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*A simple people! 'Simple, says ye!' remarked Mr. Dooley. 'Simple like th' air or th' deep sea.'*

—Finley Peter Dunne (1899)

### Chicago Irish Male Assimilation and Mr Dooley

This paper traces the Chicago Irish male relationship to American whiteness and colonisation in the nineteenth-century through analysis of Finley Peter Dunne's 'Mr Dooley' satire column. With an emphasis on the settler colonial context of American whiteness, this paper examines how the experience of assimilating appeared in the Chicago press. This was during a time when America was establishing its cultural and political while supplanting Indigenous ways of being and relating on the continent.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, as the Chicago Irish navigated their transforming relationship with Ireland and their new home in America, they simultaneously developed a structurally antagonistic relationship to American Indians<sup>2</sup>; however, the silence, ambivalence, and

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<sup>1</sup> One note on language throughout is that I have included Indigenous place names and perspectives where applicable. Relatedly, the continent of 'North America' is known by many Indigenous peoples as Turtle Island. However, as I am coming from a male settler gaze, I have been cautious not to imply that this paper represents Indigenous ways of knowing and being, and because this is a critique of 'America' I will primarily be using the colonial place naming. Also, there is no perfect shorthand or generalisation for the Irish population examined in this paper. Some scholarship describes the masses of Famine emigrants as Catholic. However, Catholic as a broad descriptor of the population flattens critical temporal and spiritual dimensions of their identities and is only used when specifically applicable. Also, once they arrived in America, from the dominant gaze, they have been described as immigrants (Kraut); however, from an Indigenous point of view they were/are settlers (Dunbar-Ortiz 2020). These language challenges could be seen as existing in a liminal space between normative coloniality and a future normative Indigenous gaze.

<sup>2</sup> American Indians is the legal usage generally of Indigenous peoples of the United States. However, particular Indigenous nations or tribes are named specifically wherever possible.

satirical nature in response to assimilation means that American whiteness was not unequivocally opted for.

To examine the experience of the Chicago 'Famine Irish'<sup>3</sup> who arrived beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, it is important to begin with the cultural and political context leading up to their arrival. According to Heather Miller, the former executive director of the American Indian Center in Chicago and a member of the Wyandotte Nation of Oklahoma, 'For time immemorial, tribes from across the country congregated here in the Chicago area; it was a central trade hub' ('We're Still Here'). The *Settler Colonial City Project* adds, 'The Great Lakes region [where Chicago is situated] was for millennia traversed, occupied, and sustained by Odawa, Ojibwe, and Potawatomi people who allied themselves in the "Three Fires Confederacy"' (*Decolonizing*). The name Chicago comes from French fur traders' translation of the Miami-Illinois place names Shikaakwa, meaning 'smelly wild onions', and the Ojibwe word Zhigaagong, meaning 'on the skunk' (Schwartz).

At the turn of the nineteenth century, the US army arrived to the area and conditions shifted rapidly. They waged war on the Potawatomi, Ojibwe, Odawa, and other Anishinaabe and Algonquin peoples in the area, leading to the Black Hawk War of 1832. This war culminated in the surrender of Chief Black Hawk in 1832 (leader of the Algonquin speaking Sauk tribe). The 'Surrender Speech' of Chief Black Hawk illustrates the Indigenous peoples' resistance to colonisation and fundamentally different worldview than the Americans, and is testimony to the forceful and deceptive ways the land was seized and privatised:

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<sup>3</sup> These were not the first Irish people to arrive in Chicago, however, they represent a large influx of settlers who were relatively much poorer and generally Catholic.

[Black Hawk] has done nothing for which an Indian ought to be ashamed. He has fought for his countrymen, the squaws and papooses [women and children], against white men, who came, year after year, to cheat them and take away their lands. You know the cause of our making war. It is known to all white men. (Hawk 1832)

In September 1833, ‘after weeks of coercion’, representatives from the aforementioned Indigenous peoples signed the Treaty of Chicago, ‘transferring to the U.S. government 15 million acres of territory they had inhabited since time immemorial’ and forced most of the remaining Indigenous inhabitants west (Hautzinger 2018; Schwartz 2020).

Therefore, the Famine Irish began arriving just 12 years after the land was seized for US property.

Finley Peter Dunne’s writings on the working-class parish of Bridgeport – through Dooley – provide a vivid slice of life of nineteenth century Chicago Irish.<sup>4</sup> Charles Fanning, distinguished scholar on the Chicago Irish, provides a summary of the Dooley column, in which:

themes include memories of the Great Hunger, the turbulent voyage out to America, the shattered dream of gold in the streets, the hard life of manual labor, the sufferings of the destitute, the pains of assimilation, the gulf between immigrants and their American children, and the slow rise to respectability.

(Dunne 1987 xxiii)

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<sup>4</sup> Grace Eckley surfaces a ‘problem that should be mentioned’, which is ‘the Dunne-Dooley relationship.’ (Preface) Continuing, ‘The question remains whether Dunne speaks through Dooley in Dunne’s own voice: or whether Dooley has a voice separate from that of Dunne. Confounding the issue, I believe, is the fact that both are true. I have tried to solve the problem by saying, ‘Dunne writes’ and ‘Dooley says.’ (Ibid) Agreeing with Eckley, it is to be assumed that Dunne is using his fictional character to express points of view that he himself shares.

The first Dooley piece was published by the Chicago *Evening Post* on October 7, 1893, and the last piece in the ‘original Chicago Dooley series’, as described by Fanning, was published on January 22, 1898. Altogether, the ‘original series’ consisted of 215 pieces, ‘and most of them were concerned with Irish American daily life in Bridgeport’ (Dunne 1987 xiii-xiv, xv, 324, 326). Fanning states that the insights therein are ‘not available elsewhere’ (Dunne xvi, 40). Therefore, even though Dunne’s depictions of the Irish in Chicago are ‘American Literary Realism’, Fanning is suggesting they are the most authentic depictions of the nineteenth century working-class Chicago Irish that exist. The dearth of non-fiction testimony also suggests a high-level of silence among emigrants and between generations related to the experience of settling in Chicago. As such, keeping the fictional nature in mind as well as the singular male gaze of Dunne, analysis of the Dooley column provides useful insight into the working-class Chicago Irish *male* relationship to colonisation.<sup>5</sup> As remarked in the epigraph, the Dooley column was dedicated to depicting how the Chicago Irish were not a simple people, nor a monolith, and very contradictory.

While no one’s experience is the same and not everyone felt remorse about leaving, it is important to consider how much was lost—culturally, socially, spiritually, epistemically, and also linguistically—by emigrating. Economic, colonial, and agricultural forces pushed these masses of Irish peasants out of their home country, and the burgeoning settler colonial state pulled them westward. Working-class Chicago Irish

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<sup>5</sup> Throughout the collection, the only featured female is a teen, Molly Donahue, and one of the few, if not the only time(s) an adult woman ‘speaks’ is in ‘On the New Woman’, which is spoken through Dooley’s recounting of a male patron’s tale about something his wife said, with the column joking about women working to advance their agency (Dunne 1898).

settlers arrived to a rapidly growing town-turned-metropolis that required masses of labourers to continue building the infrastructure for America.

Mimi Cowan provides an in-depth look at the population shifts and Irish experience in the dissertation *Immigrants, Nativists, and the Making of Chicago, 1835–1893*. Between 1843 and 1850, the Irish population grew from 773 to 6,096 making them the highest foreign-born population at the time (248-9).<sup>6</sup> By 1900, the Irish born population in Chicago was 73,912, with the total of first and second-generation Irish population at 318,292 or 19% of the total Chicago population (248, 251). Being a substantial part of the Chicago population, the Chicago Irish shaped Americanness while engaging with forces of assimilation. David Lloyd states:

Unhappily, the Irish success in the US lay in part in their ability to extend and transform those informal functions<sup>7</sup> into *institutions*, contributing to the formation of a new racial state. It is not then, so much that the Irish ‘became white’, as if whiteness was a stable and permanent condition, but that in their entry into the US, they transformed the constitution of whiteness and simultaneously the meaning and function of race itself—and along with it the meaning of Irishness.

(17)

Cowan shows in her dissertation how throughout the nineteenth century, working-class Chicago Irish worked their way into politics and resisted nativism by participating in US institutions such as militias, the police, fire departments, and also in disavowing political ‘radicals’ such as anarchists during labour uprisings. (i) All of these dynamics are

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<sup>6</sup> During the 1840s alone, the population of Chicago grew almost seven times, from 4,470 to 29,963 (Cowan 247).

<sup>7</sup> Informal functions like, ‘as [W.E.B] Du Bois put it, “a special police force” so that gradually “the whole white South became an armed and commissioned camp to keep Negroes in slavery and to kill the black rebel”’ (Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America* 8 Cited in Loyd 17).

commented on through Dooley, including how the westward movement of America required the forced removal and attempted extermination of Indigenous peoples.

(Cowan 6)

The column, 'On the Indian War', features a story about a violent incident by Dooley towards one of the remaining Indigenous men of the area 'ol' Snakes-in-his-Gaitors', which is included in Dunne's book *Mr. Dooley in Peace and War* (1898). Divided into two sections, 'Mr Dooley in War', and 'Mr Dooley in Peace', Luke Dietrich points out that 'On the Indian War' is 'paradoxically included in the ["in Peace"] section'. This shows that America's attempt to exterminate Indigenous peoples is different than the US Civil War or Spanish American War, and that to have 'peace' in America requires the removal or at least subjugation of the Indigenous populations.

The piece begins with Dooley praising US General Sherman, 'Twas him said, 'War is hell'; an' that's wan iv th' finest sayin's I know ... An' Gin'ral Sherman says, 'Th' on'y good Indyun is a dead Indyun. An' that's a good sayin', too' (Dunne 1898 cited in Dietrich 2013). Notably, Dooley is misattributing the latter quote, as US General *Sheridan* officially stated this line. Dunne is likely illustrating the casual, loose nature of discussion at the bar. The subtext could be, however, that the generals' personal identities were arbitrary in light of their function of Indian removal and US expansion.<sup>8</sup> Notably, Sheridan was the son of Irish settlers and Sherman was not Irish, but it is unclear if or how this influenced Dooley's words.

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<sup>8</sup> Also of note is that General Sheridan and his troops were called away from the Great Plains, where they had been campaigning against the Sioux, to halt a railroad labour strike in Chicago, illustrating how the US Army was instrumental in waging war on Indigneous peoples while also serving business interests to subjugate labour (Dunbar-Ortiz 2014).

Dooley proceeds to proclaim, to his friend Hennessey, the importance of improving 'th' race' by exterminating 'thim Chippeways' (the Chippewa Indians live(d) north of Chicago) and elaborates:

'Ye see, Hinnissy, th' Indyun is bound f'r to give way to th' onward march iv white civilization. You an' me, Hinnissy, is th' white civilization. I come along, an' I find ol' Snakes-in-his-Gaiters livin' quite an' dacint in a new frame house. Thinks I, "Tis a shame f'r to lave this savage man in possession iv this fine abode, an' him not able f'r to vote an' without a frind on th' polis force.' So says I: 'Snakes,' I says, 'get along,' says I. 'I want ye'er house, an' ye best move out west iv th' thracks, an' dig a hole f'r ye'erself,' I says. (ibid)

This passage situates Dooley as affirming his membership in the white race while designating the Indigenous man as savage, undeserving of shelter or amicable relations with the police. Dooley also assumes the authority to relegate Snakes westward, out of sight and towards death. Curiously, Snakes retorts using Hiberno-English:

Divvle th' fut I will step out iv this house,' says Snakes... 'F'r why should I take Mary Ann, an' Terence, an' Honoria, an' Robert Immit Snakes, an' all me little Snakeses, an' rustle out west iv th' thracks,' he says, 'far fr'm th' bones iv me ancestors. (ibid)

And Dooley responds by getting the 'loot' [lieutenant] and the police force to evict Snakes:

Well, me frind Snakes gives [the lieutenant] battle, an', knowin' th' premises well, he's able to put up a gr-reat fight; but afther a while they rip him away, an' have

him in th' pathrol wagon, with a man settin' on his head. An' thin he's put undher bonds to keep the peace, an' they sind him out west iv th' thracks. (ibid)

Snakes' usage of Hiberno-English suggests that Dooley either translated what Snakes actually said if it was a real event, or that it is entirely an imagined story with a fictitious Indigenous man. It shows that Dooley is positioned on the side of requiring subjugation of the Indigenous population in order to experience American 'peace'; and by stating that Snakes was difficult to apprehend because he knew the premises well highlights how the American police force was still an invader in the Indigneous peoples' territory.

Snakes' name is almost without a doubt fictional. 'Snakes-In-His-Gaiters' connotes inspiration from American Indian naming conventions that are descriptive and related to nature, and Dooley likely developed a comical name based on this convention partially in jest. As perceived by David Emmons, however, 'It may be that Dunne selected the name 'Snakes' intending to make an 'Irish' point: St. Patrick drove the snakes out of Ireland and they came to America' (170). As Dunne often has his characters contradict themselves, it is possible that Snakes is representative of the lost part of Dooley's own identity that had an ancestral connection to land, therefore Dooley could be projecting turmoil about assimilation through conjuring an Indigenous man with Irish qualities. Emmons notes important subtext that 'only the Irish would have gotten' that further contends with the surface level anti-Indigenous commentary stating:

Dunne's use of four of the most common Irish baptismal names<sup>9</sup> as well as Mr Dooley's reference to Snakes-in-His-Gaiters as his 'friend,' while having Snakes forcibly evicted by an overwhelmingly Irish police force (the urban equivalent of the equally overwhelmingly Irish western army), established a second level of

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<sup>9</sup> Mary Ann, Terence, Honoria, and Robert Emmet (Dunne 1898).

meaning...Dunne's Indian War was quite literally internecine: one savage twin plundering and laying waste the other. (Emmons 170-1)

This is a crucial insight but equating the two as savage twins omits the structural power imbalance between the Irish and Indigenous along with Indigenous peoples' assertion of sovereignty. Emmons does address this in part, stating:

Also at issue is the related question of ancestral inheritance. George Templeton Strong said the English were right about the Irish: they were savages and likely irredeemably so. On this point as on others, Americans-Albion's unmutated seed-had taken their cue from Britain. Dunne managed to capture all of that and more, including Irish ambivalence<sup>10</sup> about who and what they were, or-and more accurately-who and what they had been made to be. (ibid)

'Americans' seems to be referring to Anglo-Saxons, who certainly did treat the Irish settlers as savage initially; however, ambivalence on the part of the Irish does not position them as equals in relation to America. Grace Eckley, who wrote about Dooley in 1981 argued that Dooley is satirically showing sympathy to the Indigenous population in this story (Preface). However, classifying this story as purely sympathetic fails to address the complexity, namely Dooley's hostility and the embedding of Irishness into the description of Snakes. The dynamic of Dooley partially seeing himself in an Indigenous likeness, while maintaining a future for himself in America that required a removal of Snakes illustrates the crux of this paper. Whether real or imaginary, Dooley illuminates the reality at the time of how the (recently displaced) Chicago Irish had

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<sup>10</sup> An added layer to this ambivalence is that Dooley shows sympathy with fellow Irishmen evicted by landlords back in Ireland in 'The Necessity of Modesty among the Rich: A Tale of the Famine', therefore heightening the contradictions in orchestrating Snakes' eviction (Dunne 1987 7-10).

friends on the police force while the police served to evict Indigenous people regardless of if they were being 'civilized'.

This story is exemplified through the real-life account of Charles Kickham of the Fenian Brotherhood, written about by Mary Mullen in *How the Irish Became Settlers*, where Kickham, like Dooley, alludes to Indigenous peoples:

so that they can disappear once more', and 'In this way, he also enacts a double disappearance of Indigenous peoples—by identifying with imperial heroes, like Columbus, and by rendering them ghosts in order to relegate them to the past.

(96)

Dooley identifies with General Sherman and as a member of white civilization; and while he talks of Snakes as a living person in his memory, sending Snakes 'west of the tracks to dig a hole for himself' has a similar purpose of disappearance, if even in Dooley's imagination. Ultimately, Dooley's praise of US military generals carrying out the Indian Wars and utilising the police in carrying out violence against Indigenous peoples—through satire—illustrates the structural antagonism *and* ambivalence embedded in Chicago Irish assimilation.

In conclusion, the purpose of this paper is to excavate the unique position of many Irish-Americans as being descended from people who were colonised and are now structurally part of the colonising force. The nineteenth century was a key period of Irish assimilation into American whiteness, and Mr Dooley provides a wealth of material—albeit fairly opaque and contradictory—to contemplate the experience of working-class Chicago Irish males. Within the contradictions, ambivalence, and satirical nature of Dooley exists the possibility of further interrogating and potentially

transforming the antagonistic position of the Irish diaspora in relation to Indigenous peoples, especially given the diaspora's ancestral experience with settler colonialism in Ireland.

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