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# Irish Women's Immigration to the United States After the Potato Famine, 1860-1900

Mackenzie S. Flanagan  
*Dominican University of California*

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IRISH WOMEN'S IMMIGRATION TO THE UNITED STATES AFTER THE  
POTATO FAMINE, 1860-1900

A senior thesis submitted to  
the History Faculty of Dominican University of California  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
Bachelor of Arts in History

by

Mackenzie Flanagan

San Rafael, California

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## **ABSTRACT**

Thousands of single Irish women emigrated to the United States after the Great Potato Famine. These women left Ireland because social conditions in Ireland limited their opportunities for fulfilling lives. Changes in marriage and inheritance patterns lowered the status of unmarried women and made marriage increasingly unlikely. As a result, many women emigrated to the United States and, once here, worked, used their wages to help others emigrate, and most eventually married. Irish culture facilitated this mass migration by promoting the autonomy of single women yet limiting their options. Emigration did not signify a break with their Irish culture and their families but represented a culturally approved solution to the constraints single women faced in Ireland.

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## 1. Historiography

Ireland was devastated by a potato blight, which resulted in a widespread famine between 1845 and 1852. One immediate result of the famine was massive emigration of entire families to the United States. Another result was dramatic changes in Irish society, including changes in inheritance, marriage, and land ownership. These shifts changed the place of women in their families and in Irish society. Consequently, many single Irish women made the decision to emigrate to the United States between 1860-1900. Between 1871 and 1891, 55,690 Irish women emigrated to the U.S. compared to 55,215 men for the same time period.<sup>1</sup> This female dominated migration stream was unique to the Irish and reflected their cultural values.

In “Women in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Irish Emigration,” historian Pauline Jackson argues that more women than men emigrated from Ireland after the potato famine because women had fewer opportunities to marry or to find paid work. Consequently, women were placed in a subordinate social position by the patriarchal culture of Ireland. Jackson cites census data from Ireland and the United States to show that 50% of Irish emigrants were female compared to 33% of all immigrants from Europe.<sup>2</sup> Jackson examines the work of social scientists who debate the connection between the low marriage rates in nineteenth century Ireland

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<sup>1</sup> Robert E. Kennedy, *The Irish: Emigration, Marriage, and Fertility* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 66

<sup>2</sup> Pauline Jackson, “Women in 19th Century Irish Emigration,” *International Migration Review* 18, no. 4, Special Issue: “Women in Migration” (December 01, 1984): 1006, accessed January 29, 2015, JSTOR.

and the high emigration rates. She convincingly argues that the low marriage rate caused the high emigration rate and not the other way around. Connecting changes in land ownership to changes in marriage customs, Jackson claims that economic conditions meant fewer Irish women were able to marry. After the famine, only twenty to fifty percent of Irish women of marriageable age were able marry.<sup>3</sup> Jackson cites Irish poetry as evidence of the difficulty poor women faced in being able to marry. Jackson sums up her evidence: “The narrow range of options open to unmarried women in post-famine Ireland made emigration a rational choice for those excluded from a recognized place in the society.”<sup>4</sup> However, Jackson concludes, “[T]he post-famine emigration of women was a refusal to accept the servile role allotted to them in their society and a rejection of the patriarchal values underpinning it.”<sup>5</sup> Jackson sees single women’s immigration as a rejection of their culture and its underlying patriarchy.

In “Women and Migration: The Social Consequences of Gender,” sociologist Silvia Pedraza reviews the literature on the role of women in migration. Pedraza looks at women immigrants from around the world and immigration flows during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. She examines the decision to migrate and the effects of migration on the immigrant women, their families, and their new society. One of Pedraza arguments is: “[G]ender plays a central role in the decision

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<sup>3</sup> Jackson, “Women in 19th Century,” 1017.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 1006.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 1015.

to migrate.”<sup>6</sup> Pedraza cites studies of women immigrants from the Dominican Republic and Mexico to show that females may initiate immigration decisions.<sup>7</sup>

Historian Timothy J. Meagher uses a unique methodology to gather information for his article, “Sweet Good Mothers and Young Women Out In The World: The Roles of Irish American Women in Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century Worcester, Massachusetts.” Meagher reviewed copies of the Catholic Messenger, an Irish Catholic newspaper in Worcester, Massachusetts, to gather information about attitudes toward women held by Irish and Irish Americans in the later half of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. Meagher concludes that Irish culture drew a “sharp distinction between the roles of married and unmarried women.”<sup>8</sup> Meagher quotes extensively from articles about women’s leisure activities and participation in the church and politics to support his point: “Few western cultures combined nineteenth century Ireland’s rigid and narrow limitations of married women’s sphere with the latitude Irish culture afforded single women in their freedom to migrate and find employment.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Silvia Pedraza, “Women and Migration: The Social Consequences of Gender.” *Annual Review of Sociology* 17, (January 01, 1991), 321, accessed January 29, 2015, JSTOR.

<sup>7</sup> Pedraza, “Women and Migration,” 306.

<sup>8</sup> Timothy J. Meagher, “Sweet Good Mothers and Young Women Out in the World: The Roles of Irish American Women in Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century Worcester, Massachusetts,” *U.S. Catholic Historian* 5, no. 3/4, (July 01, 1986): 325, accessed January 29, 2015, JSTOR.

<sup>9</sup> Meagher, “Sweet Good Mothers and Young Women,” 325.



Meagher's research shows emigration and employment by single Irish women was consistent with their culture rather than a rejection of it.

Sociologist Dean Braa examines the causes and effects of the potato famine on social structures in Ireland in his article "The Great Potato Famine and the Transformation of Irish Peasant Society."<sup>10</sup> Braa documents how the reliance on the potato shaped the inheritance and marriage customs before the famine. As a result of changes in agriculture after the famine, both inheritance and marriage customs also changed. Braa's article provides technical support for the research by historians on Irish women's immigration.

Historian Hasia Diner wrote a groundbreaking study of emigration by Irish women called *Erin's Daughter in America: Irish Immigrant Women in the Nineteenth Century*.<sup>11</sup> Diner analyzes the factors that influenced the decision of thousands of Irish women to leave their homeland and make new lives in America. She notes that women were driven by forces different from those, which drove men to emigrate. Women in post-famine Ireland had fewer opportunities to marry or to work outside the home. For these women emigration was a solution to a loss of status brought about by the Great Famine. Diner's research and her conclusion that

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<sup>10</sup> Dean M. Braa, "The Great Potato Famine and the Transformation of Irish Peasant Society," *Science & Society* 61, no. 2 (July 01, 1997): 193-215, accessed February 11, 2015, JSTOR.

<sup>11</sup> Hasia R. Diner, *Erin's Daughter in America: Irish Immigrant Women in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Johns Hopkins U.P., 1983).

emigration “did not represent a search for a new identity, nor did it constitute a break with the past” are central to this paper.<sup>12</sup>

Historian J.J. Lee examines the influence of the famine on the role of the Catholic Church and on the status of women in Ireland in his article, “Women and the Church since the Famine.”<sup>13</sup> Lee traces the connections between the loss of women’s economic independence and their ability to marry. He also describes the increased power of the Church in the decades following the famine. For Lee, the expansion of the Church contributed to the marginalization of women in Irish society, which lead to their decisions to emigrate. Lee concludes that women emigrated in order to “begin once more to enjoy something of the economic independence many of them knew before the Famine.”<sup>14</sup>

This study concurs with many historians and sociologists that the decision to emigrate by single Irish women was a result of many changes in society that began after or were accelerated by the famine. These combined forces reduced the status of Irish women, especially single women, and limited their choices for paths to a meaningful life. Because Irish culture encouraged the ability of single women to emigrate on their own without family members, these women had the option to leave Ireland and seek a new life in the United States. This study sees this emigration as an expression of Irish culture rather than a break from it. This

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<sup>12</sup> Diner, *Erin's Daughter in America*, xiv.

<sup>13</sup> J.J. Lee, “Women and the Church since the Famine,” in *Women in Irish Society: The Historical Dimension*, ed. Margaret MacCurtain et al. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1979), 37-45.

<sup>14</sup> Lee, “Women and the Church,” 44.

conclusion is consistent with Diner's view but differs from those of many other historians who see the move to America as creating independence for these single women.

## 2. Social Conditions in Post-Famine Ireland

Before the Great Potato Famine of 1845-1847, Ireland was a peasant society with large numbers of poor farmers on smallholdings. Subsistence potato farming was possible on small plots of land, which were divided among all the children when the father died. Because it was possible to support a family on very little land, young men and women could marry early and support their families. Further, the efforts of both men and women were necessary for the survival of families, and both genders worked side-by-side in the fields and on the farm. As a result of the famine, over one million people died from starvation and disease and another two million emigrated.<sup>15</sup> These were substantial losses for a society with a population of 8.2 million in 1841.<sup>16</sup> The aftermath of the famine affected every aspect of Irish society. Farming practices, inheritance, marriage, and relations between the sexes were altered. These changes lowered the status of women in Irish society and reduced their likelihood of marriage.

Before the famine, Irish peasants relied on potatoes for the bulk of their diet. Potatoes could be grown on poor soil and small plots of land. A one-acre plot could grow enough potatoes to support an entire family.<sup>17</sup> Consequently, land holdings in Ireland before the famine were small in size: twenty percent of the 685,309 holdings

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<sup>15</sup> Warwick Funnell, "Accounting for Justice: Entitlement, Want and the Irish Famine of 1845-7," *The Accounting Historians Journal* 28, no. 2 (December 01, 2001): 196, accessed February 11, 2015, JSTOR.

<sup>16</sup> Braa, "The Great Potato Famine," 210.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 200.

were smaller than one acre.<sup>18</sup> After the famine, peasants stopped relying exclusively on the potato. Further, agriculture in Ireland shifted from tillage to grazing. As a result, land holdings were consolidated into fewer farms with more acreage.<sup>19</sup> Specifically, Dean Braa cites the following statistics: “Farms over 30 acres numbered 48,625 in 1841, a mere seven percent of the total; in 1851, the number in this category was 149,090 or 26.2 percent”.<sup>20</sup> This shift in the size and number of land holdings significantly impacted Irish society after the famine.

The size of landholdings affected inheritance patterns. Before the famine, the parent generation would divide the family farm amongst all the children in the family. Known as “gravelkind,” this tradition, divided property equally among the offspring.<sup>21</sup> This custom resulted in smaller and smaller farms for each successive generation, which was a sustainable practice as long as the main crop was potato. According to Braa, families stopped subdividing land holdings to make them more commercially viable after the famine.<sup>22</sup> One child would inherit the entire farm; this was often, but not necessarily always, the oldest son. This shift in inheritance patterns in turn changed other traditions.

Because inherited land and wealth often provided the means to marry, changes in inheritance affected marriage patterns. Before the famine, the practice of

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 198.

<sup>19</sup> Jackson, “Women in 19th Century,” 1006.

<sup>20</sup> Braa, “The Great Potato Famine,” 212.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 203.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 212.

potato farming enabled most peasants to marry at a young age. In 1841 18.1% of women who married were under twenty-one years of age.<sup>23</sup> In pre-famine Ireland, Braa asserts, there were few impediments to early marriage because sons desiring to marry could plant enough potatoes on a small scrap of land to support himself and his family.<sup>24</sup> The decision to marry was more spontaneous and more within the control of the marrying couple before the famine than after. The ability to provide for a family with a small plot of land and, therefore, the freedom to marry disappeared as a result of the famine.<sup>25</sup>

After the famine, the only child in the family could plan to marry was the child who would inherit the family property, often a son.<sup>26</sup> No set rule determined which child would inherit. Neither the oldest or the youngest son could count on inheriting.<sup>27</sup> His choice of partner was often the result of an arrangement between his parents and those of his future bride. Pauline Jackson notes, "Arranged marriages spread more and more replacing the earlier more spontaneous customs."<sup>28</sup> Before the famine, only the very wealthy used arranged marriages, but afterwards, the practice spread to the farming class. With arranged marriages came the practice of requiring a dowry, which effectively limited the ability to marry to

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<sup>23</sup> Diner, *Erin's Daughter in America*, 9.

<sup>24</sup> Braa, "The Great Potato Famine," 203.

<sup>25</sup> Jackson, "Women in 19th Century," 22.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Diner, *Erin's Daughter in America*, 10.

<sup>28</sup> Jackson, "Women in 19th Century," 1009.

the son who inherited his family's property and one of his sisters. The sister could use the dowry paid by her sister-in-law to get married herself.<sup>29</sup> The principle of supply and demand also limited the ability of young people to marry. J.J. Lee comments drily, "Marriage might be a sacrament, but for the farmer, the marriage contract was essentially a commercial transaction, and it devalued the family currency to put two daughters on the marriage market."<sup>30</sup> The sons who did not inherit and the daughters without dowries had trouble marrying in post-famine Ireland. Young men could not afford to rent farms large enough to support a family.<sup>31</sup> The lack of economic prospects limited the marital prospects for young people in post-famine Ireland.

The combination of land scarcity, inheritance by one child, arranged marriages, and dowries resulted in late marriages in post-famine Ireland. In 1841, 28% of women between twenty-one and thirty-four years old were unmarried; by 1851 this percentage had risen to 39%.<sup>32</sup> Fathers tried to minimize the number of dependents supported by one holding by delaying the marriages of their children.<sup>33</sup> With delayed marriages, the average age of grooms rose to the late thirties and

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 1010.

<sup>30</sup> Lee, "Women and the Church," 39.

<sup>31</sup> Kerby A. Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 47.

<sup>32</sup> Diner, *Erin's Daughter in America*, 9.

<sup>33</sup> Braa, "The Great Potato Famine," 213.

brides to the late twenties.<sup>34</sup> Further, the age gap between spouses widened. Before the famine, 20% of husbands were ten years older than wives; the percentage climbed to 50% by the early twentieth century.<sup>35</sup> Hasia Diner notes that by the 1870s, Ireland had the highest marriage age in the world.<sup>36</sup> Post-famine Irish society was a paradox: “It claimed to venerate the family as the fundamental unit of society and yet insisted on depriving a higher proportion of its people of the opportunity of establishing a family than any other European country.”<sup>37</sup> Delayed marriage and the increasing number of single women affected the status of single women in Irish society.

Before the famine, women were encouraged to marry and have children, yet single women still had value in the family and in society because of their ability to work. Lee reminds us, “As late as 1841 women accounted for more than half the total non-agricultural labour force.” Rural women supplemented family income by spinning yarn, raising poultry and selling eggs. Urban women worked in factories spinning wool, cotton, and linen before the famine. Availability of factory work decreased in all areas except Northeast Ireland. As a result of the economic shifts caused by the famine and its aftermath, women lost almost all sources of independent income. More and more women were deprived of the ability to marry, and more and more single women were deprived of their ability to financially

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Lee, “Women and the Church,” 38.

<sup>36</sup> Diner, *Erin's Daughter in America*, 5.

<sup>37</sup> Lee, “Women and the Church,” 42.



contribute to their families. According to Lee, this trend “in itself sufficed to tilt the balance of economic power within the family in the male direction.” Married women also suffered a loss of status when they lost the ability to earn. The combination of most husbands being both older than their wives and the sole wage earners in their families made the husband’s control stronger.<sup>38</sup>

Another trend that accelerated after the famine was the growth of the power of the Catholic Church. Of course, Ireland was a Catholic country before the famine, but the Church itself became more organized afterwards. More seminaries were established producing a greater number of priests. Further, the church established a widespread educational system. As a result of schools whose curricula matched church doctrine staffed by a growing number of priests, clerical authority increased substantially.<sup>39</sup> As a result of these factors, “The church was able to preach its doctrines in detail for perhaps the first time in Irish history to the mass of the people.”<sup>40</sup>

Another factor that influenced the decision to emigrate was the rise in literacy rates. Before the famine, literacy rates, especially for women, were very low, with over fifty percent of the women in some counties unable to read and write.<sup>41</sup> With the increased influence of the Catholic Church after the famine, more

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 37-38.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles*, 47.

girls received an education. But literacy was a double-edged sword. Because education was controlled by the Church, it was used to teach women their status as second class citizens in Irish society. Lee comments, "It is ironic that at a moment when educational opportunities increased for Irish women, the educational system began to be more systematically used to indoctrinate them into adopting as self-images the prevailing male image of women."<sup>42</sup> One important consequence of this increased literacy was the ability to read letters from those who had emigrated to the United States, which increased the desire to leave Ireland. Reading letters from abroad made life in Ireland seem dull in comparison.<sup>43</sup> Further, the overall standard of living in Ireland improved due to the significant drop in population caused by famine, disease, and emigration. This improved prosperity brought higher expectations and fueled the desire to emigrate.<sup>44</sup> Although conditions in Ireland were better than they had been, the Irish standard of living fell for short of that in the United States. More information about the world outside Ireland made staying home less desirable.

Another change in post-famine society was the greater separation of males and females. Because marriage rates lowered and people married later, there were more restrictions on sexuality outside of marriage. The genders were segregated in

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<sup>42</sup> Lee, "Women and the Church," 41.

<sup>43</sup> Diner, *Erin's Daughter in America*, 12.

<sup>44</sup> Janet Nolan, *Ourselves Alone: Women's Emigration from Ireland, 1885-1920* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1989), 93.

their daily lives.<sup>45</sup> Another factor in the separation of the sexes was the increased influence of the Church and the Church's intense focus on celibacy. Irish culture has a long tradition of sexual chastity: "Pre-Famine Irish society was renowned for its chastity, but prudery was conspicuously absent."<sup>46</sup> After the famine, clergy were more preoccupied with sex and sexual chastity than they were before.<sup>47</sup> The new segregation of sexes further lowered the status of women in post-famine Ireland.

The shifts in social and economic structures in Irish society reduced the status of women. Woman, especially single women, no longer contributed significantly to their family's household economy. Many women were unable to serve as wives and mothers because marriage opportunities were restricted by changes in the size land holdings and inheritance traditions. The traditional male dominance in Irish culture was strengthened by limitations on the ability to marry and a greater gap in age between brides and grooms. The dominance of males and subservience of females was supported by the Catholic Church doctrine and instilled in girls as part of their education at church schools. For all these reasons, women lost economic and social power in Ireland as a result of the famine and the changes it triggered in Irish society.

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<sup>45</sup> Lee, "Women and the Church," 39.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>47</sup> Pedraza, "Women and Migration," 46.

### 3. The Decision to Emigrate

With little hope of marriage or employment, single Irish women had few options to create meaningful lives for themselves, as defined by their culture. Two choices were available: entering a convent and emigration. The requirement of payment to a convent to enter religious life above the level of a menial servant that choice was foreclosed for many women. The choice that remained—emigration—was the most practical one for many single Irish women for decades before the famine. The social changes after the famine made it the best choice for thousands of Irish women in the second half of the nineteenth century. The changes in Irish society produced surplus daughters, who would attain few benefits—economic or social—from remaining in Ireland.<sup>48</sup> To obtain the possibility of marriage or employment, these women “had to turn their backs on the land of their birth.”<sup>49</sup>

Robert E. Kennedy notes an interesting paradox in Irish culture: women were subordinate to men yet had the freedom to emigrate on their own. Kennedy notes that Irish rural women were given a much more subordinate status compared to women in other European countries. Despite this subordinate status, Irish women were as able to emigrate on their own as men were.<sup>50</sup> One reason for this freedom was that Irish society trusted single women to refrain from sexual activity and

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<sup>48</sup> Diner, *Erin's Daughter in America*, 28.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>50</sup> Kennedy, *The Irish: Emigration*, 67.

protect their chastity even when they were outside of family supervision.<sup>51</sup> Because Irish women were permitted to emigrate alone, they represented a larger proportion of emigrants than women in other cultures.<sup>52</sup> As Nolan writes, “most Irish women migrants sought their fortunes independently of a father’s or husband’s or brother’s direct support.”<sup>53</sup> Thus, Irish culture gave women both the motivation and the freedom to leave their homeland.

The stereotype of the emigrant is a young single male looking for economic opportunity. Pedraza notes, “[This] assumption . . . has overshadowed the reality of migration streams that were dominated by women.”<sup>54</sup> According to Kennedy, the number of occupations open to men in nineteenth century America and “the total demand for male labor” was much greater than for women.<sup>55</sup> Even though there were fewer jobs open to women, the Irish immigration stream included a larger proportion of women than the immigration streams from other European countries. According to Lee, women made up thirty-three percent of the total European immigration stream, yet they made up about fifty percent of Irish Immigrants.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Moloney, Deirdre M. “A Transatlantic Reform: Boston's Port Protection Program and Irish Women Immigrants.” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 19, no. 1 (October 01, 1999): 50-66. Accessed February 11, 2015. JSTOR.

<sup>52</sup> Moloney, Deirdre M. “A Transatlantic Reform,” 51.

<sup>53</sup> Janet Nolan, “Women's Place in the History of the Irish Diaspora: A Snapshot.” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 28, no. 4 (July 01, 2009): 77, Accessed January 29, 2015. JSTOR.

<sup>54</sup> Pedraza, “Women and Migration,” 303-304.

<sup>55</sup> Kennedy, *The Irish: Emigration*, 83.

<sup>56</sup> Lee, “Women and the Church,” 39.

From these percentages, Kennedy concludes that what drew Irish women to the United States was more than just employment. Kennedy understands that women's motivation to emigrate was due in part to the extreme male dominance in Irish culture compared to other northern European societies.<sup>57</sup> Other writers attribute the women's motivation to the loss of status that resulted from the societal changes after the famine. "Kennedy and Lee insist that with regard to female emigration from Ireland the social status of women rather than poverty alone was a causal factor 'pushing' them abroad."<sup>58</sup>

The Irish immigrant stream contained a higher proportion of women than the immigrant pool from other northern European countries. This was the result of social conditions in Ireland making it difficult for women to find satisfying roles in life. Further, Irish culture allowed women to emigrate without the supervision of family members. Finally, conditions in America offered opportunities for employment and marriage making emigration hard to resist for many Irish women.

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<sup>57</sup> Kennedy, *The Irish*, 84.

<sup>58</sup> Jackson, "Women in 19th Century," 1008.

#### 4. Life for Single Irish Women in the United States

Most women leaving Ireland for the United States came from rural areas in West Ireland. Kennedy notes that the rural population of Ireland decreased by 2.8 million between 1841-1891, while the urban population decreased by 212,000. Some of the drop in population in cities was offset by internal migration away from agricultural areas. Perhaps because life in rural Ireland was so difficult, almost all immigrants chose to live in cities, especially New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, Boston, and San Francisco. Irish women immigrants preferred city life even more than the men.<sup>59</sup> In her study on the saving habits of Irish immigrants, Polly Beckham notes that Irish women outnumbered Irish men in Philadelphia in 1850.<sup>60</sup>

Single Irish women, once they reached the United States, settled into cities and found work usually as domestic servants. At first, their employment was necessary to support themselves and their families. The tradition of single Irish women working continued even after second-generation Irish families in America were economically stable. The expectation that single women work outside the home whenever possible and married women work at home reflected values carried over from Ireland.

Irish tradition encouraged single Irish women to work outside the home. This attitude was originally based on necessity: "Economic considerations were very

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<sup>59</sup> Kennedy, *The Irish*, 66-75.

<sup>60</sup> Polly Beckham, "A Little Cache of Green: The Savings Habits of Irish Immigrant Women in 1850 Philadelphia." *Pennsylvania History* 69, no. 2 (April 01, 2002): 261, accessed January 30, 2015. JSTOR.

important, however, in shaping conceptions of the roles of single women... but they encouraged—even expected—single Irish women to work ‘to help their people’ or ‘save the dear ones.’”<sup>61</sup> When they emigrated to the United States, Irish women worked because they had to.<sup>62</sup> This tradition continued in the United States even in second-generation families that were economically stable. In the 1890 and 1900 censuses “a large proportion of second generation Irish working women came from families enjoying modest prosperity.”<sup>63</sup> Families encouraged single Irish women to work even when it was not necessary. Meagher cites an example of a young Irishman who approved of how his girlfriend’s family encouraged her to become a milliner even though she would stop working as soon as they married.<sup>64</sup> The assumption that single women would work outside the home went beyond helping the family survive. It was part of their identity as a result of a cultural imperative.

Emigration freed women from the restrictions of the dowry system, but the realities of immigrant life kept them from marrying early. Most important for immigrant women was the need to find a job to support themselves. It could take many years of low paying work to become economically stable to marry. Annie O’Donnell, a nanny for the Mellon family in Philadelphia, worked for six years before she married Jim Phelan, a young man she met on the boat coming over from Ireland.

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<sup>61</sup> Meagher, “Sweet Good Mothers and Young Women,” 342.

<sup>62</sup> Patricia A. Lamoureux, “Irish Catholic Women and the Labor Movement.” *33U.S. Catholic Historian* 16, no. 3, Sources of Social Reform, Part One (July 01, 1998): 30, accessed January 29, 2015, JSTOR.

<sup>63</sup> Meagher, “Sweet Good Mothers and Young Women,” 333-334.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 330-331.



Some people attribute the late marriage of immigrant women to their strong family loyalties and their desire to use their earnings to help their families emigrate.<sup>65</sup>

Some people at this time worried that encouraging single women to work would enable them to marry inappropriately or avoid marriage altogether.<sup>66</sup> This proved not to be the case: Second generation Irish women married late, as did Irish men. Further, the vast majority of these Irish women ended up marrying Irish men.<sup>67</sup>

Once married, few Irish women worked outside the home. According to Meagher, "In both census years, 1880 and 1900, the proportion of married Irish women working outside their households was no more than 5 percent."<sup>68</sup> Married women had responsibilities for taking care of the children and the household. In addition, some married women took in work like laundry or ironing to support their families, but very few worked outside the home. This was true even of the women who were successful in white-collar jobs, such as secretary and teacher, before marriage. Despite professional achievements before marriage, these women did not plan to continue to work after marriage.<sup>69</sup> Irish women in the United States followed the cultural traditions of Irish women in Ireland: the single women worked outside the home while the married women worked only in the home.

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<sup>65</sup> Lamoureux, "Irish Catholic Women," 30.

<sup>66</sup> Meagher, "Sweet Good Mothers and Young Women," 335.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 335.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 329.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 338.

Meagher comments on the split between the roles assigned single women and married women in Irish culture. Religious values were responsible for making motherhood the key role of a wife. But, Meagher notes, that there was no simple rationale for the idea that single women should work.<sup>70</sup> Meagher concludes that these different roles for single and married women can only be understood “in strict terms of duty. The wife’s role was to be a mother, the daughter’s role was to work.”<sup>71</sup> Annie O’Donnell who emigrated from Ireland to Philadelphia in 1898, wrote about the importance of duty in shaping her life: “In America . . . life was duty.”<sup>72</sup>

Irish women immigrants adapted to life in the United States by working hard. In time, marriage was often an option and work outside the home ceased, but work at home continued. Work for single women gave them a means to help their families rather than getting free of their families.

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 329-330.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 342.

<sup>72</sup> Annie O’Donnell, *Your Fondest Annie: Letters from Annie O’Donnell to James P. Phelan, 1901-1904*. ed. Maureen O’Rourke Murphy (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2005), 39.

## 5. The Significance of Immigration

Historians differ on the conclusions to be drawn from the migration of Irish women and their lives in the United States. Some (e.g. Nolan and Jackson) may have been influenced by their own experience making their way in the professional world in the 1970s and 1980s in the wake of the feminist movement. These academics see the female immigrants as gaining independence and autonomy by their migration to America and their supporting themselves through their work. Others (e.g. Diner) see the women immigrants as improving their lives but not gaining freedom from their culture and their families.. This paper views Irish immigrant women as remaining connected to their culture and their religion under the new circumstances presented them in post-famine Ireland even as they emigrated.

Many historians view the result of the emigration as the women gaining independence. For example, Nolan notes, “[E]xpectations that grew out of the renewed prosperity of post-Famine life, enabled a dispossessed generation of women to seize control over their own destinies by seeking new lives abroad.”<sup>73</sup> Nolan’s use of the language “to seize control over their own destinies” suggests that these women made decisions about the future without consulting anyone else.<sup>74</sup> In fact, the decision to emigrate and to choose to send money back home were all made in reference to the needs of the migrant’s family. According to Diner, Irish immigrant women had a strong sense of self but they were not selfish: their

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<sup>73</sup> Nolan, *Ourselves Alone*, 93.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

decisions to emigrate reflected their loyalties to their families.<sup>75</sup> Nolan describes these immigrant women as shifting from dependent to becoming independent, no longer daughters but sisters.<sup>76</sup> But these arguments claim too much. Emigration did not make these women independent of their families and their culture. The connections to their families and to Irish culture were as strong as ever. Instead, “Their actions represented a commitment to Irish Catholic culture and to its way of life.”<sup>77</sup> These commitments were merely expressed in a new way under the new circumstances presented by the post-famine world and a new country.

Ruth-Ann Harris claims, “[women’s] access to cash income made them more able to control their own fates and determine the course of their lives, altering gender relations between immigrant men and women.”<sup>78</sup> In fact, the money earned by Irish immigrant women was designated for certain purposes. Many immigrant women saved their earnings to send them back to family in Ireland. Hotten-Somers quotes the manager of a bank who commented: “During the four weeks ending on Dec. 20, 1879, drafts to the number of 2,250 and representing 5,376 pounds, passed through his hands. The senders were almost exclusively servant girls” (Hotten-Somers 234). The money sent to Ireland sometimes paid the rent on the family

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<sup>75</sup> Diner, *Erin's Daughter in America*, xiv.

<sup>76</sup> Nolan, *Ourselves Alone*, 79.

<sup>77</sup> Diner, *Erin's Daughter in America*, xiv.

<sup>78</sup> Harris, Ruth-Ann. “‘Come You All Courageously’: Irish Women in America Write Home.” *In New Directions in Irish American History*, ed. Kevin Kenny, 209-226. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), 220.

farm.<sup>79</sup> Many Irish women left the family farm in order to allow their parents to remain on that farm. Other women sent money back to Ireland to finance the migration of family members.<sup>80</sup> The cheapest passage from Ireland to America cost \$16.00. With \$20.00, a traveler could also buy bedding, soap, and food for the journey.<sup>81</sup> Annie O'Donnell followed her two sisters to the United States, and she was followed by her youngest brother. Clearly, obligation to family members determined in part how Irish immigrant women saved and spent their money. Working for wages for these women was not a way to separate from their families, but it was a way to strengthen family bonds and further the fortunes of their families.

According to Diane M. Hotten-Somers, "Many historians have seen the movement from Ireland to America as one from social constraint to personal autonomy."<sup>82</sup> For example, Nolan describes the emigration of Irish women as a path out of dependency that enabled them to experience independence in America.<sup>83</sup> Hotten-Somers disagrees with this assessment in light of her research into how Irish

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<sup>79</sup> Janet Nolan, "Women's Place in the History of the Irish Diaspora: A Snapshot." *Journal of American Ethnic History* 28, no. 4 (July 01, 2009): 79, Accessed January 29, 2015. JSTOR.

<sup>80</sup> Nolan, "Women's Place," 79.

<sup>81</sup> Beckham, "A Little Cache of Green," 252.

<sup>82</sup> Diane M. Hotten-Somers, "Relinquishing and Reclaiming Independence: Irish Domestic Servants, American, Middle-Class Mistress, and Assimilation, 1850-1920," in *New Directions in Irish American History*, ed. Kevin Kenny (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), 234.

<sup>83</sup> Nolan, "Women's Place," 95.

women working as servants in America gave up their personal autonomy.<sup>84</sup> The life of a domestic servant was under the almost complete control of her mistress: “She has to live other people’s lives from the moment she gets up till the moment she goes to bed. She is at best a well kept prisoner.”<sup>85</sup> While Hotten-Somers concedes that conditions improved in some respects for Irish immigrant women in America, she is careful to note this improvement did not constitute liberation. Diner is even more emphatic: “The behavior of these women, as immigrants and as wage earners, may seem to indicate autonomy and independence. It does not.”<sup>86</sup> Irish women used the money earned as immigrant works to strengthen their bonds with their communities, not liberate themselves from them.

Irish women did not leave Ireland in order to separate from their families, but in order to help them. Diner argues persuasively that when women arrived at their new homes, Irish immigrant women were not trying to break with their families: “Their actions stemmed from family loyalties. They reckoned that they could support and succor brothers, sisters, and parents better from America than on the ‘ould sod.”<sup>87</sup> Given the limitations of life in Ireland, these women realized they would have a greater ability to support their families from America where there were more opportunities for work. Once in America, the immigrants offered to help those back in Ireland to emigrate. This process, known as chain migration, was

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<sup>84</sup> Hotten-Somers, “Relinquishing and Reclaiming Independence,” 235.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 235.

<sup>86</sup> Diner, *Erin’s Daughter in America*, xiv.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, xiv.

especially strong among women.<sup>88</sup> Many immigrant women would travel to America to join a sister, or female friend.<sup>89</sup>

Annie O'Donnell made the trip from Ireland to Philadelphia to join her two sisters who were married and lived near each other. O'Donnell comments in her matter-of-fact way that her two sisters barely recognized her and seemed worried that she had come to depend on them.<sup>90</sup> Despite her sisters' lack of warmth, O'Donnell recognized that it would have been difficult to make the journey without their invitation. O'Donnell, in turn, encouraged her youngest brother to come to America. "I believe my youngest brother will soon come here too. He is only a young lad about 18. Then the old homestead will be rid of us all excepting my oldest brother."<sup>91</sup> O'Donnell's experience reflects "the overwhelming tendency of the Irish to journey 'one member of a family at a time' and of the Irish here to provide for the migration of yet one more family member."<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Moloney, "A Transatlantic Reform," 91.

<sup>89</sup> Diner, *Erin's Daughter in America*, 38.

<sup>90</sup> O'Donnell, *Your Fondest Annie*, 93.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

<sup>92</sup> Diner, *Erin's Daughter in America*, 36.

## 6. Conclusion

The famine changed economic and social forces in Ireland. As a result of these changes, the status of women in Irish society declined. Fewer women were able to marry and become mothers, the most desirable role for Irish women. Further, single women had fewer opportunities to contribute economically to their families. Male dominance increased as did the power of the Catholic Church, which supported that dominance. For many reasons, single Irish women left Ireland and emigrated to the United States. The Irish tradition that granted single women the autonomy to travel alone to a strange land gave them the ability to escape the restrictions imposed by post-famine society.

Once in America, these women worked, often as domestic servants. The ability to earn their own wages did not mean Irish women immigrants sought or achieved independence from the families or their culture. Most workingwomen used their wages to support family members, enabling them to either remain on their family farm by paying the rent or enabling them to emigrate by paying their passage. The forces that changed Irish society after the famine required that single women adapt to new conditions in their families and communities. Emigration marked a key form of adaptation and allowed Irish single women to express their traditional devotion to their families and their culture in new ways.

Irish women who journeyed to America as immigrants gained power over their lives unavailable to them in Ireland. The ability to start a new life freed them from the limitations present in Ireland including restrictions on the ability to marry and to work. Most women used this freedom to help their families and to



eventually marry a man of Irish descent and to raise a family within the Irish culture as it was evolving in America. Thus, the move to America did not represent a break from families and their culture but a continuation of it.

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