What We Know About the Irish in the United States: Reflections on the Historical Literature of the Last Twenty Years

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Abstract: For many years, scholars and others who wrote about the Irish in the United States focused on the Catholic Irish, especially those who arrived around the time of the Irish Potato Famine and the several decades after that great calamity. Over roughly the last twenty years, the historical literature has come to grips with the more varied nature of the Irish experience in the United States and now better reflects the diversity of the varied religious backgrounds of the Irish in the United States. Further, while the literature on the Catholic Irish in the United States focused heavily on the Irish in northeastern cities there has been increasing attention to the Irish in other sections of the United States. The result of this new research and writing has been to expand and enrich our understanding of the Irish experience in the United States. My intention in this article is to sketch out this expanded and enriched understanding of the Irish experience in the United States which is also part of a larger, global process, the Irish Diaspora. The Diaspora approach to the study of the Irish in the United States offers a great many advantages. One of the limitations on the study of United States history has long “American exceptionalism.” In its simplest form this approach begins by seeing United States history as a unique experience, separate from the larger flow of world events, and stresses the distinctiveness of the American (U.S.) experience. The Diaspora approach moves away from this and places the experience of the Irish in the United States in global context.

In the United States today, people asserting Irish ancestry are the second largest white ethnic group – there are more people claiming German ancestry. The 30.5 million or so United States citizens who claim Irish descent, as well as another 4.3 million who identify as Scotch-Irish, are mostly Protestant – about 52 percent. The number has declined steadily since ethnic identity was first reported in 1970; in 1990 the total of Irish and Scotch Irish was slightly over 43 million.1 The large number was something of a surprise; that the majority of Irish in the United States are Protestants was much more
so. The principal reason for this is that for quite some time in the United States, being Irish has been equated with being Roman Catholic. Popular culture, especially the movies, has played a significant role in promoting this view. The academic literature certainly reflected that understanding for a long time. Donald Harmon Akenson, “Irish Migration to North America, 1800-1920,” in Andy Bielenberg, editor, The Irish Diaspora (Harlow, England: Longman 2000), 111-138. How that came about is the result of complicated cultural processes that I am exploring in my own research but that research is not the subject of my presentation today, or at least its focus.

Two articles appeared in 2003 that form a foundation for my thinking. The first, Kevin Kenny’s “Diaspora and Comparison: The Global Irish as a Case Study” appeared in the Journal of American History in June 2003. It outlines much the same approach I will discuss today – with, of course, some variations. Most importantly, I see the Diaspora approach as having more potential than the comparative approach, the opposite of the conclusion Kenny reaches. The second, Patrick O’Sullivan’s “Developing Irish Diaspora Studies: A Personal View” appeared in New Hibernia Review in the spring of 2003. O’Sullivan’s essay is important for a number of reasons, two of which I want to highlight. As founder and moderator of the Irish Diaspora discussion list O’Sullivan has been a central figure in the development of the field and has actually helped create the sense of community that exists among scholars working on the Diaspora. Second, the essay began as a presentation at the International Basque Congress. The Basques were interested in the Irish Diaspora and particularly the connection those in the Diaspora feel to Ireland and being Irish as a model for the dispersed Basque people, who are also have a Diaspora. More recently, the Armenian government has invited him there for a similar purpose. The Irish Diaspora, both as an analytical concept and as particular type of community is significant far beyond its role in Irish history and relationship to Ireland. It is something other groups look to help understand their own experience. The special, particular nature of the Irish Diaspora as well as its more general aspects make it a viable and important framework for research.

The best introduction to the current state of knowledge about the history of the Irish in the United States is Timothy J. Meagher’s, The Columbia Guide to Irish American History. I offer this essay as a brief introduction to the topic.

In short form and very broad strokes, the dynamic of migration from Ireland to the United States shifted from being primarily from the north of Ireland and heavily (about 2/3) Protestant to being principally from the south and west and overwhelmingly Catholic around 1830. The pre-1830 arrivals, especially those arriving before 1780, came during the formative period of what became the United States and helped shape and define its values and identity. Those who were Catholic often had few qualms about becoming Protestant in their new homeland. The strong identification between Catholicism and Irish nationalism, and hence identity, only developed during Daniel O’Connell’s various campaigns of the 1820s and 1830s. Those who came after 1830 not only were Catholic, they were overwhelmingly from rural areas and found themselves in a country that had defined itself as Protestant and was well along in the process that
would transformation it into an urban, industrial economy and society. They were profoundly other. Their “otherness” made their experience very different from that of those who had arrived earlier.

Many of those from Ireland already in the United States around 1830 and those Protestants who continued to come to the United States developed a new identity, variously stated as Scots-Irish or Scotch Irish that underscored their separateness from the more recent arrivals. This helped them avoid the discrimination that Irish Catholics faced and preserved their position as part of the core culture. Based on recent work this phenomenon may have been more pronounced in the northeast than in the southern states due to the presence of large numbers of African slaves in the South. Interestingly, when large numbers of eastern European Jews began arriving in the United States in the late nineteenth century German Jews, who were already established, followed a similar course.

More important to my concern here, for many years scholars and others who wrote about the Irish in the United States focused on the Catholic Irish, especially those who arrived around the time of the Irish Potato Famine and the several decades after that great calamity. Many of these scholars were themselves Catholic Irish Americans. Over roughly the last twenty years, however, the historical literature has come to grips with the more varied nature of the Irish experience in the United States and better reflects the diversity of the varied religious backgrounds of the Irish in the United States. Further, while the literature on the Catholic Irish in the United States had focused heavily on the Irish in northeastern cities there has been increasing attention to the Irish in other sections of the United States during this same period. The result of this new research and writing has been to expand and enrich our understanding of the Irish experience in the United States. My intention here is to sketch out this expanded and enriched understanding of the Irish experience in the United States.

The most significant book in beginning the sustained reexamination of the Irish in the United States is Kerby A. Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America*. Kerby A. Miller, Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985). Only a year earlier, the first revised edition of Lawrence J. McCaffrey’s *The Irish Diaspora in the United States* appeared with a new title, *The Irish Catholic Diaspora in the United States* (emphasis added). The first edition published in 1976 had omitted the word Catholic although it only discussed the Irish Catholic experience. To a certain extent, McCaffrey was responding to specific and pointed criticism of his focus on the Catholic Irish by Donald Harmon Akenson as well as to new studies that appeared following his initial publication.

So, the first thing about the Irish in the United States that we now are more aware of and have a substantial and growing historical literature than we were twenty-five years ago is the balance between Catholics and Protestants among the Irish. This is important because it opens up new possibilities for studying the Irish in regions where Protestants were more numerous than Catholics, such as the American South, and adds
new levels to our understanding of the reception of Irish immigrants as the make-up of that migration changed.\textsuperscript{10}

A second new direction is a more national focus on the Irish. For many years, a corollary of the focus on the Irish Catholic experience was a focus on the seaport and industrial cities of the northeastern United States. These cities certainly had large Irish communities and the work done was generally quite good. Oscar Handlin’s work on Boston, first published in 1941, was a major contribution that, one might argue, moved the study of the Irish into the mainstream of U.S. historiography. Handlin’s view of immigration as an “uprooting” prefigures in some ways Miler’s focus on loss and longing among Irish immigrants.\textsuperscript{11} Stephan Thernstrom discussed Irish Catholic immigrants as part of a larger study of social mobility in nineteenth-century Newburyport, Massachusetts.\textsuperscript{12} He found significant differences between the Catholic Irish and other groups. The Irish were slower to own homes and move up the social ladder – which Thernstrom attributed to the resources committed to building churches, schools, and other separate institutions. Dennis Clark wrote extensively on the Irish in Philadelphia. While not an academic historian, Clark was a prodigious researcher and his work has been well received in academic circles.\textsuperscript{13} Very good work continues to appear especially focused on the medium size northeastern cities such as that of Brian Mitchell on Lowell and Timothy Meagher on Worcester, both of which are in Massachusetts.\textsuperscript{14}

Another area where there is renewed activity is the study of the Irish in New York City. Obviously, historians have not just discovered that there were Irish people in New York City. The size of the city and the very large number of people involved discouraged the kind of comprehensive community studies that appeared for smaller communities. In 1986, the New York Irish History Roundtable began changing this situation. A number of books and articles are bringing the largest Irish community outside Ireland’s history forward.\textsuperscript{15}

It is now clear that the experience of the Irish outside the northeast was quite different. A number of recent studies on San Francisco, California show a very different pattern than that which emerges from the studies of the northeastern communities. In San Francisco, there was much less discrimination against Irish Catholics, more rapid upward social mobility, and more marriages outside the group.\textsuperscript{16}

This is an area where a great deal of work remains to be done. One very interesting project underway at Stanford University is creating an online library of literary works that grow out of the Irish experience in the American west as well as memoirs and autobiographies. These works were largely unknown before this project and offer tremendous potential. Many are not only out of print, but very hard to find. The Irish American West Project, to use its formal name is a very positive example of the power of the Internet to open up new areas of scholarship.\textsuperscript{17}

Another of the images of Irish immigrants in the United States has been that they have been overwhelmingly unskilled, rural people. This, and much of what we
have “known” about the Irish in the United States, is largely based on extrapolation from the Famine-era immigrants. To a considerable degree, the renewed attention directed at pre-1830 immigrants has revised this for that cohort. However, the image persists to a considerable degree for later arrivals, especially those during and shortly after the famine. Given the economy of Ireland, a large portion of unskilled, rural migrants in any cohort of emigrants would hardly be surprising. However, recent work is uncovering a thread of Irish immigrants who brought real skills to the United States and who migrated at least in part because of those skills.

The first to highlight these skilled Irish immigrants was David Emmons in his work on the Irish in Butte, Montana. Marcus Daly, from County Cavan, emerged as the winner of the War of the Copper Kings and controlled the copper mining industry in Butte from 1875 to his death in 1900. Irish copper miners from the failing copper mines of the Beara Peninsula in southwest County Cork flocked to Butte to work in Daly’s mines. In addition, Irish miners from the Michigan Copper Country went to Butte. The Michigan mining districts, copper and iron, had opened in the mid 1840s and Irish miners from the Beara and mines in counties Waterford and Tipperary were among the pioneer settlers there. This was thirty years before Butte. Other Irish miners, I have learned through my research, who appear to have been from the small mines of County Tipperary, had already been in the lead mines of southwestern Wisconsin and northwestern Illinois and were the earliest Irish in the Copper Country. Other recent research has found the Irish on most western mining ranges as skilled miners who had migrated either directly from Ireland or from the Michigan copper and iron ranges. Still others were prominent in the development of copper and other mining in Australia and mining in New Zealand as well.

My research expanded with this enlarged agenda and has revealed a very different experience for the Irish who went to the Michigan Copper Country from the Irish in the Northeast whose experience has dominated the literature on the Irish in the United States. The first Irish in the Copper Country arrived there from the lead mining fields of Southwest Wisconsin and Northwest Illinois beginning in 1845. They were almost all originally from County Tipperary, which had a number of small copper, lead, and other metal mines early in the nineteenth century. They left Ireland between 1820 and the early 1840s, nearly all pre-Famine. The next wave, which began to arrive a few years later were overwhelmingly from the Beara Peninsula, which had the most extensive copper mines in Ireland at Allihies. Others in this group were from the Knockmahon mines in County Waterford. The mining areas in Tipperary appear to have been areas well penetrated by English, the Beara and Waterford mines were in heavily Irish-speaking areas. While not ruling out the ability to communicate in English – and those who worked in the mines at Allihies would have had to have some English to communicate with the small number of Cornish miners, including the superintendents, and the Puxleys – it does suggest the possibility of problems using English, at least initially. Those from Knockmahon would have had a similar need for minimal English, perhaps.
There is some contemporary information about the language spoken by the Irish in the Copper Country, even if one disregards the phonetic mocking of Irish speech frequently appearing in the *Portage Lake Mining Gazette*, especially in the 1860s.

Language may have been an issue for the Beara emigrants in the Copper Country. In an 1860 letter to the *Wahrheitsfreund* [a German-language Catholic newspaper published in Cincinnati beginning in 1837.] Frederic Baraga, founding bishop of the diocese within which the Copper Country is located, wrote,

The copper mines in Portage Lake are very rich, and they attract so many people that on the census taken this year, over 6000 persons were found there, of whom one-third are Catholics [...] Last year, we built quite a large church here, but it is now too small. This year we will begin to build a second one. I would like to point out a remarkable fact: the zealous missionary, Mr. Jacker, [pastor at Hancock] who already hears confessions and preaches in four languages, is now going to learn a fifth, that is the Irish, or better the Celtic language, because he has so many Irishmen who only speak this language. It takes a heroic will for learning such a language. I procured him a Celtic grammar in New York.23

There is additional evidence of use of the Irish language in the Copper Country. In the early 1870s, a dozen or so families who had emigrated from the Beara between 1845 and 1849 joined Fenian General John O’Neill’s planned agricultural colony, modestly named O’Neill, in north central Nebraska. In her reminiscence of growing up in O’Neill, Margaret McGreevy wrote,

One of the areas that I remember well was the Michigan settlement where the Dwyers and the Sullivans and the Murphys lived. Tim and John Dwyer were friends of Grandpa and they loved to go back to the Gaelic selections that they both knew in Ireland – songs and poems that they learned in school. Grandpa would carry a Gaelic bible and a Gaelic catechism down to the Bank sets – their favorite meeting place when the weather was nice, to speak Gaelic to one another and they were always surrounded by interested listeners. 24

The last piece of Irish language evidence is especially intriguing. In its November 3, 1881 issue the *Portage Lake Mining Gazette* reprinted an article from the *New York Tribune* about a local man. James Sheehan, who had worked at the Osceola Mine, near Calumet, had gone to New York City to arrange for his wife and twelve children to join him.

An Irish immigrant who came to this country in May last, went to the Castle garden yesterday and was unable to make known his destitute condition except through an interpreter, as he could not speak any other than the Irish language. The man was James Sheehan, who, assisted by the Irish Relief Fund, left his
wife and twelve children in Castle Down, [most likely Castletownbere] Ireland, and came here to establish a home. He went to work in Osceola mines, near Lake Superior, and not only sent money home to support his family but sent $100 additional six weeks ago, to pay their passage here as soon as he could send a little more [...] He does not speak a word of English.25

Yet, despite not having a word of English, he was able to work in the mines for more than a year, earning enough money to send a substantial amount home. This was in 1880 – more than three decades after the initial settlement of the region and several decades after large numbers of Irish people had settled in the region. So, Irish had to be spoken and understood in the Copper Country longer than the initial settlement period for Sheehan to have survived.

Granted this is not a large body of evidence, but it suggests that some the Copper Country Irish were Irish speakers, some especially in the earlier years, exclusively so. I think this is an important factor in two characteristics of the Copper Country Irish community. First, the dominant role early arrivals from Tipperary played in the community, particularly in the period before 1870 – they clearly had English — and the very high percentages of Irish-born people who married an Irish-born person into the 1880s. This, the language question, is another of the things we thought we knew that needs to reevaluated. It has been a standard explanation for Irish upward mobility in the historical literature that the Irish had an advantage over most of immigrant groups because they spoke English. Given the strength of the Irish language in the rural south and west of Ireland, this deserves to be reconsidered.

The earliest arrivals in the Copper Country, those who arrived before 1850 especially, did well. It was a mining boom area – those who knew how to open mines, sink shafts, and the other aspects of hard rock mining found work and opportunities to advance. The Tipperary group benefited the most – they had some familiarity with the United States and English; the Beara and Waterford people had less familiarity with English and some, apparently only spoke Irish. They could work because mining work was organized by teams in the early period and the teams were based on ethnicity – Cornish, German, and Irish.

As the mines went deeper and shifter from mining mass copper to native copper the costs of development and operations rose dramatically and control shifter from prospectors and small firms to large corporations. These firms were based in Boston and controlled by native-born capitalists.26 They strongly preferred Cornish and German Lutheran workers to Irish Catholics. Opportunities for Irish Catholics, especially for promotion, declined dramatically. By the mid-1870s the community was stagnating and an exodus began to Butte, Montana, Leadville, and other mining towns further west where opportunity existed. This, and much of what is being learned about Irish Catholic communities in the nineteenth-century American west suggest that we may also need to rethink the nature of prejudice against the Catholic Irish and see it not as a constant in
the United States but as a variable depending upon the specific environment in which people found themselves.

Another group is of particular interest to me. Many of the workers at du Pont’s gunpowder plant on the Brandywine River in Delaware early in the nineteenth century were Irish. The du Ponts were French but they had little success in recruiting workers from France and many of their early workers were Irish. I first became aware of this in 1977 when I joined the staff at the Hagley Museum & Library, established to preserve and interpret the early du Pont site. Only years later did I learn that not only were many of the early Hagley workers Irish – they were from Ballincollig in County Cork. Many had emigrated when the Royal Powder Works in Ballincollig closed after the Napoleonic wars – the precise time du Pont, who was desperate for labor, had finally accepted that he would not be able to draw it from France.

There is a great deal more work to be done on the migration of skilled workers from Ireland to various parts of the United States. These four examples cannot be all there is.

For example, the experience of the Irish in Argentina, for example, suggests that connections between particular places and particular industries, in this case grazing sheep and cattle are worth pursuing more generally. A majority of the emigrants bound to Argentina came from the Irish Midlands counties of Westmeath, Longford and Offaly, as well as from Co. Wexford. According to Peadar Kirby, however, the focus is even narrower, “came from two clearly defined areas, south-east of a line from Wexford Town to Kilmore Quay in Wexford, and from a quadrangle on the Longford/Westmeath border stretching roughly from Athlone to Edgeworthstown, to Mullingar and to Kilbeggan. Virtually the whole population surrounding the town of Ballymore, which stands roughly at the centre of this quadrangle, emigrated to Buenos Aires in the 1860s.”

A related area is assisted migration. Generally, assisted migration in the Irish Diaspora is associated with Australia and New Zealand and to a much lesser extent South Africa. Ambinder’s work cited above raises the question of how extensive this might have been in the United States. Bishop Ireland’s efforts to establish rural Irish communities in Minnesota and Tyler Ambinder’s recent article on assisted emigration to New York City from Lord Palmerston’s estates suggests that this too is an area worth investigating for the United States as well.

The final area I want to discuss today is the awareness that Irish immigration in the United States is very much part of a larger, global process, the Irish Diaspora. While president of Ireland Mary Robinson brought the discussion of the Diaspora out of the shadows in Ireland and the Diaspora has attracted considerable scholarly interest. Mary MacAleese has continued to discuss the Diaspora during her presidency. In 1997, both the Irish Centre for Migration Studies at University College Cork (now closed) and the Centre for Emigration Studies (now the Centre for Migration Studies) at the Ulster American Folk Park in Omagh hosted major international conferences devoted to the Diaspora. That same year the last volumes in a six-volume anthology of scholarly writing
on the Diaspora, The Irish Worldwide, appeared. In 1999, RTÉ produced a five-part television series, The Irish Empire, with accompanying book, that explored both the history and current status of the Irish around the world. A lively internet discussion list (IR-D@jiscmail.ac.uk) helps maintain a lively exchange among scholars interested in the Irish around the world.

The Diaspora approach to the study of the Irish in the United States offers a great deal of advantage. One of the limitations on the study of United States history has long been what is known as “American [United States] exceptionalism.” In its simplest form, this approach begins by seeing U.S. history as a unique experience, separate from the larger flow of world events, and stresses the distinctiveness, some would say uniqueness (literally) of the American (United States) experience. At times, it can be providential and/or triumphal, suggesting that the United States has been specially favored and blessed not only by nature but also by God. While this approach is waning, it persists often subtly. Looking at the experience of the Irish in the context of the Irish Diaspora helps us move beyond that approach. Including the perspective of the Diaspora is also useful in another important way; it helps us move away from seeing the Irish experience as the Irish Catholic experience.

But, migration does not occur in a vacuum, nor is it likely to be directed by God and large numbers of Protestants left Ireland for the same destinations as Irish Catholics. From the very beginning, migration out of Ireland is related to events in Ireland more than anything else. Further, the decision of where to go, once one decided to leave was complex. Canada was generally the least expensive destination (other than Great Britain), but as part of the British world after 1776 Catholics faced the same religious discrimination (disabilities was the contemporary term) there as in Ireland. Assistance was frequently available for Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa but these were distant and harsh environments. South Africa attracted relatively few Irish settlers who were not already there as part of the British Army, for example. Despite Irish sympathies with the Boers in their struggle with Britain, few Irish emigrated there. Irish troops were also a significant component of early Irish settlement in New Zealand. Australia, of course, received many involuntary settlers.

Being Irish, the precise sense of Irishness people develop and organize their lives around differs throughout the Diaspora – as it has in Ireland. We need to begin the integration of the many studies of the Irish in local communities and countries across the globe into a coherent sense of the overall experience. This not only should affect our understanding of Irish America, by seeing the Irish experience in the United States as part of a global Diaspora, not something purely American. This approach also has implications for the study of the literature that has emerged from the diverse global experiences of the Irish people. This offers us all a broad and inviting common ground for study.
Notes

1 Angela Brittingham and G. Patricia de la Cruz, Ancestry: 2000 (United States Census Bureau, June 2004).
9 Ibid., 3 ff., 201, note 4. Akenson has written extensively not only on the Irish in the United States but also on the entire Diaspora, giving his work an unusually comparative dimension. The most relevant of his works for this essay are Donald Harmon Akenson, The Irish Diaspora: A Primer (Toronto: P. D. Meany Company, 1996); Being Had: Historian, Evidence and the Irish in North America (Toronto, 1985); and Small Differences: Irish Catholics and Irish Protestants, 1815-1922: An International Perspective (Kingston and Montreal, 1988); and “Irish Migration to North America, 1800-1920.”
10 David T. Gleeson, The Irish in the South, 1815-1877 was among the first to begin this investigating. His recent article “Small Differences: ‘Scotch Irish and ‘Real Irish’ in the Nineteenth-century American South,” shows the continuing potential the topic offers.


17 http://shl.stanford.edu/IAW/about-overview.html


24 Margaret McGreevy to Holt County Historical Society, June 1973. Holt County Historical Society, O’Neill, Nebraska. She was 88 at the time she wrote this as part of program by the historical society to collect reminiscences.

25 *Portage Lake Mining Gazette*, Nov. 3, 1881.


