"Melting pot or salad bowl? Assessing Irish immigrant assimilation into American society in the late nineteenth century"

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"America is God's crucible, the great Melting Pot where all races of Europe are melting and re-forming! ... At Ellis Island, here you stand in your fifty groups, with your fifty languages and histories, and your fifty blood hatreds and rivalries. But you won't long be like that…Germans and Frenchmen, Irishmen and Englishmen, Jews and Russians - into the Crucible with you all! God is making the American."

From Israel Zangwill's *The Melting Pot* (1908)[1]

Introduction - Israel Zangwill's theatrical work entitled *The Melting Pot* gave birth to a metaphor for the assimilation of immigrants into American society that has lived on long after his play stopped running on Broadway in the early years of the twentieth century. The concept that immigrants to the United States (US) were melded into a new culture, combining the attributes of a range of immigrant groups with native born Americans, attracted widespread attention at the time. It has since become an important concept not only in popular culture, but also in the academic literature on immigration and assimilation. While subsequent work in the fields of sociology, economics and economic history has led to a more nuanced approach to immigrant assimilation, the theatrical work of Zangwill still offers a useful metaphor for the study of immigrant assimilation.

My dissertation will seek to assess the degree of assimilation achieved by Irish immigrants in the US in the last decades of the nineteenth century. I will monitor their progress in America as captured in US census manuscripts, and potentially other sources such as city directories. These sources will be used to create a sample of Irish immigrants and then to track their lives over the twenty year period from 1880 to 1900. Of the various individual characteristics available in US census data, one which will receive particular attention is the occupational level of these immigrants, and their occupational mobility over this time period. However, I will also seek to assess immigrant assimilation across a range of socio-economic characteristics, and will thus seek to develop a clearer sense for how these immigrants adapted to their new surroundings, both inside and outside the workplace. In which areas did the immigrants retain a distinct Irish difference, and in which areas did they quickly come to resemble their native born neighbours? Were they melded in the crucible of the American melting pot, being reformed into "the American" so dramatically described by Zangwill? Or did they retain their distinctness in their new homeland? Was the melting pot in fact more of a salad bowl where different ethnic groups were mixed together, but with each retaining its own identity? Or were

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[1] Israel Zangwill, *The Melting Pot* (New York: 1909), pp. 37-38.

there certain areas where the Irish adapted quickly to their new surroundings and others where their socio-economic outcomes did not come to resemble those of native born.

So why should we be interested in the assimilation of Irish immigrants into US society at the end of the nineteenth century? There are many reasons. First of all, Irish per capita emigration during the last decades of the nineteenth century was larger than any other emigrant group and the US was their primary destination.[2] In this period, the Irish were ascendant, becoming the leading immigrant group in most major cities and regions in the US (including New York, Philadelphia and Boston). They established substantial support networks and achieved prominence in local politics, labour unions and the hierarchy of the Catholic Church. In addition, unlike the extreme circumstances which led to high Irish emigration during the Famine years, these Irish immigrants would have had greater control over the decision to emigrate, and their adjustment into the US economy would not have been subject to the same dire circumstances which faced the distressed Irish immigrants of the mid-nineteenth century. In sum, the Irish were the most prolific of the European immigrant groups in the nineteenth century and the last two decades of this century represent a critical time period to assess their assimilation into American society.

While there has been a great deal of literature written about the Irish in America, there remain questions which merit further attention. One such question is whether the Irish achieved occupational parity with native born Americans in the workplace by the end of the nineteenth century. In the literature, there are conflicting views. Borjas found that European immigrants (including those from Ireland) who arrived in what he terms The First Great Migration (1880-1924) did not achieve convergence in occupational levels with native born white males for as long as four generations.[3] In contrast, Doyle and Miller argued that Irish Americans had achieved "relative occupational parity" with native white Americans by 1900.[4] This debate on Irish occupational mobility will be a major focus of my presentation today.

Data and methodology: Census data and matching technique – In this paper, assimilation will be measured primarily by various socio-economic characteristics available in the US censuses of 1880 and 1900. The 1880 US census has been converted in its entirety into a machine readable dataset by the North Atlantic Population Project (NAPP). NAPP was created by the Minnesota Population Center at the University of Minnesota in collaboration with a number of academic institutions and governmental agencies. A random sample of the 1900 US census has also been converted into a machine readable dataset, again by the Minnesota Population Center. Their Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS) is a project dedicated to collecting and distributing

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[2] Dudley Baines, *Emigration from Europe, 1815-1930* (Cambridge: 1991), pp. 2-3.

[3] George J. Borjas, "Long-Run Convergence of Ethnic Skill Differentials: The Children and Grandchildren of the Great Migration", Industrial and Labor Relations Review, Vol. 47, No.4 (July 1994) pp. 571-572.

[4] Kerby A. Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles – Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America* (New York: 1985) p. 495; David N. Doyle, 'Irish and American Labour, 1880-1920', Saothar, vol. 1, 1975, pp. 42-43.

US census data. In the case of the 1900 US census, their dataset is currently a 1% random sample, but is scheduled to be increased to 2.5% during March 2008. NAPP and IPUMS data are fully compatible and thus provide a rich source of longitudinal data on the American population over the last decades of the nineteenth century.

In my research, I have employed a matching technique to link specific individuals across these two datasets. I have created a sample of Irish male immigrants of working age drawn from the 1880 US Census, and then located as many unique matches as possible from the 1900 US Census. I have similarly created a separate, random sample of native born white males of working age. Utilising these samples, I will assess the degree of assimilation achieved by Irish immigrants with native born white Americans across a range of census characteristics including: occupation, employment status, geographic location, literacy, home ownership, marital status and fertility. The purpose for using this technique is to enable me to track the experience of particular individuals over time, as well as to locate information regarding their actual spouses and children. This approach will allow me to measure changes in socio-economic variables over time, which is critical to the examination of assimilation. In addition, this matching technique will also allow me to examine questions of intergenerational assimilation and mobility, as well as to assess the impact of spouses on the assimilation of their husbands. Finally, I will seek to combine this individual level data with other sources such as city directories to obtain additional individual level data beyond the US census datasets.

In order to create these samples, individual level census data on first name, last name, age and marital status, is used to link individuals across the 1880 and 1900 US censuses. To create my Irish born sample, I utilised the NAPP sample extraction system to select all males of working age, born in Ireland, who were listed in the 1880 US census manuscripts. This selection generated a universe of 899,314 observations. I then went to the IPUMS sample extraction system and performed a similar selection procedure for their 1% sample of the 1900 US census. I also specified that the 1900 US census sample include only those males who had become resident in the US on or before 1880. This selection process generated 4,834 observations. Utilising Soundex, a phonetic algorithm, I then created alpha-numerical codes for first and last names, merged the two files into one and identified those individuals whose Soundex last name and first name code matched from the 1880 dataset to the 1900 dataset. I further limited my sample by allowing for only a one year variation in the reported age of an individual in 1880, and the reported age of that individual in 1900 (errors in age reporting were common in nineteenth century US census data). A subsequent review of the file revealed many observations where common names were resulting in multiple matches of the same individual across the datasets. To address this issue, I dropped any common names (based on Soundex codes) for which there were more than three duplicate matches. This procedure generated 387 matches which were unique, 222 matches for which there were two duplicates and 146 matches for which there were three duplicates.

In the final stage of the process, I individually inspected each remaining set of matches. I undertook this approach for two reasons: to reduce the chances of a false positive match, and to try to increase the number of unique matches for the groups which had either two

or three duplicates as described above. This inspection allowed me to eliminate matches where the first and/or last name of the matched individuals was materially different, but the Soundex coding had been the same. I also had access to the individual's marital status in both 1880 and 1900, and the duration of their current marriage in 1900. With this information, I was able to identify 39 false positive matches from my sample of 387 unique matches. In addition, I was able to confirm 133 new unique matches from my duplicate samples, in this case by eliminating duplicates using the approach described above. In summary, I was able to generate a sample of 481 unique matches of Irish born males drawn from both the 1880 and 1900 US censuses. Of these 481 individuals, 315 were married in 1900, allowing me to capture data on all of these spouses as well. As previously mentioned, with the IPUMS 1900 US census sample increasing from 1% to 2.5% in March, I expect my final Irish born sample to number in excess of 1,000 observations.

To create my native born sample, I utilised the identical process as described above for the Irish born sample with one minor exception. Given the extremely large universe of potential native born males, I chose not to seek to identify incremental matches where the process created two or three duplicates. I defined native born as an individual who, along with both of his parents, was born in the US. For this sample, I was able to identify 7,135 unique matches drawn from both the 1880 and 1900 US censuses. Finally, I again sought to locate the spouses of my native born males using the 1900 US census dataset. Of these 7,135 individuals, 5,537 were married in 1900, again allowing me to capture data on all of these spouses of native born males.

Data and methodology: Occupational categories and incomes – In order to measure occupational mobility, it is necessary to create a framework in which to evaluate occupational levels and changes in those levels over time. As noted by Sobek (1996), "our understanding of historical social structure and where people fit in is bound up with the interpretation of occupations."[5] Thernstrom (1973) pointed out in his groundbreaking study *The Other Bostonians* that the measurement of occupational mobility "requires a specification of the broad occupational categories that may be considered socially distinct, and a definition of which jobs fit in which category." He noted that such a specification is not straightforward, requires flexibility, and is subject to change over time.[6] As this researcher (and many others) has found, where you draw the lines between occupational classes can have a meaningful impact on your results. Therefore, in my analysis of occupational mobility in the late nineteenth century, I have utilised both occupational groupings as well as an estimate of income by occupation in order to assess the occupational mobility of the individuals in my sample. For my occupational categories, I have drawn on the work of Thernstrom, which itself was inspired by the work of the statistician Alba Edwards. As Table 2 illustrates, I have separated my sample

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[5] Matthew Sobek, "Work, Status and Income – Men in the American Occupational Structure since the Late Nineteenth Century", Social Science Review 20:2 (summer 1996), p. 170.
[6] Stephan Thernstrom, *The Other Bostonians – Poverty and Progress in the American Metropolis* (Cambridge: 1973), p 46.

into six categories, and then examined the changes in these categories over the period from 1880 to 1900. Separately, I have drawn on the work of Sobek, who assembled a dataset of occupational incomes in the US as of 1890. The primary benefit of an income level is that it is a categorical variable more easily suited to econometric analysis, and it does not require one to draw arbitrary lines between occupations to make comparisons. However, there are shortcomings involved with income estimates as well. First of all, an occupational income score ignores the fact that many people in the same occupation may earn different incomes, and that incomes may also vary based on the impact of career trajectories, regional differences and other factors. In addition, many researchers have speculated that certain nineteenth century immigrants to the US were the victim of discrimination, and may have been paid less than native born workers for the same work. A single income level per occupation would not capture this effect. Finally, the measurement of the income level of farmers in this time period is particularly problematic. Economic historians such as Preston and Haines (1991) have chosen to exclude farmer income from their own income estimates due to the uncertainty surrounding "type and size of farm, crop prices and harvest size." They concluded that there was simply too much uncertainty to make a single estimate for this group.[7] Inconveniently, farming was the leading occupation of native born Americans in this time period. Thus, my analysis of nineteenth century occupational mobility will draw on both the occupational categories as well as an income estimate, and will make particular note of the role of farmers in these results.

Initial Results – Did Irish immigrants assimilate quickly into American society at the end of the nineteenth century? My sample results would indicate that for the most part, they did not. As Table 1 indicates, with the exception of literacy, the Irish living in the US in 1880 did not reach the levels of native born white males across a range of socio-economic characteristics captured in US census data in 1900. The native born were much more likely to have lived in rural areas, and although the US was becoming more urbanised during this period, this substantial difference in geographic location between the two samples continued to persist as of 1900. As for home ownership, the native born had achieved a noticeable advantage in this measure of wealth by 1900. The native born were also much more likely to be married, with almost one fifth of the Irish sample never having been married versus 11% for the native born. This difference occurred in spite of the fact that my native born sample was approximately four years younger. In terms of employment stability, the native born reported lower levels of unemployment than did the Irish in 1900. In the area of fertility and child mortality, the results were also quite different. Measured in 1900, the Irish in my sample had had (on average) 30% more children than the native born, with a much higher implied rate of infant mortality (24.6% versus 16.0%).

Did the Irish achieve occupational parity with native born Americans by the end of the nineteenth century? Based on my sample results, they did not. As Table 2 illustrates, the Irish were more likely than the native born to occupy lower levels of the occupational

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[7] Samuel H. Preston and Michael R. Haines, *Fatal Years – Child Mortality in Late Nineteenth Century America* (Princeton: 1991), p. 212.

ladder in 1880. While this was not unexpected, they continue to lag behind the native born in 1900 as well. In the white collar segments of the workforce, the Irish made up a lower percentage in both the professional and lower white collar areas. More significantly, the percentage growth in these categories was lower for the Irish than for the native born over the period of analysis. In addition, if one were to include farmers in the low white collar grouping (as most historians of this time period would), the native born advantage over the Irish would increase dramatically.

In terms of estimated income levels, the results also reflect a definitive gap between the income levels of the Irish sample versus the native born. Excluding farmers from the analysis, for whom reliable income estimates in this period are highly problematic, Table 4 shows that the Irish actually have a very slight advantage over the native born in 1880 (which is likely to be explained by the four year age differential between my samples). However, by 1900, the native born have opened up a sizeable gap, with their mean income rising 28% from 1880 versus 9% for the Irish. (I would welcome your input on how best to incorporate the impact of age into this income analysis. In addition to the four year age difference between my two samples, there is also the question of whether there is an earnings profile over a worker's life time, where income levels are positively related to age up to a certain point, and then negatively related to age as a worker grows older and eventually leaves the workforce. Comments on this section are particularly welcome.)

Conclusions: These results, though preliminary in nature, would seem to indicate that the flame burning under the Irish melting pot in the last decades of the nineteenth century was not very hot. Only in the area of literacy did my sample of Irish immigrants attain levels resembling those of native born white males by 1900. In virtually every other socio-economic category under review, the Irish experience differed markedly from that of native born, reflecting low levels of assimilation. With respect to the issue of occupational mobility, the Irish did make progress in the period between 1880 and 1900, but they continued to lag behind the levels achieved by the native born sample over the same time period. In the white collar and skilled categories, the native born began the period with a higher concentration in these occupations than did the Irish, and they achieved higher growth rates in these categories over the period. Including farmers in the low white collar category only further increases the distance between the two samples. Estimated income growth was also much higher for the native born, though the impact of age and the role of farmers in this calculation require further examination. In summary, it would appear that the Irish immigrants living in the US at the end of the nineteenth century did not assimilate quickly and that the claims of Irish occupational parity made by Doyle and Miller would appear to be overly optimistic. Based on this evidence, the Irish assimilation experience in the US would appear to be much better described as a salad bowl than as a melting pot at the end of the nineteenth century.

References

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Table 1

Summary Statistics

Variable	Irish Sample	Native Sample
Observations	481	7,135
Age		
1880	30.9 years	26.5 years
1900	50.8	46.4
Rural Status		
1880	46.4%	85.6%
1900	33.1%	72.1%
Literacy (1900)		
Read and write English	90.2%	94.4%
Read only	2.7%	1.1%
Home Ownership (1900)	45.5%	57.1%
Months Unemployed (1900)		
0 Months	77.8%	85.0%
1-6	18.9%	13.1%
7-12	3.3%	1.9%
Marital Status (1900)		
Married	69.0%	81.9%
Never Married	19.3%	11.0%
Widowed	11.6%	6.4%
Divorced	0.0%	0.7%
Spouse Fertility (1900)		
Avg. Children Ever Born	6.5	5.0
Avg. Children Surviving	4.9	4.2
Implied Mortality Rate	24.6%	16.0%
Spouse Age (1900)	46.5 years	41.2 years
Spouse Birthplace		
Ireland	58.1%	
Other Foreign Country	7.0%	
US	34.9%	
Spouse Literacy (1900)		
Read and write English	87.9%	93.6%
Read only	4.4%	1.7%
Spouse in workforce (1900)	0.6%	1.9%

Table 2

Occupational Groupings 1880-1900

1880 Irish Sample	No.	%	Cum %	
High WC	25	5.6%	5.6%	
Low WC	26	5.8%	11.4%	
Skilled	62	13.8%	25.2%	
Semi-skilled	158	35.3%	60.5%	
Unskilled	128	28.6%	89.1%	
Farmer	49	10.9%	100.0%	
Total	448	100.00%		

1900 Irish Sample	No.	%	Cum %	% Change from 1880
High WC	42	9.5%	9.5%	68%
Low WC	34	7.7%	17.1%	31%
Skilled	82	18.5%	35.6%	32%
Semi-skilled	111	25.0%	60.6%	-30%
Unskilled	111	25.0%	85.6%	-13%
Farmer	64	14.4%	100.0%	31%
Total	444			

1880 Native Sample	No.	%	Cum %	
High WC	465	7.7%	7.7%	
Low WC	403	6.7%	14.4%	
Skilled	527	8.7%	23.1%	
Semi-skilled	526	8.7%	31.8%	
Unskilled	1,793	29.7%	61.4%	
Farmer	2,333	38.6%	100.0%	
Total	6,047			

1900 Native Sample	No.	%	Cum %	% Change from 1880
High WC	894	13.4%	13.4%	92%
Low WC	557	8.4%	21.8%	38%
Skilled	862	12.9%	34.7%	64%
Semi-skilled	636	9.5%	44.3%	21%
Unskilled	851	12.8%	57.0%	-53%
Farmer	2,866	43.0%	100.0%	23%
Total	6,666			

Table 3

Change in Occupational Groupings 1880-1900

Irish Sample   1880

1900	High WC	Low WC	Skilled	Semi-skilled	Un-skilled	Farmer	Total
High WC	9	1	7	10	11	3	41
Low WC	2	11	0	7	10	0	30
Skilled	5	5	24	23	16	4	77
Semi-skilled	6	2	11	48	33	5	105
Unskilled	2	4	9	42	32	10	99
Farmer	0	3	5	16	14	23	61
Total	24	26	56	146	116	45	413

Native Sample   1880

1900	High WC	Low WC	Skilled	Semi-skilled	Un-skilled	Farmer	Total
High WC	159	81	37	57	170	223	727
Low WC	59	75	43	41	112	101	431
Skilled	35	46	174	76	214	184	729
Semi-skilled	33	31	51	98	179	132	524
Unskilled	35	34	47	71	294	240	721
Farmer	110	90	144	143	717	1297	2501
Total	431	357	496	486	1686	2177	5633

Table 4
Estimated Mean Income Levels Excluding Farmers
($ per annum)

	Irish	Native
1880	529	525
1900	576	672
% Growth	8.9%	28.0%