Narrating Norah: Economic Identity for Irish Immigrant Women in New York City, 1855-1865

A summary of a larger paper

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Until recently, historical scholarship concerning the American immigrant experience has taken a decidedly male perspective; the study of nineteenth century Irish immigrants in the United States has not been exempt from this convention. Yet, a framework that treats only the historical experience of immigrant men as worthy of attention is both unstable and incomplete. In privileging Paddy over Norah, scholars outside the field of Women’s History have not only disregarded the majority of these Irish immigrants, but also the knowledge that provides a more comprehensive understanding of life during this time.¹ As such, this analysis addresses the economic experience of nineteenth century urban female Irish immigrants in particular and seeks to examine the manner in which these women were able to assert their American economic identities in ways that simultaneously challenged and resonated with their traditional roles.

Not unlike much of Europe during this time, nineteenth century Irish culture instituted a distinct separation of the sexes. Drawn along lines of domestic duties, socialization, and religious worship, this separation often relegated women and their responsibilities to the more private, domestic sphere.² Therefore, for Irish women who immigrated to America and were living in New York City from 1855 to 1865, the most significant departure from tradition resided in the vast opportunities now available to women outside of their own homes. These occupations were eagerly seized by female Irish immigrants for multiple reasons, chief among them: the economic independence it afforded them, the ability to send and provide for relatives back home, and in order to compensate for the death of or desertion by a spouse.

Female Irish immigrants’ newly realized economic freedom remained, in large part, due to their embrace of positions in domestic service. Because workers’ room and boarding costs were typically included in the terms of their service, these posts became especially appealing for the waves of young, unmarried Irishwomen arriving in New York during this period.³ Although
these positions were usually obtained through traditional networks, such as church and community, the novelty of becoming wage-earners was not lost upon Irishwomen for whom emigration represented a route out of poverty. As such, questions of allocating this new income became increasingly pushed to the fore.

For many, the answers lay in new forms of saving and spending. Although Irish cultural norms typically allowed Irishwomen to manage familial income, their American experience differs in its public nature. Recent scholarship shows significant numbers of Irishwomen opened accounts at the New York Emigrants Savings Bank, despite the widespread mistrust of such institutions during this time. As other historians have noted, however these account balances tended to stay static, hovering at the appropriate amount for an emergency fund, thereby complicating notions of Irish saving. Additionally, the sudden acquisition of discretionary funds excited many young Irishwomen who eagerly embraced their status as conspicuous consumers.

Domestic workers’ new preoccupation with fashion and material status, however, did not go unnoticed. As one advertisement suggests, these workers became target markets not only for household necessities, but also luxury fabrics that could be sewn into clothing. Conversely, some of this attention also took the form of criticism, with many chastising the Irish domestic servant for “spend[ing] all she earns on foolish dress.” However imprudent this affinity for fashion seemed, what remains significant is the domestic servant’s desire to assert authority over her own labor and the wages earned through that labor, as manifested in her new economic decisions.

Wages earned in domestic service and other employment served a familial purpose, as well. In their “American letters” to relatives back home, Irishwomen frequently included sums of
money that would help to sustain the sender’s family for a time, or when accumulated, secure a passage to America. As such, despite the existence of other modes of emigration, female Irish immigrants often played a significant role in supplying the fares necessary to emigrate. In fact, by 1838, more than half of these passages were made possible by money sent from relatives in the United States. Therefore, as the labor market in the U.S. made economic independence possible for the initial wave of Irish female immigrants, the wages earned from these opportunities liberated even more women from the nineteenth century Irish economic system that hindered female self-sufficiency.

Although Irishwomen in America assumed the traditionally male role of provider, they also refused to relinquish their familial roles as nurturers, extending this responsibility to include those they left behind. Margaret McCarthy’s 1850 letter to her family evidences this blending of Irishwomen’s traditional and modern values. Like popular depictions of Irish domestic servants, McCarthy relishes in the material goods available in New York, tantalizing her sister with promises of silk bonnets and new clothes. Aside from McCarthy’s preoccupation with fashion however, is her more telling desire to reunite her family in the U.S., enclosing

In this Letter 20 Dollars that is four Pounds thinking it might be Some Acquisition to you until you might Be Clearing away from that place all together and the Sooner the Better.

As this excerpt demonstrates, Irishwomen’s embrace of their new economic roles was often motivated by deep responsibility to the larger family unit. Through their representation in the labor force, Irish female immigrants assured their independence not only through the types of jobs they accepted and the clothes they wore, but also by maintaining familial connections and providing for those who would need to make the journey themselves.
The Irish female immigrant’s pursuit of an occupation outside the home, however, was not always grounded in a desire to assert her independence, but was often catalyzed by the death of or abandonment by her husband. As such, this particular motivation for Irishwomen to seek work necessitates a discussion of the obstacles faced by the men in their lives. Comprising the vast majority of unskilled laborers in New York City, Irishmen during this period regularly encountered job scarcity and dangerous, at times even fatal, work. Reliable statistics regarding widowhood in the Irish immigrant community, however, are complicated by instances of desertion. Deflated by the lack of available jobs and pressured by their traditional role as breadwinner, significant numbers of nineteenth century Irishmen abandoned their families, either in search of opportunity or as a means of escaping their responsibilities. Consequently, many of the Irishwomen left behind frequently chose to self-identify as widows in an effort to avoid public humiliation.

Further, in many cases, widowed or abandoned Irishwomen also had children for whom they needed to provide, leading them to explore employment outside domestic service. Much like their sisters in the domestic sphere, however, these women also frequently turned to the larger Irish community, receiving both charity and knowledge of potential job opportunities. For Irish immigrant mothers seeking work, these opportunities often came in the form of factory or mill jobs whose schedules allowed women to return home to care for their children. Although convenient, this arrangement was not without its shortcomings, as many Irishwomen were obliged to work in hazardous conditions with machinery that threatened “instant death” on a daily basis. Additionally, Irish mothers’ employment in the mills was predicated on the assumption that children were capable of looking after themselves for several hours a day. For women with infants, these circumstances did not exist. As such, rather than resigning themselves
to a life of destitution, some women opted to create economic advantages for themselves through work that could be performed with a baby in tow. One example, highlighted in the *The Barre Patriot*, details the status of two women accused of selling illegal liquor whom, after two months in prison, were released along with their infant children. While the report does not detail the marital status of the two women, the presence of the infants with their mothers signifies the absence of other paternal care. Regardless of the illegality of this enterprise, at its heart, this story demonstrates the tenacity with which these women continued to provide for their families, despite their paralyzing circumstances as mothers of young children. Most importantly, *The Barre Patriot*’s account signals the growing trend of empowered Irish women that embraced new, public roles to better ensure their family’s financial success.

The economic experience of the urban, Irish immigrant woman is, in some ways, a precursor to modern woman that would emerge at the turn of the twentieth century. Raised within conventional gender constructs, the Irish female immigrant in New York City reconciled traditional values with her modern ability to be self-sufficient. In learning to assert her power as a worker and consumer, in sustaining ties with family members in Ireland, and by carving out a livelihood for both herself and her family, the Irish immigrant woman embraced her new American self without forgetting those individuals and values that have shaped her to this point. The mixture of these two creates a powerful image of being Irish, American, and feminine in the nineteenth century, lending historical significance to the tale of any Norah.
Endnotes


6 Advertisement, *Farmer’s Cabinet*, May 1, 1851.


8 Tyler Anbinder, “From Famine to Five Points,” p. 356.


13 “Mary S. Paul to Her Father” as found in *Farm to Factory: Women’s Letters: 1830-1860*, p. 127.

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