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Black spirituals for Irish evangelicals: the Fisk Jubilee Singers' Irish tours, 1873–6

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ABSTRACT. *From 1873 to 1876, the Fisk Jubilee Singers, an African-American choral troupe from Nashville, Tennessee visited Ireland three times. This article details their experiences and impressions of the country, focusing especially on the relationship they forged with their Irish evangelical sponsors and audiences. While the Jubilee Singers' story is typically told as an inspirational tale of triumph over adversity, this article argues that there is another way of framing the narrative that emphasises the centrality of evangelical Protestantism to the Jubilee Singers' mission. The Irish tours brought this dimension into full relief, demonstrating how evangelicalism fostered a degree of mutual understanding between the singers and Irish Protestants while also serving to exclude Irish Catholics. This article also examines audience responses to the Jubilee Singers, particularly the racial and aesthetic concepts they used to describe them. For all that the singers were familiar on account of their faith, they were unfamiliar on account of their race; this tension structured not only Irish responses to the singers, but also the singers' responses to Ireland.*

In the mid 1870s, a musical sensation swept through the north and east of Ireland. Concert halls bulged. Tickets flew. Journalists described some of the largest audiences they had ever seen and some of the most unusual music they had ever heard. The cause of the excitement was a group of young African Americans called the Fisk Jubilee Singers, a choral troupe from Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee. They were performing what were then called slave songs, also known as spirituals. During three visits to Ireland from 1873 to 1876, they provided the first real contact many Irish people had with African-American people and their culture. There had been the *Uncle Tom's Cabin* craze of the 1850s, of course, as well as the ubiquitous minstrel shows, but these were highly mediated, distorted and often malignant depictions of African-American life. There had also been visits by Black abolitionists, but these had occurred some time ago — the most recent was by Sarah Parker Remond in 1859 — and much had changed since then, not least the abolition of American slavery. The Fisk Jubilee Singers offered a compelling image of African-American culture for the post-emancipation age, one that was sophisticated and dignified, rooted in the past but not bound by it, heralding better days ahead.

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For all their novelty, however, there was also a sense in which the Fisk Jubilee Singers were already known before they arrived in Ireland, particularly among the evangelical Protestants who were their chief sponsors and audiences.[1] Fisk University was an evangelical school imbued with a strong biblical ethos that encompassed not only Black education but also temperance, African missions and Christian philanthropy. Their songs were heavily scriptural, adapting biblical tales to individual lives with a kind of 'existential immediacy' (in Mark Noll's words) that was typical of the evangelical ethos.[2] Their association with the cause of anti-slavery likewise made them familiar to evangelicals who had long been central to that movement in Ireland and elsewhere. But, how far did their shared evangelicalism override the racial and cultural distance between the singers and their Irish hosts? And what did the singers' Protestant evangelicalism mean in a place like Ireland, which was, after all, predominantly Catholic?

In what follows, I argue that the Fisk Jubilee Singers' Irish tours offer a unique opportunity to study the evangelical dimension of the troupe's work in its full complexity. This dimension has not typically been central to discussions of the Jubilee Singers, but Ireland shows just how central it really was. Three key points emerge from this analysis. First, the Irish tours show the Jubilee Singers aligning — sometimes wittingly, sometimes inadvertently — with the Protestant side of Ireland's sectarian divide, revealing a latent strand of anti-Catholicism in their worldview that limited their appeal and reach. On the other hand, a shared evangelical culture could only go so far in fostering mutual understanding between the singers and their hosts. Newspaper reports and concert reviews suggest that what fascinated Irish audiences was not so much the singers' evangelical faith but, rather, the prospect of seeing Black bodies and hearing Black voices. The spectacle, in other words, trumped the spiritual, although of course these elements were intertwined. Meanwhile, the Jubilee Singers' own words reveal that what fascinated them about Ireland was the absence of the racist hostility they had come to expect among the Irish in America. Once again, evangelicalism was key, for it ensured that the Jubilee Singers moved among the Protestant urban elite and middle classes, who occupied very different social strata than the Catholic immigrants they encountered in America.

I

Fisk University was founded in 1866 by members of the American Missionary Association (A.M.A.), a White-run evangelical abolitionist organisation whose chief aim, now that the American Civil War was over, was to provide a Christian education to African-American freedmen and freedwomen. This was a period of great hardship for the formerly enslaved, who faced ongoing racist violence, as

[1] David Bebbington has offered an influential definition of evangelicalism that identifies a 'quadrilateral of priorities' — namely, conversionism, or a belief in changing lives and saving souls; activism, or the spread of the gospel through teaching and preaching; biblicism, or a particular regard for the bible; and crucicentrism, or an emphasis on the sacrifice of Christ on the cross: D. W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in modern Britain: a history from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London, 1989), pp 3–14. In Ireland, evangelicals were often, though by no means always, members of the dissenting or non-Anglican churches.

[2] Mark A. Noll, *America's book: the rise and decline of a bible civilization, 1794–1911* (New York, 2022), pp 477–80; Bebbington, *Evangelicalism*, pp 477–80.

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well as severe economic disadvantages, but it was also a period of great optimism. What is sometimes called Christian Reconstruction, the project of uplifting African Americans in a manner that was simultaneously material, intellectual and spiritual, was a particular source of hope.[3] Christian Reconstructionists held that emancipation was inseparable from evangelisation. The body could not be saved without the soul, and, now that the bodies had been freed, it was time to focus on the souls.

The Fisk Jubilee Singers were an important part of this project. The troupe had formed in 1871 to raise money for their struggling school and advance the cause of freedmen education. After some disappointing early concerts in which they performed songs that were already familiar to White audiences, they began rendering the songs of African-American plantation life into complex harmonic arrangements. This turned out to be precisely what White audiences wanted. Within two years, they were stars, packing concert halls across the country and counting among their admirers Henry Ward Beecher, Mark Twain and Ulysses S. Grant. They made their first trip to the United Kingdom in 1873 and returned for a second tour from 1875 to 1878, when they also visited parts of continental Europe. During these tours they performed for Queen Victoria and the German royal family, befriended William Gladstone and other European leaders, and managed to set Fisk University on a sound financial footing. Along the way, they established the 'Negro spiritual' as a unique African-American art form and paved the way for the global triumphs of Black music in the twentieth century. Jubilee Hall, purchased with funds from the first overseas tour, still stands on the Fisk campus as a testament to their work. While the original Fisk Jubilee Singers disbanded in 1878, the name has lived on in reconstituted troupes down to the present day.

Popular narratives, as well as some scholarly literature, tend to frame the Jubilee Singers' story as an inspiring tale of triumph over adversity — as, in the words of Toni P. Anderson, 'almost like a fairy tale'.[4] Andrew Ward, their most thorough biographer, calls it 'one of the most remarkable trajectories in American history: from whipping post and auction block to concert hall and throne room'.[5] Where there has been debate, it has mostly concerned the extent to which their songs were authentic expressions of African-American life and culture. W. E. B. Du Bois, himself a Fisk graduate, believed that they were. He wrote that their 'sorrow songs' were 'the singular spiritual heritage of the nation and the greatest gift of the Negro people', a judgment with which leading figures of the Harlem Renaissance such as Alain Locke, Richard Wright and Arna Bontemps concurred.[6] Zora Neale Hurston disagreed, finding '[t]heir Glee Club style so full of musicians' tricks that Negro congregations are highly entertained when they hear their old songs so

[3] Joe M. Richardson, *Christian Reconstruction: the American Missionary Association and southern Blacks, 1861–1890* (Athens, GA, 1986), pp 124–8; Toni P. Anderson, *'Tell them we are singing for Jesus': the original Fisk Jubilee Singers and Christian Reconstruction, 1871–1878* (Macon, GA, 2010), p. 8.

[4] Anderson, *'Tell Them'*, p. xi.

[5] Andrew Ward, *Dark midnight when I rise: the story of the Fisk Jubilee Singers* (New York, 2000), p. xiii.

[6] W. E. B. Du Bois, *The souls of Black folk* (Boston, 1997), p. 186; Alain Locke, *The Negro and his music* (Washington, D.C., 1936), p. 19; Ronald M. Radano, 'Soul texts and the Blackness of folk' in *Modernism/modernity* ii, no. 1 (1995), pp 71–95; P. A. Anderson, *Deep river: music and memory in Harlem Renaissance thought* (Durham, 2001), pp 13–56.

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changed'.[7] Recent scholarship has followed Hurston in emphasising the labour the Jubilee Singers put into making Black music palatable to White audiences. As Sandra Jean Graham writes, 'Pitches, rhythms, enunciation, intonation, tempos, articulations, lyrics — all were rehearsed, perfected, synchronized.'[8] Yet this labour was often invisible to White audiences, who tended to hear the songs as the authentic, untutored utterances of the African race. For them, a Jubilee Singers concert was, in Graham's words, 'both an exotic adventure and a colonial encounter, rendered safe by White guideposts (harmony, tonality, meter, the [White] Jubilee management)'.[9]

The handful of historians who have scrutinised the Jubilee Singers' European tours have concentrated on this question of White reception. Helen Metzelaar has examined the several months they spent in the Netherlands in 1877, arguing that their performances awakened some Dutch guilt about their nation's past involvement in the slave trade but little introspection about their ongoing colonial endeavours.[10] Kira Thurman has examined the ten months they spent in Germany that same year. She shows how German critics and scholars positioned the spirituals within an African folk tradition that could fruitfully be compared with Germany's more 'advanced' musical traditions.[11] She also argues that the concerts contributed to an emerging line of German imperialist thought that believed Africans could become civilised given proper tutelage by Europeans.[12] There is no comprehensive study of the Jubilee Singers' tours of the United Kingdom, but in a recent chapter about their time in Wales, Jen Wilson notes the resemblance of their concerts to the Welsh *hwyl* tradition, the 'half-singing, half-shouting in Welsh from the minister up in the pulpit while he worked himself into a sweat, thumping his Bible and encouraging his congregation to respond to the sermon with "Amens" and "Praise the Lords"'.[13] This, she posits, made the Jubilee Singers especially popular among marginalised groups such as poor women, who could identify with their themes of uplift and struggle.[14]

On the whole, those who have studied the Jubilee Singers in Europe have been more interested in race than religion; that is, they focus on how European audiences fit the singers into prevailing racial ideas and categories but have little to say about the evangelical faith that inspired the singers or the evangelical networks through

[7] Zora Neale Hurston, 'Characteristics of Negro expression' in Nancy Cunard (ed.), *Negro anthology: 1931–33* (London, 1934), p. 46.

[8] Sandra Jean Graham, *Spirituals and the birth of a Black entertainment industry* (Urbana, 2018), p. 80.

[9] Graham, *Spirituals*, p. 81. See also Steve Waksman, *Live music in America: a history from Jenny Lind to Beyoncé* (New York, 2022), pp 78–93.

[10] Helen Metzelaar, 'A hefty confrontation: the Fisk Jubilee Singers tour the Netherlands in 1877' in *Tijdschrift van de koninklijke vereniging voor Nederlandse muziekgeschiedenis*, lv, no. 1 (2005), pp 67–86.

[11] Kira Thurman, 'Singing the civilizing mission in the land of Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms: the Fisk Jubilee Singers in nineteenth-century Germany' in *Journal of World History*, xxvii, no. 3 (2016), pp 443–71.

[12] Ibid., p. 471.

[13] Jen Wilson, *Freedom music: Wales, emancipation and jazz, 1850–1950* (Cardiff, 2019), p. 90.

[14] Ibid., 102. See also, Katie Graber, '"A strange, weird effect": the Fisk Jubilee Singers in the United States and England' in *American Music Research Journal*, xiv (2004), pp 27–52; and Doug Seroff, 'Fisk Jubilee Singers in Britain' in Rainer Lotz and Ian Pegg (eds), *Under the imperial carpet: essays in Black history, 1780–1950* (Crawley, West Sussex, 1986), pp 42–54.

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which they moved. Broader studies, particularly those by Ward and Anderson, rightly place evangelical Protestantism at the centre of the story, but here, too, the emphasis is largely on race, specifically the work the Jubilee Singers did to confront and overcome racial barriers. Framed in this way, the story becomes easily legible as an inspirational tale of Black courage and uplift that resonates down to the present day. But, when we take seriously the evangelical component of their work, and when we recognise just how seriously the singers and their supporters took it, then the tale gets a little more complicated. This is what makes Ireland such an interesting case, for it allows us to see both the inclusionary and exclusionary potential of the Jubilee Singers' brand of Christian Reconstructionism: how it could promote solidarity and understanding across racial barriers, while at the same time erecting (or reinforcing) religious barriers.

II

Ireland occupied a relatively minor place in the Jubilee Singers' European tours: they spent just six weeks there over a five-year period and saw little of the country beyond Dublin and Ulster. Yet, Ireland was unique in that it was the only majority Catholic country they toured. This not only limited their range of movement — and, arguably, their appeal — but it also showed how rooted the Jubilee Singers were in evangelical networks. Throughout their time on the island, they remained effectively sealed within a Protestant bubble, and an evangelical, dissenting Protestant bubble at that, for their contact with members of the Church of Ireland seems to have been nearly as infrequent as their contact with Catholics. Yet, their avoidance of Catholics seems to have been deliberate — perhaps, indeed, deliberate on both sides — whereas their arm's-length relationship with Anglicans was probably incidental. This is hardly surprising, for the Jubilee Singers were rooted in an evangelical milieu that was profoundly anti-Catholic. As Bebbington has suggested, evangelical anti-Catholicism was probably at its 'peak' in the mid-Victorian period, but it had long been a feature of evangelicalism on both sides of the Atlantic, and it would have been remarkable if the Jubilee Singers had not shown traces of it.[15]

Anti-Catholicism was a particular feature of the evangelical abolitionist tradition from which Fisk University emerged. In Britain, as David Turley has shown, prominent abolitionists such as Granville Sharp, Harriet Martineau and Mary Estlin were strongly opposed to Catholic political equality and Irish nationalism partly on the grounds that the Catholic faith was supposedly antithetical to freedom, and partly because they held the Catholic Church responsible for Ireland's moral and material squalor.[16] In America, many abolitionists were likewise hostile to the Catholic Church, if not always to individual Catholics. Frederick Douglass, who toured Ireland in 1845–6, saw the Catholic Church (in William Hardack's words) as 'a

[15] D. W. Bebbington, *The dominance of evangelicalism: the age of Spurgeon and Moody* (Downers Grove, IL, 2005), p. 242. On anti-Catholicism as a binding agent among Irish and American Presbyterians, see A. R. Holmes, 'Religion, anti-slavery, and identity: Irish Presbyterians, the United States, and transatlantic evangelicalism, *c.* 1820–1914', in *I.H.S.*, xxxix, no. 155 (May 2015), pp 378–98. On the British context, see Bebbington, *Evangelicalism*; John Wolffe, *The Protestant crusade in Great Britain, 1829–1860* (Oxford, 1991); and Walter L. Arnstein, *Protestant versus Catholic in mid-Victorian England: Mr. Newdegate and the nuns* (Columbia, MO, 1982).

[16] David Turley, *The culture of English antislavery, 1780–1860* (London, 1991), pp 191–2.

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voluntary form of bondage' that was more responsible for Irish poverty and oppression than British rule was.[17] Although he was very popular with Catholics, Douglass saw his 'stronghold' in Ireland 'to be to be among the non-Catholic population', a view partly inspired by his experiences of racism among Irish Catholics in the United States.[18] Other Black abolitionists were even more hostile. Christine Kinealy has described how Samuel Ringgold Ward, who toured Ireland in 1854–5, blamed Ireland's poverty on its thraldom to Rome and viewed his abolitionist work as part of 'the struggle for the heart, minds and souls of the Catholic population.'[19] Irish evangelical abolitionists tended to share this preoccupation with 'rescuing' Catholics from their church. As Sean Farrell has pointed out, they saw 'no contradiction in supporting the emancipation of enslaved African men and women in the United States and the British Caribbean and standing in resolute opposition to Roman Catholicism in Ireland and the world.' Both systems, in their eyes, amounted to different forms of slavery.[20] Little wonder, then, that Ireland's first anti-slavery body, the Hibernian and Foreign Bible Society, was explicitly committed to converting Catholics.[21]

There had once been a time when abolitionism was capable, in the words of Kinealy, of 'providing a middle ground' on which all of Ireland's religious communities could agree.[22] This was in the 1830s and 1840s, the period of Daniel O'Connell's outspoken abolitionism and Douglass's lectures before Irish crowds of all persuasions. Yet, even at that time, Irish abolitionism was not the mass movement that it was in Britain, and, as the century progressed, it became ever more identified with a minority of Protestant dissenters.[23] The prominence of anti-Catholic evangelicals, such as the Belfast Anglican Thomas Drew, surely kept many Catholics away from abolitionism, but another factor was the lack of engagement from Catholic leaders, particularly after O'Connell's death in 1847. The Catholic Church kept its distance from the cause, Irish nationalists offered little more than token support (and sometimes, as in the case of John Mitchel, active opposition), and Irish Catholics in America — whose views probably influenced their relatives back home — were usually pro-slavery. David Gleeson has argued that the majority of the Irish population was probably pro-Confederacy by the middle of the Civil War, with priests urging their congregations to petition the American government to recognise the Confederacy and Irish M.P.s presenting numerous pro-Confederacy petitions to Westminster.[24] These influences were

[17] Richard Hardack, 'The slavery of Romanism: the casting out of the Irish in the work of Frederick Douglass' in Alan J. Rice and Martin Crawford (eds), *Liberating sojourn: Frederick Douglass & transatlantic reform* (Athens, GA, 1999), pp 125–6.

[18] Hardack, 'Slavery', p. 121.

[19] Christine Kinealy, *Black abolitionists in Ireland* (London, 2020), p. 211.

[20] Sean Farrell, 'Going to extremes: anti-Catholicism and anti-slavery in early Victorian Belfast' in *European Romantic Review*, xxviii, no. 4 (2017), p. 466.

[21] Nini Rodgers, *Ireland, slavery and anti-slavery: 1612–1865* (Houndmills, 2007), p. 270.

[22] Kinealy, *Black abolitionists*, p. 88.

[23] Rodgers, *Ireland*, pp 275–7. See also Douglas Cameron Riach, 'Ireland and the campaign against American slavery, 1830–1860' (Ph.D. thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1975); and Fionnghuala Sweeney, 'Common ground: positioning Ireland within studies of slavery, anti-slavery and empire' in *Slavery & Abolition*, xxxvii, no. 3 (2016), pp 505–20.

[24] David T. Gleeson, 'Failing to "unite with the abolitionists": the Irish nationalist press and U.S. emancipation' in *Slavery & Abolition*, xxxvii, no. 3 (2016), pp 622–37.

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probably just as important in keeping Catholics away from abolitionism — and, later, from the Jubilee Singers — as evangelical anti-Catholicism was.

By the 1870s, of course, abolitionism was on the wane, although some of its energies were transferring to East Africa, where the 'Arab slave trade' was coming in for condemnation by evangelicals hoping to establish missions there.[25] For the most part, the concerns of Irish evangelicals at this time lay much closer to home. Speaking of evangelicals generally, John Kent has observed that many felt (and quietly revelled in) a sense of 'embattled isolation', amounting at times to a kind of 'siege mentality' amidst the industrialising and secularising forces of the Victorian era.[26] Irish Protestants had a similar 'siege mentality' — it had been a core component of their identity since the seventeenth century[27] — but for many evangelicals, the most dangerous besiegers were not churchless workers or Sunday traders (although these were dangers), but rather an increasingly assertive Catholic Church, an increasingly influential Irish nationalism and a British government that seemed indifferent to (or actively collusive with) the threats these forces posed. Hostility toward the Catholic Church on theological grounds was nothing new, of course, for this was the very root of Reformed Christianity. As Andrew Holmes observes, the 'overwhelming majority' of Irish Presbyterians (a group that provided a large portion of Ireland's evangelicals) were 'in no doubt that the Antichrist of the Bible was synonymous with the Papacy', a view codified in their Westminster Confession of Faith.[28] Particular moves by the Catholic Church during this period, such as the 1870 declaration of papal infallibility and the vigorous promotion of new churches, schools and charities by Cardinal Paul Cullen, the ultramontane Catholic Archbishop of Dublin, were especially troubling.[29] On the political front, the violent exploits of the Fenian Brotherhood and the growing influence of Irish nationalists at Westminster were likewise throwing evangelicals onto the defensive. What was almost more troubling was the seeming determination of elements of the British state to undermine Protestantism by, for instance, disestablishing the Church of Ireland in 1869, a move that symbolised the ongoing decline of the landholding Anglican elite (the so-called Protestant Ascendancy) and led Cullen to predict, 'in 30 years we shall not have many Protestants in Ireland'.[30] Disestablishment also, as Alvin Jackson observes, removed one of the key barriers separating Anglicans and dissenters, creating the conditions for a pan-Protestant alliance in defence of their embattled position that would, in time, take the form of the mass Unionist movement.[31]

[25] Richard Huzzey, *Freedom burning: anti-slavery and empire in Victorian Britain* (Ithaca, 2012), pp 150–4; Moses D. E. Nwulia, *Britain and slavery in East Africa* (Washington, D.C., 1975).

[26] John Kent, *Holding the fort: studies in Victorian revivalism* (London, 1978), pp 204, 218.

[27] Ian McBride, *The Siege of Derry in Ulster Protestant mythology* (Dublin, 1997).

[28] Andrew R. Holmes, 'The uses and interpretation of prophecy in Irish Presbyterianism, 1850–1930' in Crawford Gribben and Andrew R. Holmes (eds), *Protestant millennialism, evangelicalism, and Irish society, 1790–2005* (Houndmills, 2006), p. 152. There were, of course, exceptions. See Daniel Ritchie, *Isaac Nelson: radical abolitionist, evangelical Presbyterian, and Irish nationalist* (Liverpool, 2018).

[29] On the Protestant response to Cullen's reforms, see Desmond Bowen, *History and the shaping of Irish Protestantism* (New York, 1995), pp 269–315.

[30] Paul Bew, *Ireland: the politics of enmity 1789–2006* (Oxford, 2007), p. 270.

[31] Alvin Jackson, *Ireland, 1798–1998: politics and war* (Oxford, 1999), p. 221.

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It is not quite accurate to say that Irish Protestantism was in crisis in the 1870s, but there certainly was a sense of danger closing in. It was an anxious time that occasionally tilted over into open conflict: in July 1872, just fourteen months before the Jubilee Singers performed there, Belfast experienced severe sectarian rioting during a parading dispute in which the evangelical Presbyterian minister Hugh Hanna played a prominent, and by no means placating, role. Most evangelicals were less extreme than Hanna, but the difference was largely one of tone rather than essence. When the Jubilee Singers arrived in Ireland in September 1873, they were stepping into a situation wherein it would have been difficult for a band of evangelical Americans singing religious songs to avoid the impression of taking sides, even if they had wanted to.

III

The Jubilee Singers' first Irish performances were in Belfast and Derry in the autumn of 1873, followed by eight performances in Dublin, Belfast and Derry in November and December 1875, then a stretch of eighteen performances in Dublin and various Ulster towns in November and December 1876. They sang in public halls and churches, dined with clergymen and local grandees, attended temperance meetings, went sightseeing and stayed in fine hotels. While they did glimpse the seedier side of Irish life as they travelled about on trains and jaunting cars, their experiences were circumscribed both socially and geographically. They rarely strayed from the society of middle-class dissenters (mostly Presbyterians, Methodists and Quakers) or from a coastal arc running from Bray in the east to Derry in the north. What they saw of Ireland was, on the whole, its most urban, industrialised and Protestant portions. Among the letters collected in the Jubilee Singer archives are invitations to Tullamore (in November and December 1875), Enniskillen (in November 1876), and Wexford (in November 1876), as well as letters of introduction prepared by David Mullan of Dublin addressed to recipients in Waterford, Galway, Wexford, Cork, Clonmel and Limerick. But, they never travelled to the south, west or even the midlands.[32] The initial invitation in 1873 came from the Irish Temperance League, a Protestant organisation based in Belfast whose members had heard reports of the singers' performances in London.[33] Temperance was a cause that American revivalists and Black abolitionists had long advocated — Frederick Douglass was a temperance campaigner — but there is little evidence that the Jubilee Singers engaged deeply with it on this first tour, which lasted just a week and consisted of two public concerts, some church visits and a couple of sightseeing tours. Relatively unknown upon their arrival, they soon had the backing of William Johnston, Moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, and Wallace McMullen, a Methodist minister who had earlier met the singers in Newcastle, County

[32] Fisk University, John Hope and Aurelia E. Franklin Library, Special Collections (hereafter F.U.S.C.), Jubilee Singers Archive (Original), box 1, folder 3, and box 2, folders 7 & 8; and Jubilee Singers European Tour Collection, box 4, folders 2 & 3.
[33] Letter from Irish Temperance League, 12 June 1873 (F.U.S.C., Jubilee Singers European Tour Collection, box 1, folder 1).

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Down.[34] Both men helped to arrange and publicise the Jubilee Singers' concerts, and McMullen was especially energetic in encouraging colleagues and congregants to attend. The patronage of these and other dissenting ministers would remain important on subsequent tours.

Despite their novelty, from the beginning there were those in Ireland who claimed a special, almost proprietorial, interest in the Jubilee Singers. After one performance at Belfast's Ulster Hall, a letter appeared in the *Northern Whig* from Rev. James McKee, whose nephew, Rev. Joseph McKee, had been a missionary and educationalist in Nashville from 1863 until his death in 1868. A County Down man, Joseph McKee had, in his uncle's words, 'devoted himself, heart and soul' to the cause of freedmen's education in Nashville, which was now bearing fruit not only at Fisk but also at the Baptist Theological Institute and Central Tennessee College. Now, the uncle said, Fisk was giving Ireland a taste of the progress it was making toward 'elevating morally and spiritually the coloured population all over the land', while also providing 'truly a stately monument' to the memory of his nephew.[35] Others expressed their interest through the money they had donated to missions in the United States. A Miss Hamilton of Belfast, who had given £1,000 to the Freedmen's Missions Aid Society (the Jubilee Singers' chief British sponsor), told the troupe's agent, Gustavus Pike, that she saw them as 'an illustration of the work her money had promoted'. Pike also heard about an Irishwoman named Mary Kildare who had gone to work among the freedmen of Virginia and North Carolina under the auspices of the A.M.A. 'Her friends,' Pike wrote, 'rejoiced in their labours when the Jubilee Singers sang.' [36]

As was the case elsewhere, some Protestants expressed anxiety about the suitability of hosting Jubilee Singers concerts in sacred spaces. During two performances in the First Presbyterian Church in Derry, the troupe consented to omit their secular songs and perform only religious ones. This was not enough for some: at the first performance, the minister instructed the audience not to applaud, an instruction that he had some trouble enforcing.[37] Such anxieties persisted throughout these tours. In 1876, the troupe received a note from the First Armagh Presbyterian Church stating that some members of the congregation 'feel so strongly against the use of our church for any other than "devotional exercises"' that they would 'withdraw from the congregation' if the Jubilee Singers performed there. They performed in a public assembly hall instead.[38]

Such worries aside, the first tour gave the singers an opportunity to forge tighter bonds with Ulster Protestants and to absorb some of their worldview. In Derry, Pike preached at the First Presbyterian Church and the Congregational Church, and one of the singers, Thomas Rutling, visited a Congregationalist Sunday school.[39] The

[34] Rev. Gustavus Pike, *The singing campaign for ten thousand pounds: the Jubilee Singers in Great Britain* (London, 1874), p. 126; *Northern Whig*, 10 Sept. 1873; *Belfast News Letter*, 30 Aug. 1873.

[35] *Northern Whig*, 11 Sept. 1873.

[36] Pike, *Singing*, p. 124.

[37] Ibid., pp 127–8; *Londonderry Sentinel*, 6 Sept. 1873; *Londonderry Journal*, 8 Sept. 1873.

[38] Letter from Richard Williamson, 22 Nov. 1876 (F.U.S.C., Jubilee Singers Archive (Original), box 4, folder 2); *Ulster Gazette*, 9 Dec. 1876, in Fisk Jubilee Singers Scrapbook (F.U.S.C., Jubilee Singers Archive (Original), box 7, folder 3).

[39] *Londonderry Journal*, 8 Sept. 1873.

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singers were also treated to a tour of the Derry walls, where they learned about the 1689 siege. In his subsequent book about the tour, Pike described the great interest with which they learned about the onslaught of 'twelve hundred papists' and the quick-thinking manoeuvres by 'thirteen young apprentices, most of whom were of Scotch descent', who saved the city. Noting the episode's importance for securing the 'overthrow of Roman Catholicism and the reign of the Stuarts', Pike asserted that the Jubilee Singers 'were esteemed by the citizens of Derry as another company of young people turning back a tide of ignorance, cruelty, and prejudice'.[40] It was a telling remark that not only excluded Catholics from the ranks of 'the citizens of Derry' but also linked the Jubilee Singers' campaign for racial uplift with Ulster Protestants' historic fights for 'civil and religious liberty' (as they often termed it) in Ireland. Both activities were part of the same struggle.

Although brief, this first tour established the Fisk Jubilee Singers as serious, Christian artists whose piety and talent advertised the success of anti-slavery and the promises of the post-emancipation age. Before they came to Ireland, when there was not yet reason to think they would visit, the Dublin *Evening Telegraph* had printed a mocking report of a concert in London that dwelled upon the singers' 'coal black' skin and poked fun at the very idea of artful music coming from Black bodies. It was, the writer said, an example of 'that bold leap over logic which distinguishes the negro race' to think that they could advance their condition 'by means of music'.[41] After the singers came to Ireland, blatant mockery of this sort would largely cease, at least in print. It was replaced by sympathy, admiration and at least some attempts (not always successful) to overcome racist preconceptions. 'We went to Ireland,' recalled the singer Ella Sheppard many years later, 'and our work there was a repetition of that in other countries, only our Irish friends, in their enthusiasm, seemed even more demonstrative than other peoples in expressing their appreciation.'[42] Not all Irish people were their 'friends', however, and on subsequent tours the lines of exclusion would become clearer.

IV

The Jubilee Singers returned to Ireland in late November 1875 during a long European tour that lasted from May 1875 to July 1878. There were several newcomers on this tour, including America Robinson, a formerly enslaved woman from Murfreesboro, Tennessee, who wrote to her fiancé about her first impressions: 'I am now among the "Paddies" in real earnest. The lower classes of the Irish only have resemblance to our American emigrants from this country. You would not recognize the real ladies & gentlemen as being allied to this nation.'[43] The touch of snobbery here was characteristic of Robinson, who was developing rather refined tastes on this trip, but it also reflected an overturning of expectations based upon her prior

[40] Pike, *Singing*, pp 128–9.
[41] 'London gossip' report by London correspondent to the *Evening Telegraph* (Dublin), reprinted in *Freeman's Journal*, 10 May 1873.
[42] Ella Sheppard Moore, 'Historical sketch of the Jubilee Singers' in *Fisk University News* ii, no. 5 (1911), p. 54 (F.U.S.C., Jubilee Singers Archive (Original), box 6, folder 6).
[43] America Robinson to James Burrus, 23 Nov. 1876 (F.U.S.C., Jubilee Singers Archive (Original), box 1, folder 12).

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experience of Irish Catholics back home.[44] Writing in 1911, Ella Sheppard recalled that, before coming to Ireland, 'we had always supposed that the Irish were our natural enemies, because of experiences in both the North and South. We rejoiced at the discovery of our mistake.'[45] Robinson's remarks about the 'lower classes of Irish' both corroborate and qualify Sheppard's recollection: it was not necessarily the Irish as a whole whom Robinson found sympathetic, but rather the 'real ladies & gentlemen' — i.e., the middle- and upper-class Protestants amongst whom they circulated — who overturned her expectations.

The main event of the 1875 tour was an appearance at a multiday 'Christian Convention' in Dublin. This was the sequel to a revival that had been hosted by the American evangelists Dwight Moody and Ira Sankey in Belfast, Derry and Dublin the previous year. Moody and Sankey were friends of the Jubilee Singers: the troupe had contributed their 'services of song' to many of their revival meetings in America, England and Scotland, and it is notable that in Ireland the Jubilee Singers often performed in the same venues — and, surely, before some of the same people — as Moody and Sankey had. Music was an important feature of a Moody and Sankey revival (Sankey arranged and performed the music) and it is likely that their performances helped prepare Irish audiences for the Jubilee Singers, particularly in Dublin, where the Jubilee Singers had not yet performed. John Kent describes Sankey's tunes as, '[n]ovel, sentimental songs, with an emphasis on the words and sentiment, sung plainly with no kind of concert arrangement, but supported by mass choral singing'.[46] This was very close to what the Jubilee Singers offered, with the important exception that, in place of mass singing, they substituted the complex harmonics of a small choir of around ten or eleven singers. At the same time, like the Jubilee Singers, Moody and Sankey were notable for their 'religious sobriety' and 'efforts to avoid sensationalism', as Andrew Holmes and Stuart Mathieson put it. This was a deliberate strategy to emphasise the universalism of their message and to sidestep denominational differences.[47] The Jubilee Singers' concerts were similarly carefully pitched to emphasise the seriousness and sophistication of their faith and to avoid any whiff of minstrelsy.

Despite their generally nondenominational religious message, however, Moody and Sankey were also hoping to convert Catholics. Mabel Lewis, the one Jubilee Singer who had been raised Catholic, had been converted during a Moody and Sankey revival, and she later reported being treated with suspicion by people who detected latent Catholic tendencies in her behaviour (for instance, in her 'habit of looking down' in churches).[48] Historians have argued that the Moody and Sankey revivals avoided the barbed anti-Catholicism that was common among Ulster evangelicals, but instead (in the words of Janice Holmes) 'offered

[44] Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish became white* (New York, 1995); Madeleine Hooke Rice, *American Catholic opinion in the slavery controversy* (Gloucester, MS, 1964); Ivor Bernstein, *The New York City draft riots: their significance for American society and politics in the age of the Civil War* (New York, 1991); David Gleeson, *The Irish in the American South, 1815–77* (Chapel Hill, 2001).

[45] Moore, 'Historical sketch', p. 54.

[46] John Kent, *Holding the fort: studies in Victorian revivalism* (London, 1978), p. 154.

[47] Andrew R. Holmes and Stuart Mathieson, 'Dwight L. Moody in Ulster: evangelical unity, denominational identity and the fundamentalist impulse' in *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, lxxii, no. 4 (2021), p. 808. See also Janice Holmes, *Religious revivals in Britain and Ireland, 1859–1905* (Dublin, 2000), pp 61–8.

[48] Ward, *Dark*, pp 243–4, 331.

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a respectable, non-sectarian front to the ongoing efforts of the Irish evangelical community to convert Catholics.' Although Irish evangelicals' hope that Moody and Sankey 'would spark off a mass of conversions among the Catholics of Ireland' came to nothing, the idea was not entirely fanciful.[49] Andrew Holmes and Stuart Mathieson have noted that quite a few Catholics seem to have attended these revivals, despite the disparagement Moody and Sankey received from segments of the nationalist press and from Cardinal Cullen.[50] Efforts to convert Catholics — what John Brewer and Gareth Higgins call the 'pharisaic' mode of anti-Catholicism — were an important feature of nineteenth-century transatlantic evangelicalism, particularly during religious revivals. The Jubilee Singers, through their association with Moody and Sankey and their performance at the 'Christian Convention' in Dublin in 1875, were aligning themselves with this softer — and for that reason, in the eyes of Catholicism's defenders, more threatening — form of anti-Catholicism.[51]

Moody and Sankey were not at the Dublin convention in 1875, but their spirit certainly was. Much of the event was taken up with calls to unite the various Protestant denominations into a common evangelical front, but discussion ranged across a host of topics, including an hour set aside for the topic 'How can we further unite for the evangelisation of Ireland?' — in other words, a discussion of the best means of converting Catholics. The Jubilee Singers opened and closed this portion of the conference with several songs, including their signature tune, 'Steal Away to Jesus'.[52] On the fourth day of the convention, the Fisk University President, E. M. Cravath, gave a speech outlining the history of the college and describing their current mission to raise money to train Fisk students as missionaries to Africa, 'thereby helping England in her great work of Christianizing and evangelising the coloured race'.[53] Just as their Irish hosts were hoping to convert the Catholics of Ireland, so were the students of Fisk hoping to convert the 'pagan' of Africa; each group would undertake the evangelical labour appropriate to their race and circumstance.

While they were in Dublin, the Jubilee Singers also gave public performances at the large Rotundo concert hall and the Exhibition Palace, a 12,000-capacity space where Moody and Sankey had also appeared. 'It seems as if Dublin is creating quite as great a furore as when our first visit happened in 1873', Sheppard recorded in her diary.[54] At the end of the Exhibition Palace performance, a slight but significant disturbance occurred when the Jubilee Singers joined in a group singing of 'Rule Britannia'. Some members of the audience hissed in disapprobation; in

[49] Janice Holmes, *Religious revivals*, p. 83.

[50] Andrew R. Holmes and Stuart Mathieson, 'Dwight L. Moody in southern Ireland: modern evangelical revivalism, the Protestant minority, and the conversion of Catholic Ireland' in *Journal of Religious History*, xlvii, no. 2 (2023), pp 281–2.

[51] John D. Brewer with Gareth Higgins, *Anticatholicism in Northern Ireland, 1600–1998: The Mote and the Beam* (London, 1998), p. 133; Andrew R. Holmes, 'The Ulster Revival of 1859: causes, controversies and consequences' in *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, lxiii, no. 3 (2012), pp 488–515; Mark Doyle, 'Visible differences: the 1859 Revival and communal identity in Belfast' in Mervyn Busteed, Frank Neal and Jon Tonge (eds), *Irish Protestant identities* (Manchester, 2008), pp 141–54.

[52] *Daily Express*, 25 Nov. 1875; *Warder and Dublin Weekly Mail*, 27 Nov. 1875.

[53] *Dublin Evening Mail*, 25 Nov. 1875.

[54] Ella Sheppard diary, 25 Nov. 1875 (F.U.S.C., Jubilee Singers Archive (Original), box 6, folder 12).

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response, as Sheppard recorded, 'the audience fairly shook the building with applause & some called out "Fenians, Fenians"'.[55] The incident suggested that not all who heard the singers held the same loyalist political views as their sponsors; indeed, considering the ways political views tended to align with religious identities in Ireland, it is likely that there were some Catholics in among the hissing 'Fenians'. Nevertheless, the deafening response clearly demonstrated which side of the divide most of the audience were on.

A few days later, in Belfast, the singers once again edged up to Ireland's sectarian divide when they attended a service at St Enoch's Presbyterian Church, the largest Protestant church in Belfast and the headquarters of the Presbyterian firebrand, 'Roaring' Hugh Hanna. Hanna had been at the centre of Belfast's sectarian riots since the 1850s, and in 1872, St Enoch's itself became a flashpoint when a group of men enlisted by Hanna to defend the church began throwing stones at a nationalist procession.[56] Hanna was part of the extremist minority of evangelicals whose '[a]ggressively negative and socially divisive' anti-Catholicism often put them at odds with their own churches but brought them considerable influence with working-class Protestants.[57] It is unclear whether the Jubilee Singers were aware of his reputation, but nothing of the fire-breathing variety seems to have occurred during their visit. 'The service was two long hours & very tedious,' recorded Sheppard, but the choir, at least, was interesting: 'one of the best, so far as spirit & life are concerned I have heard in these countries.' Later that day, the Jubilee Singers performed at a 'united Sabbath-school service' at St Enoch's. The building was 'filled in every part,' Sheppard wrote, 'both galleries back to the wall, & all the aisles were filled with standing persons'.[58]

These tours were arduous, but they were not all work. On the way back to Dublin, Sheppard and Robinson met two 'very agreeable' gentlemen named Wilson and Lindsay who offered to take them sightseeing. They signed autographs for the men and gave them their address at the fashionable Morrison's Hotel. Shortly after arriving at the hotel, they were amused to receive a pair of scissors from one of the men to replace a pair Sheppard had lost on the train. The next day, Wilson sent a servant to show them round Dublin. They visited the Masonic Lodge, the National Library and the museum of the Royal Dublin Society before Sheppard became weary, and they returned to the hotel.[59] The singers left Ireland soon thereafter.

V

The Jubilee Singers' longest Irish tour occurred between late November and mid December 1876. This time, in addition to Dublin, Belfast and Derry, they visited several smaller towns around Ulster, as well as Bray, south of Dublin. Dublin was their main theatre of operation: they gave eight performances there, including

[55] Ibid.

[56] Mark Doyle, *Communal violence in the British Empire: disturbing the pax* (London, 2016), pp 63–5.

[57] David Hempton and Myrtle Hill, *Evangelical Protestantism in Ulster society, 1740–1890* (New York, 1992), pp 123–4.

[58] Ella Sheppard diary, 28 Nov. 1875 (F.U.S.C., Jubilee Singers Archive (Original), box 6, folder 12); *Northern Whig*, 29 Nov. 1875.

[59] Ibid., 2, 3 Dec. 1875.

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several appearances at another evangelical convention. There was a brief negotiation with the Catholic proprietor of the Cork Opera House about a possible concert there, but the proprietor was hesitant because, in the words of the troupe's agent, he did not want 'anything of the "Moody and Sanky" [sic] order', adding that he 'rather thought of [the Jubilee Singers] as a humbug'. In the event, the venue did not suit the Jubilee Singers, either, for it had a smoking room, a bar and 'pictures of actresses', which made it altogether too secular for their purposes. They never did make it to Cork.[60]

As this incident suggests, by now some Catholics were coming to regard the Jubilee Singers with suspicion. Shortly after arriving, Robinson told her fiancé that the 'common people' in Dublin were 'afraid' to come to their concerts because their priests were warning them away.[61] This may have been mere rumour, but it is supported by a later claim by Frederick Loudin, the troupe's bass and chief spokesman, that the singers stayed mostly in the Protestant-majority northern counties because 'they feared that the towns and cities where Roman Catholicism predominated would not give paying audiences'.[62] Catholic suspicions of the singers would not have been unreasonable by this time. Since they had begun touring abroad in 1873, the singers had publicly associated with some of the most prominent anti-Catholic evangelicals in the United Kingdom: not only Hugh Hanna in Belfast but also Charles Spurgeon in London and, during this third Irish tour, Rev. S. M. Dill, a Ballymena Presbyterian who had once published a screed denouncing the Papacy as 'The Beast, The Great Red Dragon, The Great Whore, The Mother of Harlots and Abominations of the Earth, The Man of Sin', and other biblical epithets.[63] The singers had also performed at evangelical conventions whose purposes were, in part, to proselytise Catholics, although there is no evidence that they engaged in this activity themselves. In fact, there was very little effort to reach out to the Irish masses at all. Unlike in Britain, there were no impromptu open-air performances, no concerts at orphanages, asylums, or prisons — little, in short, that would have brought them into sustained contact with the Catholic poor, nor, apart from their occasional appearances at Sunday schools, even the Protestant poor. They did give one free performance in Dublin for 'Arab and Gutter Children' arranged by the philanthropist Thomas Barnardo, but Barnardo was an evangelical, even if the children were probably not.[64] Whether the singers eschewed more robust engagement with the Irish poor because they feared opposition from Catholics, or because their Protestant hosts kept them away, or for reasons of time and convenience, the result was that the Jubilee Singers had less contact with the lower classes in Ireland than in Britain, and this likely reinforced the notion that their songs, and their mission, were not for everyone.

The advertising receipts and agent reports which make up, along with newspaper clippings and invitations, the bulk of the archival sources relating to the Irish tours

[60] L. R. Casey to E. M. Cravath, 17 Nov. 1876 (F.U.S.C., Jubilee Singers Archive (Original), box 4, folder 1).

[61] America Robinson to James Burrus, 29 Nov. 1876 (F.U.S.C., Jubilee Singers Archive (Original), box 1, folder 12).

[62] J. B. T. Marsh and Frederick J. Loudin, *The Jubilee Singers and their songs with supplement by F. J. Loudin* (London, 1903), p. 132. I would like to thank Lewis Defrates for pointing me to this source.

[63] Andrew R. Holmes, 'Uses', pp 152–3.

[64] *Freeman's Journal*, 24 Nov. 1876.

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likewise indicate a strong preference for Protestant audiences. In Belfast, their agents paid for advertising in Protestant or independent outlets the *Northern Whig*, *Belfast Morning News*, *Ulster Echo*, *Belfast Evening Telegraph* and *Belfast News Letter*, but not in the city's main Catholic organ, the *Ulster Examiner*. In Dublin, their reach was slightly more ecumenical: while they advertised in newspapers aimed at Protestants (*Daily Express*, *Evening Mail*, *Irish Times*), they also ran ads in the city's largest newspaper, the moderate nationalist *Freeman's Journal*, whose readership included both Catholics and Protestants.[65] Significantly, the *Freeman's Journal's* reports tended to be the most cursory.

There were two other aspects of the 1876 tour that would have strengthened the idea that the Jubilee Singers were taking sides in Ireland's religious divide. The first was the formal affiliation of the troupe with the International Order of Good Templars (I.O.G.T.), a temperance society that was proscribed by the Catholic Church for its resemblance to Freemasonry and which some Catholics accused of having a proselytising agenda.[66] At this time the I.O.G.T. was experiencing a fierce internal quarrel on the subject of race. Southern lodges in the United States, led by the Kentuckian John J. Hickman, were working to exclude Black people. Most lodges in the United Kingdom opposed such a policy, and so in late 1876, while the Jubilee Singers were touring Ireland, Hickman and other anti-Black Templars were in Britain trying to drum up support for their side. The Dublin branch's invitation to the Jubilee Singers to form their own lodge was an effort to oppose Hickman and align Irish Templarism with the pro-integration faction. In his speech marking the occasion, Loudin proclaimed his delight at finding himself 'standing in the presence of a band of temperance reformers who recognised *no distinction* of colour, but who, looking only at the soul, welcomed into their midst *all* who were exposed to the dangers of the drink'.[67] It was not a sectarian motive, then, but an anti-racist one that drew the singers into the I.O.G.T. To any Catholic looking on from the outside, however, this distinction may not have been apparent.

The second development that reinforced the identification of the Jubilee Singers with evangelical interests, and incidentally with anti-Catholic interests, was their ever-strengthening embrace of African missions. Since at least 1868, there had been those at Fisk University who advocated training students for this purpose, but the project really came into focus in 1875, when it was decided that the proceeds from the Jubilee Singers' concerts would go toward constructing a campus building named Livingstone Missionary Hall, after the beloved Scottish explorer and missionary David Livingstone, which would be used to train missionaries for Africa.[68] This was one of the themes struck at a fundraising breakfast held for the Jubilee Singers at Morrison's Hotel in Dublin on 14 December 1876. The gathering was not a concert, although the Jubilee Singers did sing a couple of hymns, but rather a series of addresses by singers Frederick Loudin and Thomas Rutling, the troupe's manager George White, Fisk President Cravath and assorted local dignitaries. Alongside praise for Fisk University's work among American freedmen,

[65] Financial records and agent reports (F.U.S.C., Jubilee Singers Archive (Original), box 7, folders 14, 21 and 22).

[66] *Freeman's Journal*, 25 Feb. 1873, 17 Feb. 1874.

[67] *Londonderry Sentinel*, 7 Dec. 1876.

[68] James A. Quirin, '"Her sons and daughters are ever on the altar": Fisk University and missionaries to Africa, 1866–1937' in *Tennessee Historical Quarterly*, lx, no. 1 (2001), pp 16–37.

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there was much talk of Africa. Especially significant was White's speech, as reported by the *Daily Express*:

> He could tell the Protestant people of Ireland that there was no time to be lost in this matter [of evangelising Africa]. Already insidious agents were endeavouring to educate freed slaves, with the view of endeavouring to subjugate Africa to Papal domination, after millions of Protestant [money?] had been spent in the work of civilization.[69]

This was probably a reference both to the Catholic mission at Bagamoyo, Zanzibar, and to ongoing Portuguese incursions along the East African coast. It reflected a feeling among many evangelicals that if they did not hurry up with their own missions, they would cede the ground to their Catholic rivals.

One final episode also had an oblique connection to missions. In December 1876, somebody — probably one of the men she had met on the train to Dublin the previous year — proposed marriage to America Robinson. She dutifully reported the incident to her fiancé:

> A young man proposed to me in Dublin. I have known him one year & without my knowledge he says that he has loved me all that time. Four years ago he loved a young girl who died & when he saw me he said that I bore such a striking resemblance to her that he loved me unconsciously at first sight. I told him that my love was engaged & therefore I could not return his. He told me that he resolved when he asked me, that if I refused him he would never ask another woman to be his wife, & now he has written to London to engage himself as a missionary & is expecting to be sent out to he knows not where, any day.[70]

This was not the only marriage proposal that a Jubilee Singer received in Europe, but it does seem to have been the only one in Ireland. It is an interesting indication of the extent to which some of their 'Irish friends' had come to accept and admire them. Whoever this young man was, he seems to have been willing to endure whatever difficulties such a marriage would have presented on account of Robinson's race, although it is noteworthy that she was among the most light-skinned of the singers. That his contingency plan was to run off to become a missionary suggests that he was fired with the same evangelical zeal that fired the Jubilee Singers. Perhaps he hoped to take Robinson with him to Africa.

VI

What did Irish audiences make of the Jubilee Singers? To judge from newspaper reviews, advertisements, letters and speeches, the chief attraction of their concerts was the promise of hearing 'authentic' Black songs from 'authentic' Black bodies. According to America Robinson, during their performances at the second evangelical convention in Dublin in 1876, the doors had to be locked to prevent people

[69] *Daily Express*, 15 Dec. 1876, in the Fisk Jubilee Singers Scrapbook (F.U.S.C., Jubilee Singers Archive (Original), box 7, folder 3).

[70] America Robinson to James Burrus, 22 Dec. 1876 (F.U.S.C., Jubilee Singers Archive (Original), box 1, folder 12).

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leaving once the singing was over.[71] This suggests that the messages behind the music, often propounded in speeches before and after the singing, were of secondary importance. Irish audiences were not unique in this respect. Audrey Fisch has described the 'voyeuristic interest' British audiences took in American slavery and the ways visiting African Americans, including abolitionists, 'formed part of a string of non-white Others, each paraded in its turn in front of the British public as an exotic spectacle.'[72] Helen Metzelaar claims that many Dutch people came to hear the Fisk Jubilee Singers because they were 'simply eager to see people with a darker skin'; Katie Graber identifies 'novelty and otherness' as the main focus of audiences in America and England, whose expectations had been shaped by minstrel shows; and Kira Thurman describes German audiences receiving the Jubilee Singers like 'exotic jewels beaming brightly on stage'.[73] Voyeuristic fascination need not preclude sympathy, of course, nor need audiences' hunger for spectacle prevent them from finding genuine spiritual fulfilment from a Jubilee Singers concert. But it does seem likely that what brought Irish audiences through the doors of a church or concert hall was not so much religious sympathy or anti-slavery conviction but rather simple curiosity and, perhaps, a liking for religious music.

The singers' agents understood this. By the second tour, they had developed a sophisticated publicity machine that included newspaper ads, church visits, handbills and reading material supplied to local shops and sold after concerts. A typical ad in Belfast's *Northern Whig* ran, 'THE JUBILEE SINGERS, Emancipated Slaves, Students of Fisk University, Nashville, Tennessee, U.S.A., will give a SERVICE OF SONG … consisting principally of the QUAINT HYMNS, OR "SPIRITUALS," Used by them in their DAYS OF SLAVERY.'[74] The ad made no mention of the fact that they were raising money for the education of American freedmen or African missions, nor of the fact that some members of the troupe had never been enslaved. Instead, it enticed audiences with the promise of direct contact with emissaries from the American plantation, something that the blackface minstrel shows — whose ads frequently appeared in the same newspapers — could not offer.

As far as audiences were concerned, how the singers looked could be just as important as how they sounded. This was evident as early as the first tour, when Alexander Ayton photographed the singers and sold the portraits from his Derry studio.[75] On later tours, the troupe's agents would supply the photographs themselves. 'Our readers,' wrote the *Portadown & Lurgan News* in 1876,

> have seen the photographs of the Singers either in the shop windows or in the books which were so energetically offered for sale during the evening; and no personal description is necessary … They have a genial and interesting

[71] Ibid., 29 Nov. 1876.

[72] Audrey A. Fisch, *American slaves in Victorian England: abolitionist politics in popular literature and culture* (Cambridge, 2000), p. 8; Audrey A. Fisch, '"Negrophilism" and British nationalism: the spectacle of the Black American abolitionist' in *Victorian Review*, xix, no. 2 (1993), p. 21. See also Sarah Meer, 'Competing representations: Douglass, the Ethiopian Serenaders, and ethnic exhibition in London' in Rice and Crawford (eds), *Liberating sojourn*, pp 141–65.

[73] Metzelaar, 'Hefty', p. 79; Graber, 'Strange', p. 36; Thurman, 'Singing', p. 449.

[74] *Northern Whig*, 3 Nov. 1876.

[75] *Londonderry Sentinel*, 13 Sept. 1873.

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> appearance; and manifest in all their actions and in every animated expression of countenance, a keen intelligence.[76]

The singers' skin tones were a source of particular fascination. A concert review in the *Ballymena Advertiser* noted: 'Some of the females … were as white as many in this country, and but for the woolly hair, which was common to all of them, there was little trace of negro blood discernible; the others were unmistakable daughters of Ham.'[77] The *Freeman's Journal* was also interested in the light-skinned singers, calling attention to the 'half-a-dozen pretty young quadroons or creole girls in bright costumes' whom the singers had recently 'introduced into their dusky line'.[78]

When it came to the music, the same words appeared over and over: weird, grotesque, quaint, beautiful, pretty, sweet, heartfelt. Some reviewers recognised the effort that went into the performances, but many assumed that such sounds must spring naturally from African bodies. A letter to the *Coleraine Chronicle* put it thus: 'Their melodies, in their plaintiveness and passion, suggest the canebrake and the swamp — the driver's lash and scowl. They are the heart-utterances of the big children whose swarthy skins sweated under the severe yoke of serfdom.'[79] This was typical of White responses to Black music generally, which posited, in Ronald Radano's words, 'a natural creativity that stemmed from a pre-conscious, intuitive level'.[80] How, then, to account for their obvious technical proficiency? Some simply registered surprise. 'The singers used no book of words or music sheet, and the accuracy with which they rendered both was truly surprising,' wrote the *Ulster Gazette*.[81] The *Newry Reporter* offered the following faint praise: 'The most noticeable features in their performance is their singing so perfectly in tune, without instrumental aid, and their distinct articulation of the words.'[82]

Not all reviewers were quite so condescending. In November 1875, the *Belfast News Letter* accurately speculated that a good deal of work had gone into the performances:

> It is quite evident that their training has not been of the ordinary class … The music sounds somewhat strange to the ear at first, but as you listen it becomes sweeter. There are some turns of a very difficult character in many of the hymns, but the Jubilee Singers have quite mastered the difficult parts, and they sang last night with a refined taste and skill as have seldom been excelled in the Ulster Hall.[83]

[76] *Portadown & Lurgan News*, 2 Dec. 1876, in Fisk Jubilee Singers Scrapbook (F.U.S.C., Jubilee Singers Archive (Original), box 7, folder 3).
[77] *Ballymena Advertiser*, 9 Dec. 1876, in ibid.
[78] *Freeman's Journal*, 25 Nov. 1876.
[79] Letter from Drummond Grant dated 30 Nov. 1876, *Coleraine Chronicle* (n.d.), in Fisk Jubilee Singers Scrapbook (F.U.S.C., Jubilee Singers Archive (Original), box 7, folder 3).
[80] Ronald Radano, 'Hot fantasies: American modernism and the idea of Black rhythm' in Ronald Radano and Philip V. Bohlman (eds), *Music and the racial imagination* (Chicago, 2000), p. 464.
[81] *Ulster Gazette*, 9 Dec. 1876, in Fisk Jubilee Singers Scrapbook (F.U.S.C., JSA, box 7, folder 3).
[82] *Newry Reporter*, 14 Dec. 1876, in ibid.
[83] *Belfast News Letter*, 30 Nov. 1875.

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The *Ballymena Advertiser* went slightly further, arguing that 'a race capable while in bondage of developing such qualities, as these possess, are not inferior to white men, if placed in equally favourable circumstances'. Indeed, the Jubilee Singers' stage presence was better than that of many White singers: 'In their manner there was nothing at all theatrical, their behaviour was quite becoming and modest, and their action throughout quite natural and unaffected, which is more than we can say for some white people who sing at our concerts.' Significantly, this reviewer also recognised that the 'quaint and curious songs' were of the slaves' own creation: they were 'not composed for, but by, the slaves themselves in the days of bondage', and, therefore, were worthy of respect.[84]

Such views were in the minority, however. Most reviewers, while admiring the music, described it as rooted in nature, the body and the emotions. As such, it was alien to European standards of taste.[85] They struggled to find an appropriate frame of reference. Some compared it to blackface minstrel shows: 'a Christy Minstrel circle struck suddenly serious, with a grand piano in place of bones.'[86] Some went for literary comparisons: 'The weird, plaintiff [sic] character of the songs forcibly reminds one of Edgar Allen Poe's strange compositions.'[87] Others simply asserted that the music was impossible to judge according to normal (European) criteria. An effusive review in the *Portadown & Lurgan News* maintained,

> We are not sure that the music would bear to be judged by any very rigid application of the technicalities of art; but the very freshness of it, the very piquancy of its charm silences criticism. It is beautiful with a beauty which is not addressed to the critical intellect, but which goes straight to the heart, touching it into an infinite tenderness.

This reviewer concluded that the music must be accepted 'as the untutored utterances' of former slaves, sometimes discoloured by 'profane expressions' but on the whole exhibiting 'a pervasive spirit of earnestness, purity, and piety'.[88] Stirring, then, but not quite art.

It is impossible to know whether ordinary audience members' experiences aligned with these reviews. Surely a mixture of curiosity, sympathy, Christian sentiment and essentialist notions about Africans informed most people's responses, but the balance of these elements would have varied from person to person. The most we can safely say is that the Jubilee Singers offered Irish audiences an alternative image of Black culture to the one they typically encountered. It was an image that was more sophisticated, more dignified and, for all of the talk of its weirdness, more European than that offered by the minstrel shows, and it may have served to counteract some of the racist stereotypes the latter promulgated. But, the Jubilee Singers did not escape racial stereotyping altogether. For all that their faith made them familiar to Irish Protestants, and for all that their causes were ones that many Irish evangelicals embraced (to the extent that at least one Irishman could

[84] *Ballymena Advertiser*, 9 Dec. 1876, in Fisk Jubilee Singers Scrapbook (F.U.S.C., Jubilee Singers Archive (Original), box 7, folder 3).

[85] P. A. Anderson, *Deep river*, pp 17–23; Waksman, *Live music*, pp 109–10.

[86] *Freeman's Journal*, 25 Nov. 1876.

[87] *Coleraine Constitution*, 9 Dec. 1876, in Fisk Jubilee Singers Scrapbook (F.U.S.C., Jubilee Singers Archive (Original), box 7, folder 3).

[88] *Portadown & Lurgan News*, 2 Dec. 1876, in ibid.

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envision joining American Robinson in holy matrimony), there remained the fact that the Jubilee Singers were Black and their Irish admirers were not.

VII

Just as it is difficult to recover the responses of individual audience members, it is also difficult to gauge the long-term impact the Jubilee Singers had on Irish people's thoughts and behaviour. There is no doubt that they managed to shift at least some people's views. At the end of their last tour, the troupe received a letter and a donation of £10 from one E. G. McGeorge, who had heard them perform in Newry and Dublin and afterward read one of the books about their mission that they sold at their concerts. He had also met them on a train the previous year. 'One cannot but feel that a grand attempt is being made by a Race to raise itself', he wrote,

> and assert its dignity and manhood, and that every encouragement should be extended. The enterprise of the Jubilee Singers will do more than has been done by all past agencies to clear the minds and hearts of Europeans on the subject, and break down prejudices — the growth of centuries. For myself I can say my intercourse, slight as it was, with the members of your company, has done me an immensity of good, and given me quite new views.[89]

How many other Irish people came to hold such 'new views' — and how long those views lasted once they acquired them — can only be a matter of speculation. But, as the first direct contact many Irish people had with African Americans, it seems reasonable to credit the singers with inspiring at least a few individual conversions of the sort McGeorge described. On the other hand, the geographical and theological constraints under which the singers operated ensured that their influence was not as great as it might have been. Indeed, their strong identification with Irish Protestants may well have contributed to a sense among Catholics that the uplift of emancipated African Americans was a cause with which they need not bother. Whether this was the case, however, must also be a matter of speculation.

The impression Ireland left on the singers is easier to ascertain. Judging from the letters they wrote and the memories they recorded, many of which are preserved in Fisk University's Special Collections, their enthusiastic reception in Ireland helped them appreciate that not all Irish people were as prejudiced as the ones they had encountered in America. I have already noted Ella Sheppard's comment that before coming to Ireland they 'had always supposed that the Irish were our natural enemies'. Nevertheless, the fact that most of the people they encountered in Ireland were Protestants left room for continuing suspicion of the Catholic masses, and, as we saw in America Robinson's preference for the 'real ladies & gentlemen' over the 'lower classes of the Irish', even a little disdain. Such attitudes may have been reinforced by the anti-Catholicism they encountered among some of their evangelical hosts. Moreover, it is worth noting that the singers did not retain uniformly glowing memories of Ireland. Speaking at Tuskegee Institute in 1927, Mabel Lewis remembered arriving in Belfast to find people 'sitting on the tops of their houses and in the trees, so we were hustled along to the hotel and when we got there, it was so crowded about the hotel that we could not get in. So the proprietor let the hose on full force on the people and it didn't take them many minutes

[89] Letter from E. G. McGeorge, 20 Dec. 1876, in ibid.

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to get out of the way.' We might see this as simply an amusing illustration of the singers' popularity, but Lewis drew another conclusion: 'This will show you how ignorant some of them are.'[90]

And yet it bears emphasising that, as elsewhere in Europe, Ireland erected no barriers to where the singers could dine or sleep, nor did the singers report any overt racism. America Robinson, writing from England, told her fiancé that 'there is not an atom of prejudice here', and it is likely she would have said the same about Ireland.[91] This does not mean that Ireland was free of racism, but it is a reminder that just because we can see evidence of racial stereotyping in the words of Irish concert reviewers does not mean that the singers experienced their reception this way. Certainly the 'othering' they experienced in Ireland was nothing compared to what they experienced in the United States. They might have travelled freely around the island, even to its most Catholic regions, if they had the will to.

That they did not see more of the country was, as I have been arguing, at least partly a consequence of their evangelical faith. This ensured that they rarely left Ireland's Protestant enclaves and existed in a state of mutual suspicion with Catholics. The ease with which the Jubilee Singers slotted into Ireland's religious divisions sounds an oddly discordant note in a story that is often told as an uplifting tale of struggle and courage, but it should not surprise us. To highlight the troupe's anti-Catholic leanings is merely to highlight the centrality of anti-Catholicism to the evangelical tradition from which they emerged. It is also to remind ourselves of the antipathy many African Americans had developed toward the Irish on account of the latter's antipathy toward them in America. It is, in short, a way of insisting upon the troupe's embeddedness within their historical circumstances, circumstances that also delimited the outlook and behaviour of their evangelical hosts. By all means should we find hope and inspiration in the Jubilee Singers' story, but so, too, should we see them as real men and women with the usual share of human and historical limitations. Like all of us, they could only sing the songs that they knew.

Appendix A: the Fisk Jubilee Singers' appearances in Ireland, 1873–6[92]

1873

2 September: Ulster Hall, Belfast
5 September: First Presbyterian Church, Derry
8 September: First Presbyterian Church, Derry
9 September: Ulster Hall, Belfast
12 September: Ulster Hall, Belfast

[90] 'Excerpts from talks of Mrs. Mabel Lewis Imes, at Tuskegee', History of the Jubilee Singers, Ms. notebook, written 10 Oct. 1927 (F.U.S.C., Jubilee Singers Archive (Original), box 1, folder 1).

[91] Quoted in Ward, *Dark*, p. 293.

[92] Dates and locations taken from advertisements and reviews in the following newspapers: *Belfast News Letter*, *Londonderry Sentinel*, *Northern Whig*, *Dublin Evening Mail*, *Irish Times*, *Freeman's Journal*, *Daily Express*, *Ulster Gazette*, *Belfast Weekly News*, *Ballymena Observer*, *Coleraine Chronicle*, *Londonderry Journal*, and *Newry Telegraph*. Dates and locations for 1876 are also found in the financial records and agent reports in F.U.S.C., Jubilee Singers European Tour Collection, box 7, folder 14. These records indicate that the singers spent one night in Dundalk, but they do not appear to have performed there.

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1875
24 November: Metropolitan Hall, Dublin
25 November: Rotundo, Dublin
26 November: Exhibition Palace, Dublin
28 November: St. Enoch's Presbyterian Church, Belfast
29 November: Ulster Hall, Belfast
30 November: First Presbyterian Church, Derry
1 December: Ulster Hall, Belfast
3 December: Exhibition Palace, Dublin

1876
22 November: Exhibition Palace, Dublin
23 November: Exhibition Palace, Dublin
24 November: Exhibition Palace, Dublin (morning and evening concerts)
27 November: Assembly Rooms, Bray
28 November: Exhibition Palace, Dublin
30 November: Thomas Street Wesleyan Church, Portadown
1 December: Tontine Buildings, Armagh
4 December: Lisburn (location unknown)
5 December: Ulster Hall, Belfast
6 December: First Presbyterian Church, Ballymena
7 December: Town Hall, Coleraine
8 December: First Presbyterian Church, Derry
11 December: Downshire Road Presbyterian Church, Newry
12 December: Ulster Hall, Belfast
13 December: Exhibition Palace, Dublin
14 December: Exhibition Palace, Dublin
15 December: Exhibition Palace, Dublin

Appendix B: sample repertoires

The repertoire of the Fisk Jubilee Singers changed over time. Normally they sang a mixture of sacred and secular songs, although they sometimes omitted the secular songs when performing in houses of worship. The usual musical accompaniment was a piano played by Ella Sheppard, who also sang and arranged many of the songs.[93]

1 December 1875: Ulster Hall, Belfast[94]
'Keep Me from Sinking Down'
'The Lord's Prayer'
'Going to Ride up in the Chariot'
'We Shall Walk through the Valley in Peace'
'In the River of Jordan'
'Wrestling Jacob'

[93] For transcriptions of the Jubilee Singers' songs, see J. B. T. Marsh, *The story of the Jubilee Singers; with their songs* (Boston, 1881). On the development of their repertoire and performance technique, see Graham, *Spirituals*, chapters 2–3.
[94] *Belfast Evening Telegraph*, 2 Dec. 1875.

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‘Hard Trials’
‘Been a Listening’
‘Turn Back Pharaoh’s Army’
‘The Bells’
‘Don’t You Grieve after Me’
‘Is It All of Life to Live’
‘He Rose from the Dead’
‘Love Feast in Heaven’
‘Oh! Wasn’t that a Wide River’
‘I’ve Been Redeemed’

30 November 1876: Thomas Street Wesleyan Church, Portadown[95]
‘Steal Away’
‘The Lord’s Prayer’
‘Those Distant Chimes’
‘Pharaoh’s Army’
‘Gideon’s Band’
‘I’m Rolling through an Unfriendly World’
‘The Merry Millwheel’
‘The Bells’
‘Rocked in the Cradle of the Deep’
‘Peter Go Ring Them Bells’
‘Wrestling Jacob’
‘He Rose’
‘Swing Low, Sweet Chariot’
‘Rise and Shine’
‘I’m Troubled in Mind’

[95] *Portadown & Lurgan News*, 2 Dec. 1876, in Fisk Jubilee Singers Scrapbook (F.U.S.C., Jubilee Singers Archive (Original), box 7, folder 3).

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