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THE PORTRAIT OF IRISH IMMIGRANT WOMEN IN THE UNITED STATES, 1880–1930

The research and writing on the ethnic and immigrant women in the United States has increased remarkably. This development is a result of women and immigration historians' recognition of gender as an important factor, shaping migration, community, family and work among America's ethnic and foreign-born populations. In this article I am going to combine the fields of gender studies and immigration history and present the portrait of Irish immigrant women in the United States in the period 1880–1930.

Female emigration from Ireland

A complex relationship of land-family and marriage is believed to be the cause of emigration in the second half of the 19th century. There are however different theories with regard to female emigration from Ireland. The social status of women rather than poverty alone was a casual factor 'pushing' them abroad. Access to land was a life or death issue for the lower layers of the agricultural community in Ireland. As a consequence of land scarcity, arranged marriages spread more and more, replacing the earlier more spontaneous customs. With the spread of arranged marriages, the practice of dowries[1] spread too. In result many women experienced shrinking possibilities of marriage and faced the prospect of life as a subordinated single relative in someone else's household. In those circumstances tens of thousands of Irish women selected the option of emigrating to a new world.

[1] The *dowry* was a transfer of wealth and land, via marriage, between households. In consequence of these practices daughters went out to work, in domestic service or laboring and even abroad, to earn their dowries. The dowry signified that a woman brought enough goods and wealth into her marriage to reproduce herself and her children during part or all of her marriage and was not assumed to be totally dependent on her husband financially.

Summing up, high emigration rates among Irish women were determined by the subordinated status of women, blocked from easy access to a marriage partner, to wage employment and to expressions of their sexuality. The post-famine emigration of women was the refusal to accept the servile role allotted to them in their society and a rejection of the patriarchal values underpinning it.

Throughout the second half of the 19th century, emigration continued at a slower rate than at the peak of Great Famine in the 1840s and the proportion of women among Irish emigrants rose steadily until women were outnumbering men in the decades of the turn of the century.[2] Table 1 shows the share of women in Irish emigration in the post-famine period.

TABLE 1. Proportion of females among emigrants from 26 counties of Ireland

Period	% female
1881–1890	49.4
1891–1900	54.1
1901–1910	52.2
1911–1921	52.6

Note: Ireland has 32 counties, of which 26 cover the northwest, south, east and west of the country.
Source: Jackson, P. "Women in 19th century Irish emigration" [in:] *International Migration Review*. Winter 1984. Volume 18. No. 4. p. 1007.

Apart from the strong presence of women among post-famine emigrants, there was also a change in the age structure of emigrants. The emigrating family households were being replaced by young, single people, including teenage girls since the numbers of young women aged 15 to 19 years old doubled.

In order to assist Irish immigrants, particularly women when they disembarked in Boston from their transatlantic journeys, the Boston Port Protection Program was established jointly by the Charitable Irish Society (CIS) and the Saint Vincent de Paul Society. The Program contained significant elements of social control in regulating and monitoring the behavior of female immigrants in particular. The agent was hired with the job of assisting incoming immigrants by insuring that they were met by their relatives or friends or – if their final destinations were outside Boston – had the means and information necessary to travel there. The port agent monitored the immigrants' behavior sometimes long after they had arrived in the US, and in some instances instigated official immigration investigations into their cases. The program sought to insure that Irish women emigrating to the United States were protected from the potentially dangerous actions of male strangers in the same way that their parents

[2] For more data concerning proportion of females among Irish immigrants look at "Women in 19th century Irish emigration" by Jackson [in:] *International Migration Review* (1984:1006).

and larger community would regulate social interactions in their home towns and villages.[3]

Occupational distribution of Irish-American women

Work and the process of earning money were very important issues for Irish immigrant women. They entered the labor force at the very bottom of the female hierarchy, occupying a place perhaps equal to that of black women and worked for paltry wages in mills, factories and in private homes. A significant number of Irish women – almost all single – were successful enough to save up impressive sums of money, which they used to buy land or send back to Ireland.

The structure of the American job market as it translated into opportunities for the unskilled and uneducated, tended initially to favor the Irish immigrant woman over the man.[4] This pattern continued into the end of the century as young women moved into teaching, nursing, stenography, and clerical and sales work – all white-collar, semi-professional positions.

Table 2 shows the occupational distribution of Irish-born men and women. The manufacturing occupations show about an equal representation of both sexes. It is not surprising, however that the most important occupations for women were domestic or personal services since live-in jobs solved housing problems of single women. Clearly, domestic service carried a stigma for the Irish just as it did for women of other origins.

TABLE 2. Occupational distribution of Irish-born in US, 1900

Occupation	% of males	% of females
Agriculture	15.5	1.9
Professional Services	3.0	6.6
Domestic/Personal Services	21.9	42.7
Trade/Transport	25.8	13.2
Manufacturing	33.8	35.6

Source: Jackson, P. "Women in 19th century Irish emigration" [in:] *International Migration Review*. Winter 1984. Volume 18. No. 4. p. 1008.

Irish born women of 1890, like those of an earlier era, were greatly over-represented among servants and laundresses. But in 1900 women of Irish

[3] The activities of agents from the Boston Port Protection Program are described by Moloney in "A transatlantic reform: Boston's Port Protection Program and Irish women immigrants" [in:] *Journal of American Ethnic History* (1999:50–65).

[4] The differences concerning occupational position of Irish men and women in the U.S.A. are described by Diner in *Erin's Daughters in America* (1983:71).

parentage were under-represented among the same categories and far above their expected numbers among telephone and telegraph operators, teachers, stenographers, typists, bookkeepers, accountants, clerks and copyists. This rapid movement from lower to middle class positions can be viewed as a largely generational change dependent upon improved education and skills.[5]

Numerous Irish-American women entered other prestigious occupations. Actresses and other theater personnel were highly visible examples of successful Irish women. Finally, in a number of other areas – charity work, librarianship, prison reform, medicine – Irish women demonstrated that they could succeed in the mainstream American competition for jobs. Many Irish women, married and widowed, ran boarding houses as a means of support. They also set up dressmaking shops, grocery stores, book stores, and even breweries and liquor stores.

Of all the possible paths that women chose for self-support in the second generation, schoolteaching was the most important and certainly the most popular. Schoolteaching for the second generation was what domestic service had been for the first. The attraction of Irish women for schoolteaching grew out of the economic security such work provided.

Schoolteaching, domestic service, factory work of various kinds, clerical occupations, and nursing all provided Irish women with sources of livelihood. Their move to America had been a migration for jobs. They had been reared in a culture that defined the worth of women in highly economic terms, and as such women often had to choose between economic aspirations and marriage. Within the marketplace Irish culture allowed women to be assertive and this helps to explain the extremely active involvement of Irish women in the American labor movement. Irish women provided much of the female trade union leadership in the last half of the nineteenth century, e.g., Kate Mullaney, Leonora Barry, Augusta Lewis.

The position of Irish-American women in the family structure

Irish immigrant households were generally nuclear, that is two-generational consisting of parents and children. Irish families were more likely than native whites to own their own homes. ‘Broken’ or female-headed households were common: the Irish surpassed all other immigrant groups in the incidence of missing fathers, the result of high male mortality and desertion by fathers disgusted because of their inability to maintain a decent level of living, frequently as a result of over-indulgence in alcohol.

[5] The rise of Irish women from lower to middle-class positions is presented by. Meagher in *From Paddy to Studs. Irish-American Communities in the Turn of the Century Era, 1880 to 1920* (1986:147).

The mother was less likely to work than were married women of any other European immigrant group. Even widows preferred sending their children to work rather than leaving the home to work themselves. The life of Irish mother or widow however was far from idle: she usually took in washing, ironing or sewing for the unmarried, disabled or unemployed in the immediate neighborhood, sometimes bringing in enough cash to tide the family over an economic crisis and, maintaining ties of kin and friendship within the community.

The Irish man bore the stigma of the violent, drunken with apelike physiognomy. The images of the cold, stern, demanding mother and weak, heavy-drinking, sexually incompetent father have become part of the mythology of American life. The heavy-drinking Irishman was made to 'act right' by a sensible, tough-minded, long-suffering wife.

Summing up the mythology, the Irish Catholic family was a cold, authoritarian, and repressive family characterized by late marriage, domineering women, and sexually inadequate, unfulfilled men. It is also asserted by the mythology that the Catholicism of the Irish created models for women which bound them to the roles of housewife and mother. Both Irishness and Catholicism, in other words, produced men and women who were frustrated, unfulfilled, and unhappy.

The other side of the dominant Irish Catholic mother was the Irish attitude toward feminism. They were more likely than other Americans to approve of a woman pursuing a career; to reject the notion that women belong in the home: to say they would vote for a woman for president; to reject the notion that men are better suited emotionally for politics than women.[6]

The successes and fulfilled aspirations that many Irish women experienced, particularly those who remained single into their thirties or even beyond, contrasted sharply with the plight of Irish women, abandoned and widowed, orphaned and abused, who could not take advantage of the opportunities of American life. For some Irish women the lives of poverty they had to endure in the American slums demonstrated the differences between being married and remaining single. The voluminous records of public and private charity societies indicate that Irish women, almost all of whom were supporting children by themselves, as a result of either abandonment or widowhood, accounted for the largest percentage of cases.[7]

It was from the nuns representing the female religious orders that Irish women, faced with poverty, alcoholism, domestic violence, and illness could

[6] For the Irish attitude toward feminism look at *The Irish Americans. The Rise to Money and Power* by Greely (1928:127).

[7] The differences in the status of Irish female immigrants resulting from the choice between getting married or remaining single are demonstrated by Diner in *Erin's Daughters in America* (1983:108).

expect aid and support. It was to these religious women that they did, in fact, turn when in crisis. Some of the most important orders to service Irish women in the United States had originated in Ireland, such as the Sisters of Mercy, the Presentation Sisters, and the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Assimilation and Americanization

The American perception of the Irish changed during the first half of the nineteenth century. Initially, Americans were aware of two distinct groups of immigrants from Ireland in their cities: educated and generally affluent newcomers, both Protestant and Catholic, and poor Catholic Irish who clustered in the emerging urban slums. After the massive influx of the late 1830s and the Great Famine, Irish became synonymous with poverty, crime, drunkenness and violence.

In the early twentieth century Irish-Americans still contributed a higher proportion of the nation's paupers than any other white ethnic group, and mortality rates, especially from tuberculosis, remained appallingly high.[8] Excessive drinking was common among unskilled laborers and brutally mistreated or abandoned wives and children composed an alarming high proportion of Irish slum populations. Irish immigrants made up a large percentage of patients in public mental institutions: most suffered from schizophrenia – ironic symbol of both the extreme disparities in Irish-American society and the enormous gap between new emigrants' naive expectations and the unpleasant realities of the supposed 'land of promise'.

Female emigrants seemed especially prone to realistic assessments of America's comparative advantages, less likely than husbands or brothers to cling to old customs or romanticize the society left behind.

Even within the Irish community, immigrants bitterly lamented that the new American born Irish generation seemed thoroughly 'Americanized'.[9] It is true that the new generation had eagerly adopted many of the customs of their native America. Old Irish folk songs had given way to tin pan alley tunes and the Hurley stick to the baseball bat. Yet beneath that veneer of Americanization, Irish values and norms continued to shape the most intimate decisions of even the American born, e.g., second generation Irish couples continued to have large

[8] For more information concerning the negative sides of Irish immigration look at *The Irish in America: Emigration, Assimilation and Impact* by Drudy (1985:96).

[9] The dilemmas concerning Americanization of American-born Irish generation are described by Meagher in *From Paddy to Studs. Irish-American Communities in the Turn of the Century Era, 1880 to 1920* (1986:83).

families. In 1900 second generation Irish wives gave birth to far more children than married Yankee women, which was an obvious continuation of high fertility patterns typical of Ireland.

The Irish penchant to reside close to fellow Irish combined with anti-Irish hostility which led to formation of self-contained Irish communities in the larger cities. But neighborhoods identified as 'Irish' were never exclusively Hibernian: newcomers from Ireland were among the least segregated groups in urban America. Even the Irish slum, Five Points in New York, had a substantial non-Irish population. But the tone of life in Irish neighborhoods was distinctively Irish: the inherited culture was perpetuated by a steady stream of newcomers, contacts with Ireland through the immigrant press, letters from Ireland, lecture tours by Irish nationalists, coverage of Ireland in textbooks in Catholic schools and, after the turn of the century, periodic visits to the homeland by the more affluent.

Concluding remarks

Irish women as migrants, as new Americans, and as members of aspiring middle class behaved aggressively and valued their economic skills. They often migrated without men. Many led lives independent of men and relied heavily on female networks for support. All of these characteristics might have made them excellent recruits for the feminist struggle to improve the status of women in America.

Irish women never accepted the subordinate and submissive role that the culture assigned to them, and when it came to things that they deemed important, they acted. Like their brothers, husbands and fathers, they accepted the notion that separate spheres for men and women operated for everyone's benefit. The cultural traditions of gender segregation and the resulting patterns of gender hostility created a situation in which women had no interest in participating in men's activities or joining male company.

Immigration to the United States generally raised the status of Irish women and improved the quality of their lives. However, not all women were lucky enough to escape the dangers of uprooting oneself from one's ancestral home and adapting to a new environment. Some could not make it. Certain Irish women – the alcoholics, the widowed and the deserted, the inhabitants of the pauper houses and the recipients of charity – illustrated the dark side of Irish-American life, which contrasted with the cheerful servant girl and the aspiring clerk, the successful schoolteacher and the devout, Catholic housewife. Their presence in the Irish communities may indeed have served as a clear warning to unmarried women that perhaps they ought not to exchange a job in service for a husband.

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