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Passing for White: Race, Religion, and the Healy Family, 1820-1920 (review)

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James M. O'Toole. *Passing for White: Race, Religion, and the Healy Family, 1820–1920*. Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 2002. 286 pp. ISBN 1-55849-341-7, \$34.95.

Scholars looking for heroes in the history of nineteenth century American race relations don't usually turn to the Catholic Church. The common Catholic practice of tolerating slavery itself, if not directly the trading or trafficking in slaves, has excluded most prominent nineteenth century American Catholics from the pantheon of abolitionist heroes. Indeed, not only did many Catholics own slaves in the early years of American history, but Jesuit orders in the United States collectively owned slaves. James M. O'Toole's new book, *Passing for White: Race, Religion, and the Healy Family, 1820–1920*, doesn't argue that any new abolitionist medals need to be distributed, but it does offer a remarkable vision of how race and religion were uniquely intertwined in the nineteenth century. By exposing the history of the Healys, a family of mulatto slaves that rose to shockingly high positions in education, the coast guard, and—most significantly—the Catholic Church, O'Toole illustrates how class and religious affiliation can occasionally trump racial identity in the racially fractured world of the nineteenth century.

What is most remarkable about the success of the nine Healy siblings is that, for the most part, their racial origins were not exactly a secret. The President of Georgetown University, a celebrated Captain in the Coast Guard, a Bishop in Maine, a Rector of the Boston Cathedral, and a Convent's Mother Superior were all known to be of black origin—if not by all of their colleagues and parishioners, at least by their friends and their mentors. The children of the Healy Family (James, Hugh, Patrick, Sherwood, Eugene, Martha, Josephine, Eliza, and Michael) all managed to redefine themselves not necessarily as white, but as primarily Catholic Americans. With that, they both betrayed and surpassed fears and hopes that Black Americans at that time may have had about whether American identity could be self-created rather than imposed.

The clan's father was Michael Morris Healy, an Irish immigrant who arrived in rural Georgia in the 1820s. With financial acumen, good luck, productive soil, and the exploited labor of people he bought as slaves, Michael Healy Senior quickly rose to be one of the most wealthy and successful landowners in his region. He had nine children with Eliza Clark Healy, an African American whom he identified as his "woman." As an Irish Catholic it was not perhaps surprising that as he considered how to raise his children who were all legally slaves, he thought to send them North under the care and supervision of the Catholic Church. As O'Toole explains in one of the most insightful sections of his book, freeing a slave was virtually

impossible during the early half of the nineteenth century. Manumission was seen as disruptive to the fundamental codes of social order, and so, even if Healy had tried to free his slaves (including, one would hope, Eliza) in his will, the courts would almost certainly have voided his desires and sold the slaves off as part of his general estate. Healy thus smuggled his children North to a world in which their legal identity as slaves, if not their racial identity as mulattos, could be hidden.

It is here that this story becomes immensely complicated. Throughout most of their lives, the Healy siblings were as vulnerable as any other Blacks in the North to illegal kidnapping, or even more frightening, to being apprehended as criminals under the clauses of Fugitive Slave laws. Of course their wealth, connections, and increasing social and political prominence quickly made that possibility unimaginable, and it is the rapidity with which what should have been a very real possibility was *made* unimaginable that makes up the heart of O'Toole's study. The Healys' legal status as slaves was almost instantly eradicated. Their social status as mulattos was less completely erased—there is some evidence that the background of this family was known by some of their contemporaries—but it was certainly understood by the Healys to be an identity separate from that of their legal standing.

Michael Healy's decision to send his children North takes us into the world O'Toole handles best: the culture of Massachusetts Catholicism. For it was surely the contradictory culture of mid-century American Catholicism—both its seclusion and its social activism, its reverence for hierarchy and its devotion to sociability—as much as its theological truths that attracted the Healy family. The mass immigration of Irish men and women fleeing the Great Famine of the 1840s had just begun, and Catholics were still far from a dominant religion in Boston. Indeed, one of the most violent manifestations of anti-Catholicism had happened in 1834, when a Charlestown convent directly across the harbor from the city of Boston was burned to the ground. The rioters were fueled by Know-Nothing anti-immigrant politics, lurid tales of nuns imposing Gothic tortures on imprisoned young girls, and a general hatred of all that Catholicism represented. Michael Healy's thoughtful decision to place his young children in the hands of the Catholic Church could not, therefore, have been an easy one. Far more Protestant denominations of this time practiced interracial worship than Catholic congregations ever did, and as O'Toole points out, Michael Healy might easily have thought he risked throwing them out of the frying pan and into the fire.

Healy gambled, however, on Holy Cross, a boarding school and college newly founded in Worcester, Massachusetts. He enrolled his four older sons there, and boarded his daughter Martha with relatives of a local Catholic

bishop. Healy's gamble fully paid off: none of his children ever returned South again, except for Hugh, who returned briefly in 1851 to smuggle his youngest three siblings out of slavery after his parents' sudden deaths. Hugh brought five-year-old Josephine, three-year-old Eliza, and baby Eugene to Massachusetts, and arranged for them to be baptized as Catholics and boarded with Catholic families. Thanks to their inheritance, in an unspeakably ironic conundrum, the Healy siblings were now slave owners themselves. The older Healy brothers arranged to sell off their father's slaves just as they sold off the rest of his property, and with that gesture they effectively ended any public or private relationship with their history as slaves from Georgia.

While brother Hugh chose to graduate from Holy Cross and go into business in New York with a friend of his father's, the other three oldest brothers (James, Patrick, and Sherwood) chose to follow careers in the church. Each of them became ordained, and O'Toole spends much time and effort chronicling their various ascensions in the complex hierarchy of their Church. James became Bishop of Maine, Sherwood became the Rector of one of the most important Cathedrals in the United States, and Patrick became president of Georgetown University. This is where O'Toole's masterful analysis of American Catholicism begins to truly open up angles on American racial identity not usually marked out in the configurations of historical analysis. As he suggests, the illegitimacy of the Healy children, for example, was almost more of a problem than their racial heritage. Considerable subterfuge was used by Catholic mentors to help the Healys be ordained, as they tried to move along in their priestly careers.

O'Toole's well-researched study neglects some provocative aspects of the Healy story, but it is hard to fault him when he provides such a detailed and intensely researched analysis of their lives. He is at his most informative when discussing the nuances of Catholicism, and while his treatment of the African-American cultural politics of Boston at that time is minimal, it can be argued that the Healys' own disassociation from such politics justifies such neglect.

While O'Toole doesn't discuss it at any length, another appealing aspect of Catholicism to people of mixed race may well have been the celibacy associated with the priestly lifestyle. Sherwood, for example, was the darkest complected of the brothers, and it is clear from his own comments and the observations of others that Sherwood was not able to "pass" in any functional sense of the word. While there were certainly many instances of interracial marriages or relationships among the lower classes in the North, it is hard to envision Sherwood seeing any future for himself as a family man within the educational and class positions he was surrounded by. Marrying a Black woman would have ostracized him from the upper-middle class

Catholic world as much as marrying a White woman would. Surely opting for a career in which questions about his race would never be mixed with questions about his sexuality was not a coincidence. In the mid-nineteenth century, when sexual relationships across the races were fiercely opposed even by many of the most liberal abolitionists, it is hard to imagine Sherwood having chosen any other path. Similarly, it is not unreasonable to speculate that celibacy may have been part of the security offered by the Catholic Church for men of mixed race. While Hugh died unmarried in a freak boating accident at the age of twenty-one, it is notable that the two youngest brothers who did *not* opt for the life of bourgeois Catholicism, and who separated themselves drastically from the Catholic social world into which they were raised, did indeed get married. Michael became an important captain of the Coast Guard in Alaska—a prestigious position to be sure, but one dramatically distant from the standards of Catholic Boston. And while there are records that brother Eugene married, he basically ran off to California and became an alcoholic wastrel who died in penury. None of the brothers married and maintained a normal household within a world in which the sexuality of Black men was demonized.

As for the sisters, their problems with sexuality must have been vexed as well. All were raised Catholic, and while sister Martha eventually left her convent (where she studied to be a nun for ten years) and married a white Irish immigrant, the other two sisters became prominent nuns in their respective orders. Eliza was even twice appointed as a Superior to two different convents. With the signal exception of Martha, then, every one of the Healy children effectively separated himself or herself from the mainstream of American culture and its vexed ideologies of race and identity.

Brother Michael's career differed so drastically from the other brothers' that O'Toole's treatment of it as a separate chapter is justified, but one also wishes it had been woven into the fabric of the other chapters more as a point of comparison. For O'Toole asserts that Michael became "the most famous 'white man' in Alaska" (208). As captain of the most important ship in the region, he oversaw countless rescue operations, and regularly served as sort of a floating government official, visiting secluded settlements through the region and dispensing official and unofficial government supervision and enforcement. Twice court-martialed for drunkenness and improper punishments of his subordinates, his career ended in disgrace. Yet, as O'Toole points out, "at no time during any of these proceedings and all the publicity surrounding them was mention made of his racial background" (214). One officer was quoted as saying that Michael Healy had no business serving as a government officer because he was a Catholic, and an angry passenger

testified that he was “a God Damned Irishman” (214), but like the rest of his family, Michael ended his career as a white man.

Passing for White offers more than just a study of the vexed and ever moving color line dividing America. It presents a story of lines crossed and mapped out in a dizzyingly multidimensional field of class and race. This work offers us new tools for interrogating the very notion of passing—not so much a question of how was it done (although the role of the Catholic Church as ally is certainly a compelling tale)—but more a question of how passing for others can also be passing for oneself. Some of the most poignant moments of the text are when O’Toole chronicles casual racism as expressed by the brothers themselves. The Healys aren’t always sympathetic or appealing figures—they tend towards priggishness, and their complete identification as upper-class white Catholics unconcerned with the civil rights of Americans of color reveals in them an often tragic lack of imagination. How could the Healys, every one of them legally a slave, be relatively disengaged from the Civil War? They were staunch supporters of the preservation of the Union, and they exhibited little interest in the eradication of slavery. James Healy, for example, was more concerned that Jesuit properties in Maryland were being used as hospitals without church compensation than he was with the potential liberation of millions of enslaved Americans. Another stark example of this total identification with the white establishment can be found when a black seminarian looked to the Bishop of Maine, James Healy, for assistance with placement, only to be told that there weren’t enough black people in Maine to make him a useful representative of the Church. For Healy, presumably, only a black congregation would take a black priest seriously. And yet, perhaps these instances demonstrate precisely how in the luxury of their disengagement, their comfortable and totalizing identification of themselves as white, that the Healys’ truly American triumph of self-definition can be recognized.

Susanna Ashton