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**Finley Peter Dunne:  
Establishing Irish/American Identity while  
Helping to Integrate it Within American Culture  
at the Turn of the Century**



*May 19, 1999*

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**Title:** Finley Peter Dunne: Establishing Irish/American Identity while Helping to Integrate it Within American Culture at the Turn of the Century

Chicago journalist Finley Peter Dunne, son of Irish immigrants, helped popularize Irish/American culture at the turn of the century through the creation of a literary persona known as Martin J. Dooley in weekly newspaper columns throughout the decade of the 1890's and early twentieth century. Despite overwhelming prejudice against the Irish, significant alienation within the Irish community, a prevalent literary gusto for British Victorianism, the growing popularity of the Irish revival movement, and initially targeting only a small burgeoning Irish bourgeoisie, the saloonkeeper/philosopher figure of Martin J. Dooley achieved overwhelming international success while making a lasting contribution to social history and literary realism. Dunne's success is not only due to his utilizing Martin J. Dooley as a literary technique for serious fiction regarding the common lives of Irish immigrants, but in providing his characters, made up mainly by teamsters, millworkers, and other hard laborers, with depth and dignity. The realist depth

of his characters was related to very easily by the middle class and by most second generation Americans who, for the first time, yearned to draw a sense of pride rather than shame from their immigrant roots through literature.

Around the time Finley Peter Dunne was starting his career in journalism in the 1890's many immigrants considered the United States as the "Land of Opportunity" but upon their arrival found a life based on extreme hardship, self-sacrifice, cultural alienation, and meager economic rewards. Through the use domestic and foreign propaganda, the United States reinforced its perception of prosperity around the world and built a solid industrial infrastructure in part by exploiting cheap manual labor provided by immigrants. At the same time, many countries in Europe and in Asia supported the exodus of many of their people towards the United States in an attempt to fight unemployment and secure an influx of American capital over time. Most illiterate immigrants were forced to a life of quasi-slavery, working over ninety hour workweeks while ruining their health under terrible sanitary conditions. Upon arriving in the US, immigrants began losing their cultural identity as their native culture began to mix and evolve within American society. They were alienated by the prejudice and cultural discrimination emanating from American society that, rendered their integration into society much more difficult.

Finley Peter Dunne's parents' generation, which still bore the deep emotional scar of the infamous "Potato Famine" of the 1850's, had largely left Ireland in a desperate attempt to ensure survival rather than to achieve greater economic freedom as in the case of the German immigrants of that period. This circumstance, together with the indentured servitude mentality already present in Ireland for, led to greater economic exploitation of the Irish than most immigrant groups mainly because the Irish were prepared to sacrifice their freedom in order to get a job (Golway 143).

The precarious nature of the Irish arrival into the "New World" contributed to creating their initial reputation of being lazy, troublesome, without ambition, unintelligent, and worthy of working only as manual laborers. This preconceived viewpoint was common at the turn of the century and was promoted by many Americans of English descent who were unhappy with Ireland's attempts to challenge England in a quest for its own independence at the time.

Finley Peter Dunne's parents' generation, which had begun to lose contact with its historical and cultural roots, began living within an atmosphere of extreme cultural alienation. At the time, it was not uncommon for newly arrived immigrants to feel a sense of powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, isolation, and self-estrangement as a result of being transplanted in a foreign country (Gallo 204). The Irish-American society

present in America at the turn of the century represented a model of this phenomenon because it consisted in a group of people who by living far away from their country of origin began losing their heritage without being able to fully embrace American culture, which refused to acknowledge them as worthy citizens.

Given the unpopularity of the Irish in America during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it would have seemed almost impossible, at a time when the newspapers were sold mainly to the upper middle urban classes, that a writer like Finley Peter Dunne could achieve any success in attempting to publish a weekly column based within an urban Irish-American cultural setting. Even if a writer's intent was to write a newspaper column that targeted the Irish middle class, he would have most likely chosen to center his content on elements of Victorianism or of the "Irish Revival Movement" which were in vogue back then (Flanning 44).

Finley Peter Dunne's "Mr. Dooley" began as a literary experiment on the Saturday edition of the Chicago Daily Tribune but quickly became a national sensation by utilizing a simple and brilliant success formula involving irony, comedy, current events, social realism, and Irish-American culture. Mr. Dooley is a fictitious Irish immigrant character who keeps a saloon on Archer Road in the Chicago metropolitan area. The columns almost always feature Mr. Dooley conversing with the local Irish

manual laborers about current events, politics, and life. The dialogues are written to phonetically resemble the heavy accents of the uneducated Irish immigrants of the time providing a sense of social realism while adding a comic element. The early Dunne columns on The Chicago Daily Tribune presented Mr. Dooley as an uneducated man who revealed depth of insight regarding current events while demonstrating considerable wit. Immediately after news of fabulous discoveries of gold in the Yukon broke out in the Chicago newspapers, Dunne published a column where Mr. Dooley cast doubt on these accounts by recalling his own youthful illusions about America and describing the pernicious effects of wealth. (Flanning 263):

*“I tell ye what ye’d do,” said Mr. Dooley. “Ye’d come back here an’ sthрут up an’ down th’ sthreet with ye’er thumbs in ye’er armpits; an’ ye’d dhrink too much, an ride in sthreet ca-ars. Thinye’d buy foldin’ beds an’ piannies, an start a reel estate office. Ye’d be fooled a good deal an’ lose a lot iv ye’er money, an’ thin ye’d tighten up. Ye’d be in a cold fear night an’ day that ye’d lose ye’er fortune. Ye’d wake up in th’ middle iv th’ night, dhreamin’ that ye was back at th’ gas-house with ye’er money gone. Ye’d be prisidint iv a charitable society. Ye’d have to wear ye’er shoes in th’ house, an ye’er wife’d have ye around to rayciptions an dances. Ye’d move move to Mitchigan Avnoo,*

*an' ye'd hire a coachman that'd laugh at ye. Ye'er boys'd be joods an' ashamed iv ye, an' ye'd support ye'er daughters' husbands. Ye'd rack-rint ye'er tinants an' lie about ye'er taxes. Ye'd go back to Ireland on a visit, an' put on airs with ye'er cousin Mike. Ye'd be mane, close-fisted, onscrupulous ol' curmudgeon; an', whin ye'd die, it'd take half ye'er fortune f'r rayqueems to put ye r-right. I don't want ye iver speak to me whin ye get rich, Hinnissy."*

*"I wont't," said Mr. Hennessy.*

The above passage demonstrates how Mr. Dooley was able to provide an accurate social analysis of the effects of easy wealth in a comic dialogue with Mr. Hennessy. At the time of the Yukon gold rush, many Americans flocked to Alaska searching for wealth in the gold mining business. Dunne understood that similarly to the 1849 California gold rush, only a small number of people would achieve wealth in Alaska from gold mining. For the most part, those who would accumulate great riches would do so by selling products or services to the waves of gold miners. Dunne was aware that the American government promoted the gold rush mentality because it inspired people to populate newly acquired territories. He also realized that wealth would have pernicious effects on people who accumulated it quickly and by luck alone. Without insulting those who believed in the gold rush or in the ideal of easy riches, Mr. Dooley promoted Dunne's viewpoints by ridiculing Mr. Hennessy.

Dunne's genius lies in creating a literary setting so that Mr. Dooley's humor, lack of education, lack of a defined set of static political views, and witty ironic monologues would render him funny and harmless in the mind of the reader. His "harmlessness" enables him to criticize the propagandizing of the American dream within the gold rush mentality while entertaining the reader and offering a serious assessment on the effects of wealth on people who do not earn it. This dialogue formula was repeated each time to enable Mr. Dooley to touch upon a wide variety of political and social issues of interest to the American middle class.

Dunne's unique formula quickly made Mr. Dooley a national sensation transforming him into a formidable public relations medium for Irish-American culture since it was the first and sole Irish-American literary work that most Americans had come into contact with. Mr. Dooley was recognized everywhere as the synonym for delicious humor, penetrating common sense, and a highly American, close-to-the-soil point of view (Ellis 181). Dunne's incredible success quickly gained him the respect and fear of many politicians due to the power he exerted on American public opinion. Teddy Roosevelt, like many other political figures of his time, made every attempt to keep positive relations with Finley Peter Dunne. He feared not only a potentially negative indirect reprise from one of the Mr. Dooley columns, but also Dunne's strong

relationships with members of the cultural elite of his time, which included a long friendship with Mark Twain.

Dunne's ability to discuss current international events such as the Dreyfus case, the Boxer rebellion, and American expansion through the Mr. Dooley Chronicles from a comic and ironic perspective gained him international acclaim while helping to promote an endearing perception of the Irish people worldwide. After his initial success in America, Finley Peter Dunne was invited to travel around Europe to present his work to an eager international cosmopolitan audience. In one of his many books of Mr. Dooley stories, Dunne helped to diffuse the tension regarding the question of Irish independence from England by embedding wit and humor in a dialogue between Mr. Dooley and Mr. Hennessy (Dunne 134):

*"F'r, Hinnissy, Ireland 'll niver get annything fr'm England but a threaty iv peace."*

*"I wondher will England iver free Ireland?" asked Mr. Hennessy.*

*“Niver,” said Mr. Dooley. “What talk have ye? No wan wants it that way. England will niver free Ireland, but some day, if we make it inthrestin’ enough f’r her she’ll have to free England iv Ireland. An’ that’ll be all right.”*

The previous passage is useful in understanding how Mr. Dooley influenced public opinion into sympathizing with the Irish. At the turn of the century most Irish-Americans fervently supported Ireland’s struggle for independence. By directly criticizing England the Irish-Americans were scorned by Americans of white Anglo-Saxon protestant descent. Mr. Dooley makes fun of Ireland by referring to it as England’s affliction rather than vice-versa. This technique of self-mockery is useful in defusing what was an emotionally charged subject for many readers of the time. He finishes the passage supporting the Irish cause stating that independence will come when it is in the best interest of both parties. Instead of promoting the idea of revolution via terrorism, Mr. Dooley alludes to Irish independence as a potential benefit for England.

The Mr. Dooley Chronicles represent an intense production of social commentary as its characters are based on America’s Irish immigrant society. Similarly to Mr. Dooley, characters like Mr. Hennessy are typical in The Mr. Dooley Chronicles as they portray simple men who have been tested by a hard life of manual labor in an attempt to establish

themselves in America. Although the Mr. Dooley Chronicles were comical and ironic in nature being able to draw fun and humor out of the most tragic and delicate of subjects, they at times pointed out the harsh reality of immigrant integration. In the following dialogue Mr. Dooley talks with one of his customers whose son has just graduated from high school (Flanning 179).

*His father come ov er with me afther th' intertainment an' he looked blue.*  
*"What's th' matther with ye?" says I. "Does it remind ye iv ye'er own boyhood days," I says, "whin ye was gradjooated be th' toe iv th' hidge schoolmaster's boot?" I says.*  
*"No," says he. "Tis not that," he says. "I was on'y thinkin' afther hearin' Joe's o-ration," he says, "that I've lived a misspent life," he says. "I niver give care nor thought to th' higher jooties iv citizenship," he says. "Mebbe," he says, "I had to wurruk too hard," he says. "Go home," says I. "I'm goin' to close up," I says.*

In the above passage Mr. Dooley is met with the sadness of a first generation immigrant who has sacrificed much so that he could provide better opportunities for his children. His sense of pride for his son is matched by a feeling of personal failure and inferiority as he realizes the cultural difference between himself and his son.

Rather than glorifying the Irish immigrant experience in America, Dunne provides a realist insight on the feeling of alienation felt by many first generation immigrants.

Finley Peter Dunne helped popularize Irish/American culture at the turn of the century by achieving an overwhelming success among a wide international audience with the writing of The Dooley Chronicles. By utilizing Martin J. Dooley as a literary technique for realist depth regarding first generation immigrants as well as to provide keen social commentary, Dunne greatly helped to establish the self respect of the Irish-Americans who before the arrival of Mr. Dooley were estranged and were living on the margins of American society. Dunne provided a catalyst for social change, which eventually led Irish-American culture to occupy the upper echelons of American society in the 1960's when an Irish-American president by the name of John F. Kennedy took office.

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