

Living a Baptismal Call: John Boyle O'Reilly at the helm of *The Boston Pilot*.

In 1829, the bishop of Boston started a Catholic newspaper to promote, explain, as well as defend the life and practices of the mushrooming Catholic population of the diocese--swelled by waves of immigration from Ireland. In 1836 the Bishop handed the ownership and direction of the paper to a group of lay people, headed by one Patrick Donahue. It was subsequently renamed *The Boston Pilot*.

One of the most important and influential editors of the *Pilot* was John Boyle O'Reilly, who held the post from 1876 until 1890.

From Printer to Prisoner

He was born to a family of educators in Ireland. After finishing his studies, he worked as a printer at a local Irish newspaper before moving to England and writing for *The Guardian*. As a young man, he enlisted in the British army, but having seen the injustices between his home and England, he began to work (covertly) for Irish freedom from English rule. His seditious activity led to his court-martial from the British Army--which carried a life sentence. Due to his extreme youth, the sentence was commuted; instead he was given a twenty-year prison term and sent to a penal colony in western Australia. In 1869, O'Reilly successfully escaped Australia with the assistance of a whaling ship captain from New Bedford, Massachusetts.

From Reporter to Author

Reaching the United States in 1870, he made his way to Boston, and based on his earlier experiences in the press, he became first a reporter, and then the editor of the *Pilot*. For nearly twenty years, he used his 'bully pulpit' as the foremost advocate and influence directing Irish immigrants through the process of cultural assimilation into the United States.

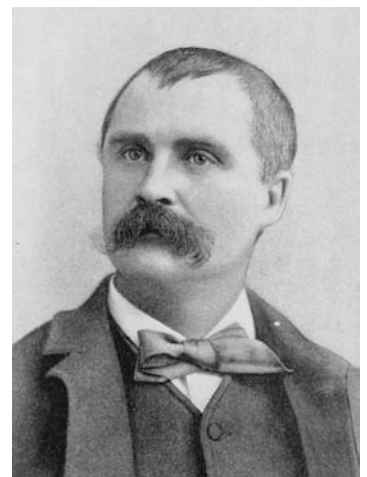
Through the years his literary talents and cordial attitude toward Boston's mainly Protestant establishment earned him a favored place in civil society an invitation to join the exclusive *Papyrus Club*, which counted Mark Twain and other literary lights of the time among its members.

In the midst of this success, O'Reilly never forgot his ethnic Irish roots or his Catholic faith. From his perch in society he used his gifts as a public speaker, civil rights leader, poet, and novelist to bridge the gap between Catholics and Protestants in nineteenth-century Boston, while enhancing Catholic identity in the process.

He wrote for and was published in Catholic publications as well as those with a wider readership, including *Scribner's Monthly* and *The Atlantic Monthly*. His published works include four volumes of poems: *Songs of the Southern Seas*, *Songs, Legends, and Ballads*, *The Statues in the Block*, and *In Bohemia*; as well as a novel, *Moondyne*, based on his Australian experiences. He also collaborated on two other novels.

Advocate for Immigrants and Minorities

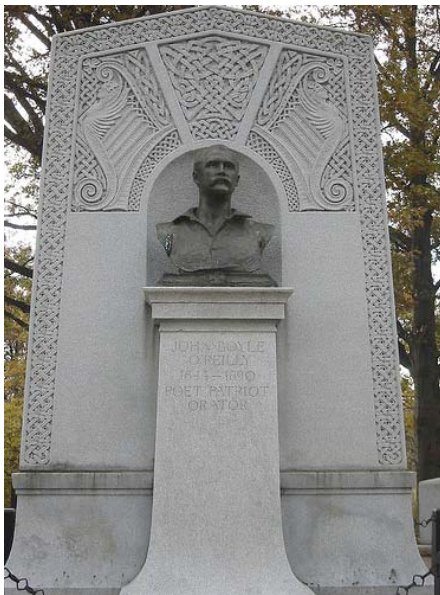
Through it all, he used *The Boston Pilot* as a platform for defending the rights of Irish immigrants and calling for an independent Ireland. The oppression and discrimination faced by the Irish led him to call for civil and human rights of African Americans and Native Americans who were suffering even crueler injustices. He openly campaigned in the *Pilot* for socially-reforming political candidates. He was member of many charitable organizations and a champion of Catholic education. He received honorary doctorates from Georgetown University, in Washington D.C., and Notre Dame University, in South Bend, Indiana.



His sudden death from a heart attack in 1890 was termed a 'public calamity' by Cardinal Gibbons of Baltimore. Because of his forceful public presence and outstanding Catholic witness, the wake for O'Reilly was held in St. Mary's Church, in Boston's Irish-immigrant Charlestown neighborhood; mourners by the thousands came to pay their respects.

Baptism in Action

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says that all who are reborn as children of God baptism, "must profess the faith they have received from God through the Church and participate in the apostolic and missionary activity of the People of God" (CCC, no. 1270). God gave John Boyle O'Reilly the grace to live out--in a vigorous and inspiring manner--his baptismal commitment to the cause of Christ, the Church, and God's Kingdom.



Monument commemorating John Boyle O'Reilly on the Fenway in Boston (erected 1896).