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THE LYNCHING OF JAMES CULLEN: ANOMALY OR ARCHETYPE?

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IN New England, lynching was so rare as to be remarkable in historical accounts. Between 1873 and 1903—the forty years that mark the greatest scourge of lynching in American history—New England recorded only two such incidents: Cullen’s death and that of another man, which actually proved to be an error in the historical record.¹ During this same period, lynchings were pandemic in many southern and western states. Beginning in 1882, the Chicago Tribune kept a tally of—and reported upon—lynchings throughout the United States, providing a statistical basis for other surveys of this frightening phenomenon throughout the nation. In a later survey, the Tuskegee Institute estimated that 4,730 lynchings took place in the United States between 1882 and 1951. With only one incident to contribute to the nationwide toll, New England clearly existed on the statistical periphery.

In his classic work, *Lynch Law*, James Elbert Cutler observed that no “psychic” connection existed between the lynching of whites in the West and blacks in the South.² “Psychic” is a curious choice of words. Cutler did not deny the presence of “race prejudice” as a motive for lynching, but he saw the phenomenon as deriving from other causes. He was convinced that the seeds of vigilante activity lay in the failures of Reconstruction. Cutler also contended that American laws were created to govern a “highly civilized and cultured race,” and were not easily applicable to “a race of inferior civilization.”³ Cutler’s work appeared in 1905, and his racist attitudes reflect the times in which he wrote. Modern statistical analysis indicts the South, where lynching is inextricably associated with

the maintenance of white supremacy. The West, on the other hand, directed much of its racial hatred onto Mexicans and Chinese, lynching them for essentially the same reasons that blacks were hanged in the South. Nor was the Northeast immune to racially motivated lynchings, for a black man was burned alive in Pennsylvania in the twentieth century.⁴

Obviously, removing the odium of racial hatred as a motivation for lynching is a difficult feat, in part because the overwhelming majority of lynching studies are focused on the South. But if the stain of racism were removed, there is evidence that a “psychic” connection actually did exist in many vigilante actions. Some remarkable similarities are evident in the causal factors related to lynching regardless of region. It must be stressed, however, that these factors are indeed psychic and visceral. Lynching, and the indignities and tortures to which victims of lynching were subjected, varies wildly. These punishments even vary by chronology. In the years prior to the Civil War, the act of lynching could refer to a flogging. In post-bellum America, lynching was more often associated with hanging, or even burning alive. If the Cullen lynching is examined in the context of the years after the Civil War, the incident very much resembles lynchings in the South and West. Far from an isolated incident, the Cullen lynching conforms to the archetype. To prove this, three factors will be examined: region, motivation, and justification.

In his own work on lynching, Frank Shay denounced the idea that lynchings only occurred in the “backwoods and rural districts of the South.” He contended that “climate and section do not make for lynch-executions any more than does the lack of theatres or motion picture houses, merry go-rounds and symphonic orchestras. There are few places in the United States where it is impossible to rouse a lynch minded mob, even though it may be frustrated by effective police action. The mob is lying dormant and needs but the spark of an overt act to bring it into snarling action.”⁵ Shay was basically correct. Lynchings occurred in urban areas from Atlanta to St. Louis, and even in New York City. Because the samples are wide-ranging, it is possible to contend that mobs could be aroused to murderous intent irregardless of geography or urban-rural differences. Like Cutler, Shay’s work on lynching was first published in 1905. He did not credit the sources from which he calculated his conclusions, but because they originated in 1882, his figures were almost certainly drawn from the *Chicago Tribune*. And in spite of Shay’s protestations, the fact remains that lynching was predominantly a rural occurrence. Studying lynching in the South during the years 1900-

1930, Arthur F. Raper determined that lynching was most common in sparsely populated areas. Raper also determined that the South was becoming increasingly isolated in regard to lynching in the twentieth century, and eminent historians of the region, such as C. Vann Woodward, support his analysis. At the beginning of that century, 18 percent of lynchings occurred outside the South; by the 1920s that figure was down to 5 percent.⁶

So how does all of this pertain to James Cullen? The majority of studies agree that six major offenses usually prompted lynchings: murder, rape, assault, arson, theft, and “desperadism.” There were also innumerable minor offenses that could lead to lynching. In the West, banditry—or “desperadism” in Shay’s terminology—was always a potential factor. But despite regional variations, murder and rape were the most common factors. Using the *Chicago Tribune’s* statistics, Cutler determined that murder was the crime that instigated most lynchings. Between 1882 and 1903, western states experienced 280 lynchings for murder, a figure well above theft, which resulted in some 200 lynchings. Examining figures from the South for those same years, and concentrating exclusively upon the lynching of whites, the total was 320 summary executions for murder, greatly exceeding the second-ranking cause of 60 lynchings for rape. So too, in the eastern states, murder was the determining factor in most lynchings; Cullen’s act of murder fits within the profile.⁷ But Cullen was not lynched in the Wild West or the racially charged South; he was hanged in the more “civilized” environs of the Northeast. How does an ostensibly orderly community rationalize the commission of an extra-legal act such as lynching?

In 1839, William Ellery Channing, the guiding spirit of Unitarianism, wrote that “undoubtedly there may be crimes, so unnatural, so terrible to a community, that a people may be forgiven if, deeming the usual forms of justice too slow, they assume the perilous office of inflicting speedy justice.”⁸ James Cullen’s crime was so monstrous that the Mapleton community reacted in horror and outrage. Through all inquiries into the phenomenon of lynching, the idea of a conservative, “virtuous” community reacting to an outrageous crime with a lynching is pervasive. Once again, this consistency transcends regional boundaries; Channing’s observation is constantly invoked, if not by name, then at least in spirit. In January 1930, commenting upon the torture and lynching of James Irwin, a black man, for the alleged murder of a sixteen-year-old white girl in Irwin County, Georgia, the *Macon Observer* opined: “But it is to be expected. When this kind of crime is committed,

whether it be in Georgia or Maine, men are going to see that the offender gets his punishment without waiting for the courts”—an insightful and chilling comment made almost sixty years after the Cullen incident.⁹

Do newspapers in Maine suggest themes particular to the community or region? Locally, the *Presque Isle Sunrise* vehemently denied any community involvement: “we have a ray of pleasure in saying that no citizen of Presque Isle is suspected of being a party to that mob.” After all, the paper continued, the lynching was committed seven miles from the town. The *Sunrise* had “not the remotest idea who the persons involved were,” and further, it wished “never to know.” The *Aroostook Times*, published in the shire town of Houlton, covered the events surrounding the murders and the lynching extensively, but offered no opinions or regrets. On May 8, the Bangor correspondent to the *Aroostook Times* wrote of events in the Queen City. He included the usual business and entertainment news, and then in closing wrote that the news of the events in Presque Isle had created a “sensation” in Bangor. The correspondent further hoped that Cullen’s fate would be “a wholesome lesson to all desperate characters.”¹⁰ The strongest negative reaction came from the *Kennebec Journal*, published in Augusta. In an editorial that did not equivocate, the *Journal* clearly stated that Cullen’s hanging was “an act for the most profound regret and severe reprobation. There is no decent apology for such an open defiance of the law....The law of the mob is wicked and dangerous....No community with a proper regards for the rights of life and property, where the courts are accessible, will resort to lynching.” The paper went on to compare Aroostook citizens to western settlers, who were “little more civilized than Indians.”¹¹

Papers outside Maine were strangely indifferent to the Cullen lynching. True to form, the *Chicago Tribune* published an account of the incident. And while the paper termed the affair a “Maine Tragedy,” it expressed no opinion regarding the manner of Cullen’s demise and pronounced no judgment upon the Presque Isle community or the vigilantes involved. The *Tribune* chose not to sensationalize the events that led up to Cullen’s lynching, and opted to simply relate the manner in which Hayden and Hubbard were dispatched. This is surprising because murder and mayhem sold newspapers, and the *Tribune* was not above giving a lavishly graphic recounting of the grisly details surrounding each homicide it reported. The day before Cullen’s hanging was reported, the *Tribune* had given the details of murders in Brooklyn and in southern Illinois. In the case of James Long of Brooklyn, readers were in-

formed that he had been shot with a shotgun while in bed. The blast had the effect of “blowing his head almost from his body and scattering his brains over the bed and floor.” The paper later related the story of a mass murder on a farm outside Kansas City, even describing the condition of the bodies exhumed in the nearby fields.¹²

Other dailies outside of Maine were equally restrained. In Cullen’s native province of New Brunswick, the *Saint John Morning Freeman* pronounced the lynching a “Dreadful Affair,” but declined to editorialize further. Also from Canada, the *Halifax Daily Chronicle* branded Cullen as an “assassin,” and proclaimed that the vigilantes had “assumed a fearful responsibility,” but any sense of impropriety was ameliorated by the knowledge that the vigilantes’ action was “approved of by a large portion of the community.” This pronouncement apparently satisfied whatever indignity, if any, the paper’s editor felt over the affair.¹³ The most overt and succinct reaction came from the *Boston Globe*. The *Globe* recapitulated the events surrounding Cullen’s case in two paragraphs, and then pronounced his lynching as very appropriate. In conclusion, the *Globe* trumpeted that “the voice of the people is: Served the murderer right (!).”¹⁴

A frequent contributing factor in lynchings was the presence of the “other”—the outsider. In the South, lynchings were most likely to occur in rural counties with scattered farms and a large proportion of transient blacks to white residents. Diffused towns characterized such counties, as did poor communications with the outside world and weak law enforcement.¹⁵ In isolated areas such as these, the population felt more threatened, less secure. And while these attributes have been used to describe the perfect atmosphere for lynching in the South, but they could just as well describe Aroostook County in 1873. Interestingly, Cullen was not the only transient. Two other particulars in the Cullen drama, Thomas Hubbard and John Swanbeck (or Swanbuck depending upon the source), were transplants to the community. Hubbard came from Somerset County, and Swanbeck from Prussia. However, in comparison to the contemptible Cullen, Hubbard was described in the papers as “a very worthy young man” and the only support of his widowed mother. Likewise, Swanbeck was depicted as “honest and pious.” Cullen, however, represented a threat to the fragile order of the Mapleton community. Born in Canada, he was an outsider without benefit of local intergenerational ties. In 1897, a black minister in Montgomery, Alabama wrote: “I speak from my own experience when I say that in the lynchings I have known about, the victims were always men in the community no

one could say a good word for. They came out from the slums at night, like the raccoon, and stole back again.”¹⁶

Dena Lynn Winslow York does a fine job of revealing how Cullen’s distasteful legacy blossomed into hateful legend through the medium of oral tradition. The process was aided, and even initiated by the local press. Within hours of Cullen’s demise, newspapers laid the groundwork for the perpetuation of the saga by citing his non-conformity and unpredictability. The papers reported that Cullen’s family was of unsavory reputation, and that when captured he had boasted that he had five brothers of equally foul temperament that would break him out of Houlton jail. Other newspapers in the state supported these observations. The *Bangor Commercial* informed its readers that Cullen was a “reckless and dangerous man,” while the *Kennebec Journal* opined that the murderer was a “hard character.”¹⁷ The *Lewiston Evening Journal* speculated that the wounds inflicted upon Hubbard and Hayden were “what a strong and perfectly reckless man could inflict with a sharp axe upon two defenceless (sic) men sleeping side by side.” Finally, in a sensationalized account calculated to thrill and shock, the *Presque Isle Sunrise* related that when Cullen confronted Bird and Swanbeck outside the cabin, he was “crazed by his infernal crime, brandished the axe reeking with gore and yelled like a madman.”¹⁸ That article was reprinted in several dailies around the state.

But newspaper accounts were after the fact, and can perhaps be viewed as attempts at rationalization. There was another factor to consider—one that further supports the contention that Cullen operated outside of the communal mainstream and was branded as a threat. Three of the men involved in the initial process of drawing up the warrant for James Cullen’s arrest—David Dudley, Amasa Howe, and Granville Hayden—were Presque Isle merchants. Of the three, Howe and Hayden were of modest resources, possessing personal property worth about \$1,000. Dudley was very successful by comparison; his personal property totaled about \$8,000, and in 1870 he held real estate valued at about \$10,000.¹⁹ It is neither difficult nor unreasonable to believe that these men were bound by a common interest that was linked to the economic well-being of the community. James Cullen, disruptive and “reckless,” was bad for business and a threat to property. Asking him to leave the area would have been a logical decision for these three men, and an important step towards the restoration of order.

One of the most interesting revelations about the events surrounding the Cullen affair is the fact that the men who hanged him were, by al-

most all accounts, disguised.²⁰ For the modern reader, this disclosure conjures up images of white hooded men performing their foul, extralegal deeds by the flickering light of sputtering torches. While this is a compelling stereotype, and one that clearly associates lynching with the American South, it is also a fallacious image. One of the greatest tragedies of lynching in the southern context is the fact that it was performed openly by men who felt no need to hide their faces.²¹ Their images still exist in photographs, smirking brazenly out at viewers across the years, and surrounding their kill as though they were hunters posing by some trophy. Lynchings were photographed, and post cards were created to commemorate the events. These postcards were openly sent through the United States Mail until the practice was halted.²² Although we have no description of their disguises, at least the citizens of Mapleton and Presque Isle had the decency to understand the gravity of their act, fear the consequences, and hide their faces.

There is one final aspect of the Cullen lynching that links it to others across the United States: the taking of souvenirs. We know from Dena York's essay that Cullen's head was claimed by a phrenologist. But there was another bizarre twist to the Cullen tale. In the *Aroostook Times* account of the Cullen affair, the following appeared as a footnote: "Mr. Harry Fellows, traveller for the firm of A.P. Tapley & Co., of Boston, has obtained the rope and limb of the tree on which the murderer, Cullen was hung, and had it with him at the Snell House, Tuesday. He will deposit these articles of curiosity in the Boston Museum."²³

Trophies were the currency of lynching. They served as evidence that the community had performed its civic duty. When the previously mentioned James Irwin was lynched, his fingers and toes were cut off, joint by joint, while he was still alive. The digits were then distributed to the crowd as gruesome keepsakes. Likewise, when Raymond Gunn was burned alive tied to a ridge-pole in Maryville, Missouri, the crowd later sifted through the ashes to find charred remains. True enough, the procurement of the bough that suspended Cullen is less disgusting than the collection of body parts, but both acts are psychologically disturbing and morbid.

Early in the twentieth century, examination of the causes and motivations for lynching was primarily the domain of sociologists, not historians. This was because historians in the United States were largely concerned with promoting consensus. Even sociologists such as James Elbert Cutler found it difficult to transcend the consensus barrier, as is evinced by his awkward insertion of the word "psychic" for racial. Fortu-

nately, historians have more recently begun to probe the constructs of race, class, and patriarchy for explanations. Their investigations help clarify the motivations behind the act.

Lynching in the United States served many purposes, from an open display of white solidarity to a tool of political repression. More often than not, African-Americans were the targets of lynching, and this held true across regional lines. But as Jacqueline Dowd Hall has noted, lynching could be far more than a vehicle for white supremacy. Lynching was also the agent of social and communal discipline, a warning not only to potential miscreants, but also an indelible reminder to those who witnessed or learned of the event.²⁴ As we have seen in the case of James Cullen, the press could very much be the conduit of that social enforcement by disseminating the message even further afield. In this context, Cullen's race becomes unimportant. His lynching becomes more than just a singular, isolated act; it provides evidence of a wider pattern of disturbing American behavior.

NOTES

1. Examining lynching over a thirty-year period, NAACP figures included the 1907 lynching of one Louis Higgins in Bancroft, Maine. In fact, Lewis Higgins was lynched on August 26, 1907 in Bancroft, Nebraska, for the murder of his employer and his wife: An object lesson on the dangers of placing too much faith in statistics. *Thirty Years of Lynching in the U.S., 1889-1918* (New York: Arno Press and the New York Times, 1969), p. 73; *Chicago Tribune*, August 26, 1907.

2. James Elbert Cutler, *Lynch Law: An Investigation into the History of Lynching in the United States* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Company, 1905), p. 186.

3. Cutler, *Lynch Law*, pp. 224-25.

4. Frank Shay, *Judge Lynch: His First Hundred Years* (Montclair, New Jersey: Patterson, Smith, 1969), p. iv; Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1987), pp. 241-42; Denis B. Downey and Raymond M. Hyser, *No Crooked Death: Coatsville, Pennsylvania, and the Lynching of Zachariah Walker* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991).

5. Shay, *Judge Lynch*, p. 84.

6. Arthur F. Raper, *The Tragedy of Lynching* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1933), p. iv; C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South, 1877-1913* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1971), pp. 351-52.

7. Cutler, *Lynch Law*, pp. 178-81.

8. Raper, *Tragedy of Lynching*, p. 194.
9. Cutler, *Lynch Law*, p. 194; Raper, *Tragedy of Lynching*, p. 147.
10. *Kennebec Journal*, May 3, 1873; *Aroostook Times*, May 8, 1873.
11. *Kennebec Journal*, May 3, 1873.
12. *Chicago Tribune*, May 5-10, 1873.
13. *Morning Freeman* (Saint John), May 3, 1873; *Morning Chronicle* (Halifax), May 6, 1873.
14. *Boston Globe*, May 3, 1873.
15. Edward L. Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 156-57.
16. Ayers, *The Promise of the New South*, p. 158.
17. *Bangor Commercial*, May 5, 1873; *Kennebec Journal*, May 3, 1873.
18. *Lewiston Evening Journal*, May 5, 1872.
19. *Ninth United States Census* (1870), Aroostook County, Reel #538.
20. Ibid.
21. James Allen, Hilton Als, John Lewis, Leon Litwack, eds., *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* (Santa Fe, New Mexico: Twin Palms Publishers, 2000).
22. The mailing of violent or sexual material through the United States mails was restricted in 1908 after a quadruple lynching in Kentucky. Unfortunately, postcards of lynchings continued to surface periodically into the 1930s. See *New York Times*, August 19, 1908.
23. *Aroostook Times*, May 8, 1873.
24. Jacqueline Dowd Hall, *Revolt Against Chivalry: Jesse Daniel Ames and the Women's Campaign Against Lynching* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), pp. 132-36.