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Irish women in the United States 1870-1914: a case study: factory workers

Mary Susan Hewitt

University of the Pacific

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IRISH WOMEN IN THE UNITED STATES 1870-1914

A CASE STUDY: FACTORY WORKERS

A Thesis
Presented to
the Faculty of the Graduate School
University of the Pacific

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
Mary Susan Hewitt
May, 1975
This thesis, written and submitted by

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Dated April 14, 1975
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INTRODUCTION

Contemporary conventional wisdom suggests that a radical change in environment produces a variety of conflicts for an individual's perception of the world. Certain geographical, social or cultural environments are seen as either supporting or threatening corresponding value systems and life-styles, and alteration of one's environment, such as moving to the suburbs, integrating schools, etc., is often sought as a reinforcement for a particular way of life. Correspondingly, value changes seen as undesirable are frequently attributed to environmental change, such as moving to the big city, ghettoization, etc. Indeed, environmental change itself, whatever its substance or direction, is usually assumed to produce some impact on the outlook and values of a person undergoing such change. This study seeks to examine such assumptions with reference to a group which underwent dramatic environmental and occupational change: Irish women immigrants employed in factories in the United States, 1870-1914.

Did these Irish immigrant women who labored in factories retain their traditional set of personal values once they reached the highly industrial urban scene of the factory? Or did these values disintegrate under the strain of change? Did these women develop a new set of values? Or did their traditional values stretch to encompass the new demands of city and factory, retaining their initial character, but generating deep unresolved tensions? Close examination will point up some important aspects of personal adaptation to historical upheaval and
perhaps suggest a legacy.

Looking at one large single group of immigrants such as the Irish in some ways eases this research. Information on the Irish is readily available throughout the period. But the problem of isolating women's experiences and treating them in a multi-disciplinary, sociocultural approach is a novel and complex one. This approach is a frontier area of contemporary historical research. Despite the difficulty of pioneering, the new perspective which such an approach provides should lead to conclusions previously unavailable.

Because discussion of "values," "attitudes" and other qualitative factors can so quickly lead into fuzzy generalities, it is essential that a few basic definitions be introduced here.

Values are abstract, generalized principles of behavior to which the members of a group feel a strong, emotionally toned positive commitment and which provide a standard for judging specific acts and goals. Values are accepted and internalized by each group member in the process of socialization. Values are desired objects or goals.\(^1\)

Attitudes are defined as orientations toward certain objects, including persons—others or oneself, or situations that are emotionally toned and relatively persistent. Attitudes are learned and may be regarded as more specific expressions of values or beliefs. Attitudes result from the application of general values to concrete situations.\(^2\)

A value crisis is defined by a combination of the meanings of

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\(^2\) Ibid., p. 19.
values and crisis. A crisis is a serious interruption in the normal way of life of an individual or group, resulting from the occurrence of an unexpected situation for which the individual is not prepared, and which raises problems for which customary responses are not adequate. A crisis requires the development of new modes of thought and action. 3

Sometimes new values develop as a result of a crisis. In other situations, existing values may be flexible enough to accommodate the new situation. Thus, other indices of value crisis than value change must be investigated. One of these is role strain.

"Role" refers to a pattern of behavior structured around specific rights and duties and associated with a particular status position within a group or social situation. Roles are how people act in particular positions. 4

Role strain is difficulty or stress that individuals experience in meeting their role obligations. 5

Employing these definitions, this study will examine the traditional environment and values of Irish immigrant women especially in the light of the reinforcing factors of religion, village life and family structure. The evolution of these values in the new urban industrial setting will then be investigated providing a basis from which to delineate the areas of conflict, confusion and compatibility in the two environments and in the woman's response to them. The information obtained from this comparative study will then be used to explore whether or not a value crisis really occurred for these women, and, if it did,

3Ibid., p. 88. 4Ibid., p. 356. 5Ibid., p. 356.
what form it took, how extensive it was and what was the character of their response to it. Once the value crisis question is in perspective, evaluation can be made.

Why the Irish? The Irish are a valuable group to assess in this study for a variety of reasons. They were among the largest nationality groups to immigrate to the United States. Ireland was a predominantly rural agricultural country with less industrialization than most of western Europe. Thus the cultural contrasts with industrial American cities were greater than those for immigrants from the more industrialized areas of Europe. Conversely, the fact that the Irish came with the asset of the English language, albeit often broken English, meant that as a group they did not face as significant a linguistic barrier as did other immigrant groups. This factor tended to reduce the significance of certain phenomena inherent in immigration such as learning a new language, while emphasizing certain others such as rural to urban change, central to the concerns of this study.

Why women? Much attention has been paid to the immigrant Irish as a group, but the focus for the studies has been men. A number of factors contributed to this distortion. Men keep the same surname throughout their lives and impart it to their children. It is thus possible to follow them through birth, census, death and other legal documents.6 They were more often engaged in visible occupations in the society, and what statistical and other data which can be derived from employment is far more available for males. The right to vote, while not universally

available to all immigrant males, provided even more sources of data. Women, on the other hand, changed names with marriage and remarriage and could not vote. Their occupations were often unreported in city directories, and since their person and property was under the absolute control of their husbands, they had no legal existence at all and hence would not often appear in the usual data sources.

These are perfectly understandable factors accounting for the exclusive focus on men in studies made to date of Irish immigration. Yet, there may also be elements of prejudice which account for the selective emphasis on men, especially the assumption that one could generalize from the situation of male members of the group to the group itself. This is not the place to try to resolve questions of historians' bias. But this study might prepare the ground for such resolution by providing a basis for comparing male and female immigrant experiences. Until that is done, there is no way to know whether men can be selected as a representative sample of Irish immigrants or not. Thus, the most basic reason for this study's focus on women is that they represent a most significant group, in size if nothing else, whose experience might be expected to be somewhat different than that studied to date, but who have not yet been adequately investigated.

Why 1870-1914? This period begins with the effective end of major civil war difficulties, and the quickening of industrial and urban growth. It also coincides, not coincidentally, with the high tide of immigration to the United States. In 1864 the first national immigration

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7Jennie L. Wilson, The Legal and Political Status of Women in the United States. (Iowa: Torch Press, 1912), p. 28. Laws pertaining to women's status varied by state, but this was the common law of most.
law was passed by Congress for the purpose of encouraging immigration. It did so by placing no physical, mental or material prerequisites on those who came. In 1868 it was repealed and no new law was adopted until 1882. But the invitation to the "new world" was clear. In 1882 the development of restrictive immigration laws began and finally in 1921 legislation was passed which closed the door to all but a trickle of the foreign born. In 1910-1911 the United States government published the results of extensive studies on immigration. It was this information which provided some important background for the 1921 legislation effectively ending immigration. 1914 marked the beginning of World War I and a dramatic change of focus in United States history from internal industrialization to war production and the arena of world politics.

The relationship between immigration and industry grew throughout the period 1870-1914. The first stage of industrialization in the United States, the buildup of heavy industry and transportation in the 1860's and 70's gave way to the increase of machinery and factory mass production of goods requiring huge unskilled labor forces. Immigrants provided a source of labor cheaper than the local population and the consequent savings to industrialists was one among the many factors contributing to the rapid growth of industry.

Intertwined with the growth of industry was the growth of cities. Cities housed farm migrants displaced by agricultural technology as well as immigrants to America. The financial situation of most immigrants barely provided money for passage and did not include capital to acquire land. Friends already located in cities offered them comfort, shelter, information and contacts to acquire work from which they hoped to save enough to move to the land. The growth of cities and the needs of
industry fed upon one another and became essential to each other. As industry needed population centers for a source of future workers and markets and for the psychic and social livelihood of employees, so cities needed industry to provide jobs for their new or otherwise unemployed members.

The result of this process is that, with regard to the factors of immigration, industrialization and urbanization, the period 1870-1914 forms a sufficiently distinct span to merit isolation for study. While immigration, industrialization and urbanization were all under way prior to 1870, the resolution of the Civil War and a number of other factors makes that year a take-off point for the far more significant pace of growth in all three areas during the following four and one half decades. Similarly the impact of World War I and the ensuing restrictive legislation makes 1914 a natural closing point for a study centered on immigration.

The above thumbnail sketch of some of the variety of elements in a topic such as this study of female Irish factory workers shows in microcosm some of the problems of social, intellectual and cultural history in general. Historians are forging new territory here and often raising more questions than can be answered. Stephan Thernstrom makes this point well when he asks:

To what extent did differences in the cultural background of the particular immigrant groups, or in the character of the economy and the labor market at the time they first arrived, speed or slow their progress? Did all groups whatever their national background have essentially similar forms and channels of mobility . . . .

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9Thernstrom, p. 112.
Such questions are of fundamental importance and have not been given the attention they deserve. They exist in a no man's land between disciplines, too sociological for historians and too historical for sociologists. The sources for this kind of study in the period proposed are often scattered and sometimes inadequate. Asking the response of women no longer able to speak for themselves to the sweeping changes in their habitat and occupation leads inevitably to accepting some generalizations based on rather limited samples. In time, as new research avenues open, it may be possible to become more comprehensive. In the meantime, this study will draw on what information is currently available to develop as full a picture as possible of the situation of Irish women factory workers.

Primary sources used here are the massive Immigration Reports of 1911 and the Labor Bureau Reports on the conditions of women and children wage earners issued between 1910 and 1913.

Secondary sources include studies of women's minimal participation in the labor movement, information on the dynamics of urban-industrial development in the United States, and conditions surrounding immigration, studies of specific aspects of the role of women in the labor force as well as detailed studies of the Irish in both Ireland and

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10Ibid., p. 2.


A few historians point out the far reaching implications of the industrialization-urbanization process for women. Arthur Schlesinger, Sr., in his pioneering book of urban history devotes a whole chapter to women in the city. However, he deals primarily with women who are already middle class and hence does not include immigrant factory workers. William S. Holt points to the relationship between urbanization and the lives of women as an area for further investigation. Virginia McLaughlin discusses the impact of urban industrial life upon the family 1900-1930. This study, dealing with the consequences of immigration for family value structure, is one of the most valuable secondary sources for this study.

Stephan Thernstrom suggests that in the literature of social stratification it is customarily assumed that males are the breadwinners and carriers of the family's aspirations. He agrees that women have played a role in history deserving of more study and sees the lack of their inclusion as a limitation within the discipline.

Such an admission is a welcome event in the field. While distinction by sex is not usually a primary focus in research, the real

16Thernstrom, p. 7.
point is that women's experiences have been assimilated to men's without suggesting differences. This process appears to be similar to that by which historians have amalgamated other "minority" \(^\text{17}\) groups into a picture of the development of modern America that was derived for a long time almost entirely from the experience of white, middle-class males. The recent discovery by historians that different groups have had different, equally significant roles in American history has begun to correct this bias. Somewhat similar to the bias which led to the exclusion of black people from our history, this one against women in urban history has probably been strengthened by the myths which have surrounded women, and have been accepted by both men and women. In turn, the lack of historical study has probably contributed to the continuance of such myths, which ultimately influence the course of history.

\(^\text{17}\) Helen May Hacker, "Women as a Minority Group," Social Forces, III (October, 1951), pp. 60-69.
Chapter 1

BACKGROUND

The United States underwent a major transformation. In less than a hundred years agricultural lands and domestic workshops developed into sprawling industrial cities. Hand tools and simple mechanical contrivances were replaced by machines, the craftsman's house/workshop by the factory; steam and electricity replaced the traditional energy sources of water, wind and muscle. Some country folk, their former occupations no longer viable, migrated to mining and manufacturing towns to become workers of the new age. Meanwhile a professional class of entrepreneurs, financiers and managers, of scientists, inventors and engineers rose to prominence and expanded rapidly. The Industrial Revolution was underway.

And revolution it was because it turned the nation upside down and around, realigning population centers, creating complex needs for large cities and then expanding production to fulfill them. Expanding production required more labor, and industry, in attracting new labor sources, encouraged the growth of cities which in turn created more needs for goods and services.

Rapid growth of cities created insatiable demands for lighting, communication, heat, power, transportation, water, sewerage, newsprint, street cards, coal, iron, steel, copper, lead piping and other
construction materials.¹ This network of demands upon industry caused it to become more bureaucratic, creating specialized purchasing, marketing and accounting departments to handle the problems of volume.

By the 1870's the expansion of railroads and the heavy industrial development in iron and steel, coal and associated industries was already under way, and the Industrial Revolution in the United States was beginning to expand into what is often called its second stage: the proliferation of production for consumption. Between the 1870's and the beginning of World War I, the United States became an industrialized society. It also became an urban one: although the absolute number of rural dwellers continued to increase until the 1890's, cities grew even more rapidly so that 45% of the American people lived in cities in 1910, and the country became more than 50% urban by the census of 1920.²

Yet, these overall statements by themselves do not convey adequately this transformation. Even a cursory examination of the fifty largest industrial corporations in 1909³ reveals a very different make-up of the industrial sector than exists now. The heavy concentration in extractive industries and in those making producer's goods is obvious. The human reality behind these figures, i.e., the concentration of workers in mines, foundries, smelters and in factories producing large capital goods is similarly obvious. The working conditions, levels of


²U. S. Census Figures as reported in "Migration," Encyclopedia Britanica, 1950, XV, 466.

skill required and differences from rural life and work are also fairly clear-cut.

Table 1 shows the corresponding growth of cities in this period. It is adapted from United States Census figures, which count every place with more than 2500 inhabitants as an urban area. What is even more significant here than the growth of the overall urban population sector is the rapid expansion of large cities.

Table 1. Urban Population Growth in the United States, 1870-1910

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1870</th>
<th>1910</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Population</td>
<td>38,558,371</td>
<td>91,972,266</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban Population</td>
<td>9,902,361</td>
<td>41,998,932</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Per Cent Urban</td>
<td>25.7%</td>
<td>45.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of Places with:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1,000,000 or more</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>500,000 - 1,000,000</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100,000 - 500,000</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25,000 - 100,000</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>228</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Per Cent of Urban Populations in cities of:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1,000,000 or more</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>500,000 - 1,000,000</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100,000 - 500,000</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25,000 - 100,000</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These figures show the dramatic change in urban growth in only one generation. Whereas in 1870 only something less than 12% of the total American population, or about 4.5 million people, lived in cities of 100,000 or more, by 1910 more than one out of every five Americans lived in cities of this size, a big-city population of some 19 million

4U. S. Census Figures as reported in "Migration," Encyclopedia Britanica, 1950, XV, 466.
people. In forty years, the number of Americans living in cities over 100,000 had grown by more than 14.5 million, or over 300%, and corresponding growth had taken place in cities in the 25,000 - 100,000 range.

With the rapid growth of these cities came numerous social problems. Crime, police protection, unemployment, housing, health and other social welfare needs all created a demand for local government with the authority to tax resources to alleviate the personal suffering of the workers and poor. However, the needs always outpaced the resources and manpower available.

Much of the responsibility for the enormous social problems in the cities was shirked by big business who preferred to lower costs through cheaper labor sources. The most reliably cheap source was the newly-arrived immigrant. Although some immigrants were craftsmen who brought their trade with them and gained a decent income thereby, the bulk of the immigrants--especially those coming during the last decades of the 19th century from less developed areas of Europe--had no such skills and no option to refuse even the poorest paid work.

As a result, much of the population swelling American large cities came from abroad. Immigration had always been a fact of American history, undergoing various phases of official encouragement and discouragement. Though statistics were not collected as carefully then as today, the records in Table 2 show that from 1880 to 1890 the number of immigrants was twice that for any previous decade. In 1890 two-thirds

5Ibid. Some representative figures: The following show percentages of total immigration from each area for the period specified. 1861-70: British Isles 45%, Germany 34%, Italy .51%, Russia .10%, Austria-Hungary .33%. 1901-1910: British Isles 10%, Germany 4%, Italy 23%, Russia .18%, Austria-Hungary 24%.
of the entire immigration of the world was to the United States.\(^6\)

Table 2. Immigration to the United States\(^7\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Decade</th>
<th>No. of Immigrants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1871-1880</td>
<td>2,812,191</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1881-1890</td>
<td>5,246,613</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1891-1900</td>
<td>3,687,564</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1901-1910</td>
<td>8,795,386</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Immigration flow to the United States reflected the economic and political picture rather well. The end of the Civil War and the return to prosperity in the late 1870's brought an enormous increase in immigrant numbers. But when hard times set in with the depression of the 1890's, at one point the number of immigrants leaving exceeded the number coming in.\(^8\)

The early immigrants in the nineteenth century had been predominantly from the British Isles, Germany, Norway and Sweden. The last decade, however, brought peoples mainly from Austria-Hungary, Italy, Russia and Poland. The first groups fared better in American society because their language was less of a barrier and they shared some cultural similarities. They were light skinned and often fair haired. The second group was more diverse in cultural origins, had a greater language barrier and were often dark haired and skinned and thus more visible as foreigners. Their acculturation was more difficult.

Legislation affecting immigration in the period 1870-1914 went

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\(^7\)Ibid.

\(^8\)Ibid., p. 20.
from one extreme of wholesale encouragement of all comers to a policy of
very limited restriction in 1882 and the establishment of the Federal
Immigration Bureau to operate the Ellis Island port of entry inspection,
investigation and care center. While there were many unpleasant aspects
to the Bureau, it did provide some important services by insuring that
the immigrants had people to meet them and destinations upon landing. A
hospital was operated on the Island and every immigrant had access to it
for one year after arrival.9

Many immigrants hoped to enjoy the fruits of rural America by
acquiring a plot of land and beginning a farm. But most arrived without
savings and were forced to seek unskilled employment in the urban indus-
tries. Thus they provided an unending supply of cheap labor and they
flooded cities where they had friends, exerting even more social pressure
on the already overburdened population centers. Many remained trapped in
the cities struggling with the problems of acculturation and adjustment
and unable to provide for their bare necessities, much less save money to
buy land.

Among the newcomers women faced all the general adjustments of
the hard journey, new environment and acculturation, and some additional
difficulties. Peasant women were in many ways less prepared than men to
deal with the experience of change itself. They were even less likely to
have any education, to have traveled or to be experienced in dealing with
strange people, circumstances and ways of life. This relative lack of
experience in the world, combined with the protective enclave of the home
and paternalistic attitudes toward women, made change all the more

9Ibid., p. 21.
anxiety-producing for women. The more rural a woman's previous existence had been, the more dramatic and potentially disturbing was the upheaval of emigration.

While there was a multitude of reasons why people emigrated, the basic facts of overpopulation, famine, political persecution and financial ruin often forced people to seek a new opportunity and abandon what little they did possess in the process. For many there was little choice, and women's lack of experience in the world left them even further removed from a basic understanding of the factors compelling emigration.

The reasons for leaving were somewhat more comprehensible to men who carried on the contacts between the home and the outer world for the family. Subjectively women felt more in a situation beyond their control and comprehension.

Men were in a direct relationship to the economic process while women were culturally conditioned to be indirectly related to the world through their husbands and fathers. Women did, of course, raise chickens and sell or trade eggs and some other dairy products, but this was a supplementary function while their primary responsibility lay in cooking, caring for the house, and raising the children. There were, of course, women who were not married, but this was a deviation from the cultural norm and the peasant world related to them as if they were wives and mothers. The departure of males for the new world was in itself as important a reason as any for women to also emigrate, since marriage and motherhood were the apex of their cultural orientation.

But however humble their situation, women generally lost more in terms of subjectively important material goods in leaving. A woman's
labor had gone largely into her house. Its furnishings and implements, however meager, were part of her world. Some may have been part of her dowry or passed on from a parent or grandparent. She may well have expected to live out her life and die in that house. Women thus experienced more concretely and directly the shock of uprootedness.

Emigration thus was a different, and frequently more difficult, experience for women than for men. Women in a peasant culture were even less experienced with change, especially radical change, than men. They were less advantageously situated by social and economic role to be able to comprehend the need to emigrate. And while they probably felt the personal and emotional dimension of departure more strongly than males, they also suffered more from the loss of the comfortable environment of their own home.

Upon arriving in the "new world," devoid of the comfort of a familiar and supportive environment, the immigrant woman found herself thrust among strangers, many of whom looked, spoke and acted differently than anyone she had ever encountered before. This experience was profoundly disorienting.

Her previous existence had been on the fringes of a monetary economy. In the new world money became very important for carrying out her basic responsibilities such as feeding and clothing her family. This altered the ways of relating to those around her. While the peasant economy tended to distribute goods and services through gift-giving, exchanges which linked individuals socially as well as economically, the money economy provided no such relationships and made it difficult for her to understand such transactions.

Other economic factors altered her situation as well. In her
peasant existence there was little or no distinction in status or reward between men's and women's work. It was all a part of the whole. Now money intruded and imposed a higher value on certain occupations by the mere fact that they were salaried. Without money one could not provide the basic necessities for survival. Homemaking, housekeeping and child care in one's own home was unpaid labor. Husband-wife relationships were subtly or dramatically changed by this circumstance as well as by the husband's disappearance for long hours. There was less of a sense of shared existence in the new world than when both were around the same area and knew what each other's chores entailed. When the woman worked, of course, some of the above features were altered but family life virtually disappeared in the face of her long working hours. The possibility of conflict arose in the threat that her working may have posed to her husband's conception of himself as breadwinner.

The family was the compensating factor for many immigrants. Its importance grew as parents rapidly abandoned hope of much improvement for themselves, such as gaining enough capital to move on to farming, and began concentrating their ambitions on their children. This heightened importance of children contributed to the woman's anxieties since she bore the primary responsibility for the children. She was now under far greater pressure to continue to raise the children according to the traditional culture and values now that the larger environment was no longer supportive of those values and culture, but potentially inimical to them.

Previously, the extended family, church and village had provided a supportive and reinforcing milieu for raising children. In the new world city life posed a particular threat to this all-important function.
Children often worked among strangers, attended public schools and were subjected to a multitude of peer forces beyond the mother's control. Her husband was absent much of the time. If the woman worked, the situation was even worse because she had less time for any knowledge of her children.

Not all aspects of the new world were negative. Ghettos provided an environment which emphasized similarities with the homeland and provided a familiar social framework. Sometimes entire neighborhoods were transplanted from the old world to the new. More commonly, the ghetto provided an environment of countrymen where language was understood, specialized foods were available, religion was practiced in common, and some remnants of the old culture were preserved.

But the ghetto was not the old village. It was only an insulating layer of sociality in a larger sea: the city. As Shannon points out:

People who dwell on the land, live by the crops they plant and harvest, turn the soil over in their hands, dig the turf which warms their hearth, watch the common mystery of birth among the animals of their barnyards, and work long days in the fields under sun, sky and rain, come to know deep in their bones and spirit an appreciation of the natural world. They learn its unchangeable rhythms and innate order, its cruelty and beneficence, and its power. This knowledge is the common possession of country people the world over. It is a knowledge that breeds patience, fatalism, a sense of awe.

The city changed all this. Some of the changes, such as the confinement, polluted air and streets, slum housing and lack of natural


environment, were visible and obvious to the immigrants. Others, such as the change in time-cycles provided by the shift from an agrarian to an industrial existence worked their effects in more subtle fashion. The impact of these changes was different for women than for men, but the overall rule may have been the same: what the new world and the ghetto gave them, the city and the factory took away.

It is relatively easy to measure kinds of work done, numbers of people and wages earned; personal anguish and levels of stress and strain do not lend themselves readily to quantification. But the lack of statistical information does not mean the problems were not real and the cost in the quality of life often intolerably high. The bitter truth was that, for most immigrants, coming to America had been seen as a move toward a better (or, at least, less miserable) life. Conditions at home had become intolerable or most would never have left. Even if they had had the money to return, there was nothing left for them in the old country. But few could feel highly positive toward the new world either. The best that could be said for it was that it was the lesser of two evils. To understand the dimensions of this kind of choice, though, it is now necessary to explore the old world situation of Irish peasant immigrant women in greater detail.
Chapter 2

TRADITIONAL SOCIETY: SOCIO-CULTURE AND OCCUPATIONS OF IRISH WOMEN

Investigation of the response of Irish women to immigration, urbanization and factory work in the United States requires a basic understanding of what their lives were like prior to these changes, as well as of the causes that prompted them to so transform their lives. Generalization about life in Ireland contains some obvious pitfalls, but is rendered easier by the relative homogeneity of traditional Irish life, where centuries of English oppression had reinforced cultural and religious unities, and had prevented the development of significant economic inequality, industry, education or foreign trade which might have introduced differentiating elements into Irish society. However, a variety of reasons explain emigration from Ireland: young people emigrated for different reasons than older ones, single persons had different motives than married, and some emigres left in the face of famine and economic ruin while others departed in relatively good times. These differences must be attended to, since they obviously condition expectations about the "new world," but first a picture must be drawn of traditional peasant life in Ireland.

That life was essentially village-centered. Historically, Ireland's few cities had all been established by foreigners, and even at the end of the nineteenth century, Ireland possessed only one city, Dublin, with a population in excess of 100,000. In the twentieth century,
as the town became the focus of modernization and of economic development, significant differences appeared between rural and town life. But in the nineteenth century, the town was basically a larger village, and so the immigrant who came from the countryside was likely to have a very similar background to the one who came from a town, with Dublin and, probably, Belfast excepted.\(^1\)

The traditional Irish village was a place of stable, predictable social relations. Everyone had a role to play. A stern oligarchy of elders ruled but the advantage of the system for the young was that their position was likely to improve with time.\(^2\)

Three basic institutions, along with the economic system and the impact of English rule, shaped the lives, social roles and relationships, outlooks and values of the people. These three institutions, the Church, the family and the village community itself, were inseparably interconnected in the lives of traditional Irish. Although it is necessary to separate these for analysis, it must be remembered that for participants in this society they formed an integrated whole. The fact, then, that certain elements from this situation, such as the Church, could be transported to America, while others, the village, for example, could not, meant that even the institutions which persisted through immigration were transformed in the process, since they were no longer part of such a

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\(^1\)Conrad M. Arensberg and Solon T. Kimball, *Family and Community in Ireland* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1940), pp. XXV-XXXII, 3-5. Much of the rest of this chapter is based upon this thorough socio-anthropological study of Ireland. Though conducted in the late 1920's, the authors point out that little has changed in this basically agricultural traditional culture in the past two centuries.

unity. But, in Ireland, they had this character, and at the center of this system lay the Church.

Religion formed the core of traditional Irish culture. The census of 1861 showed that, out of a total population of 5,798,967, 4,505,265, or 78% were Roman Catholics and only 693,357, or 12% belonged to the Established Church\(^3\) or "the United Church of England and Ireland." The United Church had been imposed upon Ireland in 1800 by England in an effort to gain support for its Church. In 1869 England gave way to Ireland's wishes and the Act of Disestablishment was passed. The clergy of the former Established Church of Ireland, in response to this legislation and to preserve their livelihood, quickly reaffirmed their support for the doctrine and discipline of the Catholic Church while retaining their right to dissent from Rome. The net effect was to make Catholicism uniform throughout Ireland.\(^4\)

The way in which the average Irish person encountered the Catholic Church was at the parish level. The parish was the formal hierarchic repository of religious belief and observance. It was to the parish that a person went to worship, to baptize, to retreat, to be confirmed, to marry and to bury. The local clergyman or priest was seen as the direct link between the individual and the higher law to which all subscribed. The priest had a very fixed status in the community and was loved and respected, but he was detached from the masses by his position. His duties were to provide religious education, moral control, ceremonial leadership and to take an active role in recreational, cultural and

\(^{3}\)"Ireland," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1950, XII, 612.

\(^{4}\)Ibid.
educational activities.

The priest could move easily among the people but he was not "of them"; he belonged to another realm. This attribution of a separate status was due partly to religious belief, which established clerical life as a "higher way" than lay status, and partly to educational and socio-economic factors. The Penal Codes dating from 1691 barred Catholic Irish from receiving an education, along with many other privileges, and this left the parish priest as usually the only member of a village who possessed any learning. Moreover, in a peasant society where life was dependent on land, marrying well, children and other relatives to provide for old age, any individual who did not own land and who was dedicated to celibacy was naturally set apart. In addition, the priest usually served a parish for a set period of time, five to ten years, and thus he was an outsider in another sense.5

As a result of all these factors, the priest had a crucial leadership role in the village, and a central responsibility for the definition and elaboration of religious values. While his authority was overwhelming in these areas, it was also circumscribed by them. People were wary lest he overstep his position, especially in political matters.

For the individual, life was seen in terms of obedience to higher authority. Deviation from this authority was sinful and would bring dire punishment. This basic tenet of the Catholic Church was internalized and influenced every facet of thought, life and relationships of the people. The effect of religion was far more extensive than the outside contact with the priest and parish church would suggest.6

5 Arensberg and Kimball, p. 252. 6 Shannon, pp. 18-23.
For women and girls, religion had a particular effect upon their status. Catholic doctrine gave to Mary, the Mother of Christ, and to motherhood itself, a central place, which was emphasized even more in popular practice. As a result, the position of women was sacrosanct. They could not be priests, but their ability to bear children gave them another kind of power, a unique status in lay society. Correspondingly, inability to bear children would compromise this status for any individual woman.

Understandably, this kind of religious emphasis only reinforced the value strongly placed in a peasant economy on marrying well. An unmarried woman, other than a nun, was incomplete, unable to fully realize herself in society. Only in marriage and family could she exercise her powers in the way prescribed by religion and society.\(^7\)

Partly as a result, the family comprised one of the two other central institutions of peasant life. While symbiotic with the village community, the family, both in nuclear and extended form, maintained a certain preeminence over all other forms of social organization. Certainly the family was the central situation for an Irish woman: her rearing took place there, she was oriented toward the extension of the family through her own marriage and the family faced no significant competition from other sectors of society.

This family-centeredness correlated with an economic situation in which the basic method of survival was the small subsistence farm. "Success in the culture consisted in either earning or inheriting enough land to set up such a farm. Enough land for a farm was a requirement for

\(^7\)Arensberg and Kimball, pp. 35-67.
marriage. What constituted "enough" might vary from place to place, but in 1841, shortly before the famine that prompted waves of Irish emigration, of the 685,000 farms in Ireland, some 300,000 or 46% were under 3 acres in extent, and another 250,000 or 35% were from 3 to 15 acres. 8

Within the family the (eldest) father was the authority figure with the mother in a definite place of power alongside of, but not in conflict with, the father. In situations where a son was unable to acquire extra land for marriage, the parents could step aside and let the son take over the farm. The parents would then remain in the household, recognizing the fact that it now belonged to the young couple.

Since, as in other peasant cultures, considerable status was given to elders, relinquishing actual ownership did not relegate the parents to oblivion, but they retained a considerable position in the household with all the potentialities for conflict this involved. The son's wife in such a situation was expected to produce grandchildren as a payment on the debt she had incurred by partially taking over her mother-in-law's place.

This system had the curious effect of maintaining very close parent-child relationships into adulthood. It also provided hope for younger members that things would get better for them when they were older, that the place and power which would eventually come to them would make the long wait in secondary roles worthwhile. As Arensberg and Kimball point out, this hope was tempered by the fact that life expectancy in rural Ireland was among the highest in the world, despite

8Ireland," Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1950, XII, 612.
a relatively high infant mortality rate.\textsuperscript{9}

In the traditional family, there were specific roles, obligations and responsibilities for men and women. The man was in control of the resources he gained but was expected to provide well for his family. Being a good provider was the fundamental norm for his success as a man and father. He worked the farm, and was responsible for the plowing and other heavy or hard labor. He was principally concerned with corn, pigs, lambs and wool. Women often helped with the men's tasks, but were entitled to pity and sympathy in doing so because the work was thought to be harder than was natural for them.

A woman had her own work, centered about the home and child bearing and rearing. Any earnings she made from household work, such as churning butter or gathering eggs and tending poultry, was under her control. She was accorded homage as a woman and expected to work hard at such women's work within her family. Should her husband die, she had a claim on her brother-in-law or other close male relative to support her. But a woman without a husband was to be pitied.

Disputes were handled within the family with the father having the dominant, but not sole, voice in their resolution. When difficulties with another family arose, they were treated, as much as possible, as a matter between the two families. When disputes could not be settled between the two parties, the priest was the source of appeal. Formal

\textsuperscript{9}Arensberg and Kimball, pp. 160-64. Even in the 1920's Ireland still had a higher percentage of "over-65" in her population (9.2\%) than any other European country except France (9.4\%), and at any given age after year one, an Irish person had a longer life expectancy (e.g., 64 at age five) than even the French. Among other things, these authors find one of the more important causes of this longevity in the honored status of the elderly: it was worth living to a ripe old age in traditional Ireland.
legal proceedings or any other form of appeal to civic authority were generally not even considered, since the judicial system was viewed as simply an agency of English domination, and Catholic Irish were barred from both Bench and Bar.

The exchange of goods was handled primarily through the mechanisms of borrowing, and exchanging services and gifts in patterns of kinship or "cooring," a folk term for non-monetary cooperation. Money was not common tender. Any extensive use of it was the mark of an outsider.\textsuperscript{10} Community fairs provided occasions for exchange of goods as well as social opportunities. Cooperation in the community took the following forms: lending tools, helping out with others' work, lending a son to a farm that needed an extra hand. A woman would make a tub of butter and share it, lend a daughter to a household needing assistance, and in times of severe distress help out with gifts of food. Everyone would join in at harvest time, and in repaying obligations with gifts at rites of passage such as weddings and baptisms.

Within the culture, women might engage in any of the following activities: weaving, tailoring, shoemaking, midwifery, doctoring or being a "wise woman," domestic servant work, shopkeeping (eggs and butter for trade) and so forth, but their primary role was always in the home as wife and mother.\textsuperscript{11}

Mothers had specific relationships to both sons and daughters. Until seven years of age the child of either sex was the constant

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., pp. 250-53, where Arensberg and Kimball point out that this was still true of rural Ireland in the 1920's. Barter and exchanging services were overwhelmingly the primary methods of payment.

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., pp. 245-53.
companion of its mother regardless of where she was or what she was doing. She exercised controls as guide and companion and made her authority felt through praise, persuasion and endearment. Only when a grave breach of discipline occurred did the father become a disciplinary force. The barriers of authority, respect, extra-household interest and duties made it difficult for paternal intimacy to develop until the son began actively learning his father's skills. Although this meant that a son was less completely under his mother's influence after about age eight, she still retained an important role. The son looked to his mother as an arbitrator against his father's power. She played a diplomatic and conciliatory role in family disputes. Throughout the years of the son's development on the farm, the mother remained a source of counsel and comfort and the preparer of food. Only at marriage was the bond broken and transformed. If the clergy or bachelorhood were chosen, the closest possible relationship was still maintained.

Daughters were obviously even more under their mother's influence than sons. Women's work on the farm was quite distinct but complementary to men's. Young girls learned this quickly. They were thrown constantly in with their mother and any other older women of the household. After seven a daughter's life was completely different from her brother's and she had little working contact with her father. She grew up milking and driving cows, tending poultry, making butter and going to market with her mother, who thus became, in substantial isolation from any relationship with the father, her sole role model. The chief business of women was the house, preparation and serving of food, repair and upkeep of clothing and tending the hearth. When there was nothing else to do, they needed to occupy themselves with knitting or spinning. The younger woman was
always at the older woman's command.  

There was little readjustment between mother and daughter at marriage. Rather the change that was crucial was between the daughter and her new mother-in-law. This gave the daughter the knowledge that submission to her own mother would one day cease. However, a new person and household would take her mother's place.

Not all farms were run by married couples. There were spinsters, bachelors, widowers and widows. In each case a close relative helped out, indicating a need for family support. But marriage was the norm in the culture. Sex outside of marriage was considered a taboo and those who were known to have departed from this norm were subject to ridicule, scorn and other pressures from the dominant elders of the society.

If the family was thus the primary focus of life in traditional Ireland, it was only so within the context of the village. The village was the self-sufficient economic unit, providing the full range of necessary skills and trades for an agrarian community. It was the market-place for farm products. It was the locus of kin and other relationships, to which an individual or family might turn in time of need. It was coterminous with the parish, and with the horizons of the average inhabitant. After church and family, the village received the primary loyalty of the peasant.

But other factors also had important influences on the shaping of Irish values, attitudes and ways of life. Perhaps most visible among these factors was English rule. The Irish may have been among the most

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12 Ibid., pp. 53-74.

13 Ibid., pp. 224-272.
completely colonized peoples of all times; few nations in the third world today have a history of relations with the colonial power remotely comparable to that of the Irish.

While the division and redivision of land holdings provided the framework, it was the English system of rack-renting and absentee landlordism that turned the economic screws and kept most Irish at or below a subsistence level in the nineteenth century. From Swift's "Modest Proposal" to the benign neglect of the British government in the face of the potato famine, the English attitude toward the Irish actively encouraged the kind of anomic violence characteristic of those who feel powerless. Violence was an ugly part of traditional Irish life, and many Irishmen brought it with them to America.

The Penal Codes, blocking Catholic Irish from education, economic advancement, the professions, and any other advantages until the second quarter of the nineteenth century, contributed, along with the absence of industrialization and urbanization, to the maintenance of a traditional culture and peasant economic base long after a free Ireland would have begun some modernization. Also, by severely limiting literacy, they promoted a highly verbal culture in which powerful or poetic speech or a good singing voice earned high status, but "book learning" was not seen as an available road to personal or social advancement. The Codes just as frequently promoted a fatalistic passivity, alcoholism and rebellion. Thus, while the cohesive, co-operative and fixed world of family, church and village provided an environment which could have offered security,

14Shannon, pp. 16-17.
15Ibid., pp. 6-7.
success and contentment for the peasant, these were offset by the consequences of the economic and political situation. Shannon, though a little too strongly, summarizes some of these forces and their consequences this way:

The Irish, long before the late eighteenth century, had developed the habit of introspection and refined a system of inner checks and balances. They lived, after all, in a predominantly rural, secluded society in which property was not secure; the administration of justice was erratic and unfair; outlets for a freer, more varied life through education and trade did not exist or were almost entirely choked off; and where advancement often meant outward conformity to an alien religion and the consequent sacrifice of individuality. In these circumstances, it was natural for them to center their values within the bourne of the family and to guard that retreat jealously against exterior influences and interior tendencies to defilement and impurity. They could not marry casually or improvidently nor could they surrender lightly to wayward passions. If a son's marriage did not bring with it a wife's dowry, then the daughters of the family would not have a dowry to be properly married off in their turn. If the son or daughter married into a landless family, it would degrade their own family's status in the eyes of the community. The delicate balance of mutual interests on which depended the entire family system rested fundamentally on individual self-restraint. The authority of the father had to be respected and obedience paid to it. The role of the mother had to be exalted; and a mother's values, such as devotion to the husband's interests, a willingness to sacrifice on behalf of the children, and absolute chastity outside the marriage relationship, must be accepted and esteemed. These were absolute values, and on them everything depended. There were no competing social institutions to spin a wider web of allegiances or to construct differing hierarchies of value. There was no place for individualism. A man had identity only as a member of a functioning family. What endangered it endangered him; what lowered its status lowered his. Each member of the family had constantly to examine his own conscience to judge carefully whether his or her behavior met the expected standard. If he fell below that standard, he endangered the foundations of his family's and his own self-respect.16

For women, this situation meant that every effort had to be bent to maintain and strengthen their situation with regard to family.

16Ibid., pp. 22-34.
Attitudes, practices and institutions which supported it had to be promoted. Those inimical to it had to be fought. Women had to adhere to a role which promoted the family from within, a role which balanced the right degree of subservience to parents or husband with the right amount of authority over children. Since the proper rearing of children was the mother's responsibility, she had to see that they grew up with the right values in this respect. A stronger recipe for conservatism could hardly be imagined.

Yet that conservatism took strange twists. It meant that when the combination of the population explosion and the potato blight in the 1840's threatened the very survival of the family, the Irish woman was willing, even if reluctantly, to leave everything else that meant home to her--her village, parish, natural family--and migrate to another world in search of a better situation for her family or of the right kind of marriage so she could begin a family. Not only would she leave "home," she would expose herself and her children to all sorts of alien influences, clinging tenaciously to her primary concern for maintaining the family itself.

While the specific cause which triggered an Irish woman's departure for America might be famine, a lack of marriageable males in her village, the emigration of her family or the desire of a widow to better her children's prospects, all were united by the common fundamental desire to preserve the constellation of values centered in the traditional family. Immigration, then, however radical it might appear as a means, was chosen for a conservative end. The first generation immigrant woman cannot be understood without recognizing this fact, nor without realizing that she would also seek to maximize those values which she saw
as integral to good family life. These certainly included the moral and ethical values of Catholicism, the preservation of appropriate kinship and generational relationships, the continuance of a proper division of labor and other responsibilities between men and women, and the preservation of correct relationships among individuals joined together by geography or economics rather than blood, relationships reckoned, maintained and adjusted by the exchange or services and gifts and the participation in ceremony.\(^{17}\) What happened to this pattern of goals in the new world will now have to be examined.

\(^{17}\) Arensberg and Kimball, pp. 299-306.
Chapter 3

THE NEW WORLD: EMIGRATION AND SETTLEMENT

Although it has been possible to treat the Irish way of life in a generalized way, because nineteenth century Ireland was still relatively homogenous, the phenomenon of emigration must be approached differently. As already noted, although there were some statistically evident overall factors causing emigration, such as the potato blight famine, people in different circumstances in terms of age, marital status and sibling rank left Ireland for different reasons. While it would be impossible to sort out and measure completely all the motives, some attempt must be made to assess their relative importance, for at least two reasons. First of all, the immigrant population was not simply a replica of the Irish population; the relative importance of different motives for leaving Ireland directly affected the make-up of the immigrant group. Secondly, the reasons that individuals had for leaving Ireland shaped their expectations of what they would find in the new world, and thereby conditioned their response to life in America.

In examining the causes of emigration, it will sometimes be hard to distinguish between women and men since the statistics are for the "Irish." Whenever possible, concrete examples will refer to women, the focus of this study.

The primary reason the Irish emigrated by the middle of the nineteenth century was the brutal character of their economic life. Land was
of central importance, as indicated above. As the population grew, there was not enough land to go around. In 1849, five-sixths of the population depended directly upon the soil. By 1900 the figure was two-thirds. "Peasants married or murdered for land, not love . . . ."  

As has already been seen, the pressure of land starvation was not always experienced directly or in the same way everywhere. Younger daughters of an already land-poor farmer might see that there would be no dowry for them, and thus no possibility of marriage, and so might emigrate. Marginal changes in farm size might reduce a given son's inheritance below that sufficient for subsistence, but this may not have become obvious until a succession of below average crop yields or a depressed market for his produce drove him to ruin. The competition among younger farmers in a village for the little bit of land available to increase their holdings might result in the losers being forced out.  

Emigration, chiefly internal, had long been one Irish response to hard times. When the oldest son inherited a farm too small to be subdivided any further, any remaining brothers, and sometimes even sisters, had to move on. In a society built around family-centered subsistence farming, the lack of sufficient land forced both young men and young unmarried women to look elsewhere, while hard times drove out even the smaller land holders.  

Whatever the specific form it took then, the data in Table 3 suggests that too many people for too little land 2 was a dominant factor

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1Arnold Schrier, Ireland and the American Emigration 1850-1900 (Bloomington: University of Minnesota Press, 1958), p. 11.

in Irish emigration throughout the nineteenth century and especially in the middle decades with the potato blight of the 1840's.

Table 3. Yearly Number of Emigrants from Ireland, 1845-1901

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total Number of Overseas Emigrants from Ireland</th>
<th>Number Emigrating to United States</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total Number of Overseas Emigrants from Ireland</th>
<th>Number Emigrating to United States</th>
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<td>66,467</td>
<td>1897</td>
<td>35,673</td>
<td>32,822</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1870</td>
<td>74,283</td>
<td>67,891</td>
<td>1898</td>
<td>34,395</td>
<td>30,878</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1871</td>
<td>71,067</td>
<td>65,591</td>
<td>1899</td>
<td>42,890</td>
<td>38,631</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1872</td>
<td>72,763</td>
<td>66,752</td>
<td>1900</td>
<td>45,905</td>
<td>41,848</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As is readily evident from these figures, as well as from

---

3Schrier, p. 157.
Figure 1, the heaviest emigration from Ireland took place in the late 1840's, the years of the great famine. The two other periods in which emigration surpassed an average of 75,000 persons per year were in 1863-67 and 1880-83, years of severe crop failure in Ireland.  

However much food and land shortages may have spurred emigration, though, they did not occur in a vacuum. Few leave a bad situation for a more difficult one. The potential emigres must believe that a better situation exists elsewhere in order to actually leave home, except for those physically driven from their homes. Figures 1, 2 and 3 provide some clues in this regard. Figure 1 plots the total number of emigrants from Ireland by years and also indicates the number who emigrated to the United States. Figure 2 shows the number of Irish emigrants to America as a percentage of total emigration from Ireland, while Figure 3 plots both the number of Irish emigrants to countries other than the United States, and this number as a percentage of total annual emigration.

A comparison of these figures reveals several significant features. First of all, emigration to the United States, after the first few years of the potato famine, appears to be much more volatile than immigration to other areas. This is particularly noticeable in the period from 1873-80, when the number of Irish emigrants to areas other than the United States remained relatively constant, varying between 7.5 and 10 thousand, while emigration to the United States dropped from 75 thousand to a low of 14 thousand, i.e., from a high of 90% of total Irish emigration in 1873 to a low of 62% in 1877. This begins to suggest that factors other than those forcing Irish out of Ireland, i.e., factors

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4Ibid., p. 8.
Figure 1. Total Annual Irish Emigration and Annual Irish Immigration to the United States, 1845-1903.5

Thousands of Persons

- Emigration to U.S.

- Total Irish Emigration

5 Developed from Schrier, pp. 9, 157.
Figure 2. Annual Irish Emigration to the United States as a Percentage of Total Emigration

Percentage of Total

100 -
95 -
90 -
85 -
80 -
75 -
70 -
65 -
60 -
55 -
50 -

Years '45  '51  '57  '63  '69  '75  '81  '87  '93  '99  '05

6Ibid.
Figure 3. Annual Irish Emigration Outside the United States by Number and as a Percentage of Total Irish Emigration.

Number in Thousands | Percentage of Total Irish Emigration
---|---
40 | -40%
35 | -35%
30 | -30%
25 | -25%
20 | -20%
15 | -15%
10 | -10%
5 | -5%

Years: '45 '51 '57 '63 '69 '75 '81 '87 '93 '99 '05

Ibid.
attracting them to a new location, are involved in the equation of Irish emigration patterns.

This assumption is reinforced by a second observation. Whereas in the first few years of massive emigration, 1845-46, a large proportion of Irish emigrants went to countries other than the United States, chiefly Britain, so that this group accounted for as much as 45% of all Irish emigration in 1846, reports coming back from the pioneer emigrés apparently indicated that the United States was considerably more attractive as a relocation site, so that, with the exception of the 1873-80 period, America became the destination of the overwhelming majority of Irish emigrants after 1848. The percentage of emigrants going to the United States annually averaged 83% of all Irish emigrants for the half century, 1848-1903, and 89% annually for the years 1867-1903.

It is clear then, that for a number of reasons, the United States tended to be the preferred destination for departing Irish, but there were three periods when clearly its attractiveness declined significantly. These can be seen in Figure 2 in the proportionate decline in Irish going to America in the years 1856-69, 1860-63 and dramatically from 1873-80. Schrier suggests that the first two of these may be due to the rise of the Know-Nothing Movement in the 1850's and the fear of commercial crisis generated by the Panic of 1857. The American Civil War also depressed Irish emigration to the United States in the early 1860's, but the reappearance of famine in Ireland in 1862-63, combined with improving Northern prospects in the war, caused a resurgence of Irish entrants into the United States by 1863. The last major period of decline, that of 1873-80, appears to be linked to the financial panic of
1873 and the following five years of depression.  

As Schrier observes:

One cannot say that the principal cause of Irish emigration has been "push" (of poverty) or "pull" (of a better break in America), only that the two are inextricably intertwined in a myriad-threaded pattern of personal choices and desires whose total effect has been to produce a continuing stream of Irish emigrants.

What accounted for the "pull" of America which apparently became self-reinforcing very quickly after the arrival of the first waves of Irish immigration in the 1840's? All other facts being equal and the much longer and costlier voyage notwithstanding, the United States was preferable to Britain because of age-old animosities on both sides. America became the New Ireland because it was reasonably close, compared to such possibilities as Australia, and passage was relatively cheap, the language was English, steady employment and good wages were promised, and --after the initial period--there was the prospect of joining kinsmen and friends there.

The lure of American companies recruiting an immigrant labor force figured in the decision of many to leave their native land. The American Emigrant Company in Europe was one of a number of such agencies whose task was to provide a body of unskilled labor for American industry. Table 4 comparing advertised wage rates and prices with actual figures for the period suggests the extent to which such firms overstated the opportunities available.

While conditions in Ireland may have been bad enough in certain

8Ibid., p. 9. 9Ibid., p. 10. 10Ibid., p. 17.
Table 4. Statements of Wages and Prices Published by the American Emigrant Company in Europe

United States, 1865

### WAGES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>AEC Statements</th>
<th>Bureau of Labor Statistics Estimate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cotton Spinners</td>
<td>$ 5.00-</td>
<td>Mass. $ 4.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(female)</td>
<td>8.00/week</td>
<td>$ 2.70 $ 4.98</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### PRICES

Statements of Prices of Certain Foods Published by the American Emigrant Company Compared with Prices at the New York Produce Exchange, 1865

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Product</th>
<th>AEC Statement</th>
<th>New York Price</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Butter, per l.b</td>
<td>$ .12-.14</td>
<td>$ .36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wheat, per bu.</td>
<td>1.12-.130</td>
<td>1.69 1/4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oats, per bu.</td>
<td>.48-.50</td>
<td>.74 13/24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corn, per bu.</td>
<td>1.10-.115</td>
<td>1.19 1/12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

periods to drive people out no matter how attractive or unattractive the
destination, the numbers of Irish immigrants to the United States were
certainly swollen by its genuine advantages, as well as by the
deliberate misrepresentations of immigrant recruiting companies such as
this one.

But another form of misrepresentation, not so deliberate, also
contributed to the "pull" of America. Letters written home to Ireland
from countrymen already in the United States had a significant effect on
further emigration from Ireland. They provided intimate contact and con-
crete, trusted information. Frequently, no matter how realistic the
descriptions they gave of the conditions in the new land, the letters had
the effect of making the United States all the more attractive. Such
correspondence was necessarily highly subjective, as each individual
letter-writer saw his situation as "America." The reader in Ireland,
lacking any overall perspective on the United States, and having only
Ireland for comparison, was bound to judge the United States favorably.
In addition, there was also the tendency to write the "best" back home in
order to demonstrate that the emigrant had made the right choice in
leaving Ireland.

Not only did those who had already immigrated contribute to
increasing the attractiveness of America, but they also contributed to
increasing emigration in other ways as well. The most important of these
was financial. Over the course of a half century, 1850-1900,
$250,000,000 was sent back to the old country and forty per cent of this
was in the form of prepaid passage tickets to aid in the reunion of

families. This financed three-fourths of the total emigration from Ireland and helped make it a self-perpetuating phenomenon.\textsuperscript{14}

As might be expected, this combination of causes for leaving Ireland and reasons for coming to the United States produced an immigrant group in which the proportion of young adults was much higher than in the general Irish population. While whole families tended to emigrate primarily in times of severe hardship, younger sons and daughters left regularly for America.\textsuperscript{15} And it is the "daughters" who were most unique about the Irish. While the relatively high proportion of young people, and the background of agricultural laborer and small farmers was similar to the make-up of immigrant groups from other countries, the high proportion of women among the Irish set them apart. Of the more than four million Irish who came to the United States between 1850 and 1900, there were only 170,000 more males than females, a difference of only 8\% and a dramatic contrast with other ethnic groups.\textsuperscript{16}

This balance between the sexes tends to support the view that the dominant factor spurring emigration from Ireland was lack of land, since this affected both sexes equally.\textsuperscript{17} But this factor was reinforced by the availability of employment for single Irish women as domestics in urbanizing nineteenth century America. Since there was no comparable kind of employment available in Ireland, this kind of job availability provided the impetus necessary for the young woman to depart from strong traditional prohibitions and leave home without marrying immediately. Given the nature of Irish peasant culture, this was a major break with

\textsuperscript{14}Ibid., p. 151.  
\textsuperscript{15}Shannon, pp. 25-26.  
\textsuperscript{16}Schrier, p. 4.  
\textsuperscript{17}Shannon, p. 26.
tradition, involving all sorts of perils and could only be justified as a means to the ultimate goal of marriage and motherhood.

If this survey has provided some picture of the motivations for leaving Ireland and for choosing America as a destination, it should now be possible to consider the experience of actual emigration and initial culture shock, because these are shaped—at least in part—by the expectations of those who experience them.

By the 1870's, 97% of those traveling to America went by steamship. This was a considerable improvement over the previous conditions of sailing vessels. Nevertheless, many of the evils of steerage, overcrowding, poor quality and quantity of food and drink, sickness and disease, disagreeable passengers, misrepresentation of charges by ship's owners, remained although somewhat improved with the speed of the steamship.18

All immigrants were obliged to land at Castle Garden, operated by the Commissioners of Immigration of the state of New York. There temporary accommodations were provided and plans for reaching destinations were worked out. Wards Island was another branch of the Immigration Commission and it provided lodging for those having neither money nor friends, until suitable employment could be located. All immigrants sick on landing were treated in the hospital there.19

The actual experience of transit and immigrant processing was an uncomfortable and somewhat disorienting one. After the pain of


separation from family and friends and the disagreeable aspects of the actual journey and first arrival, the immigrant woman had to be looking forward to life in the new land as offering substantial and quick improvement of her situation in order to undertake the deprivations involved. Instead, most found themselves deposited after arrival in a totally strange environment, the large city.

Although this situation was not usually a matter of choice, since most Irish immigrants did not have the capital to move directly into farming, the prospect of having to live in the city was not entirely disagreeable. The variety, pace, size and other characteristics of city life could be viewed favorably by someone coming from the countryside, especially if she had no direct experience of large cities, but only romantic notions to draw upon. Yet, once actually in the city, those same characteristics that seemed attractive at first glance could show their other side, and the rural immigrant might find the crowding, noise, rapid pace, lack of open space and sheer number of people and things to deal with confusing and disorienting. There were few institutional arrangements available at this time to assist the newcomer through this initial period of culture shock, although those who were fortunate enough to find themselves among family, friends or countryfolk could at least find human comfort and support from these people as they worked out their own adjustment to the new situation.

Crucial to that adjustment was the housing situation immigrants found. Women in domestic service had comparatively decent quarters, although they paid a price in separation from their countrymen, but most other Irish quickly found themselves quartered in the worst of the tenements. Such property was essentially held for speculative purposes.
by absentee landlords and consequently no improvements were made, and basic maintenance was often neglected. Such slums were, as always, products of city growth and change, with the newest arrivals normally getting the worst places.20

Living in such places, confronting the new and strange environment, the immigrant woman naturally tended to try to assimilate her experiences and relationships to patterns familiar to her from all her previous life. Crucial in this respect were the remnants persisting in the "new world" of the triadic institutional arrangements of the village, church and family that provided an integrated whole to life in the old world.

These, however, could not be brought over wholesale to America, and the form which they did take was very important for the individual in making sense of her new situation and being able to function effectively in it. The village community, of course, was the most difficult to transport to America, though some groups managed to bring over together or reunite in the United States a significant portion of their native village. Even for these, though they had the advantage of being able to retain familiar personal relationships, social life, rituals and other aspects of their home culture, it was impossible to insulate themselves completely from intrusions of the larger society through the workplace, public school, changed patterns of marketing, politics and the like. The old network of cooperative endeavor based on exchange of skills and products simply could not be maintained. And only a minority had this experience: for most Irish, though they lived in neighborhoods which

20Brown, p. 227.
maintained much of the old Irish culture, the village was only a memory.21

The loss of the village community experience in turn tended to result in emphasizing more strongly the parish as the central organizing institution for social life outside the family. Yet, the Church in America was not the same as it was in Ireland. For one thing, it existed now in a pluralistic context, where Catholicism and its values were no longer assumed to be part of everyone's upbringing and daily life. For another, the parish priest no longer possessed the status which came "naturally" in the village: he now faced competition from school teachers, politicians, union organizers, journalists and a host of others who could speak with some kind of authority. Moreover, the Church the Irish found on first arriving was not an Irish Catholic Church. But they rapidly made it into one, and one responsive to their particular needs. As Shannon points out:

By 1880 there were more than 6,000,000 Catholics in the United States where forty years earlier there had been only one-tenth that many. For two generations Catholics under the leadership of a predominantly Irish hierarchy had expended their energies on the urgent task of reorganizing new parishes, building churches and schools, and training priests. The issue of the Catholic community's relationship to the larger American society and the many subsidiary questions deriving from that issue had been left in abeyance. Before the Civil War, Orestes Brownson, the first native Protestant intellectual to be converted to Catholicism, had pondered the implications of the Church if it passed into the hands of the Irish immigrants. Thomas D'Arcy McGee and other Irish "Forty-Eighters" had in the same period tried unsuccessfully to bring the Catholic Irish immigrants into the mainstream of liberal, nationalistic, middle-class politics. But their concerns had been premature. The Irish, surging ahead within the Church by force of numbers, were content with the leadership of conservative clerics, such as Archbishop John Hughes of New York, an able but narrow man.22

21Ibid., p. 121.  
22Shannon, p. 59.
If the parish thereby made up for the loss of the village community, it did so only by channeling life and energy in certain fixed directions, and it certainly did not provide a direct basis for coming to terms with the values, culture and social organization of the new land.23

And what the parish and now departed village could not provide, the immigrant naturally looked to the family for. And yet this avenue was not that available for large numbers of Irish. Many had left the families of their birth in Ireland and had not yet formed new families in America. Others who had married found that the demands of factory labor --especially when both partners were working--stifled family life as they had known it. Yet, the family remained the greatest source of security and identity for those who had them. Forming a family was the continual goal of those not yet married.

Even where such institutions provided comfort, a sense of the familiar, and a means by which to orient oneself, other forces continued to cross-pressure the "greenhorn," heightening the difficulties of acculturation. The Irish had known discrimination in Ireland but had not expected it in America in the intensity and comprehensiveness which they found. The pace and monotony of factory work came as a shock to those used to only an agrarian work-style. The need to be constantly watchful for unscrupulous practices by landlords, merchants and others made it harder to maintain the simplicity and directness of peasant relationships.

These are some of the major dimensions of the situation faced by the new immigrant only recently "off the boat." As time went on, as the second generation grew up, some of these factors became less salient,

23Ibid., p. 25.
areas of similarity between the old culture and the new were naturally emphasized. Indeed, the rapid penetration of such areas as politics and the Church by the Irish demonstrates that their traditional heritage was not so alien that they could not make their way--where the possibility existed--in the new society. The basically family-centered values of rural Ireland were not that far removed from those of urban America, its native population not that far away from the farm either.

The group under study here included individuals at all stages in this process from the raw greenhorn to the relatively assimilated, and everyone in between. The "culture shock" of the newcomer is not the same as a genuine value crisis, since, however disturbing an experience it may have been, it was not until culture shock gave way to the myriad problems of assimilation that there was a real challenge to personal values.

For women, their marital status was likely to be the single most decisive factor in their response to the new culture. If they had arrived in the United States already married, or had become married within a relatively short time after emigrating, their natural focus on their family, the routines and responsibilities of their homes, would have placed them among the most insulated members of the immigrant group. Conversely, the unmarried woman, working in service or in a factory, was already out of character as far as the traditional culture was concerned, and was daily exposed to encounters with different values and lifestyles. Eventually, she had to confront such dilemmas as the possibility of marriage outside the Irish and/or Catholic community, and even if she ruled this out, marriage was still much more complicated in a situation where the marriageable population was more mobile, where a man's "prospects," rather than his land were the index of suitability and where
she herself often lacked a family situation to marry from.

While this focus on marriage may seem to reduce the complexities of overall value questions to a single element, it is the central context for the Irish woman's experience of her situation as an immigrant. The details of this experience must now be examined more closely.
Chapter 4

THE IMPACT OF THE FACTORY

Of the total Irish immigrant population, first and second generation, in the United States in 1900, amounting to 5,234,647, 2,557,751 or 48.9 per cent were female. As already noted, this proportion of females to males is significantly higher for the Irish than any other immigrant group. By 1900, this relative balance is due, at least, in part, to the fact that the Irish had been in the United States longer than other groups and thus had a higher proportion of second generation members among their number to even out the proportion. But it is also due to the higher level of initial migration by Irish women, married or unmarried.

Many of those women worked outside the home for a short time after arrival in the United States in order to help their families get started or until they found a husband. But large numbers continued to be gainfully employed, either due to failure to find a husband, economic necessity in their family, widowhood or desertion, or perhaps because they began to find personal benefit in such employment.

In fact, by 1900, of the 1,943,137 Irish women of working age, 633,900 or 32.6 per cent were gainfully employed. This meant that

1Immigration Commission Reports, Vol. 20, pp. 30-44. In fact, by 1900 the ratio of males/females among the Irish, 104.6 men for every 100 women, is very close to the figure for the "native white, native parents" category as a whole, which was 103.7 men/100 women.

2Ibid., Vol. 2, p. 75. The definition of working age as given in the Reports is 10 years of age or above.

55
although first and second generation Irish made up only about 6.9 per cent of the total United States population at that time, slightly less than one out of every seven women workers was a first or second generation Irish woman.

In 1900, of the total 633,900, slightly less than two out of every five, or 245,792, were first generation immigrants, while 61 percent were second generation. The geographic distribution of these workers follows the general pattern for the Irish, clustering in the urbanized East Coast states, but beginning to move west in the second generation, as Table 5 shows.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>1st Generation</th>
<th>2nd Generation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Massachusetts</td>
<td>49,334</td>
<td>57,884</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York</td>
<td>78,500</td>
<td>101,225</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Jersey</td>
<td>15,234</td>
<td>20,699</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pennsylvania</td>
<td>29,538</td>
<td>49,246</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ohio</td>
<td>5,672</td>
<td>16,721</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illinois</td>
<td>12,371</td>
<td>24,469</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iowa</td>
<td>1,708</td>
<td>7,809</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All other States and Territories</td>
<td>57,421</td>
<td>111,743</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>245,792</strong></td>
<td><strong>388,108</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The occupations of these women show that agricultural life as farmers, planters, overseers or laborers did not account for a large number of Irish women workers, as shown in Table 6. The only state identified here which had a significant percentage of female workers on

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid., Vol. 28, pp. 588-593.
farms was Iowa. Despite Iowa's almost exclusively agricultural orientation in 1900, the total number of Irish women in agriculture was still quite small, 938 out of 9,517. And the figures for the second generation show a dramatic shift away from agriculture, even in Iowa.

Table 6. Irish Immigrant Women Involved in Agriculture, 1900

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>1st Generation</th>
<th>2nd Generation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total % of in</td>
<td>Total % of in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>State</td>
<td>State</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Massachusetts</td>
<td>234 .5%</td>
<td>65 .1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York</td>
<td>986 1.3%</td>
<td>657 .6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Jersey</td>
<td>86 .6%</td>
<td>55 .3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pennsylvania</td>
<td>336 1.1%</td>
<td>504 1.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ohio</td>
<td>243 4.3%</td>
<td>492 2.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illinois</td>
<td>508 4.1%</td>
<td>452 1.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iowa</td>
<td>559 32.7%</td>
<td>379 4.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All other States</td>
<td>4,034 7.0%</td>
<td>2,862 2.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and Territories</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>6,956 2.8%</td>
<td>5,466 1.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The number of professional immigrant women, primarily musicians, music teachers, teachers in grammar schools and colleges was limited to 1.9 per cent or 4,578 of the total first generation group and 9.6 per cent or 37,215 of the second generation group.6

Domestic and personal service workers included boarding house and hotel keepers, housekeepers and stewards, janitresses and sextons, laundresses, nurses and midwives, servants and waitresses, unspecified household laborers. These accounted for 70.4 per cent or 173,114 of the first generation group and 25.1 per cent or 97,232 of the second

5Ibid. 6Ibid.
Those involved in trade and transportation included bookkeepers and accountants, clerks and copyists, hucksters and peddlers, merchants and dealers, except wholesale, messengers, errand and office girls, packers and shippers, saleswomen, stenographers and typists, telegraph and telephone operators and other miscellaneous occupations. Trade and transportation accounted for 11,797 or 4.8 per cent of the first generation and 71,885 or 18.5 per cent of the second group.

Those in manufacturing and mechanical pursuits included bookbinders, paper box makers, gold and silver workers, hat and cap makers, the needle trades (dressmakers, milliners, seamstresses, tailoresses), paper and pulp mill operatives, printers, lithographers and presswomen, shirt collar and cuff makers, textile workers (cotton mill operatives, silk mill operatives, woolen mill operatives and other textile mill operatives), tobacco and cigar factory operatives, plus other miscellaneous occupations of this type. Manufacturing and mechanical pursuits accounted for 49,317 or 20.1 per cent of first generation Irish women and 176,310 or 45.4 per cent of second generation Irish women.

Using these categories and statistics, and including those developed by Baker for all gainfully employed women in 1900, the picture appears as shown in Tables 7 and 8.

These figures point up a number of important aspects of the situation of Irish working women. Most dramatic, for a people from an agrarian background, is the lack of agricultural workers. But almost equally striking is the relatively high degree of mobility shown by the changes
Table 7. Occupational Distribution of Irish Immigrant Women Workers and all Women Workers in the United States in 1900, by Number

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Work</th>
<th>Irish 1st Gen.</th>
<th>Irish 2nd Gen.</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>All Working Women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agricultural</td>
<td>6,956</td>
<td>5,466</td>
<td>12,422</td>
<td>977,336</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional</td>
<td>4,578</td>
<td>37,215</td>
<td>41,793</td>
<td>430,597</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestic and Personal Service</td>
<td>173,114</td>
<td>97,232</td>
<td>270,346</td>
<td>2,095,449</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trade and Transportation</td>
<td>11,797</td>
<td>71,885</td>
<td>83,682</td>
<td>503,347</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing and Mechanical</td>
<td>49,317</td>
<td>176,310</td>
<td>225,627</td>
<td>1,312,668</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>245,792</td>
<td>388,108</td>
<td>633,900</td>
<td>5,319,397</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8. Occupational Distribution of Irish Immigrant Women Workers and All Women Workers in the United States in 1900, by Proportion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Work</th>
<th>Irish 1st Gen.</th>
<th>Irish 2nd Gen.</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>All Working Women</th>
<th>Irish as % of All Workers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agricultural</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
<td>18.4%</td>
<td>1.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
<td>9.6%</td>
<td>6.6%</td>
<td>8.1%</td>
<td>9.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestic and Personal Service</td>
<td>70.4%</td>
<td>25.1%</td>
<td>42.8%</td>
<td>39.4%</td>
<td>12.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trade and Transportation</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
<td>18.5%</td>
<td>13.2%</td>
<td>9.4%</td>
<td>16.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing and Mechanical</td>
<td>20.1%</td>
<td>45.4%</td>
<td>36.0%</td>
<td>24.7%</td>
<td>17.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>11.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


11Immigration Commission Reports, pp. 30-44 and Baker, p. 75.
in occupational distribution from the first to the second generation.
The only category in which the proportion of first generation Irish women
workers exceeds the national figure is in domestic and personal service.
But for the second generation, higher-than-norm percentages appear for
the categories of professional, trade and transportation, and manufac-
turing and mechanical, while domestic and personal service drops well
below the national proportion. This contrast may be partially accounted
for by the fact that certain types of jobs were much less available to
the first generation woman (e.g., few Irish immigrants had the requisite
education for professional jobs or even clerical work), but it is cer-
tainly also a reflection of the fact that jobs in the professional
category, and most of those in the trade and transportation group,
brought somewhat better pay and had a higher status ascribed to them.
And even factory work, though it shared a working-class status with
domestic and personal service, certainly seems to have been more attrac-
tive to the American-born Irish woman.

Those who chose factory work are the specific focus of this
study. Slightly more than one out of every three Irish working women in
1900 was a factory worker, and during this period factory work seems to
have held something of an intermediate rank in the Irish occupational
scale: above the "entry-level" work of domestic service, but below the
middle-class status of professional or clerical work. If there was a
"typical" Irish immigrant working woman in the period 1870-1914, she was
a factory worker.

Within this group as a whole, two particular types of work drew
65% of all Irish women workers, with the rest scattered among a variety
of manufacturing situations. In the 1900 figures, 146,879 Irish women
were employed in textile manufacturing and the needle trades, out of the total of 225,627 in all types of manufacturing. For first generation workers, 18,428, or 37.3% were in the needle trades, with 18,302 or 37.3% in textiles. The second generation breakdown was 69,637 women, or 39.4% in the needle trades, and 40,512, or 22.9% in textiles. Collectively, these two occupations alone accounted for one out of every four Irish working women. While conditions for factory workers varied somewhat by type of manufacture, these two types will be treated as representative for the purposes of this study.

Of the needle trades workers, the women were engaged in the following categories of work:

Table 9. Distribution of Irish Women Workers in the Needle Trades

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Work</th>
<th>1st Generation</th>
<th>2nd Generation</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dressmakers</td>
<td>11,672 63.3%</td>
<td>42,786 61.4%</td>
<td>54,458 61.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Milliners</td>
<td>1,252 6.8</td>
<td>8,692 12.5</td>
<td>9,944 11.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seamstresses</td>
<td>3,974 21.6</td>
<td>12,948 18.6</td>
<td>16,922 19.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tailoresses</td>
<td>1,530 8.3</td>
<td>5,211 7.5</td>
<td>6,741 7.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>18,428 100.0</td>
<td>69,637 100.0</td>
<td>88,065 100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Of the textile workers, the women were engaged in the following categories:

Table 10. Distribution of Irish Women Workers in Textile Manufacturing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Worker</th>
<th>1st Generation</th>
<th>2nd Generation</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cotton Mill</td>
<td>8,257 45.2%</td>
<td>9,873 24.4%</td>
<td>18,148 30.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silk Mill</td>
<td>1,447 7.9</td>
<td>5,496 13.6</td>
<td>6,943 11.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woollen Mill</td>
<td>2,443 13.4</td>
<td>6,617 16.3</td>
<td>9,060 15.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Textile Mill</td>
<td>6,137 33.5</td>
<td>18,526 45.7</td>
<td>24,663 41.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>18,302 100.0</td>
<td>40,512 100.0</td>
<td>58,814 100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

12Ibid., p. 343. 13Ibid.
Neither of these types of work was essentially new to Irish women; most had been trained in spinning, weaving and making clothing as a part of their basic upbringing, and thus these occupations were less likely to seem alien than clerical work or schoolteaching. What was, of course, "new" about textile and clothing manufacturing here were the conditions under which it was done: the factory system which broke the process down into small components and specialized tasks; the ever increasing use of machines; and the factory environment itself.

Twentieth century observers tend to look back at nineteenth century textile factories and nod approvingly at Blake's line about "dark, satanic mills." It is important, though, to remember that studies of the earliest American cotton mills suggest that working conditions in the United States were probably better than in England, and that mill work certainly had a better reputation. In fact, it seems to have been preferred to agricultural or domestic work by women in the early 1800's.14

When Irish women first began arriving in America in large numbers, they found that mill work was an occupation with a favorable image, which had long had a high proportion of women workers, and in which there were jobs readily available.15 But the large numbers of immigrant women available for such work depressed wages, and technological changes worsened working conditions, so that the reputation mill work had less

14Baker, pp. 11-15.

15Ibid., pp. 15-16. Availability of jobs was chiefly the result of general expansion of employment in the late 1840's and 50's, and the departure of men for California gold, which allowed existing mill-workers to move into trade and professional work, thereby creating a place for the Irish.
and less corresponded to reality.

By the 1870's, cotton mill work for women had declined, due partly to the closing of the mills during the Civil War, partly to further technological innovation which appeared to, or did, demand male workers, and partly to the growing popularity of woolen and worsted materials. Correspondingly, employment for women increased in woolen and silk manufacturing, where technological innovation appears to have favored employment of women. The effect of such shifts is evident among Irish women in the figures already cited in Table 10, where four times as many second generation women were working in silk mills as first generation, and nearly three times as many American-born were working in woolen mills as Irish-born, while the increase between generations in cotton mill workers is less than 20 per cent.

While textile production was already established as a factory process when Irish immigrants first arrived in America, it was only during the period under study that clothing manufacture moved out of the home and into the shop. Ready-made clothing for men only became popular during and after the Civil War, and the basic technology did not demand concentration of workers until the increasing application of power to sewing and cutting in the 1880's. This innovation, combined with

16 Ibid., pp. 17-21.
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid., pp. 23-25.
19 Ibid., pp. 24-25. Women's clothing was still largely the work of housewives and individual seamstresses during this period, so that most of the women classed as "dressmakers" in the census reports were actually making men's clothing.
the impact of continuing immigration, led to widespread abuses in the needle trades and the appearance of the notorious "sweatshop." 20

The working situation of women thus differed somewhat in these two fields. For textile workers, the mills were badly constructed from the point of view of safety, comfort and sanitation. They were narrow, extremely high buildings, heated by stoves, badly ventilated and poorly lighted. Looms often had special "petticoat lamps" filled with whale oil for use during light failure. There was no artificial ventilation or means of removing unhealthful dust in the cotton mills. During the winter the windows, which were double storm windows, were closed for months. Hours were long--often from sun up to sun down. Ninety to one hundred hour weeks were not uncommon. 21

A number of industrial diseases developed among the workers due to the poor working conditions. The close proximity and lack of fresh air contributed to a variety of easily communicable ailments such as colds and flu. Tuberculosis was common as was brown lung from the cotton dust in the air. Bissinosis, or the lessening of capacity to see things other than right before one's eyes, was a common result of continual close work in poor light. Hookworm was very common. Industrial accidents as a result of the hypnotic effect of long hours of routine as well as lack of basic safety equipment in factories accounted for numerous injuries and many deaths each year. It was generally considered the worker's failing if she had an accident. 22

21Ibid., pp. 12-16.
22Labor Bureau Reports, Vols. 17 and 19.
Conditions were both better and worse in mills producing woolens and silk. Wool manufacture also involved dust, but added to it several stages involving heat and steam. But woolen mills were generally newer in design, somewhat better lighted and ventilated, and the work was less taxing. Silk manufacture was probably the cleanest type of mill, but it also involved machinery running at the most demanding pace.

Often employment was contingent upon one or more children in the family agreeing to work for a lesser wage. Some employers followed the practice of paying the wages for all members of a family to the principal breadwinner as a means of insuring their continued employment. This was to the benefit of the employer, rather than the workers, as it insured him of some cheaper labor source.

By contrast, the needle trades initially involved much less exposure to large machinery, highly specialized procedures, and an unhealthy physical environment. Moving from hand-sewing to a treadle-operated sewing machine was not that radical a change, but once it became feasible to power sewing machines and to mechanize other steps in clothing manufacture, "putting-out" was replaced by shop production, and working conditions plummeted. Manufacturers sought to put as many workers as possible in very limited space, and this confinement, heightened by extremely long hours, caused destructive effects on the health of the workers. In fact, by the close of the period under study, it was the scandal created by the sweatshops that led to the first protective labor legislation for women.

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23 Ibid., p. 17-19.  
24 Ibid., pp. 19-21.  
26 Ibid., pp. 24-26.
What made it all worthwhile to these women? Did they turn to factory jobs in such large numbers simply because these were readily available and required little, if any skill? Were wages better there? The relationship between earnings and economic needs must now be examined.

Irish women workers entered employment in industries where competitive pressures were already stimulating every possible innovation which would cut costs. Increasing mechanization, which not only increased productivity but lowered the level of skill required, was one avenue. Increasing immigration was another.

Taking advantage of a "soft" labor market of immigrant women and children was considered prudent business practice. The immigrant with little or no money and a family to support was willing to work for less money than the native American who had been previously employed. Women, not having put in the long years of apprenticeship to learn a craft, were willing to work for lower wages than male craftsmen.

Additionally, the introduction of the piece work system made it appear to the worker to be to her benefit to find more efficient methods for each operation. But the manufacturer, once production improved as a consequence of the worker's innovations or quickened pace, then reduced the price per job. The worker ended up working harder but earning little more, if not less, than she did on day work.

An extensive study of cotton-mill workers in Fall River, Massachusetts, offers some of the best information on the relationships between wages and costs of living for factory workers.\textsuperscript{27} It shows that

\textsuperscript{27}Labor Bureau Reports, Vol. 16, pp. 239-245.
the annual income for an individual worker ranged between $345 and $600 per year, with some of the variation being due to the uneven effect of the temporary lay-offs frequent in textile production. Families with more than one worker, of course, earned more, but not proportionately so; the highest annual income reported was for a family with four wage earners who gained a total of $1,356 for the year, while another family with three workers earned only $680.

The study reports that a "fair" standard of living for these same workers would have cost, annually, $353 for a single woman, and $731 for a family with three children ten or younger. Of these totals, approximately 35% would have gone for rent, and another 20% for food for the individual worker's budget, with only 2% allocated for "amusements," another 2% for "newspapers and other reading material," and less than 1% for medical expenses. For the family budget, some 38% of the annual income went for food, with rent a proportionately smaller portion of expenses.

What this study suggests is that wages available to a woman working full-time were sufficient to maintain a reasonable, if very basic, standard of living. Factory work paid well enough to live on, although no one was likely to get rich at it. But this income potential was sufficient, probably, to make it more attractive than agricultural or domestic work.

Remuneration in the needle trades appears to have undergone more change during the period under study. While wages in this sector in the third quarter of the century were sufficient to make needlework competitive with other types of comparably-skilled work, by 1900 they had been driven down enough to make it likely that most women working in the shops
were doing so because nothing else was available to them.

In general, then, factory work was a mixed experience for Irish immigrant women. It was more desirable, in both working conditions and financial and personal return than certain other kinds of jobs, such as agricultural and domestic work. Thus, the worker may well have had the sense of having chosen factory work, even if as the least of several evils, and even though she would have sought higher-status employment if she had had the skills or opportunity. The working conditions were not basically attractive but--by the comparative standards of the time--were better than many other types of work (except in the needle trades toward the close of the century). The same could be said for wages. But what did such a choice mean for the individual Irish immigrant woman?
Chapter 5

WOMEN IN TRADITIONAL RURAL IRISH SOCIETY VS. IRISH WOMEN AS FACTORY WORKERS IN A NEW URBAN SOCIETY

The Irish woman working 12 to 14 hours a day in front of a loom in a cotton mill checking for broken threads seems a long way away from churning butter, tending children and chickens, collecting eggs and knitting in her spare time. The entire urban industrial environment appears to be dramatically different from the rural world in which she or her parents had been reared. At first glance, this seemingly radical change in physical, social and occupational milieu would appear to call for a correspondingly comprehensive alteration in personal outlook, values and behavior. But is this what actually occurred?

This question must be asked because, as already shown, the Irish did not simply try to reestablish in America the Ireland of their youth, even when they had the chance.1 The simultaneous retention of Catholicism and rejection of agriculture alone points up the complexity of evaluating Irish acculturation. Irish success in moving fairly quickly into higher-status occupations and political power, coupled with the extremely small number who returned to Ireland, shows that they were able to function with reasonable effectiveness in the new culture, enough at least to achieve certain kinds of success and to feel sufficiently

1 Many other immigrant groups, primarily by establishing rural communities, did attempt to replicate their old world in the new, either in general or in very detailed ways.
positive about America to remain. Yet, at the same time, first and second generation Irish remained in America by staying, as much as possible, within their own Irish-American world. While this pattern is one manner of coping with uprootedness and the adjustment to another society, it is not without its particular stresses, disorientation and conflicts for the individuals who live it. It is especially stressful for the second generation for whom the old world is no longer a living memory and the tightness of the immigrant subculture is beginning to break down. This chapter will survey the principal points of difference and potential conflict between the old and new worlds of the Irish woman factory worker in an effort to discover which were real problems and which only illusory ones, whether coping with the real difficulties was accomplished by drawing upon and adapting traditional values and behavior or by changing values, and, if the latter, what the pattern, means and direction of value change was.

The initial area of conflict and confusion for the Irish immigrant woman was in leaving "home" and family. Homesickness was a common factor among these women and it manifested itself in a variety of ways. In an effort to recapture what was lost by leaving, traditions and rituals from home often took on more serious and sacred meaning than they had in their original environment. Letters home were frequent

2Schrier, p. 128.

3For example, the wake, a genuine ritual from traditional Ireland, was developed in a considerably more elaborate measure in America. Not coincidentally, the ceremonies of leaving Ireland, the emigrant's last experience of home, took the form of a wake, and after a while were even called an "American wake," at which family and friends gathered to visit with the departing, and discuss those who had already left. See Schrier, pp. 84-91.
(especially so for a people with a low literacy rate), and money saved to send back to Ireland, partly in order to finance the transportation of loved ones to America, accounted for a significant percentage of Irish immigration.4

For first generation Irish women, at least, this ability to retain contact with family, and even to contribute materially to their welfare, was a vital part of the affirmation of the value of family, and partly offset the pain of separation. The second generation experienced no such leave-taking and inherent difficulties and were able to experience continued close relationships with their families.

The close conditions of urban tenement "ghetto" life appear to be in direct conflict with living "on the land." Land had been central in Ireland—one could not marry without some land on which to live. But a very small percentage of Irish women ever settled in rural America, or seemed to want to do so. Again, this appears to be an area where first and second generations differed, the American-born having been raised in an urban environment. But, even for the first generation, land and agriculture seem to have lost any appeal or importance. It would seem from this that land had much more the character of an instrumental rather than a goal value for these Irish. There is little evidence in Irish immigrant popular culture, letters from home, or the like, of any sense of loss in leaving rural life.5 However secure and integrated the world of village, church and family may have been, agriculture was apparently not essential to it. Most had been forced to flee Ireland by disasters.

4Schrier, pp. 65-73.

5Schrier, pp. 18-42, esp. pp. 31-37.
associated with land and agriculture. They had not rejected the land; it had rejected them. Had Ireland itself been industrializing and urbanizing in the nineteenth century, these people would probably have gone to her cities. Instead, they came to America.

And even in the old country, land had only been important for women in an indirect manner, such as making a good marriage possible. If the same could be achieved in another fashion, that certainly seems to have been an acceptable substitute. The goal for the woman was marriage and family, not the land itself (which, given the legal status of women at that time, she could never possess in any case). But the shift to the city posed other, less immediately obvious, problems. There were subtle influences of close quarters to deal with: noise pollution, disease, sanitation, and overcrowding. Life in the largely barter and subsistence farming society of Ireland had not prepared women for the sudden move into a money economy. Irish women suddenly found themselves in possession of what seemed to them relatively large sums of money. But the sums dwindled quickly when the necessities of life outstripped the purchasing power of their resources. Money received for work became important, then, insofar as it was all but impossible to obtain the necessities of urban life without it. Previously, gardens could be grown, animals raised and traded, wool spun and knitted into clothes. No such options existed in the tenements.

The place of employment required another big adjustment. A dark, dusty, monotonous factory was a substantial change from even the poorest of farms with the countryside for scenery and fresh air. Working indoors day after day prevented normal physical movement and exercise and the build-up of toxins in muscles and blood had its effect on mental health.
as well as physical stamina.

Profits from the factory system were predicated upon the minute division of labor and the development of specialized expertise in each of the workers. Rural experience had incorporated a circular approach to tasks involving all phases of development of the product. Farm work was routine and monotonous, but the pace could be adapted according to how the woman felt on a given day, and the rhythms of the work cycle seemed set by Providence through the changing seasons, cycle of animal lives, and the like. Farming in Ireland was not very rewarding, financially or personally, but it did allow time for conversation with neighbors, trips to market, and other variety in routine.

The factory worker's job, by contrast, consisted in the endless and rapid repetition of a very small part of the overall process. She never performed a complete task, had no finished product to take any satisfaction in. The work was exactly the same, day after day, with no breaks, and the pace determined by machinery and by foremen whose priorities were usually unknown to the average worker.

Yet, somehow, the immigrant adapted herself to this. In fact, it is remarkable that in a country with as long a record of labor violence and protest as this one, there are no reports of Irish women protesting their situation in any way or organizing in any fashion. Irish women were involved in the New York City draft riots in 1863, but there is no hard evidence of their rioting over working conditions, nor of complaints

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6 Schrier records no complaints about working conditions in his survey of criticisms of America in letters sent back to Ireland. See Schrier, pp. 31-37.

7 Glazer and Moynihan, p. 233.
by employers that they were unable or unwilling to adjust to the factory discipline.

However, this lack of evidence alone does not rule out the possibility of Irish women's objection to working conditions nor their participation in strikes. It seems probable that they had some labor unrest during this period. Indeed, groups of women immigrants participated in struggles for specific short term goals and some individual first and second-generation Irish women did become involved in radical labor and political activities, such as Elizabeth Gurley Flynn. The "organized" background provided by their church conditioning as well as their ability to withstand struggle as evidenced by their emigration made them likely candidates for labor disputes. But information as to the specific extent and other details of such involvement has not yet been developed, and this appears to be a fruitful area for further study of Irish immigrant women.

To the extent that they did not participate in protests, or that these were ineffective, Irish women had to adjust to their situations. One motive for adapting quietly, of course, was fear of loss of job in a "soft" labor market. Another may have been the fact that most women did not expect to be working in factories all their lives, looking forward to leaving at marriage or, at least, pregnancy. A third motive may lie in the subjective orientation of the worker: however bad these working conditions may appear in 1974, they probably did not seem quite so terrible in 1874. In the home or out, the working class woman in the nineteenth century expected to work long hours at fairly boring tasks.

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Factory work certainly seems to have been judged more desirable than some other kinds of employment, and the wages, however low, were much more in terms of absolute amounts of money than these women had ever received before. If there were sacrifices involved, they were worth the struggle, if family could be aided, a minimum standard of living achieved, and some sort of better life provided for children. What more did one expect from life?

Work in textiles and clothing manufacture was also legitimized by the fact that it was seen as an extension of what had always been considered "women's work." Irish immigrants were accustomed to a fairly sharp division among jobs by sex, and this kind of factory work was comprehensible enough in these terms. But, after the 1870's, as more men came into first the cotton mills, then tailoring, the sex-relatedness of the work lost its saliency as a way of justifying factory work. Thus whatever desirability had existed for this kind of factory work by its being perceived as women's work disappeared rapidly in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, and could not have been a major factor in easing women's adjustment to factory work.

Both factories and cities were populated with large numbers of people. The sea of faces, most of them unknown, was in direct contrast to rural experience where one knew all one's neighbors and was known by them in return. This made both city and factory an unsettling arena from which the immigrant escaped as much as possible by clinging to the ghetto.

The ghetto, creation of the first generation and nursery for the second, is--along with the Church--central to understanding Irish women's adaptation to America. Segregated by residence and religion, the Irish
created and sustained their own community within the city. As Handlin observes, with some overstatement:

Unable to participate in the normal associational affairs of the community, the Irish felt obliged to erect a society within a society, to act together in their own way. In every contact, therefore, the group, acting apart from other sections of the community, became intensely aware of its peculiar and exclusive identity.9

Such a community was not created out of thin air. Three hundred years of being a colonized subculture within their own land had prepared the Catholic Irish for a situation in which they could combine the minimum necessary external accommodation to the dominant culture with internal adherence to their own values within their own communities. Thus, while the ghetto was not simply the village, it performed some analogous insulating functions for the Irish in America. While the parish acquired some of the social functions which were more the province of the village in Ireland, the ghetto provided a larger community within which Irish culture was all-pervasive.

As has been emphasized, adjustment to America and the role of the ghetto in this process varied according to generation. The arriving Irish-born generally conformed to David Riesman's description of "tradition-directed" people.10 Their basic assumptions and philosophy of daily life were culturally imposed, accepted and internalized with minimal conflict or question posed by their original personal and social environments. They arrived as adults (or young adults) and lived together

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in groups large enough to make feasible a communal life. Religion provided a central base and a powerful reinforcement for their outlook and values. They preferred the company of fellow-countrymen and women. This banding together gave them a secure and familiar social base providing continuity to offset the disorientation suffered through migration and resettlement. They were willing to learn the rudimentary skills of survival in American culture, such as language idiom, the naturalization process, political organization for the men, and how to take advantage of educational opportunities. Their adjustment to the circumstances of life in the United States was minimal by American standards but sufficient for their purposes.

Their children faced an ethnic existence full of perplexities and conflicts. In Riesman's terms they were in a transition between tradition-directedness and the beginning of inner-directedness. How far they would move through this transition in their own lives would depend on how necessary or desirable they found it to achieve a different relationship to the American culture and society than their parents had, and on how much their parents could pass on to this generation their own values, attitudes and behavior patterns. They lacked the direct experience of Ireland, the context which had shaped their parents' lives. Instead they had the surrogates of the ghetto and the increasingly Irish-American Church. These shaped for them an almost complete world-within-a-world, in which the values and life-style of their parents were restored and reinforced.

But it was not as complete a world as their parents'. As Irish

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\textsuperscript{11}Ibid., pp. 30-34.
children grew they became aware of another universe outside the ghetto, one which was not so uniformly or pervasively evil as the outside universe, that of the English, had been for their parents. Until the parochial school movement spread extensively, those young Irish who attended school went to public schools. Eventually, they went outside the ghetto for work or for political activity, and these increasing contacts challenged them to come to terms with alternate, not always directly opposed or inimical, values. Yet, that outside world continued to discriminate, if less strongly, against the Irish; while the ghetto, and the spheres of the Church and urban politics which it had annexed, remained areas which were friendly and familiar. The pressures against significant assimilation were strong.

Second generation women felt these pressures more strongly than first generation women. They had less contact with the world outside the ghetto, having had less chance for education and no involvement in politics. Moreover, they had the experience of growing up in homes where the circumstances of urban immigrant life had given their mothers a more powerful role than women had possessed in Ireland. Save for those, then, who had sufficient education to become interested in professional employment, where they would have extensive contact with persons outside both their own ethnic group and class, most second generation women could have had little reason for seeking extensive assimilation.

Yet the question of assimilation to the host culture is not the only form in which immigrants faced value conflicts. Disappointed expectations, irrational discrimination, role expectations at odds with circumstances, differences in environment—all these and more had the potentiality for creating value conflict. Yet, there is little clear
evidence of such conflict. Surprisingly few returned to Ireland. Most of those who did had failed to find husbands in America and had extended the search to Ireland.\textsuperscript{12} Irish women working in factories showed no overt evidence of discontent. Both the women's Rights Movement and the early labor movement had passed by the Irish woman worker without any significant contacts.\textsuperscript{13}

In fact, most of the basic values vital to the Irish woman, outside of narrowly religious values, were not in serious conflict with the dominant American culture's values. The woman factory worker was most likely to encounter conflict in the clash between the demands placed on her by family responsibilities, especially child-rearing, and the conditions of factory work. But this kind of conflict was manageable for persons who still had a strong base in a fundamentally rural peasant culture: Providence arranged things in certain ways, according to its own design, and the individual must cope with her own circumstances in attempting to live her life properly. As has already been noted, certain other features of the factory worker's situation contributed to making her adjustment easier, as in the fact that making cloth and clothing fit in with the traditional conception of women's work and that factory work had certain features about it that made it more desirable than the only kinds which had been available to them previously.

But the institution which, more than any other, eased the adjustment to America and helped mediate the conflicts which did arise, was the Church. While these women's experience of the Church in their traditional

\textsuperscript{12} Schrier, pp. 129-145.
setting varied in practice a good deal from the Catholic Church as it developed in the late nineteenth century in America, religious belief became a central rallying point which filled or bridged many other voids they experienced. While other aspects of the traditional culture in America underwent some metamorphosis in the process, the Church appeared to have been changed the least by crossing the ocean. But its importance in the lives of the people, especially women, changed considerably.

The apparent continuity between the Church in Ireland and that in America certainly contributed to this increased importance: it was the one viable transferable part of the homeland. As such, it gained added importance in the lives of the Irish. As the only institutional structure in the new world corresponding in any way to the scale of the old village, the parish became the focal point for most social life in the new world. It sponsored organizations which duplicated those already existing in the larger American society but which were either closed to Irish by discrimination or because they were seen as a threat to their faith: youth groups, athletic associations, fraternal lodges, and eventually, even a duplicate school system. Its personnel and charity collections helped the needy, nursed the sick, aided with family problems. In an age without a welfare system, it was the Church, and a little later, the Irish political machine, that provided such services. In many such ways, the parish took on an all-encompassing character as the locus of Irish life.

And the Irish responded in kind. Many commentators from the 1800's to the present have expressed puzzlement at how slowly the Irish moved into business, how few became truly wealthy, how long it took before they entered the professions. While a number of factors went into
this delay, including the low initial income levels and the large amounts of money sent back to Ireland, a major reason is visible to anyone who merely looks about him in an Irish-Catholic neighborhood: the Church. Irish capital went into church, and later school, building. It was the symbol of the community's success. As Glazer and Moynihan point out:

The Irish . . . have made a tremendous sacrifice for their church.
In secular terms, it has cost them dearly in men and money. A good part of the surplus that might have gone into family property has gone to building the church.14

And Shannon says:

The Catholic Church played a significant role in the affections of the Irish, for the church buildings in the American cities were not inheritances accepted from the past. If there was to be a church and later a parish school, the parishioners had to pay for their construction by contributing small sums each week for many years. Until the money was raised, they could worship only in a store or a rented hall. The church, when it finally rose in the neighborhood was often an ugly enough structure, with its dull red brick, squat lines, square tower, and heavy Romanesque decoration. These fortresses to faith, however, were grand indeed compared to the small country churches of Ireland. Best of all, they had been built by the efforts of the people themselves. The Church in America, like that in Ireland, was the Church of the poor. There were few wealthy patrons and no government assistance. No brick would have been laid, no pews installed, and no altar erected if the parishioners had not paid their own pennies to see these things accomplished. . . . Native converts and foreign travelers accustomed to the urbane tone and richly realized intellectual life of the Church in Europe regarded American Catholics as materialistic, parochial, and culturally impoverished. There was a measure of truth in these indictments, but they overlooked the context in which the American clergy and laity operated. The insistent need for physical expansion drained them of energy and focused attention narrowly on parish concerns.15

As long as this peculiar mix of Irish culture and Roman Catholicism remained vital, the Irish as a group pursued somewhat different

14Glazer and Moynihan, p. 230.
15Shannon, p. 35.
goals than other groups. It was perhaps paradoxical for a religious organization that one of these goals resulted in a very "materialistic" endeavor. Most of the Church's priorities, however, did not lead in such a worldly direction. As Glazer and Moynihan observe, the... "Catholic Church does not measure its success by the standards of secular society."16 Nor, therefore, do most Catholics. "Spiritual" success is fundamental; worldly success is not to be despised, and many spiritual virtues—serve—secular success well also, but everything must be judged in terms of its helpfulness to salvation.

No sector of Irish immigrant society felt this more strongly than women. Cut off from politics and any other outside areas of activity, and strongly motivated by the need to raise their children properly and to discern how to save their own souls in a new and different environment, Irish women turned to the Church in America in a way they never had in Ireland.17 They peopled its sodalities, mission circles, altar societies and other auxiliary organizations, worshipped not only on Sundays, but daily and at special services such as novenas and litanies, sent their children to Catechism classes, youth groups, and parochial schools, and paid close attention to the priest's words on Sundays. Those sermons reinforced their traditional values with religious approbation, gave them reassurance and specific, practical guidance in dealing with the conflicts posed by their encounter with America. Catholicism at that time placed no great stress on individual conscience or judgment: certain things were good, others bad, and they were good or bad because

16Glazer and Moynihan, p. 230.
17Shannon, p. 25.
an infallible church said so. And the voice of that Church was the parish priest, speaking generally at Sunday Mass or individually in the confessional.

What he had to say may not have always made things easy, but it did tend to make them clear-cut. If spiritual rather than secular success was her goal, the Irish woman knew exactly what she had to do (and not do) to achieve it. The priests did not offer vague principles about doing good and avoiding evil; they told the people which specific behaviors were good and which bad, which associations were dangerous to their faith and which helpful. They provided specific, concrete guides for action, which, if followed, would guarantee success.

What conflicts, value crises, and role strain Irish women did encounter, then, were interpreted for them by the Church. Not only did it bring over and maintain many traditional values, it translated these values into specific imperatives relevant to the immigrant in her new situation. When this vital role is added to the social and other functions which the Church was also providing in the new world, the slow rate of Irish assimilation becomes much more comprehensible. The Irish-Catholic subculture in America was sufficiently comprehensive and vital to provide a situation for the immigrant which was as familiar, integrated and comprehensible as possible, and the Church was the energizing and guiding center of the subculture. Among the laity, no group was closer to the Church than the women.

All this is not to say that these women did not experience conflicts, confusion, cross-pressures and other difficulties, as has been discussed at length above. But they had ways of coping with these problems which mitigated their severity, if not by directly resolving
them, at least by providing reassurance, group solidarity and guidance in living through them. The classic assimilation crisis of the second generation immigrant may thus have been delayed until well into the third and fourth generations.\textsuperscript{18}

Were factory workers different from other Irish women in this vital respect? The evidence does not appear to support such a view. While they obviously faced a greater variety of more troublesome conflicts than those who rarely ventured out of the ghetto, and while they would have had less time for reinforcing association with the Church, it appears that the conflicts were not unmanageable and the contact with the Church sufficient for their needs.

\textsuperscript{18}Indeed, until Roman Catholicism began to lose its viability in recent years, the basic components of the subculture—the separate schools, primary associations, prohibitions against religious inter-marriage, and the like—seem to have remained substantially in place, despite movement of the Irish into predominantly middle class circumstances.
Chapter 6
VALUE CRISIS: YES, NO, MAYBE

This study began with the observation that it is a part of our conventional wisdom that there is some kind of correlation between environment and values, and that changes in environment will lead to or produce changes in values. Considerable investigation has now been done of a particular group which experienced radical environmental change for their personal values. What kind of answer can now be given to the original questions relating environmental and value change, insofar as this group is concerned?

It all depends. It depends on whether or not significant environmental change took place. Human beings live in personal micro-environments; what looks like radical change to an outside observer may not be experienced as such by the participants because the key elements of the environment—from the point-of-view of the participant—may not have changed.¹

Even if some or all of these key elements have been altered,

¹For example, when a family moves today, different members of the family may experience widely different senses of change. The father/husband's sense of change may be entirely focused on occupational alterations; since he sees the house as principally functional, he may experience little, if any, alteration in this respect. The housewife/mother's situation may be exactly the reverse. The teenager, with a central concern for social environment, may be devastated by the loss of an entire universe of friends and enemies. The three-year-old with her almost exclusive focus on other family members, may hardly be aware that change has occurred.
whether or not value changes follow depends on yet other factors, such as whether or not the new environment is actually (not just apparently) hostile to the old values, or whether or not the old values are sufficiently flexible or adaptive to enable the individual to respond fruitfully to change, or whether or not the individual has certain personal or social resources on which to draw in adjusting to the tension between her new environment and old values. Finally, it depends on the circumstances of the person undergoing change, on how much change she has previously experienced, on whether she chooses to undergo it or has it forced upon her, on her age and adaptability at the time, and on what expectations she brings to it.

The question of personal environment is a critical one in assessing immigrant Irish women factory workers. While environmental changes which seemed insignificant to the immigrant may yet have had tremendous consequences for her life, as in the subtle and cumulative effects of increased noise or altered work pace, the most important question is whether or not she was conscious of a radical change in her own environment.

Surely the very fact of traveling away from her homeland at all was an experience of significant change for a young peasant woman from such an unchanging society as traditional Ireland. Yet, following the initial waves of Irish emigration in 1846-48, it was a familiar process. When one out of every four members of a society leaves, emigration becomes almost another rite of passage. And, again after the initial immigration, it was a matter of going from one group of Irish to another, which might even include kin or close family. How uprooted the immigrant might feel in this process certainly varied, but the indications are that
it might be less so than appears at first glance.

Moving to the city might be another matter. Such a change might be viewed by the immigrant as beneficial or disadvantageous, or both, but it was certainly seen as a change, whether the city in question was Dublin, Manchester or New York. The village community was lost in the process, replaced in various ways by the ghetto and church, which softened the impact. And taking up work in a factory was something altogether new, though the products being made were quite traditionally familiar.

But as long as the Irish woman’s over-arching goal remained the family, both the city and the factory stayed on the periphery. Her primary physical and social locus was the home, and home and family did not change radically through immigration. True, the extended family and the elders declined in importance, and the woman’s role intensified, now slightly, now significantly, as relative job situations, earnings and degrees of contact with life outside the ghetto altered male/female relationships. But home and family were a safe retreat from the new and unfamiliar, a continuity on the deepest levels of the woman’s sense of her own environment. Such also was her experience of the Church.

Did immigrant Irish women factory workers experience environmental change in the period from 1870-1914? Yes, at least the first generation did, but it would appear that there were more continuities than changes in those sectors of their environment most crucial to their own sense of identity, security and satisfaction. They were in some ways prepared for the changes they did experience by information from those who had preceded them, and their relatively young age and sense of imperative emigration probably gave them a favorable disposition, at
least at first, toward those environmental changes they did encounter.

And, as we have seen, they did encounter some such changes. But radical and comprehensive value change and departure from the major goals of their traditional culture does not seem to have been their response. Here and there individuals, no doubt, proved exceptions to the rule, but by and large, Irish working women did not abandon their traditional values, cultural patterns, social roles, religious faith, or in any other way give evidence of large-scale value change. While city life, factory work and some dimensions of American culture and society provided unexpected circumstances and certainly caused them difficulty, conflict, even disorientation, there does not appear to be significant evidence of development of new modes of thought and action or of substantial value crisis among Irish immigrant women in the period 1870-1914.

Partly this lack has already been accounted for: insofar as such value crisis is linked to perceived environmental change, Irish women experience less change than might be expected. But also, they had significant resources on which to draw in dealing with the conflicts they encountered. External acquiescence to some aspects of another culture while retaining internal allegiance to one's own was a time-honored pattern for the Irish. They came to the United States enough, in large enough numbers and settled sufficiently close to each other to be able to constitute a little Ireland in America. The discriminatory attitudes and practices only strengthened these ghettos, and women were particularly well insulated within them.

When they did go out to work in the factories, cloth and clothing manufacture fit their traditional conception of women's work. The work was different, not in duration, but in intensity and pace, and the
factory was different from the farm, but few Irish women expected to be working in a factory for all their lives, and as a temporary phenomenon it was tolerable to them. They did have more money to handle, either their own or the family's, than in Ireland, and the split-up working situation probably created more independence, but this only accentuated a tendency already present in traditional Irish culture. If peasant Irish women had been kept in as secluded a role as peasant Italian women, they wouldn't have been able to migrate, single-and-often-unaccompanied, as they did.

All such mitigating factors helped, but the most important support for the Irish woman in her encounter with America was the Church. It shaped her attitudes, interpreted her experience to her, directed the application of general values to the concrete situations in the new world, gave counsel and reassurance and pointed the way for her to achieve a satisfactory life in spite of whatever environmental changes had taken place. Ultimately, one could be a sojourner in the United States as well as be in the United States; the final goal was heaven and one gained that by being a good wife and mother, no matter where she was. The fact that the Church could be carried over, that the Irish so quickly made it responsive to their needs and outlook, and that it intensified and expanded its role in America, reinforcing religion with social life, placed it in a central position for mediating the Irish woman's encounter with America.

Thus, the peculiar combination of environmental characteristics and personal and social/religious resources greatly diluted the impact of change on Irish women, and gave them avenues to deal with those conflicts that did appear. The situation of Irish women is most
accurately described by role strain, or difficulty in meeting their role obligations. Those who were slow to marry and for whom factory work turned into a long term occupation experienced more strain than those who achieved the cultural goals of marriage and family quickly.

While some of these characteristics applied to all Irish, they were particularly effective for women. Channels into the dominant culture, first through politics, then business and the professions, were open to men that were not open to women. Working women had more contact outside the ghetto than did housewives, but the emphasis on their primary (actual or potential) roles as wives and mothers brought their experience much more into line with women than men. This does appear, then, to be a case where analysis of women as a separate group appears to be justified, both in itself and as a comparative base for a fuller understanding of the history of Irish male immigrants, as well as immigration in general. Only through such comparative study could such generalizations about environment and values as the one discussed here be concretely and fairly evaluated. But this study has demonstrated some of the complexities involved, at least as far as the Irish women are concerned.
CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Irish women factory workers in the United States experienced significant role strain as a result of their immigration. There were the equally strong and insulating forces of the Church to direct their attitudes and the ghetto to cushion her in the hours of anguish.

The result of this combination was a delay in assimilation into the mainstream of American culture which was to last well into the fourth and fifth generations of Irish American women.

Further study of the Irish component of the contemporary women's movement might very likely reveal Irish factory worker's descendants coming into their own as equal voices in American society.
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