
In *Becoming American under Fire*, Civil War scholar Christian G. Samito charts important shifts in the conceptualization of citizenship during the Civil War Era, focusing particularly on the impact of African American and Irish American claims to full national citizenship in the aftermath of war. These claims were based upon the loyalty that these groups had shown to the Union through their military service during the conflict, and functioned as the means by which Irish Americans combated nativist anti-Catholicism and shaped the African American fight for full incorporation in the body politic. In the process, this fight for inclusion helped to shape the contours of national citizenship, an identity that had remained vague and indeterminate prior to the war.

In the Introduction and first chapter, Samito details a ‘crisis of citizenship’ in the decades leading up to the Civil War; a crisis of indeterminacy (p.13). The rights and privileges attendant on national citizenship were nowhere clearly articulated. Instead ‘the rights and privileges one enjoyed depended on a complicated network of factors, including whether one was a naturalized or native-born citizen, where one lived, and one’s race, slave status, gender, political office, job, position within a family, and membership in different associations (p.1).’ Samito argues that as state-based loyalties were subsumed by sectional ones, and as Irish and African American sought clarification of their status in the aftermath of war, the need to define the contours of a national citizenship became ever more exigent. These insights are uncontroversial, though interweaving the stories of Irish and African Americans during this transitional period of American citizenship is a novel one.

Samito’s most significant contribution comes in the final chapters of the book when discussing the meaning and status of naturalized citizenship in the United States and abroad. Prior to the war and in its immediate aftermath, the rights of naturalized citizens vis-à-vis the native born remained unclear. Post-war, Irish Americans sought definitive acknowledgement of the equal status of naturalized citizens before the law and acknowledgement that Irish Americans abroad would be treated as Americans. Domestically this held few problems, though the issue of the treatment of naturalized Irish generated diplomatic controversy between Britain and the United States with the rise of Fenianism and Irish American involvement in Irish nationalist causes. At the heart of the problem was a doctrinal tension between the British view that allegiance was forever locked at birth and the American view that individual liberty demanded a more consensual and contractual idea of allegiance. Samito deftly traces the way these tensions played out in the aftermath of the Civil War, providing the reader with an insightful, extremely engaging and highly original narrative of this important shift in the conceptualization of American citizenship.

As a contribution to scholarship on American citizenship, the book falls down in a number of places. Most notably, Samito finds the allure of romanticising the Civil War irresistible, as so many have before. The emancipation of blacks and their accession to the rights of national citizenship through the Reconstruction Amendments and Civil Rights Acts is celebrated as if the struggle for equality was essentially completed in the 1870s. Some concessions are made, with acknowledgement that the subsequent rise of Jim Crow, the KKK
and the judicial endorsement of ‘Separate but Equal’ challenged the gains made in the aftermath of the war, but these ‘challenges’ are presented as aberrant and temporary, rather than entrenched and depressingly characteristic. Adopting this perspective fails to acknowledge the last 150 years of American history and the last 20 years of scholarly work on race and citizenship.¹

In addition, a number of terms and phrases central to Samito’s narrative – and citizenship discourse generally – remain under-contextualised. ‘Republican’ and ‘republicanism’, for example, are frequently trotted out to imbue citizenship and the nation’s founding political ideology with meaning, even though the words are among the most problematic and debated in scholarship on American citizenship and its history.² Samito offers no historiographical treatment of the terms nor does he indicate what he understands them to mean. Similarly, Samito frequently refers to an ‘American identity’ that was ‘strengthened’ (p.217) or ‘genuinely intensified’ (p.11) among Irish and African Americans during the Civil War (see the Introduction and Epilogue in particular). Though the phrase is made to do much work throughout, the contours of this identity are not detailed. One is left with the impression that only through martial endeavour was it possible for one to feel truly American, an identity off limits to non-combatants.

While these faults will no doubt prove irksome to scholars of US citizenship, it must be remembered that the book does provide a long overdue insight into the debates surrounding the status of naturalized citizens in the second half of the nineteenth century and should be required reading on this ground alone.

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