

How Oscar McCulloch Discovered the Ishmaelites

With his dapper good looks and easy charm, Oscar McCulloch, the Protestant minister who first discovered and named the Tribe of Ishmael, was sometimes mistaken for a traveling salesman. This confusion was understandable, since McCulloch had spent several years peddling wares for a wholesale drug company before entering the Chicago Theological Seminary in 1867.¹ Settling in Indianapolis a decade later, he parlayed the same skills he had honed while hawking hair tonic and pep pills into a national reputation in the newly emerging fields of organized charity and hereditarian theory.

Oscar McCulloch was born in 1843 in Fremont, Ohio, to a solidly middle-class family with roots in New York and Connecticut. Carleton McCulloch, Oscar's father, was a pharmacist and store owner who regularly moved his family around the upper Midwest to take advantage of new business opportunities. Both he and his wife, Harriet, were devout Presbyterians at a time when the denomination held fast to traditional Calvinistic doctrines such as predestination. Oscar, the eldest of five children, experienced a religious conversion when he was fourteen that inspired him to dedicate his life to God. After entering the business world as a young man, McCulloch maintained this vow by volunteering in church missions and delivering lay sermons.

Like many young men of his generation, McCulloch was caught up in the Protestant revival that swept the country in the middle of the nineteenth century. He eventually decided to give up his career as a



Figure 2. Oscar McCulloch, undated. (University Library Special Collections and Archives, Indiana University–Purdue University, Indianapolis)

salesman and enter the Chicago Theological Seminary, an institution whose Congregationalist character better reflected McCulloch's increasingly liberal theological views. After graduating in 1870, McCulloch experienced the first of a series of physical breakdowns that would plague him over the course of the next two decades. On this occasion, with—or, more likely, despite—the help of dubious contemporary remedies such as burning the lower part of his nose and drinking strong coffee, McCulloch recovered sufficiently to assume his first position as a minister in Sheboygan, Wisconsin. Photos from this period reveal a sensitive-looking man with a high forehead, discerning eyes, and a bushy mustache that lent him the air of a kinder, gentler-looking Nietzsche.

McCulloch spent a few years in Sheboygan, where he caused a stir for attempting to harmonize Darwin's theory of evolution with the New Testament. In 1877, after a period of intense soul-searching, McCulloch accepted a new pulpit at the Plymouth Church in Indianapolis. The city that greeted him was in the throes of the economic crisis known as the Panic of 1873. In that year, the collapse of the New York banking house Jay Cooke and Company had triggered a nationwide financial depression that would last for almost a decade. In Indiana alone, nearly a thousand businesses, with a combined value of fourteen million dollars, went under between 1873 and 1876.²

In Indianapolis, the crisis reached a boiling point in June 1877, when the city teetered on the edge of a "blood or bread" uprising.³ Violence was averted only at the last minute when John Caven, the longtime Republican mayor of Indianapolis, led a march of unemployed workers to the city's bakeries, where he purchased loaves of bread out of his own pocket and distributed them to the hungry masses. The next day, Caven arranged for hundreds of men to begin working at the Belt Line Railroad and union stockyards. The construction of new railroads and canals had only recently transformed Indianapolis into an important transportation hub. Unfortunately, it also made the city's economy especially vulnerable to the railroad strikes that crippled the nation in the summer of 1877. In response to the strike, factories in Indianapolis laid off hundreds of industrial employees. Those lucky enough to remain on the job saw their wages—which were often paid in scrip—decline precipitously.

By the time McCulloch arrived in Indianapolis, the situation had become so desperate that armies of the unemployed had taken to the streets searching for work. Most of these streets were unpaved, which lent Indianapolis the air of an overgrown town, despite the city's dramatic growth in population, from 18,611 in 1860 to 48,244 in 1870 to nearly 75,000 in 1877.⁴ Most of the newcomers had come to build the railroad or to work in industries such as the pharmaceutical company Eli Lilly and the Kingan stockyards, which belatedly brought large-scale capitalism to Indianapolis. From 1860 to 1880, the number of manufacturing establishments grew from one hundred to almost seven hundred, while the number of industrial workers ballooned from seven hundred to ten thousand, including fourteen hundred women.

Many of these industrial workers had recently migrated to Indianapolis from rural farming areas that had suffered economic devastation since the end of the Civil War. These residents were crowded

into an urban area not much larger than a square mile, which had only recently acquired some of the basic municipal services that other cities in the region took for granted, such as a waterworks, a sewerage system, and public garbage collection. Because of the fiscal crisis, however, garbage collection was unreliable, and people continued to dump their trash in privy vaults and on the streets, where professional scavengers (later identified by McCulloch as belonging to the Tribe of Ishmael) hauled it away to be sorted and recycled.

Besides the rural flavor, one other factor gave Indianapolis a distinctive profile compared to other northern cities: the decidedly southern character of much of its population. By 1880, 22.3 percent of the non-Indiana-born population of the city was from the Upland South (Kentucky, North Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia), with Kentucky alone providing 14.2 percent of the city's population. In this respect, the city once again reflected the overall situation of Indiana, where by mid-century, 44 percent of the total population of nonnative residents came from the South, as compared to an average of only 28.3 percent from the upper Midwest. If one focused on the south-central portion of the state, the figure was even more dramatic, with a full 91.5 percent of the nonnative Hoosier population—as residents of Indiana are known—consisting of Southern migrants, particularly those from Upland South states.⁵ The number of Hoosiers with roots in Kentucky was so large that a popular joke asserted, “Kentucky had taken Indiana without firing a shot.” By contrast, the percentage of migrants from New England and the Mid-Atlantic was lower than in any neighboring state—comprising only 8.8 percent of the total population, compared to 19.8 percent for the upper Midwest.⁶

Like their white neighbors, most African American residents of Indianapolis hailed from Upland Southern states, especially North Carolina, Kentucky, and Tennessee. In 1860, there were 498 African Americans in the city, only 2.6 percent of the total population. These numbers jumped dramatically following the Civil War and the failure of Reconstruction in the South. By 1880, there were 6,504 African Americans in Indianapolis, and ten years later, the number had increased so dramatically that only six cities in the North had larger black populations.⁷

Poor black and white migrants from the Upland South had much in common, culturally. As Berry Sulgrove (1827–90), the author of one of the most important early histories of Indianapolis, cynically noted, “Among the early settlers were a good many from the slave states of the

class since widely known as ‘poor whites,’ who brought here all the silly superstitions they had learned among the slaves at home.”⁸

The colorful accounts of nineteenth-century travelers and residents alike make it abundantly clear that the culture of Indianapolis was heavily influenced by the many white and black migrants from Kentucky and other Upland Southern states. The impact of these mostly hardscrabble men and women could be felt in the city’s religion, language, politics, and social norms. In 1870, nearly one-third of the churchgoing population of Indianapolis belonged to evangelical Methodist and Baptist congregations that were popular among Southerners.⁹ Yet many migrants from places like Kentucky did not join these established churches, instead preferring the more emotional environment of revival meetings. Others were “indifferent” to organized religion, according to Berry Sulgrove. Indeed, he observed that “among a considerable section of the Southern immigration disparaging or even scandalous jokes on preachers and prominent church members were no unusual entertainment of social or accidental gatherings.”¹⁰

In addition to their frequently iconoclastic attitudes toward institutionalized religion, some Southerners apparently brought a love of whiskey and fighting with them to Indianapolis. Oliver Johnson (1821–1907), whose family migrated from Kentucky around the time the city was founded, later recalled in the Southern-inflected dialect widely spoken in Indianapolis, “Throughout the day and the evenin the whisky bottle . . . set on the table for anyone to help himself whenever he wanted a drink.”¹¹ Sulgrove confirmed that “the use of liquor was hardly less general or habitual than the use of coffee.”¹² Fueled by locally distilled whiskey like Bayou Blue and a deeply ingrained sense of honor, some migrants from the South were quick to fight. As Johnson put it, “The gentleman class of the early days got satisfaction by using swords and pistols, but the common class that settled the land in these parts had more sense and used their fists.”¹³ A less sanguine position was taken by the *Indiana State Sentinel*, an Indianapolis newspaper, which complained that “the moral influence of a dozen churches is not enough to check the vicious propensities of our population.”¹⁴

Whether drinking and fighting were seen as socially acceptable activities depended largely on the cultural background of the observer. As the historian Andrew Cayton has observed in his work on frontier Indiana, customs like drinking and fighting were “something more than the evidence of moral breakdown that reformers saw. From the perspective of rural and working people, they were critical components of

a traditional masculine culture that valued competition and personal honor. Imbibing alcohol, betting on sporting events, and having a good time were long-standing customs for southern rural males.”¹⁵ On the other hand, many residents originally from the Northeast viewed these same activities as dangerously undermining the industrialized Victorian society that they were attempting to create in Indianapolis. Commenting on one such resident’s “antipathy to the fiddle,” for example, Sulgrove noted that “the Eastern immigrant brought his bigotry . . . and made the whole social structure redolent of it.”¹⁶ Southerners responded in kind, as Oliver Johnson recalled: “Some thought the Easterners was kind a stuck up on account of havin more book learnin than we did.”¹⁷

By the 1870s, wealthy and middle-class residents of Indianapolis inhabited comfortable homes, while their poorer neighbors crowded into slums with colorful names like Dogtown, Poverty Flats, Holy Row, Happy Hollow, Greasy Row, and Brickville. Named for its many brick-yards, this last neighborhood was in particular home to numerous settlers from Kentucky. During the warmer months, the Kentuckians worked as brickmakers, but when winter arrived, according to one observer, “like the untameable red man, they would bury the hatchet and come in to the government agent—i.e., the township trustee, to be fed.” The same author described the Kentuckians as “a law unto themselves and as defiant as they dared be of the powers that were.” Many kept dogs—including one notorious resident who had thirty “savage sheep-killing brutes”—to keep the taxman and other unwanted visitors away.¹⁸

The denizens of these rough and tumble neighborhoods patronized brothels like Long Branch and Park House, strolled along Rag Alley (Columbia Street from Ohio to Michigan) and Cockroach Row (a stretch of Massachusetts Avenue near Pennsylvania Street), and gathered in juke joints like The Crib, The Nest, Lindenbower Station, Chism’s Fence (“a resort for the lowest class of blacks and whites”), Hoplight Station (“so called because the beaux and belles of the neighborhood used to congregate there and dance of moonlight nights”), and Sleigho, which stood just across a canal nicknamed the St. Lawrence from another dive called Canada. Putting to shame the most extravagant fashions of the disco era, the “typical Brickville dandy” dressed for a night on the town in “a compound of brilliant colors with red, blue and yellow stripes in his trousers, a red undershirt crossed with bright hued suspenders, and a gaudy neckerchief, with cowhide boots upon his feet and a broad-brimmed brown hat surmounting all.”¹⁹

Relations between working-class whites and blacks, who generally lived in a neighborhood called Bucktown, were both intimate and volatile. Despite or, perhaps, because of the cultural closeness between white and black migrants from the Upland South, Sulgrove observed that in the early days of the city, “The race prejudices of the South were imported with its dialect. . . . The colored man counted for little and claimed nothing.”²⁰ By the 1870s, however, blacks in Indianapolis had started to make inroads into business and politics. In 1879, for example, the Bagby brothers, Robert, James, and Benjamin, had begun to publish the *Leader*, the first black newspaper in the city. (Eventually there would be at least ten such publications.)²¹ Two years later, in 1881, James Hinton, a Republican from Indianapolis, became the first African American elected to Indiana’s House of Representatives.

By that time, the growing number of black voters had become critically important to Republican political success in Indianapolis. In 1876 this alignment led to the worst riot in the city’s history when a rumor spread that African American Republicans were being turned away from voting booths in the Democratically controlled Sixth Ward. When a group of blacks marched to the ward to demand their rights, a pitched battle ensued between them and the area’s Democratically inclined Irish residents, who had earlier been denounced in Republican-owned newspapers as “Irish tramps,” “Hibernian heifers,” and “Romish herds.”²²

This brief tour through 1870s Indianapolis reveals the colorful and complex socioeconomic landscape that Oscar McCulloch encountered when he arrived in 1877. Deeply divided between haves and have-nots, Northerners and Southerners, blacks and whites, urban professionals and transplanted rural laborers, Indianapolis in the late 1870s was a city of contrasts. As a middle-class white clergyman with Northeastern roots, McCulloch joined a small but powerful minority that sought to transform Indianapolis from an overgrown frontier town into a modern, industrialized metropolis. Like the author who compared the rough-edged Kentuckians of Brickville to the “untameable red man,” these bourgeois citizens saw themselves as forming a vanguard in the struggle to bring civilization to Indianapolis, hoping to enact a kind of Manifest Destiny in microcosm. The objects of this civilizing mission inhabited run down tenements like the Dirty Dozen, named for the twelve “dirty looking girls” who lived there, or they squatted on the banks of the White River in the “grotesque” shanties of Dumptown, which anticipated the Hoovervilles of the Great Depression by half a century.²³ Poor but proud, many of these individuals fiercely resented the efforts to

make them adopt middle-class norms, even as they were forced to seek charity from the very people applying this pressure to conform.

By the time Oscar McCulloch set foot in the city, the ongoing economic depression had widened the gulf between middle- and upper-class residents on the one hand and poor and working-class folk on the other. As more and more laborers were thrown out of work, wealthier residents confronted the question of what, if anything, they should do to improve the living conditions of their down-and-out neighbors, while still furthering their agenda to make Indianapolis into a modern city. Oscar McCulloch's discovery of the Tribe of Ishmael must be seen within this environment. Indeed, it is impossible to understand the true significance of the Ishmaelites without appreciating the historical context in which they were first identified as a distinct community.

On January 18, 1878, about a year after arriving in the city, McCulloch recorded the following entry in his diary under the heading "A case of poverty": "A family composed of a man, half blind, a woman, two children, the woman's sister and child, the man's mother, blind all in one room ten foot square. One bed, a stove, no other furniture. When found they had no coal, no food. Dirty, filthy because of no fire, no soap, no towels. It was the most abject poverty I ever saw. We carried supplies to them."²⁴

McCulloch had encountered this down-and-out family during one of the many charitable visits he paid to the city's poorest residents. Profoundly shocked by the sight of such intense poverty, McCulloch initially responded with what might be termed traditional Christian charity—a phrase whose meaning he would soon turn on its head, however. In order to learn more about the unnamed family, McCulloch decided to visit the office of the Center Township Trustee, an elected official in charge of distributing public charity funds to Indianapolis's needy citizens.²⁵ What he learned during this visit would not only disturb the good reverend, it would end up changing the course of his life. Unfortunately, the original files for the township trustee are no longer extant. Nevertheless, some files were copied into the case records of the Charity Organization Society, an Indianapolis institution later founded by Oscar McCulloch. Among those is a report dated August 20, 1877, which depicts the Ishmaels in starkly animalistic terms.²⁶

Two days after apparently reading this dehumanizing township trustee report, which conflated the Ishmaels proper with other, supposedly interconnected families, Oscar McCulloch took time from his busy Sunday schedule to record his own impressions. In his diary entry for

January 20, 1878, we find the following description under the heading “The Ishmaelites”:

The case alluded to under date of Friday seems to be a case similar to that of the ‘Jukes.’ I went to the office of the township trustee this morning and found them under the above name [i.e., the Ishmaelites]. They are called ‘The rest-house mob’. Real name is not known but called so from wandering habits. They are a wandering lot of beings, marrying, inter-marrying, cohabitating, etc. They live mostly out of doors, in the river bottoms, in old houses, etc. They are largely illegitimate, subject to fits. There have been in all one hundred and thirteen who have seeked aid at different times from the county—of this family and its connections. Five years ago they lived out of doors all winter. Most of the children die. They are hardly human beings. But still they can be made something of, by changed surroundings. The children ought to be taken from them and brought up separately.

Oscar McCulloch had discovered the Tribe of Ishmael, though it would be another decade before he published his groundbreaking study of the community.²⁷ Two things in particular stand out from his brief observations of January 18: the family’s terrible living conditions and the blindness of several of its members, a detail that would become a trope in later accounts of the Tribe of Ishmael. In those accounts, the blindness of various “Ishmaelites” would be attributed to syphilis (and, therefore, to sexual licentiousness) or to the lifelong abuse of blue vitriol (copper sulfate solution), also known as blue stone water, a substance that enabled individuals to feign blindness temporarily and, consequently, to beg more effectively. Blindness would thus become an important sign of the Tribe of Ishmael’s moral, social, and physical decay.

By January 20, McCulloch had learned that the poor family’s surname was Ishmael, though in his diary, he referred to them and their “connections” (i.e., the other families they had intermarried with) by the more tribal sounding name “The Ishmaelites.” This decision reflected McCulloch’s initial, though mistaken view that Ishmael was not the central family’s real name but a derogatory nickname applied to them on account of their habits. By transforming Ishmael into Ishmaelite, McCulloch stressed the name’s symbolic function and also began the rhetorical process of transforming the poor family he had encountered into the central unit of the Tribe of Ishmael.

In order to unpack the significance of the names Ishmaelite and Tribe of Ishmael during the nineteenth century, we must first begin with the Hebrew Bible, where Ishmael is portrayed as the eldest son of Abraham by his concubine Hagar, an Egyptian slave. In Genesis 16, Sarah, Abraham’s barren wife, suggests to Abraham that he have a child with

her servant, Hagar, yet she reacts jealously when the woman becomes pregnant. To avoid the wrath of her mistress, Hagar escapes into the wilderness, where an angel of the Lord appears to her and declares that her unborn son will be named Ishmael (Hebrew for “God hears”) because God heeded her suffering. The angel adds that Ishmael’s descendants will be “too many to count,” and that “he shall be a wild ass of a man; his hand against everyone, and everyone’s hand against him; he shall dwell alongside of all his kinsmen” (16:12). In the next chapter, God blesses Ishmael and makes him the father of twelve chieftains but also tells Abraham that His covenant will be established with Isaac, the patriarch’s yet unborn son with Sarah. Later in Genesis, Ishmael is described as living in the “wilderness” and his descendants, a wandering “caravan of Ishmaelites,” are depicted as selling Joseph to the Egyptians after acquiring him from his brothers. Other biblical references to the Ishmaelites portray them as enemies of Israel who plunder the land.

In the Hebrew Bible, therefore, Ishmael functions as the prototype of the older sibling displaced by a younger brother, a dynamic repeated in the story of Esau and Jacob, the father of the twelve tribes of Israel. Paul later employs the same trope in the New Testament’s Letter to the Galatians, where he contrasts the descendants of Abraham’s two sons. The older son’s descendants, the Ishmaelites, are slaves, while the younger son’s descendants, the Israelites, are free men. In an ironic twist, however, according to Paul’s allegorical interpretation, the Jews have become like the Ishmaelites, while the Christians have superseded them as the New Israel.

Post-biblical Jewish authors like the historian Josephus identified the Ishmaelites as the ancestors of the Arabs (based on a genealogical list found in Genesis 25). Later, during the medieval period, this link led to the association of the Ishmaelites with Islam. Indeed, seventh-century non-Muslim authors frequently referred to adherents of the new religion as members of the “Tribe of Ishmael.”²⁸ Muslim sources, in turn, depicted Ishmael, rather than Isaac, as the favored son whom Abraham almost sacrificed, and some even claimed that Muhammad himself was Ishmael’s direct descendant. Perhaps responding to the Muslim attempt to replace Isaac with Ishmael, the eleventh-century French rabbi known as Rashi, described Ishmael in his Bible commentary as a “thief” whom “everyone hated and fought with.”²⁹

By the middle of the nineteenth century, the name *Ishmaelite* had acquired the meanings “outcast” and “thievish” in the English language.

American documents from this period reveal the use of Ishmaelite as a biblically inflected term connoting deception, savagery, and nomadism. For example, in 1861, a Union Army soldier serving in Missouri wrote a letter in which he condemned the local Confederate sympathizers for acting like Ishmaelites: “I can not describe the misery and confusion that everywhere prevail. Law and order are abolished, and a miserable horde of Ishmaelites are roving the country, burning bridges, stealing property, and slaughtering or driving away all those who are suspected of having the least particle of love for the Union. Too cowardly, or too sensible of their inability to meet the Federal troops in a fair engagement, they are content to lie in wait, like the cunning savage, and strike a blow at some unguarded point.”³⁰

As a Christian minister, avid reader, and amateur Orientalist, Oscar McCulloch was undoubtedly well aware of these symbolic associations when he decided to call the supposedly degenerate community he had discovered the Ishmaelites. In his diary McCulloch likened the Ishmaelites of Indianapolis to their biblical namesake, a wild ass of a man who wandered the wilderness bordering the civilization of the camp and always fighting with his settled neighbors: “a wandering lot of beings . . . largely illegitimate, subject to fits . . . hardly human beings.” In the Bible, the Ishmaelites signified a kind of atavism, an earlier stage of development that had since been superseded but continued to survive on the margins of the chosen community of Israelites. Similarly, the modern-day Ishmaelites represented an itinerant way of life that was tolerated when Indianapolis was still a frontier town but, in the eyes of McCulloch, was now completely out of place in a city that was seeking to transform itself into a modern, bourgeois metropolis.

The biblical image of Ishmael as a wild man and wanderer prefigured the coon cap-wearing pioneer of the American frontier. Like Ishmael’s relationship with Isaac, the American frontiersman served as a kind of displaced older brother to the urban settler. McCulloch made it clear in his published account of the Tribe of Ishmael that the Ishmaelites were descendants of early pioneers who had arrived in Indianapolis from Kentucky, Tennessee, and other Upland Southern states. Just as Isaac superseded Ishmael in the Bible, so too would middle-class residents from the Northeast supplant the so-called Ishmaelites of Indianapolis; at least, that is what McCulloch and other reformers hoped.

By employing the name Ishmaelite, therefore, McCulloch had tapped into a biblical narrative that resonated with many Protestant Americans

who saw themselves as the New Israel. To be an Ishmaelite within this context signified kinship with, but ultimately exclusion from, the chosen community. Ironically, however, it also represented the stubborn survival of an earlier American ideal: the restless wanderer of the frontier. It was this heroic, if ambivalent, image that James Fenimore Cooper had earlier exploited in his popular novel *The Prairie*, when he decided to name his wandering protagonist Ishmael. Like Cooper, McCulloch appreciated the powerful significance of the name, and in his future writings on the Tribe of Ishmael, he would deliberately exploit its different symbolic registers.

One of the most important of these registers involved the traditional identification of Ishmael with Islam. Unlike Hugo Leaming a century later, McCulloch never claimed or even implied that the Ishmaelites of Indianapolis were actually Muslims. Yet he subtly invoked contemporary views of the Islamic East as a culture in decline, bypassed by the supposedly more civilized Christian West, when he coined the Muslim sounding names “Tribe of Ishmael” and “Ishmaelites.”

Happily for the historian, Oscar McCulloch was a precise man who diligently recorded the books he read in his diary. Indeed, he even went so far as to write down the price of each book he purchased. From these detailed diary entries, we know that in the period immediately preceding his discovery of the Tribe of Ishmael, McCulloch had become intensely interested in Islam and the Near East. Throughout 1877, he acquired a veritable library of contemporary Orientalist works, including Frederick Burnaby’s *Ride to Khiva*, Robert Arthur Arnold’s *Through Persia by Caravan*, and E. A. Freeman’s *The Turks in Europe*—the last a bargain at only 15 cents.³¹

On April 17, 1877, McCulloch noted in his diary that besides completing Burnaby’s book and beginning Arnold’s, he had come across an essay by Edwin Godkin entitled “The Eastern Question.”³² Concerning his newfound passion, McCulloch observed rather glumly: “It is a good time to study up this Eastern Question if life is long enough.” Less than a week before he discovered the Ishmaelites, on Monday, January 14, 1878, McCulloch recorded a diary entry under the heading “Mohammed’s sermon on charity.” Nor did his interest in Islam wane in the months following his discovery. For example, on February 17, 1878, McCulloch completed writing a “Sketch of the Rise and Growth of Turkish Power in Europe,” while a week later, on February 26, he read the “Resemblance of the Arabs to the Old Testament People,” contained in what he cited as Baskin’s *Abyssinia*.³³

Late-nineteenth-century Orientalists like Edwin Godkin and Frederick Burnaby diagnosed Muslims—aka Ishmaelites—as suffering from a terminal case of cultural decay. As Robert Arnold put it succinctly at the end of his five-hundred-page tome: “The religion of Islam is incompatible with progress, and must decline with the advance of civilization.”³⁴ Indeed, decades before McCulloch first employed the names “Ishmaelites” and “Tribe of Ishmael” to identify his community of urban “primitives,” Americans had already begun to characterize Turks, Arabs, and Muslims—the three were frequently conflated in the popular imagination—as savages. This phenomenon reflected a complex combination of political, religious, and cultural factors dating back to the very founding of the United States. One of the earliest phases in the development of this distinctly American brand of Orientalism was the conflict known as the Barbary Pirate War. This struggle raged on and off from 1801, when Thomas Jefferson first refused to pay tribute to North African (Barbary Coast) pirates in the Mediterranean, to 1815, when James Madison finally eliminated this threat to American ships. In addition to tribute, the Barbary pirates also took Europeans and Americans captive, sometimes selling them into slavery, an ironic and, for many outraged white observers, bitter reversal of the transatlantic slave trade.³⁵

In 1819, a few years after the Barbary Pirate War ended, the first Christian missionaries were dispatched to the Middle East from the United States. Although they met with little success in converting local Muslims, Jews, or even Eastern Christians, their theological attitudes and their experiences in the Levant helped to shape the views of their fellow Americans back home. Nineteenth-century American Protestants inherited older Christian views of Muslims as both potential converts and implacable enemies who would eventually play a decisive eschatological role.³⁶ Many interpreted the New Testament’s Book of Revelation 9:3–7, “from the smoke came locusts on the earth . . . their faces were like human faces,” as referring to Muslims. This was an easy connection to make since Muslims had long been portrayed as rapacious, animalistic hordes threatening cultivated Christian lands. Similarly, the Ishmaelites of Indiana were pejoratively labeled “Grasshopper Gypsies” because they supposedly stole farmers’ crops during their travels through the countryside.³⁷ Both groups of Ishmaelites, therefore, were explicitly likened to a biblical plague of voracious insects laying waste to civilization.

Early American travelers to the Near East viewed the places and people they encountered through a distinctly biblical lens. Since the

Bible portrayed the Ishmaelites as a tribe of nomads prone to thievery and violence, it is not surprising that when Americans in the Holy Land and elsewhere came across flesh-and-blood Muslims—"the sons and daughters of Ishmael" as one contemporary observer put it—they imagined them to be thievish and shiftless.³⁸

During the same period that Americans began to physically encounter the Near East, they were also rapidly expanding westward in self-proclaimed Manifest Destiny. Like the Near Eastern frontier, Americans understood the West in explicitly biblical terms, frequently likening their conquest of the Indians to the Israelite conquest of the Canaanites. Some even explicitly compared the Indians to Ishmaelites. Thus, an official of the Smithsonian Institution's Bureau of Ethnology wrote in 1880: "The Shawnees were the Bedouins, and I may almost say the Ishmaelites of the North American tribes. As wanderers they were without rivals among their race, and as fomentors of discord and war between themselves and their neighbors their genius was marked."³⁹

In light of these parallel historical and discursive processes, it makes sense that many American travelers to the Near East perceived similarities between the Muslim "savages" they encountered abroad and the Native Americans they had left behind. As George William Curtis noted, "the last inhabitants of the oldest land [i.e., the Levant] have thus a mysterious sympathy of similarity with the aborigines of the youngest [i.e., America]. For what more are these orientals than sumptuous savages?"⁴⁰ Following his own visit to the Near East, Mark Twain put it more succinctly, albeit more crudely: "They [Syrian villagers] reminded me much of Indians, did these people. . . . They were infested with vermin and the dirt had caked on them until it amounted to bark. . . . The children were in a pitiable condition—they all had sore eyes and were otherwise afflicted in various ways."⁴¹

Twain and other American observers painted "Orientals" and Native Americans with the same brush that Oscar McCulloch employed in his 1878 diary entry on the Ishmaelites. By the time McCulloch arrived in the state, Indiana—despite its name—had long been essentially emptied of Native Americans after years of vicious warfare had culminated in the famous Battle of Tippecanoe in 1811. In the absence of actual Native Americans or Bedouins in Indianapolis, McCulloch imagined the impoverished Anglo-American family he had come upon as their equivalents: thievish wanderers who lacked middle-class Christian morals. Hence, he called them the Ishmaelites, a name that evoked

comparisons with both Muslims and Native Americans in the nineteenth-century imagination.

The Tribe of Ishmael thus was not the first case of a marginal community in the United States being associated with Islam, as Native Americans were frequently likened to Ishmaelites, both the biblical and contemporary varieties. Nor was the Tribe of Ishmael the first European American community to be symbolically likened to Muslims. Although it may seem surprising today, the most striking example of this phenomenon was the Mormons.⁴²

From its very beginnings, Mormonism was identified with Islam. In 1831, only a few years after Joseph Smith, the founder of Mormonism, received his revelations, he was referred to as “the Ontario Mahomet,” in recognition of the New York county where he first achieved prominence. In the following decades, other observers identified Smith and his prophetic successor, Brigham Young, by a host of Islamic titles, including the “American Mahomet,” the “Yankee Mahomet,” the “New World Mohammad,” the “Yankee Turk,” and the “modern Mahomet.” One critic even observed in 1877 that Brigham Young was the “second Mohammed of American Mohamedanism,—Joseph Smith being the first.”⁴³

In addition to these monikers, critics drew a host of parallels between Mormonism and Islam during the nineteenth century. Such observers likened Mormon polygamy to the Muslim harem, the Mormon trek west to Muhammad’s flight from Medina (the hegira), Salt Lake City to Mecca, and the Book of Mormon to the Koran. They also wondered whether Joseph Smith and his followers would “like a second Mahometanism . . . extend itself sword in hand.”⁴⁴ The author of a book entitled *The Mormon Prophet and His Harem* disparagingly referred to “Mohammedan Utah.”⁴⁵ Other late-nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century authors explicitly described Mormonism as “the Islam of America” and “Mohammedanism Yankeeized,” and Mormons, themselves, as “the Mohammedans of America.”⁴⁶

Like the Mormons of Utah, the Ishmaelites of Indiana were not real “Mohammedans.” But they, too, were depicted as symbolic Muslims at a time when Islam, particularly in the form of the Ottoman Empire, was seen as an acute threat to Christian civilization. As fate would have it, in the days immediately leading up to his discovery of the Ishmaelites, Oscar McCulloch’s attention was drawn to the Russo-Turkish War, a bloody conflict over the Balkans that many European and American observers interpreted as the latest phase in an ongoing struggle between

Islam and Christianity. Indeed, on January 19, 1878, the very day before McCulloch composed his first diary entry on the Ishmaelites, *The Indianapolis News* ran a front-page story entitled “The Eastern War,” on the Balkan conflict between Muslims and Christians.

Ironically, one of the things that made the Muslim Turks so dangerous in the eyes of many nineteenth-century Europeans and Americans was that they had adopted certain Western practices over the years. Thus, the Orientalist author E. A. Freeman warned that Turks were more treacherous than other “barbarians,” such as sub-Saharan Africans, because the former had learned to “dress and talk like Europeans,” while the latter still looked like stereotypical savages.⁴⁷ Similarly, according to McCulloch, the Ishmaelites were particularly threatening to the social order of Indianapolis because, like the Turks, they were able to “ape”—to borrow an expression from Freeman—the physical appearance of their more civilized neighbors while still engaging in barbaric behavior.

Indeed, McCulloch did not point out anything remarkable about the Ishmael family’s physical appearance in his first diary entries—with the exception of their dirtiness—for a very simple reason: they basically looked like him. Had they possessed any outstanding physical traits that differentiated them from white Anglo-Saxons such as himself, it is likely that McCulloch would have taken the opportunity to note them. In the absence of such obvious signs, the family’s difference would have to be represented in other ways, beginning with the oriental-sounding titles that McCulloch applied to them. Fortunately for McCulloch, the supposedly degenerate family already possessed an exotic-sounding surname that lent itself easily to further transformations. Had the Ishmaels possessed a more mundane name, McCulloch would have been compelled to invent an evocative pseudonym, as was the case with other cacogenic groups that were called by tribal sounding names, like the Kallikaks, the Win, the Nam, the Zeros, and the granddaddy of them all, the Jukes, a name that meant “to roost” and referred “to the habit of fowls to have no home, no nest, no coop, preferring to fly into the trees and roost away from the places where they belong.”⁴⁸

As his diary entry from January 20 makes clear, McCulloch was already aware of Richard Dugdale’s famous study of the Jukes when he made his own discovery of the Ishmaelites. Several months earlier, on November 6, 1877, McCulloch noted in his diary that he had “Finished ‘The Jukes’ and shall work up into sermons.” McCulloch saw his own work on the Ishmaelites as a continuation of the groundbreaking

research done by Dugdale or, as he put it in his diary, the Ishmaelite tribe “seems to be a case similar to that of the ‘Jukes.’”

Richard Dugdale had discovered the group of paupers and criminals he immortalized as the Jukes while conducting research in rural county jails on behalf of the Prison Association of New York in 1874. Three years later, he published his findings in a landmark book entitled “*The Jukes*”: *A Study in Crime, Pauperism, Disease and Heredity*, considered the first of the eugenics family studies.⁴⁹ Many of the elements that would later come to define the genre were already present in Dugdale’s work. These included an obsessive interest in genealogy, the predominantly white, Anglo-Saxon background of the individuals involved, an emphasis on the dangers of uncontrolled sexuality, the conflation of a number of families into a single, synthetic community identified by a tribal-sounding name, and a call for public policy reforms to address the social problems (crime, pauperism, etc.) caused by the group. Yet, in contrast to later eugenics family studies, Dugdale’s book offered environmental as well as hereditarian explanations for why certain families seemed to engage in deviant behavior. Dugdale’s approach helps to explain why McCulloch initially wrote in his diary that the Ishmaelites could “be made something of, by changed surroundings,” an environmentalist view that he eventually abandoned in favor of a more strictly hereditarian perspective.

Over the next decade, McCulloch sought to gather more information about the Ishmaelites while simultaneously addressing the practical problems they posed to the city of Indianapolis. An opportunity to accomplish both goals soon presented itself on January 5, 1879, when McCulloch was elected president of the Indianapolis Benevolent Society.⁵⁰ Established on Thanksgiving Day, 1835, the Indianapolis Benevolent Society was the oldest and most venerable private charity organization in the city. Since its inception, the society had maintained the same rather quaint method for gathering and distributing charity. On a set day, each district in the city would be visited by a pair of volunteers—always a respectable gentleman carrying a basket and a lady carrying a purse—who would collect clothes, firewood, and money from residents. Once gathered, donated money would be handed over to the society’s treasurer and the wood and clothing placed in a depository. The same couple that collected the donations would then be responsible for distributing it to needy residents of their district.

By the time McCulloch was elected president, the society had become moribund. This decline may be attributed to several factors, including

the economic depression of the 1870s, which increased the number of charity applications while decreasing the number of donations; the ninefold increase in the city's population from 1850 to 1880, which put a strain on the society's antiquated mode of collecting charity; and the growing role of the township trustee in providing public assistance. Several months earlier, in November 1878, a special committee had even recommended that the society disband. Instead, with McCulloch at its helm, the organization decided to reinvigorate itself.

Looking back on those early days, McCulloch wrote in 1886, "The society had before it as its object: to distinguish between poverty and pauperism, to relieve the one and to refuse the other . . . to keep careful records of the cases; to do what it could to substitute work for alms."⁵¹ The society's new mission was grounded in an ideology—rooted in Elizabethan poor laws—that sharply distinguished between real poverty and pauperism or, as it was also commonly phrased, between the deserving and undeserving poor. As noted in the introduction, during the late nineteenth century, such moral definitions of poverty became an increasingly important part of American public policy, Protestant theology, and early hereditarian theory.

Like many of his contemporaries, Oscar McCulloch believed that paupers—unlike the deserving poor—were morally to blame for their poverty and therefore undeserving of charity. By contrast, he complained, the township trustee's office in Indianapolis had long failed to make this distinction, with dire consequences. Noting that the number of families given aid by the township trustee had increased from 314 in 1870 to 3,000 in 1877, McCulloch condemned the office for its "practical pauperization of the city" in this period and compared the situation in Indianapolis to "the latter days of Rome." Indeed, McCulloch grumbled that the city had come to be seen as so "benevolent" that "thrifty township trustees" from other towns would actually ship their poor to Indianapolis in order to avoid supporting them. Indeed, the practice of directing the poor to other municipalities became so widespread throughout the country that it eventually resulted in the modification of what were known as settlement laws.⁵² In McCulloch's opinion, morally deficient paupers and irresponsible township trustees alike were to blame for the dramatic increase in tax-supported charity in Indianapolis during the mid-1870s. Glaringly absent was any acknowledgement that the growth in poverty could be attributed to the terrible economic depression that had devastated Indianapolis's working-class residents during the same period.

After attending a meeting of the society on January 9, 1879, McCulloch lamented that it “had no system . . . no organization—No records kept, no reports. It is no easy work to organize it but it can be done. . . . I am to perfect a plan this week.”⁵³ Never one to dawdle, McCulloch returned a week later with a proposal entitled “Methods of Charitable Relief in Large Cities,” in which he called for the complete overhaul of the society along principles of “scientific charity,” as opposed to the traditional almsgiving that had previously characterized the organization. As a result of his recommendations, the Indianapolis Benevolent Society was radically transformed into a centralized bureaucracy whose structure and methods anticipated modern social work agencies. Most significantly, the organization now required every application for charity to be thoroughly investigated in order to distinguish the deserving poor from paupers. The names of all applicants, as well as decisions concerning aid, were to be recorded for future reference and to prevent duplication of assistance.

By implementing these new methods, which he had carefully modeled on an earlier German initiative known as the Elberfeld Plan, McCulloch hoped to put an end to outdoor relief (such as alms and soup kitchens) to all “vagrants, beggars, and paupers” in the city of Indianapolis. Instead, these and other “defectives” who hailed “from miserable stock” were to be placed in the growing number of institutions being built in the state. In a diary entry from January 18, 1879, McCulloch described seeing “women going from house to house. I propose to make it an impossibility for them to get anything. The begging children tell their tale in the alleys, and I listen to them. I hope to see this done away [with].” The chief goal of the newly organized society, as he expressed it a month and a half later on March 3, was to “relieve the worthy poor without breaking down that sturdy self-dependence which is characteristic of the Teutonic races.” On November 30, 1879, McCulloch would repeat this view at the Annual Public Meeting of the Indianapolis Benevolent Society: “While the poor we will always have with us, it is our fault and our disgrace if we have the pauper. The pauper is one whose Saxon or Teutonic self-help has given place to a parasitic life.”⁵⁴

McCulloch’s glowing references to Anglo-Saxon self-dependence reflect the increasingly popular racial ideology in postbellum America known as *Teutonism*. Based on the writings of men like E. A. Freeman and his disciple John Fiske, these taxonomies placed members of the Anglo-Saxon branch of the Teutonic “race” atop the racial pyramid.⁵⁵ As Matthew Frye Jacobson has shown, one of the most articulate

spokesman for this position was Daniel Ullman, a Know-Nothing politician from New York, who delivered a speech in 1868 in which he emphasized the “inherent love of freedom of the Anglo-Saxons in England and America, which has been the hereditary characteristic of the Teutonic or Germanic race from the earliest period.”⁵⁶

Like Ullman, Fiske, and Freeman—whose writings he had read—Oscar McCulloch viewed the Teutonic race as the backbone of American democracy and economic self-sufficiency. Against this backdrop, Anglo-Saxon paupers such as the Ishmaelites represented a glaring exception that proved the rule. In the following decade, McCulloch would argue that the Tribe of Ishmael’s debased condition testified to the deleterious effects of unscientific charity, on the one hand, and to an inherited propensity for begging, prostitution, nomadism, and criminality, on the other. McCulloch viewed the degeneracy of the Ishmaelites as evidence that even the Teutonic race could produce atavistic survivals of more primitive and, particularly in the modern context, socially undesirable behaviors.

McCulloch’s reorganization of the Indianapolis Benevolence Society attracted the support of the city’s wealthiest businessmen and professionals, including Benjamin Harrison, the future president of the United States, who agreed to serve on one of its committees. It didn’t take long for dissenting voices to appear, as well. The most pointed critiques were leveled by the prolabor Indianapolis newspaper, *The People*. On March 8, 1879, the paper published the following stinging editorial:

The great hobby of this Benevolent Society is “investigation”. They believe in spending dollar upon dollar for investigation—but not one red cent to relieve “cases” until they have been investigated. . . . They harp upon the “chronic poor” of the city. In God’s name how can one help from being a “chronic poor” person when he can get no work to put bread into his mouth or into the mouths of his suffering family? Does the Benevolent Society believe, for a moment that these “chronic poor” people remain the “chronic poor” of the city from choice? No doubt they would greatly prefer to be among the “chronic” rich. . . . Ask the poor people who apply to this Benevolent Society how they are treated, and you will have but a very poor opinion of the efficiency of the “Christian activity” which they so prate about. . . . God help the poor if they have no other dependence save this Indianapolis Benevolent Society and our township trustee’s office.⁵⁷

Over the next few months, *The People* continued to attack the society and its new president, asking, for example, “Who made Oscar C. McCulloch a judge of his fellows?” and exhorting him to model his behavior “more after his Savior and less after our little township

trustee.”⁵⁸ These charges of religious hypocrisy were intended to undermine McCulloch’s growing reputation as the foremost liberal clergyman in Indianapolis. From his pulpit in the Plymouth Church, McCulloch had quickly become one of the city’s most vocal proponents of the Social Gospel, a newly emerging theological doctrine that rejected predestination and, instead, argued that “applied Christianity”—that is, religiously inspired social work—could transform society.⁵⁹ Unlike their more conservative evangelical counterparts, advocates of the Social Gospel did not interpret the Bible literally, and many even embraced Darwin’s theory of evolution. Inspired by the writings of well-known contemporaries like Washington Gladden and Edward Everett Hale, Oscar McCulloch delivered sermons with titles like “Problems of the City Poor” and “The Development of Benevolence in the Race and Individual.”⁶⁰

In these sermons and in published bulletins for the Indianapolis Benevolent Society, McCulloch exhorted the residents of the city to volunteer “a very little act of personal kindness or attention” on behalf of their impoverished neighbors.⁶¹ But he also chided them for actually increasing misery through indiscriminate almsgiving. Christian charity, in his view, meant first and foremost distinguishing between the worthy and unworthy poor. Once this was accomplished through scientific methods of investigation, then deserving individuals could be reintegrated into society and undeserving ones could be safely segregated in institutions. By contrast, as we have seen, prolabor voices like *The People* believed that McCulloch and his allies spent too much time and money on surveillance of the poor and too little on actual aid. While a small number of hustlers and malcontents might end up receiving charity, these opponents argued that a more generous approach would ensure that none of the truly needy went away empty-handed—something that they claimed was already occurring under the newly organized Indianapolis Benevolent Society.

In its editorials, *The People* also accused McCulloch of being “in league with the township trustee” and of supporting “his disgraceful system of espionage upon the poor.” McCulloch was highly critical of what he viewed as the township trustee’s policy of indiscriminate giving during the first half of the 1870s. From 1874 to 1876 alone, the amount of relief given by the office had nearly doubled from \$33,601 to \$55,542—hardly surprising, given the increase in population and the effects of the depression during the same period. This changed dramatically, however, after B. F. King was elected trustee in November 1876. During his first few months in office, King assembled a team of twenty

paid and volunteer workers to investigate every application for aid. As a result of these practices, the amount of relief given by the township trustee actually decreased to \$31,733 in 1877, plummeted to an astonishing \$8,780 in 1878, and then fell even further, to \$6,743 in 1879. It would not break the \$10,000 mark again until 1884.⁶²

These numbers reveal that Oscar McCulloch's policy initiatives with the Indianapolis Benevolent Society did not occur in a vacuum. On the contrary, the city had already introduced surveillance of the poor in the year preceding his arrival. McCulloch expressed his support for the township trustee's new approach in a letter to the editor of the *Indianapolis News* on March 3, 1879: "Of over eighteen hundred applicants for aid in 1876 only forty are now receiving help. . . . I believe the management of that office to be thorough, efficient and in the best interests of the people."⁶³

The joint efforts of McCulloch and the township trustee to restrict aid could not have occurred at a worse time for the growing ranks of the city's poor. Instead of attributing the increase in need to socioeconomic factors, such as the influx of desperately poor white and black rural laborers and the lingering effects of the economic collapse of the 1870s, McCulloch and his allies blamed the so-called undeserving poor and their unwitting benefactors.

In December 1879, encouraged by the positive response of the city's upper classes to his work with the Indianapolis Benevolence Society, McCulloch established the Charity Organization Society.⁶⁴ Under his leadership, the COS, as it was also known, assumed responsibility for investigating families requesting aid, while the Benevolence Society remained in charge of actually distributing the aid approved by the investigators. McCulloch modeled the COS after a similar society in Buffalo established by Benjamin Gurteen, who was in turn inspired by the London Charity Organization Society. All these groups belonged to a new movement known as "associated" or "organized" charity.⁶⁵ As the *Yearbook of Charities, 1888–1889* made clear, the chief goal of the movement was to adopt "the principles of scientific charity as distinguished from mere relief or almsgiving societies." The constitution for the Buffalo society spelled out exactly what this meant:

1. To see that all deserving cases of destitution are properly relieved.
2. To prevent indiscriminate and duplicate giving.
3. To make employment the basis for relief.
4. To secure the community from imposture.
5. To reduce vagrancy and pauperism, and ascertain their true causes.⁶⁶

Over the next few years, Oscar McCulloch succeeded in transforming the Indianapolis Charity Organization Society into the city's central hub for the distribution of aid to the poor. During this period, the COS worked closely with the township trustee, the police, clergymen, and prominent businessmen, although McCulloch's relationship with the city's capitalists later soured after his views took a decided turn to the left. The COS minutes from 1880 mention an impressive list of financial contributors, including the Indiana National Bank, George Kingan (a local meat-packing mogul), Merchants Bank, Eli Lilly and Company, and the *Indianapolis Journal* and the *Indiana State Sentinel*, the city's two most prominent newspapers.⁶⁷ Emboldened by this support, McCulloch eventually sought to eliminate the office of the township trustee—the other main distributor of charity in Indianapolis—on the grounds that it was no longer necessary. By the end of the 1880s, McCulloch had once again become so critical of the township trustee, despite its adoption of many of the principles of “scientific” charity that he himself championed, that he even accused holders of the office of trading charity for votes.

Criticism of McCulloch's efforts with the Charity Organization Society was not confined to *The People*. One letter to the editor of the *Indianapolis Journal* sarcastically referred to the agency as the “society for the suppression of benevolence” and complained that “the poor—the deserving poor, the superlatively, double-distilled, deserving poor—get only fifty cents out of each dollar collected. It is a beautiful work.”⁶⁸

Undaunted, McCulloch continued to expand the reach of the COS throughout the 1880s. Under its auspices, he helped to establish a range of important social services in the city, including free public baths, the Indianapolis Free Kindergarten Society, and the Dime Savings and Loan Association for poor investors. He tirelessly argued for reforms in the area's decrepit jails, hospitals, and insane asylums and unsuccessfully campaigned for the construction of low- and moderate-income public housing. On another front, McCulloch established the Plymouth Institute—inspired, in part, by the Working Men's College in London—which offered courses to working people for a nominal fee, as well as a literary club and a lecture series that included talks by John Dewey, Mark Twain, Felix Adler (founder of the Society for Ethical Culture), Matthew Arnold, Henry Ward Beecher, Charles Dickens, and the explorer Henry Stanley, who supposedly received the telegram that sent him on his quest for Dr. Livingstone while staying in McCulloch's Indianapolis home. During the same

period, McCulloch himself gave numerous public lectures, on topics like “Contributions of Darwinism to Religion,” “March of the Teuton,” and “The Higher Socialism.”⁶⁹

During his days as a traveling salesman, McCulloch had learned to appreciate the power of advertising. Taking advantage of his good relations with the city’s main newspapers in the early 1880s, McCulloch began to publicize his social programs in a regular column in the *Indianapolis Journal*. Here, for the first time, he discussed in print the pauper community that he had previously referred to in his diary as the Ishmaelites. In a column published on April 16, 1880, McCulloch thanked the township trustee for granting him access to “histories of over 7,000 cases,” containing “family connections and lines of descent through three and four generations . . . [offering] an opportunity to the student of crime and pauperism unequaled, it is believed in the country.” A few weeks later, on May 1, McCulloch published a column in which he referred to 459 “knots or groups of families” who reflected the “law of retrogression” and were “connected by blood or marriage and form a mass of parasitic growth.”⁷⁰ Although he chose not to identify this cluster of pauper families by name, McCulloch was clearly referring to the so-called Ishmaelites he had discovered nearly two years earlier. In these columns, McCulloch began to formulate the rhetoric of regression and parasitism that he would later employ so chillingly in his 1888 published account of the Tribe of Ishmael.

In the same year that these columns appeared, McCulloch was invited to give a speech before the National Social Science Association in Saratoga, New York. The text of this lecture was published under the title “Associated Charities” in *The Indiana State Sentinel* and in a national publication called *Good Company*.⁷¹ At the conference, McCulloch illustrated his remarks with a diagram (no longer extant) consisting of more than four hundred supposedly deviant individuals related by blood or marriage who were “underunning our society like devil grass,” as he put it. In the following decades, such charts would become a staple of the eugenics family studies genre. Apparently wishing to preserve the anonymity of the Ishmaels, McCulloch referred to them in his lecture as an “Indianapolis family” whose members were caught in a spiral of public aid, infant mortality, and incest. As in his diary, McCulloch described going to “the office of the township trustee, where the historical records of all applicants for public aid are registered,” adding, “Here I found that I had touched one knot of a large family known as ‘American Gypsies.’”

Significantly, instead of calling them the Ishmaelites in this lecture, McCulloch identified the community as Gypsies, another equally exotic sounding title. McCulloch never suggested in either his published or unpublished writings that the Ishmaels were genuine Gypsies, or, as they call themselves, Roma. Instead, he hoped to symbolically associate the community with another outcast group then in vogue. Indeed, Roma were the subject of innumerable articles in the 1880s.⁷² Contemporary works such as George Smith's *Gipsy Life: Being an Account of our Gypsies and their Children, with Suggestions for their Improvement* (1880) and Charles Leland's *The English Gipsies and Their Language* (1874) provided a literary backdrop for McCulloch's discursive choice, just as Orientalist writings on the Islamic Near East had earlier influenced his identification of the community as the Ishmaelites.

It is also possible that McCulloch was influenced by direct contact with actual Roma who were part of the great waves of immigration from Eastern and Southern Europe that began reaching America's shores in the 1880s.⁷³ Late-nineteenth-century birth records for Marion County, Indiana—where Indianapolis is located—list “gypsies living in a tent” as the “occupation” of at least one couple.⁷⁴ Whether these itinerant folk were Roma, Ishmaelites, or the British Isles people known as Travellers is now impossible to say.

Like the Ishmaelites, Roma were consistently portrayed during the nineteenth century as wanderers and thieves. One self-appointed English expert on the Roma declared that “all their peculiar vices . . . are obviously traceable to their wandering life. This engenders idleness, ignorance, poverty, a fierce lawless temper. . . . They have so many opportunities, when unobserved, of indulging their thievish propensities, that they are bold and unblushing in the practice.”⁷⁵ Like McCulloch, the author of this passage was a social reformer who believed in surveillance—note his reference to the trouble the Roma get into when “unobserved”—as well as the removal of children from their parents, a recommendation that McCulloch had also made in his diary entry of January 20, 1878.

McCulloch probably knew that the English word “Gypsy” reflected a bastardization of the word “Egyptian,” based on a common—though mistaken—belief that the Roma originated in Egypt before arriving in Europe. Indeed, early English sources even referred to them as “Egipcyans” or “counterfayte Egipcians.” This provided a symbolic link to the name “Ishmaelites” since Ishmael himself was depicted as the son of an Egyptian slave in the Bible and his descendants were later identified

as Arabs. Like the name “Ishmaelites,” therefore, the title “American Gypsies” conjured up threatening Orientalist stereotypes of a degenerate tribe of wanderers and thieves living on the margins of civilization.

Today, Oscar McCulloch’s untiring activism on behalf of Indianapolis’s working poor on the one hand and his strident condemnation of the Ishmaelites on the other appear contradictory and even paradoxical. In his day, however, as we have seen, it was not uncommon for social reformers and other progressives to differentiate sharply between the ranks of the deserving and the undeserving poor. Poor individuals whose labor was defined as socially productive (typically those who worked in trades, factories, and farms) were deemed worthy of help; those whose labor was stigmatized (e.g., collecting junk, begging, prostitution) or who did not work at all were stereotyped as social parasites. The eugenics movement would later attract a large number of progressive activists to its ranks, including, most notably, Margaret Sanger, the founder of the organization now known as Planned Parenthood.⁷⁶ Given this broader trend, it is not surprising that during the middle of the 1880s, McCulloch began to turn away from his close ties with Indianapolis’s business community and started to champion a more progressive prolabor ideology that he and others called Christian Socialism. In McCulloch’s words, “Every public spirited man is in this sense a Socialist.”⁷⁷

In the summer of 1885, after more than half a decade of laboring in vain to eliminate the scourge of poverty in Indianapolis, a frustrated McCulloch began to deliver sermons with titles like “A Defense of Labor and Endorsement of Trades Unions” and “An Honest Definition of Socialism.” He praised labor unions as expressions of Christian self-sacrifice since “the good of the individual must be submitted to the good of his class. Each must think of all, must lay aside some of his wages for some suffering brother, for a union locked out or on a strike.”⁷⁸ Whereas McCulloch’s earlier efforts had been heavily publicized by the city’s main newspapers and criticized by its prolabor press, this time the situation was reversed. For instance, Thomas Gruelle, the president of the Central Labor Union and publisher of the Indianapolis *Labor Signal*, wrote an editorial on February 18, 1886, in which he declared, “The working people of Indianapolis should rally as one man to the support of Rev. Oscar C. McCulloch, who stands alone among the ministers of this city as the champion of labor—the defender of our faith.”⁷⁹

McCulloch cemented his newfound reputation as a man of the people following the infamous Haymarket Riots of 1886, in which the Chicago

police fired into a crowd of union supporters after a bomb went off at a labor gathering in the city's Haymarket Square. Altogether, seven police officers were killed in the explosion. In response, the police killed several workers and injured hundreds more. Eventually, eight union leaders were put on trial, and four were hanged for inciting the deadly disturbance, although an investigation later indicated that the bomb may have been planted by an agent of the police as a pretext for a crackdown on organized labor.

McCulloch's diary entry from May 7, 1886, reveals how deeply disturbed he was by the incident. Although he opposed violent revolution, McCulloch sympathized with the workers: "The one thought in my mind is the Labor trouble [in Chicago]. I wish that I could speak on that and nothing else. . . . When there is revolution there is reason for it in the oppression of the people. . . . They are brought in here by railroads who wish cheap labor, by coal syndicates, by rolling mills, etc. They are the *Frankensteins* of modern society. . . . But the Christ is behind them."⁸⁰

Half a year later, McCulloch decided to make his views public in a sermon at the Plymouth Church. Warning his congregation beforehand that they would probably disapprove of his position, McCulloch went on to criticize the trial of the Chicago anarchists as unfair. The reaction was swift. Labor sympathizers sent him letters of thanks, but opponents boycotted his church and rescinded at least one invitation to lecture. Refusing to be cowed, on November 30, 1886, McCulloch sent a letter to the editor of the *Indianapolis Journal* in which he defended his position: "They [the anarchists] see hundreds of men out of work. . . . They see machinery displace men who then go about vainly for work. . . . There are thousands today who feel that they were not legally tried; that they were too severely sentenced. It is not by repression, by 'blood and iron,' that such things are stamped out, but by remedying the causes."⁸¹

Those in power were not amused, as the pro-establishment editor of the *Indianapolis Journal* made clear in his response: "Of course Mr. McCulloch has a perfect right to think the bloody wretches in Chicago should have a new trial, or that their sentences should be mitigated; and he probably has the right to stand in his pulpit and say so, even at a time when their cases are still in process of judicial consideration; but we think that neither Mr. McCulloch nor any other man has the right to use a pulpit of a leading and intelligent church in which to utter unmitigated 'hogwash.'"⁸²

The controversy over the labor troubles in Chicago appears to have taken a toll on McCulloch's already precarious health, and in April 1887

he fell into a coma for several days following an operation. After recovering, McCulloch took a leave of absence from his duties at the Plymouth Church and spent the next six months in Europe, much of it in London.⁸³ Given his interests, McCulloch could not have arrived at a more opportune time, for the city was in the midst of a social crisis brought about by rapid industrialization, immigration, and urbanization.⁸⁴

A few years earlier, Andrew Mearns—like McCulloch, a Congregationalist minister and social reformer—had issued a clarion call with the publication of *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London* (1883). In its pages, Mearns took his readers on a virtual tour of London’s worst slums. His vivid descriptions of urban families mired in poverty recall McCulloch’s own diary account of his first encounter with the Ishmaels. For example, Mearns wrote that “every room in these rotten and reeking tenements houses a family, often two. . . . Here are seven people living in one underground kitchen, and a little child lying dead in the same room.”⁸⁵ Mearns’s incendiary pamphlet kindled a firestorm of public debate in England that eventually led to the implementation of important legal reforms such as the Housing of the Working Classes Act of 1890. It also inspired other investigations of London’s poor districts, including Charles Booth’s studies of the notorious East End, which he first presented before the Royal Statistical Society in May 1887, around the time that McCulloch was visiting London.

Booth argued that London’s one million poor residents should be divided into four classes, identified by the letters, A, B, C, and D. Booth condemned those in class A as leading a “savage life, with vicissitudes of extreme hardship and occasional excess,” and those in class B as being “shiftless, hand-to-mouth, pleasure loving, and always poor,” respectively, and called them a threat to the well-being of the city. By contrast, he sympathetically described the other two classes, those who made up the deserving poor, as “victims of competition” (C) and as living “hard lives very patiently” (D).⁸⁶

When McCulloch reviewed Jacob Riis’s *How the Other Half Lives* (1890), a trailblazing book that exposed the problem of urban poverty in America, he praised Booth’s work on London’s poor as similarly important. In his review, McCulloch also provided a list of related books, including Helen Campbell’s *Prisoners of Poverty*, General William Booth’s *In Darkest England*, and Henry Morton Stanley’s *In Darkest Africa*, that might interest his readers.⁸⁷ At first glance, Stanley’s account of his adventures in Africa seems out of place in what is otherwise a collection of pioneering works in urban ethnography. Stylistically

and ideologically, however, the colorful accounts of intrepid Victorian explorers like Stanley provided a model for the guided tours of dark slums and their supposedly savage residents published by social reformers during this era.

It should come as no surprise, therefore, that William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army, would name his own urban exposé after Stanley's enormously popular travelogue. After all, Booth asked, "As there is a darkest Africa is there not a darkest England? Civilization, which can breed its own barbarians, does it not also breed its own pygmies? May we not find a parallel at our own doors, and discover within a stone's throw of our cathedrals and palaces similar horrors to those which Stanley has found existing in the great Equatorial forest?"⁸⁸ By warning that civilization breeds its own "pygmies," Booth was implicitly invoking the frightening specter of degeneration, which emerged during the last half of the nineteenth century as a powerful counterweight to the era's essentially optimistic theories of progress and evolution.⁸⁹

Echoing the words of Booth and Stanley, McCulloch concluded his newspaper review of *How the Other Half Lives* with a question of his own: "Shall there be a 'Darkest Indianapolis'?" McCulloch and his counterparts saw many parallels between supposedly primitive people in colonized places like Africa and their own impoverished neighbors in the slums of London, New York, and Indianapolis.⁹⁰ Influential thinkers like Ray Lankaster, a scientist whose work would later influence McCulloch's published account of the Tribe of Ishmael, Max Nordau, one of the founders of political Zionism, and Cesare Lombroso, the Italian criminal anthropologist, rejected the idea that human society "moves incessantly from less good to better, from ignorance to science, from barbarism to civilisation," as the Larouse dictionary entry on *progress* phrased it in 1875.⁹¹

Instead, they asserted that certain individuals or, in some cases, entire groups or communities, could survive as atavistic throwbacks to earlier stages of human development, what Lombroso, in his inimitable and offensive style, referred to as "lubricious and ferocious orangutans with human faces."⁹² Even more frighteningly, they argued, civilized society itself could actually encourage the degeneration of some of its members by not properly addressing the environmental and biological factors that could lead to their social and physical devolution.

Like his European colleagues, McCulloch believed that the newly industrialized cities of Europe and America were fertile breeding grounds for tribes of degenerates. As early as 1880, he had publicly

declared: “Pauperism is steadily on the increase in almost every city in the land. . . . Into our cities pour, in addition to the discharged convicts, the families of convicts left without support; the tramp; the alms-house children, all these sink to the bottom forming a morass. The law of degeneration is as active as that of gravitation.”⁹³ Ten years later, in 1889, McCulloch exhorted an audience of organized charity professionals in San Francisco to see themselves as the latest links in a long chain of urban reformers stretching back to the first Christians: “All great movements have been developed in cities. Christianity took possession of the great centres of civilization—Rome, Antioch, Ephesus.”⁹⁴

The nineteenth-century fantasy of urban jungles rivaling the equatorial forests of darkest Africa would (mis)inform social reformers, politicians, and artists on both sides of the Atlantic for generations. We need only look at 1970s films like *Fort Apache: The Bronx* and *The Warriors* to see how deeply and tenaciously the idea of the city as a tribal space inhabited by urban primitives like the Ishmaelites would take hold of the popular imagination in the following century.⁹⁵ Within this genealogy, Oscar McCulloch’s published account of the Tribe of Ishmael, which he produced soon after returning from Europe in 1888, represents an early and important stage of development.