout,
 And to him I heard her shout.

(Chorus)

Nelly Kelly was sure some fan,
 She would root just like any man,
 Told the umpire he was wrong,
 All along, good and strong.
 When the score was just two to two,
 Nelly Kelly knew what to do,
 Just to cheer up the boys she knew,
 She made the gang sing this song.

(Chorus)


In both versions, the woman is Irish (the alliterative Katie Casey in the 1908 version and Nelly Kelly in the 1927 version).²⁰ The song is generally thought to have been inspired by an Irish-Mexican American and one-time paramour of the lyricist (Boziwick 2012). Born in St. Louis to Irish and Mexican parents, Delia O'Callahan adopted the stage name Trixie Friganza after moving to New York and joining Tin Pan Alley's vibrant vaudeville scene. In early 1908, she and Norworth were in the middle of a sizzling affair, and Norworth's wife announced that he would divorce her in order to marry Friganza. The divorce happened, but Norworth married a fellow Ziegfried Follies singer instead. Friganza famously claimed she would never marry, a scandalous attitude at the time, and later gained fame as a suffragist women's rights leader. However, it is thought that Friganza's passion and independent spirit inspired Norworth to make the main character of his song an Irish American (Fig. 4).

J. Eckels
 THE SENSATIONAL BASE BALL SONG

DEF. PEEST'S HOUSE
 PIONEER MUSIC HOUSE

TAKE ME OUT TO THE BALL- GAME

WORDS BY
 JACK NORWORTH
 MUSIC BY
 ALBERT VON TILZER



TRIXIE FRIGANZA

5

THE YORK MUSIC CO
 ALBERT VON TILZER, Mgr.
 40 WEST 28TH ST., N.Y.




Fig 4. One of four different covers for the sheet music book published in 1908 to “Take Me Out to the Ball-Game,” this one featured Delia O’Callahan, a.k.a, Trixie Friganza, the probable inspiration for the “Katie Casey” of the song. Before the advent of radio, early 20th century American middle class families would gather around a standup piano after dinner at home to play and sing songs from printed music books such as this. Source: Library of Congress.

While baseball fans in the 21st century only sing the chorus, the focus of the song is clearly on the character of Katie Casey, who is every bit as independent and spirited as the woman she was inspired by. In the song, Katie rebuffs a request to go to a theater show and tells her boyfriend that he should take her to a baseball game. At the time, women had just begun to go to sporting events, and women's attendance at a baseball game was still considered unusual and even resented by many men. However, societal attitudes were changing, and it is not surprising that the character of Katie Casey is shown not only as enjoying baseball but knowing the game intimately and passionately. The slides depicting the fictional Katie clearly show her to be fully engaged in the game, surrounded by men who follow her urging to cheer on the home team, which "undoubtedly encouraged the acceptance of women at games" (Bosiwick 2012: 8).²¹ She spends her own money to go to the game ("Ev'ry sou / Katie blew"), she knows all the players, she berates the umpire, and she leads the crowd in a song to support the home team (Fig. 5).



Fig. 5. A "lantern slide" created to accompany the music for "Take Me Out to the Ball Game." It would have been used in a hand-operated "magic lantern" at nickelodeon theaters in New York City. The photograph was taken during a live baseball game at the Polo Grounds in Upper Manhattan. Source: Library of Congress.

The 1927 version moves the lines “knew the players, knew all their names” from the second stanza to the first stanza, and in their place uses “She would root just like any man.” This change reflects the passage of the 19th Amendment to the US Constitution in 1920, which guaranteed the right to vote for all women over the age of 21. As the 1908 baseball “fever” season was coming to its exciting climax, *The New York Times* quoted New York Governor Hughes as supporting suffrage but lamenting that not enough women were politically active, with the editorial comment, “The most bigoted masculine oppressor cannot safely dispute the Governor’s statement. When the women want to vote they will vote.” (21 September 1908: 6). Three days later, on the front page of the issue describing “Merkle’s Boner,” the Times noted the first woman political candidate to run for public office in New York State (24 September 1908: 1). Thus, Katie Casey / Nelly Kelly is symbolic of the rise of the working-class woman, who earns a living on her own, is perfectly capable of doing things that men do, and deserves the right to vote. And she is Irish.

From Broadway to Punk: Tessie and the Royal Rooters

One of the strangest songs sung by Irish baseball fans at the turn of the 20th century was originally sung in the Broadway musical *The Silver Slipper* in 1902 and 1903. The popular tune, about a woman singing to her beloved parakeet named “Tessie,” was adopted by the Royal Rooters, a Boston baseball fan group of Irish Catholics. The Rooters were led by Michael “Nuf Ced” McGreevy, owner of a Boston pub called “3rd Base Saloon” who earned his nickname thanks to his habit of ending arguments among pub goers by pounding his hand on the bar and shouting “Nuff said!” (Stout and Johnson 2004).²²

The song “Tessie” first came to represent the fan club during the 1903 World Series in Pittsburgh, the very first one played between the winners of the old National League and the upstart American League. When the Boston Americans fell behind three games to one, Royal Rooters tried every song they could think of to help their team rally, and “Tessie” won the day. Before each game thereafter, they marched on the playing field and sang the song so loudly along with invented new lyrics to taunt opposing players that it irritated the Pittsburgh players, who later gave the fans credit for the Boston victory (Stout and Johnson 2004: 46).

Tessie (Original 1902 version)

Tessie, you make me feel so badly.
 Why don’t you turn around?
 Tessie, you know I love you madly.
 Babe, my heart weighs about a pound.

Don't blame me if I ever doubt you,
 You know I wouldn't live without you.
 Tessie, you are the only, only, only.

In subsequent years, the Royal Rooters would gather at McGreevey's pub and chant the lyrics as they walked down to the Boston Americans' (later Red Sox) playing field on Huntington Avenue. However, after the Boston Red Sox won the World Series in 1918, its owner sold star pitcher Babe Ruth to the New York Yankees, thus beginning the Yankees Dynasty of the 1920s and ushering in the "Curse of the Bambino" that saw the Red Sox fail to win the championship for nearly 90 years. The Rooters stopped singing "Tessie" that very same year and later disbanded.

But Tessie returned.

In early 2004, as the Red Sox battled the Yankees for first place in the American League Eastern Division, a local Boston punk band²³⁾ named Dropkick Murphys recorded a new version of "Tessie." The song featured new lyrics about the story of the original players and Royal Rooters of 1903. The band played the new version live at Fenway Park, home of the Red Sox, and the game that followed featured a brawl-inspired comeback win against their rival ("Dropkick Murpheys play Tessie" 2007). "Tessie" quickly became a rallying cry; after dropping the first three games of the AL Championship Series to the Yankees, the Red Sox completed an unprecedented comeback and eventually won a record eight postseason games in a row, including a four-game sweep of the St. Louis Cardinals for their first World Series win since 1918. The song is now the official team anthem:

Tessie (Dropkick Murphys 2004 version):

Tessie is the Royal Rooters rally cry
 Tessie is the tune they always sung
 Tessie echoed April through October nights
 After serenading Stahl, Dineen, and Young

Tessie is a maiden with the sparkling eyes
 Tessie is a maiden with the love
 She doesn't know the meaning of her sight
 She's got a comment full of love

And sometimes when the game is on the line
 Tessie always carried them away
 Up the road from 3rd Base to Huntington

The boys will always sing and sway

Two! Three! Four!

(Chorus)

*Tessie, Nuff Ced McGreevy shouted
We're not here to mess around
Boston, you know we love you madly
Hear the crowd roar to your sound
Don't blame us if we ever doubt you
You know we couldn't live without you
Tessie, you are the only, only, only*

The Rooters showed up at the grounds one day
They found their seats had all been sold
McGreevey led the charge into the park
Stormed the gates and put the game on hold
The Rooters gave the other team a dreadful fright
Boston's tenth man could not be wrong
Up from 3rd Base to Huntington
They'd sing another victory song

(Chorus)

After the World Series, the band recorded a second version of the song for the album *The Warrior's Code* (2005), featuring as background vocalists various Red Sox players. In keeping with the spirit of the original Royal Rooters, a group of Red Sox fans also wrote their own version of the song with new lyrics that poked fun at then-Yankees star player Alex Rodriguez, who was largely responsible for the brawl the previous year. While the style of music in the 21st century may not resemble at all the music of the early 20th century, the passion of the lyrics—and the humor of the fans—remain very much the same.

Conclusion

In both poetry and song, the Irish in America quickly came to represent the “national pastime” of baseball, which served as a symbol of national unity after a devastating civil war. As Irish immigrants poured into the US in the latter half of the 19th century, baseball gave

them not only an outlet for pent-up frustrations but also a venue for song and laughter. The association of early baseball with Irish immigrants and children of immigrants who sought recognition as American citizens despite prevailing negative stereotypes appears clearly in the popular poetry and song of the time. As the Irish became Irish Americans, their musical talents came to leave an indelible mark on American baseball culture and pop music which has continued into the 21st century.

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Endnotes

- 1) For more on the Irish in the US Civil War era, see Egan 2016, which provides a wealth of details about General Thomas Francis Meagher and the Irish Brigade, including an in-depth description of the horrific New York City draft riots of 1863. Also see Gordon 1993/2009, for more on the political crises created by Irish Fenianism in the early 1870s.
- 2) It should be noted that the Irish songwriters and actors in vaudeville are largely responsible for perpetuating ethnic stereotypes of European and Asian immigrants as well as “blackface” used in “minstrel shows” to mock Black Americans. See Moloney 2006 and Kenny 2000, who describe this as the result of the Irish trying to maintain a “pecking order” of sorts as the first major non-English immigrant group in a multiethnic city. Even at the time, the stereotypes were felt demeaning; however, a detailed explanation is beyond the scope of the present paper.
- 3) For an in-depth look at the history and evolution of stick and ball games, see 松井 2015.
- 4) In 1969, Major League Baseball officially recognized the shortly lived American Association (1882-1891), the Union Association (1884), the Players’ League (1890), and the Federal League (1914-195) as “major leagues.” The various black American leagues collectively termed the Negro Leagues, active during the period of “Jim Crow Laws” and legal segregation in American society (late 1870s to 1965), were finally recognized as major leagues in 2020 (Goldman 17 December 2020). See also “The Negro Leagues Are Major Leagues,” Baseball Reference (<http://www.baseball-reference.com/negro-leagues-are-major-leagues.shtml>).
- 5) Historian Steven Reiss (2002) points out that as late as 1868, “WASP” (white Anglo-Saxon Protestant) dominated baseball clubs that were still taking out newspaper ads with the phrase “no Irish need apply,” and that as the “poorest of the Old European” immigrants to the US, Irish and Irish Americans viewed baseball and other sports as a means of raising their social status. See also Reiss, 1980.
- 6) Cap Anson, popular player-manager of the Chicago White Stockings and future Hall of Famer who was the first player to reach 3,000 hits, refused to let his team play an exhibition against Newark of the International League in July 1887 as long as Black catcher Moses Fleetwood Walker and pitcher George Stovey were on the field. Ultimately, the refusal led to the unspoken “gentlemen’s agreement” throughout all professional baseball never to hire non-White players (Zang 1995). The “color-line” of segregated professional baseball lasted from 1889 until Jackie Robinson played for the Montréal Royals of the International League on March 17, 1946, and at the major league level with the Brooklyn Dodgers of the National League on April 15, 1947.
- 7) However, Eckard (2010) has demonstrated that during the same time period ethnically Irish players were relegated to part time or less central positions on the field and were excluded from positions of authority, despite generally batting better than non-Irish players, and were unfavorably compared to ethnic German players, who were seen as hard-working and diligent.
- 8) In 1941, legendary jazz trumpeter Harry James named a song “Flatbush Flanagan” due to his love of the Brooklyn Dodgers, whose original home was called “Flatbush” (Wilson 1983). The Dodgers were still associated with Irish players and Irish names well after the Irish were no longer the dominant ethnic group.
- 9) This rhyme was published in the *Waterbury Republican-American* (30 May 2002), but I have been unable to find a digitized version. (Cited in Kerr 2011: 1).
- 10) That said, the book was likely “ghost-written” by an unknown writer, probably a fan who worked for his publisher, Emery & Hughes.
- 11) There is an undated audio recording of a live performance by William De Wolf Hopper at https://www.baseball-almanac.com/poetry/po_case.shtml.
- 12) Thayer had an extremely low opinion of the poem, even after T. S. Eliot praised it (and wrote a parody poem based on it). As a Harvard *magna cum laude* who was friends with William James, he referred to his writings for the *Harvard Lampoon* and the *Examiner* as “nonsense.” As for “Casey at the Bat,” he wanted “never to be reminded of it again” (Gardner 1967). See Landers (28 March 2020), who suggests that Thayer based Casey on a childhood Irish American nemesis who had become enraged over Thayer’s poems mocking Irish Catholics.

- 13) J. M. Synge's 1910 play *Playboy of the Western World* was particularly reviled, and riots broke out during performances in New York City. The police, who were mostly Irish, at first refused to stop the fighting ("Riot in Theatre," 28 November 1911: 1, 3).
- 14) After the Troy Haymakers were dropped from the National League in 1883 and subsequently disbanded, several of their star players' contracts were purchased by a new team in New York City, which adopted the nickname "Giants" due to the players' towering heights. This team is now known as the San Francisco Giants, while Troy remains an "honorary" league member.
- 15) In addition, Tinker was half-Irish; after the trio broke up in 1910, the Cubs would not win another World Series until 2016.
- 16) It was not popularly sung during games until a 1976 Chicago White Sox game, when team owner Bill Veeck asked announcer Harry Carey to stand up in the announcing booth, lean out the window, and sing on a field mic while directing the crowd to sing with him as a crowd-pleasing stunt (Veeck 1962/2001: 387).
- 17) As McGuiggan (2009: 39-41) points out, 1908 was an eventful year: the death of one president (Grover Cleveland); the election of a new one (William Taft, who later threw out the first ceremonial pitch and is often cited as the originator of the "7th inning stretch" when he stood up to stretch his legs); the Ashcan School of painters who focused on the turmoil of gritty inner city life; the publication of *The Jungle* by Upton Sinclair, one of many "muckraker" journalists exposing corruption and the misery of slums; the foundation of what would later become the FBI; the sensational "escapes" of Harry Houdini; the first sales of Henry Ford's "Model T" at a low price for working Americans; and the Wright Brothers setting a new flight record of over an hour. Indeed, the same *New York Times* issue that published photographs of overflowing Polo Grounds crowds also published an article about the Wright Brothers with a photo of the "Kitty Hawk" (Section Five, page 10).
- 18) Baseball researcher Tom Shieber has examined the slides in great detail and established that the photos were taken at an actual baseball game at the Polo Grounds, on May 9, 1908, just days after the patent was filed for the song. <http://baseballresearcher.blogspot.com/2009/10/take-me-out-to-ball-game-polo-grounds.html>
- 19) Unsurprisingly, Gene Kelly was an Irish American, born to an Irish-Canadian father and Irish-German American mother in Pittsburgh.
- 20) McGuiggan (2009: 64) dryly notes the "mere coincidence" that Norworth's rival George Cohan had a wildly successful Broadway run in 1922 with the musical *Little Nellie Kellie*.
- 21) Another example is the wife of the Chicago Colts / White Sox owner Frank Seele, who was profiled in the *Chicago Tribune* (31 August 1902: 11). Bridget "May" Grant, born in Co. Kilkenny, had arrived in 1890 with other "Bridgets," as Irish servant girls were known, and became quickly caught up in the trials and tribulations of the Irish in baseball. She was "better versed in baseball matters than any other woman in the country... an enthusiastic fan." See also Rapp 2018: 116-117 and Kenny 2000: 152-153.
- 22) Not only local Irish American workers but even high-status Irish were members of the Royal Rooters—including Boston mayor John Fitzgerald, grandfather of the future President John Fitzgerald Kennedy (Fleitz 2009: 165).
- 23) In a 2007 interview, lead singer Mike Kelly described his band as "folk" (Tatangelo 19 September 2007).

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The Irish in Early Baseball Poetry and Song

by

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Baseball has long been associated with music, both instrumental and lyrical. People around the world sing the chorus from “Take Me Out to the Ball Game.” However, they may not realize that the song dates from a 1908 Broadway musical and has two stanzas not normally sung at baseball games that show the rise of the Irish in American society and their place in the women’s voting rights movement. Indeed, there were many lyrics, in both poetry and popular song, that reflect the influence of Irish immigrants in the 19th century on early baseball, and on American society and history, as well. This paper will give an overview of Irish Americans in the latter half of the 19th century and the turn of the 20th century, with a particular focus on the beginning of the professional game of baseball and the Irish role in its ascension as America’s “national pastime.”