



Devotion to the Adopted Country: U.S. Immigrant Volunteers in the Mexican War

Tyler V. Johnson

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In *Devotion to the Adopted Country*, Tyler V. Johnson looks at the efforts of America's Democratic Party and Catholic leadership to use the service of immigrant volunteers in the U.S.–Mexican War as a weapon against nativism and anti-Catholicism. Each chapter focuses on one of the five major events or issues that arose during the war, finishing with how the Catholic and immigrant community remembered the war during the nativist resurgence of the 1850s and in the outbreak of the Civil War. Johnson's book uncovers a new social aspect to military history by connecting the war to the larger social, political, and religious threads of antebellum history.

Having grown used to the repeated attacks of nativists upon the fidelity and competency of the German and Irish immigrants flooding into the United States, Democratic and Catholic newspapers vigorously defended the adopted citizens they valued as constituents and congregants. These efforts frequently consisted of arguments extolling the American virtues of the recent arrivals, pointing to their hard work, love of liberty, and willingness to sacrifice for their adopted country.

However, immigrants sometimes undermined this portrayal by prioritizing their ethnic and/or religious identities over their identities as new U.S. citizens. Even opportunities seemingly tailor-made for the defenders of Catholicism and the nation's adopted citizens could go awry. When the supposedly well-disciplined Irish volunteers from Savannah brawled with soldiers from another Georgia company on a Rio Grande steamboat, the fight threatened to confirm the worst stereotypes of the nation's new Irish citizens. In addition, although the Jesuits John McElroy and Anthony Rey gained admirers in the army and in the rest of the country for their untiring care for wounded and sick soldiers in northern Mexico, anti-Catholic activists denounced them for taking advantage of vulnerable young men to win converts for the Church.

Using the letters and personal papers of soldiers, the diaries and correspondence of Fathers McElroy and Rey, Catholic and Democratic newspapers, and military records, Johnson illuminates the lives and actions of Catholic and immigrant volunteers and the debates over their participation in the war. Shedding light on this understudied and misunderstood facet of the war with Mexico, *Devotion to the Adopted Country* adds to the scholarship on immigration and religion in antebellum America, illustrating the contentious and controversial process by which immigrants and their supporters tried to carve out a place in U.S. society.

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