The Teen Who Exposed a Professor's Myth

By **Ben Collins**, www.thedailybeast.com (http://getpocket.com/redirect?url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.thedailybeast.com%2Farticles%2F2015%2F08%2F01%2Fthe-teen-who-exposed-a-professor-s-myth.html)

View Original

Rebecca Fried had no intention of preserving the record of a persecuted people whose strife was ready to be permanently written off in the eyes of history as exaggerated, imagined, or even invented.

That's because Rebecca was too busy trying to get through the 8th grade.

In 2002, University of Illinois-Chicago history professor Richard J. Jensen printed "No Irish Need Apply: A Myth of Victimization." His abstract begins:

"Irish Catholics in America have a vibrant memory of humiliating job discrimination, which featured omnipresent signs proclaiming 'Help Wanted—No Irish Need Apply!' No one has ever seen one of these NINA signs because they were extremely rare or nonexistent."

In short, those famous "No Irish Need Apply" signs—ones that proved Irish Americans faced explicit job discrimination in the 19th and 20th centuries? Professor Jensen came to the blockbuster conclusion that they never existed.

The theory picked up traction over the last decade, but seemed to reach an unexpected fever pitch in the last few months. Explainer websites this year used it to highlight popular myths of persecution complexes that are, as Vox put it, "stand-ins for an entire narrative about how immigrants are treated in America." That's from the lede of an article printed in March called "'No Irish Need Apply': the fake sign at the heart of a real movement."

Here, of course, is the problem: After only couple of hours Googling it, Rebecca, a 14-year-old, had found out these signs had, in fact, existed all along. Not only in newspaper listings—in which they appeared in droves—but, after further research, in shop windows, too.

The Irish *were* persecuted in the American job market—and precisely in the overt, literally written-down way that was always believed.

All of this would have been written off as a myth if it weren't for Rebecca Fried, a rising high school freshman—who one of the preeminent scholars on the Irish diaspora in the United States now calls a "hero" and "quite extraordinary"—and who simply couldn't believe it, either.

Rebecca never set out to prove the thesis wrong. She was just interested in an article her dad brought home from work one day.

“Now and then I bring home stuff for the kids to read if I think they will find it interesting or will convey some lesson,” says Michael Fried, Rebecca’s father. “Half the time they don’t read them at all. Sometimes they’ll read something if I suggest it. Nothing has ever come of any of these things other than this one.”

Rebecca wasn’t even trying to disprove her dad—let alone an academic at the University of Illiniois-Chicago. She just figured she’d Google the words and see what came up over 100 years ago.

“Just for the fun of it, I started to run a few quick searches on an online newspaper database that I found on Google,” she says. “I was really surprised when I started finding examples of NINA ads in old 19th-century newspapers pretty quickly.”

So she started collecting a handful of examples, then dozens, then more. She went to as many newspaper databases as she could. Then she thought, *somebody had to have done this before, right?*

“I didn’t see anything right away. This led me to wonder if it might be worth writing up in some form,” she says. “I showed my dad right away when I started finding these NINA ads. We just didn’t know whether this was already widely known and, if it wasn’t, whether it would be viewed as a topic worth considering for publication.”

Enter Kerby Miller, a newly retired history professor from the University of Missouri. He’s written everything from Guggenheim-funded books about the 18th-century Irish to the PBS documentary *Out of Ireland* with Paul Wagner. In 1986, he was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize for history.

“It was out of the blue on May 1st, May Day—which is sort of fortuitous, now that I think about it,” says Miller. May Day is International Workers' Day, which celebrates laborers worldwide.

They wanted to know if they were missing something. They weren’t.

In fact, for years, Miller wanted to know why everyone else was missing the opposite.

“From the first, my responses to Jensen’s claims had been strongly negative, as were those of a few other scholars, but, for various reasons, most historians, social scientists, journalists, et cetera accepted or even embraced Jensen’s arguments,” says Miller.

Miller says it all makes sense when you consider the parallels between Jensen’s arguments and the tone of anti-Irish propaganda after the Irish Civil War.

“This was a period dominated in Irish writing by those who collectively came to be known as ‘revisionists.’ What they did was, in some cases, take every traditional Irish Catholic belief concerning British Colonialists—some of which were heroic, even—and turn them upside down,” says Miller. “The British and Britain’s supporters were not to be seen as oppressors. They were now to be considered those taking down Irish Catholic oppression.”

Miller says it applies to all of Irish history, but recent history as well—even events and acts of persecution that the Irish lived through themselves.

“A lot of people were getting sick of this, but were afraid to speak out. They wanted to say it’s bullshit, but you would be regarded as an uncouth barbarian or an IRA sympathizer,” says Miller. “The narrative was that, ‘They should stop their whining! They weren’t victims! They weren’t oppressed!’”

He’d been trying to bat down the conclusions in Jensen’s paper for 13 years. Miller says he knew something was fishy from the outset. First of all, he’d seen the advertisements years ago—well before something like Google Scholar made them easy to search for—as a graduate student at UC Berkeley in the 1970s. But something else tipped him off.

“Even more suspicious is that it seemed to fit into a political or ideological framework, in addition to his own writing, which was obviously polemically bent,” he says.

This is, after all, how the abstract in Jensen's paper ends:

"Some Americans feared the Irish because of their religion, their use of violence, and their threat to democratic elections. By the Civil War these fears had subsided and there were no efforts to exclude Irish immigrants. The Irish worked in gangs in job sites they could control by force. The NINA slogan told them they had to stick together against the Protestant Enemy, in terms of jobs and politics. The NINA myth justified physical assaults, and persisted because it aided ethnic solidarity. After 1940 the solidarity faded away, yet NINA remained as a powerful memory."

Miller says he wrote to Jensen at one point to contest it.

"Jensen's email response to my criticisms was that they were to be expected because I was an Irish-American and a Catholic," says Miller.

"In fact, as I responded to him, I am neither."

Miller says he realized this might be an unwinnable fight when he went to New Zealand to present some work and he was bombarded with questions on why he didn't believe Jensen. One man asked who in his family was Irish Catholic. Miller kindly reminded the questioner that the answer is no one—until he remembered his wife is.

"They said, 'That's gotta be it!' That's why I'm sympathetic to these Irish rebel terrorist scum!" he says, laughing.

"I hadn't realized how extraordinarily dominant Jensen's argument had become. I don't know if that says something about the hierarchy of power in academia, or the others who accepted it because they bought into this revisionist interpretation."

He wasn't alone. Miller could name other scholars who questioned Jensen's motives. He even tried to talk some of them into writing about it.

“They knew from their own research—or strongly suspected—that Jensen’s arguments were wrong or fallacious,” he says. “They were just too busy [to refute it], or preferred not to.”

Then May Day came.

“We didn’t know who to contact, but we saw that Professor Jensen’s article cited Professor Miller as someone who had erroneously believed in NINA, so we thought he might be a good person to try,” says Rebecca. “And he was obviously an expert in this area.”

Miller opened up Rebecca’s thesis. He quickly realized all of the academics too busy to take on Jensen couldn’t have done it better than a 14-year-old.

“She didn’t need any help from me on what she did,” he says. “I’d be surprised if she changed a single word.”

Rebecca says Miller then helped her and her father walk through what a scholarly article should look like. After all, no one in Rebecca’s family is an academic. Her parents are lawyers, and a scholarly article is not a requirement to get out of the 8th grade.

“I don’t want people to think she did this because she got expert advice,” he says. “[Rebecca and Michael] truly deserve all of the credit.”

Then, on Independence Day—fortuitous again—it became official: Rebecca printed “No Irish Need Deny: Evidence for the Historicity of NINA Restrictions in Advertisements and Signs” in the *Oxford Journal of Social History*.

“The article concludes that Jensen’s thesis about the highly limited extent of NINA postings requires revision, and that the earlier view of historians generally accepting the widespread reality of the NINA phenomenon is better supported by the currently available evidence,” Rebecca writes in her abstract.

When a story was written about the findings on the Irish website IrishCentral.com, Jensen congratulated Rebecca for her scholarship in the comments section, but took issue with her conclusion.

"I'm the PhD who wrote the original article. I'm delighted a high school student worked so hard and wrote so well," he writes. "No, she did not claim to find a single window sign anywhere in the USA."

But Rebecca's article *does* include that information. She made it clear in a reply.

"I do have to say that the article does in fact list a number of posted physical NINA signs, not just newspaper ads. Pages 6-7 catalogue a number of the signs," she wrote.

Jensen retorted with a numerical list of all of the "No Irish Need Apply" signs he encountered in her essay—ending with, "That's very rare. In Chicago, only 3 ads in over 50 years. How rare can you get?"

Then, ever politely, Fried dropped the hammer.

"Thanks again for the response. This discussion is really fun for me, and I appreciate the opportunity to have it," she wrote. "Let me make one last point and then I promise I will shut up and give you the last word if you want it. You began this conversation by stating that the article 'did not claim to find a single window sign anywhere in the USA.' I think we now agree at least that this is not correct."

She then makes a salient point: Even if it were 15 recorded instances per year or 1,500—the signs existed, the persecution was real, and discrimination of the Irish was not an imagined feeling, but a reality difficult to both express and quantify.

"NINA sign would be just as offensive and memorable to Irish-American and other viewers whether it was for a job, an apartment, a social club, a 'freedom pole,' or anything else," she wrote.

Of course, then she ended with this:

“I’ll conclude by sincerely thanking you again for interacting with me on this. It is a real honor and I appreciate it.”

Later, Rebecca says she regretted how her comments came out, saying she "may have come off as insufficiently respectful."

“He has been doing scholarly work for decades before I was born, and the last thing I want to do was show disrespect for him and his work,” she says.

But Professor Miller says he could not possibly be more impressed.

“I have the utmost admiration and respect for her. I really just want to be in the background of this,” he says.

“Rebecca is the hero.”

Now, Rebecca says she might continue along this same path, “exploring other areas where digitized newspaper evidence might supply new historical insights.” She thinks there “might still be some low-hanging fruit for researchers.”

But maybe not. Maybe she’ll be something completely different. She’s 14 years old. She has to start high school in a month.

“For the longer term, it’s too early to tell,” she says. “But I’ve become really interested in history through this process, and I think that would be an incredibly fascinating career path.”

If she does want to be an historian, when she goes to college about a half-decade from now, it’ll be time for her to tell a story no one will believe, once again.

And, for a second time, Professor Miller will be happy to help her prove it.

“It is, indeed,” he says, “quite extraordinary.”