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In 150 year old case, Rhode Island confronts its anti-Catholic past

By Marianne Medlin

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Salem, Mass., May 12, 2011 / 05:55 am (CNA).- Rhode Island lawmakers voted last week to pardon an Irish Catholic man they say was wrongfully executed in 1845. The decision closes an ugly chapter in the long history of discrimination against Catholics in the U.S.

"Anti-Catholicism was certainly one of the first religious prejudices brought to the new world, and it became widespread" in the 19th century, according to Nancy Schultz, Ph.D of Salem State University in Massachusetts.

Schultz was commenting on the May 4 decision by the Rhode Island legislature to pardon John Gordon – a 29 year-old Irish immigrant who was hanged for a murder many say he didn't commit.

Gordon was convicted in 1843 and executed two years later for allegedly killing a wealthy Rhode Island mill owner who had political connections.

Historians now believe that the evidence against Gordon was tainted and indicative of widespread discrimination against Irish Catholics. During trial, witnesses failed to positively identify Gordon and a judge instructed jurors to take "Yankee" witnesses more seriously than Irish ones.

"Catholics had difficulty getting a fair trial in New England during the nineteenth century," said Schultz in a May 10 interview.

Schultz is an authority in English and American Literature and is author of several books on historical religious discrimination in America.

Her new book, "Mrs. Mattingly's Miracle," (Yale, \$30) traces how the more tolerant Maryland tradition in the nation's capital of accepting Catholicism during the 1820s began to decline into "full-fledged, New England-style anti-Catholicism."

She told CNA that from 1830 to 1860 in particular, movements such as the "Protestant Crusade" attempted to stop the spread of Catholicism in the United States.

Schultz pointed to examples of public discrimination against Catholics such as the case involving arsonists who burned down a Massachusetts convent in 1834. The trials, she said, "were an occasion for anti-Catholic mockery."

When the mob leaders who destroyed the Charlestown convent were acquitted, there was "great rejoicing in the streets of Boston."

Schultz also noted that Gordon's hanging in 1845 came just nine years before a gift of a block of marble from Pope Pius IX for the construction of the Washington Monument "was thrown into the Potomac River" by members of the anti-Catholic "Know-Nothing" party.

She explained that "large numbers of Irish fleeing economic turmoil in nineteenth-century Ireland and immigrating to America" helped give rise to the nativist, or "Know-Nothing" party, which rose to national prominence in the mid 19th century.

"The name came from the response of members of this anti-Catholic secret society. When asked about their activities, they would say, 'I know nothing.'"

Schultz said that the Ku Klux Klan and the American Protective Association were 20th century remnants of the Know Nothing Party.

"The Puritans would burn the effigies of the Pope in the streets on Guy Fawkes Day, the anniversary of the Gunpowder Plot in 1605, "when the Catholic Fawkes was arrested for placing explosives under the House of Lords in England," she said.

In 1775, George Washington ordered the practice to be stopped.



Nancy Lusignan Schultz / Photo Credit: Kim Mimnaugh

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