CHANGING CONTOURS OF THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF IRISH AMERICA

ABSTRACT

In this paper Professor J. J. Lee provides an overview of some of the shifting concerns of historians of Irish America over the past century.

The way historians have interpreted the experiences of immigrants from Ireland, and their descendants in the United States, has undergone significant change over the past century. These changes may provide a learning experience for everyone concerned with the study of immigration.

In the late 19th and early 20th century, historical writing was dominated by a filiopietistic tendency bordering on ancestor worship. At the extreme it might seem that nothing good happened in America but for an Irish initiative. But this Irish filiopietism, expressed most vigorously in the pages of the *Journal of the Irish-American Historical Society,* was simply representative of immigrant historical writing of the time. It came as a natural response to the strong anti-immigrant impulses coursing through much of American public opinion, that ethnic groups should extol their contributions to the building of America, above all through their service in the Revolutionary War. Washington's armies were now swollen through the number of Heroes of the Revolution that every self-respecting ethnic group excavated more than a century later.

In the Irish case, the desire to claim distinction was accentuated by the fact that they were not only staking out their claim to patriotic respectability, but defending it vigorously against what they held to be the claim-jumping propensities of the Scotch-Irish. Suffice it to say that much of the substantial output of the protagonists a century ago bears the whiff of cordite. A real tug-of-war developed over who could be claimed as authentically belonging to one side or the other. Yet devoted diggers in the records, like Michael J. O'Brien, the most prolific historian of the American Irish Historical Society, can be dismissed too easily as purely polemicists, for they did unearth much still-valuable material. Although the lens through which they viewed the material may have been distorted, it's not clear the temptations to which they succumbed have always been overcome a century later, however more scholarly the format in which findings are pronounced.

It is easy to overlook, too, in just what a vacuum of scholarly interest these filiopietistic enthusiasts were obliged to labor. The American historical profession, predominantly of WASP vintage, their faces turned towards the Turnerian frontier, scarcely considered immigrants of more recent vintage fit subject for serious scholarship. There were of course scholars who did labor in the lonely immigration field in the interim, and indeed planted seeds that would yield a rich harvest, but they would for long plough lonely furrows. Irish-American scholarship was itself slow to focus on this field, even by the prevailing standards of neglect, for reasons still requiring full elucidation.

Nevertheless, probably the single most influential study of the Irish experience in nineteenth century America dates from this era, Oscar Handlin's *Boston's Immigrants,* a Harvard doctorate under Schlesinger, published in 1941. Although the Irish are not featured in the title, the book has to be, of course, mainly about them. It would come to be severely criticized, but the fact that its shadow still hovers over so much of our thinking testifies to the enduring importance of Handlin's vision. That vision was a gloomy one, Handlin's powerful brush strokes conveying dark and glowering images of the fate of the immigrants, and even of their children. Of course the vision was dominated by the tragic repercussions of the Great Irish Famine of 1845-52, which would have such fateful consequences for Boston, both foetid and fecund – but with the foetid predominant in Handlin's period. Where the filiopietists wrote contribution history, Handlin's Boston is victim history. Deeply conscious of the weakness of the immigrants in the face of a fate beyond their comprehension, his is truly a depiction of a people trapped in a world they never made. It is not unduly exaggerating to suggest that the general thrust of Handlin's Pulitzer Prize winning classic a decade later, *The Uprooted,* is in fact *Boston's Immigrants* writ large. Certainly the image of immigrant loss conveyed in *The Uprooted,* of immigrants buffeted by storms and floundering in

J. J. LEE.

Professor J.J. Lee is Director of Glucksman Ireland House, Glucksman Professor of Irish Studies and Professor of History, New York University, and Professor of History, University College Cork, Ireland. He is editing, with Marion R. Casey, /Making the Irish American, /to be published by New York University Press, Spring 2006.

floods beyond their control, recalls much of the theme of *Boston's Immigrants.*

There is of course a certain irony in finding so evocative a work on the Irish stemming from the pen of the Brooklyn-born son of Ukrainian Jewish immigrants. Ironically enough, it has been suggested that Handlin looked at Boston's immigrants partly through the empathetic eyes of a Jewish boy reared in a culture of being uprooted in the Brooklyn of the Depression, where strong anti-Semitic prejudices (ironically enough, not least among the Irish) fostered in him a sympathy for the obstacles confronting Irish immigrants in the Boston of the previous century.

Handlin's vision would dominate the historiography of Irish America for a generation. But it then gradually began to be chipped away, from at least four angles. Part of this came from taking a harder look at the old world the immigrants left behind, which began to seem distinctly less romantic than when seen through immigrant nostalgia. The American experience came then to be seen much less as one of loss of an old world than of gain of a new. Even, it was argued, if the immigrants themselves often suffered a sense of irreparable loss, their children enjoyed far better prospects than they ever could have at home. A whole cadre of scholars from the 1960's, and especially the 1970's on, began to stress just how unrepresentative Boston was of America. No other major cities grew so slowly economically, or were as socially and politically rigid, with the Boston Brahmins resenting and resisting the upward pressure of the repulsive Irish Catholic lower orders. San Francisco, which scarcely existed before the 1849 gold rush, comes to be presented as the polar opposite, where the Catholic Irish flocked in as equals on a level playing field, and unhampered by ethnic or religious prejudice, rose rapidly in business and politics.

This perspective does indeed enormously enrich our understanding of the Irish immigrant and ethnic experience by providing a valuable corrective to unduly pessimistic generalizations based on Boston's nineteenth century experience. But it is also important to preserve a sense of perspective. In 1870, New York City had more Irish-born than the next six biggest centers of Irish settlement together. No generalization about Irish experience that does not touch on New York can be deemed adequate. And despite a useful 1949 book by Robert Ernst, it was not until Ronald Bayor & Tim Meagher edited *The New York Irish* in 1996 that a full scale volume, covering the entire history of the city, was devoted to the Irish. Although it was a wonderful collection, the colossal challenge of systematically studying Irish social mobility in New York City remains to be undertaken.

Handlin's interpretation of Irish immigration history helped spur massive investment in social mobility studies to assess just how the immigrants and their descendants fared in economic terms, the most celebrated those of Stephen Thernstrom on Newburyport in 1964 and Boston in 1973. Those studies have greatly illuminated the Irish as well as other group's experiences, but they in turn can be seen to require qualification for at least three reasons, two from within the field, one from outside it.

Earlier studies of social mobility were unable to follow those who had left the area under investigation. Given the rates of geographical mobility the question naturally arose whether the migrants had flourished or failed. Until one knew the answer to that, every conclusion about the original group had to be provisional. Not until Joseph Ferrie's recent *Yankees Now* has a technique been devised to capture the likely fate of the disappeared, which Ferrie finds far more positive than Thernstrom surmised. However, Ferrie's data only refers to males. This is particularly problematic for the Irish, where the sex ratio of immigrants was roughly 50:50, given the far higher rate of female emigration from Ireland than was customary from Europe in general. Although the exceptionally high ratio of domestic servants among Irish immigrant women may suggest a lower rate of internal female mobility, this issue remains to be explored.

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Of course no reader of Finley Peter Dunne's Mr Dooley stories in the Chicago of the 1890's could have been left in any doubt about that. The external criticism of the social mobility study syndrome – that it reduced the meaning of life solely to economics, shrivelling 'success' to changes in the number of dollars in the pocket – was in one sense unfair to individual researchers, but not perhaps unfair to the impression left by what seemed at times an obsession with measuring 'success' by materialistic criteria. There turned out to be three kicks in this particular trail.

Firstly, scholars apart from economists or economic historians began to ponder other perspectives on immigrant experience, none better than Charles Fanning in his studies of the aforesaid Mr Dooley. The cultural historical approach that has flourished in recent decades, whether in the hands of literary specialists like Fanning, Robert Rhodes and Daniel Casey, or of musical virtuosos like Mick Moloney and William J. Williams, fleshes out the economic dimension in ways essential to understanding the full immigrant experience.

Secondly, the extensive use of immigrant letters as source material, pioneered by Arnold Schrier in 1958 in *Ireland and the American Emigration,* has been massively extended by Kerby Miller in his 1985 classic, *Emigrants and Exiles,* and in *Irish immigrants in the Land of Canaan: Letters and Memoirs from Colonial and Revolutionary America, 1675-1815,* published in 2003. Miller has brought culture back into the center of the interpretive framework, arguing for a specific Gaelic Irish Catholic world view, which could foster a degree of fatalism about material matters among immigrants, leaving those steeped in that value system ill-equipped to cope with life in America.

The 'success' issue will not go away, partly because of its implications for Catholic-Protestant relations in Ireland, particularly Northern Ireland, where sectarian stereotypes owe much to ideas, to put it politely, about who has, and hasn't, the Protestant Ethic. But the American experience of Catholics and Protestants from Ireland can serve as ammunition too. Here irony piles upon irony. Andrew Greeley has revolutionized inherited perspectives by establishing from the seventies that, contrary to stereotype, Irish Catholics now count as more 'successful', by material criteria, than Irish Protestants – indeed than any Protestants. The surprise caused by this was nearly matched by the discovery that the majority of the 40 million plus Americans who recorded themselves as having some Irish connection in the ancestral returns in the 1980 census were – Protestant. However quick the emotionally engaged seized on these findings, to support whatever cause it may please them to champion, scholars must come to grips with them to ascertain what apparent implications survive scholarly scrutiny and what do not. It is appropriate that it should be an American in Canada, Donald Akenson, who has suggested that a close study of the Canadian religious census date may serve as a proxy for the absence of religion from the American census. This would allow some conclusion to be hazarded about Catholic and Protestant in the history of Irish America – and doubtless add to the gaiety of immigrant historiography by bringing us in a way back to the concerns of our ancestral filiopietistic protagonists, though from a scholarly perspective.