

Biographical Essay: David Boyle Duncan

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On May 1st, 1852, the *Buckpoor* arrived at a port in New Orleans, Louisiana.¹ A family of seven, from Londonderry, Ireland, dwelled amongst its passengers. The family patriarch was James Duncan, a Presbyterian pastor looking to form a new life in America.² His youngest son at the time went by the name David Boyle Duncan.³ David was just four years old when his family decided to make the journey across the Atlantic Ocean. Due to his parents' remarkable decision to leave behind the life they knew, David led a successful life in America, ultimately graduating from Hanover College in 1874.⁴ His experience as an immigrant, though, remained unique compared to other Irish immigrants of the time. Catholic-Irish immigrants, specifically, faced harsh stereotypes due to their differing religious values and urban lifestyles that disturbed mainstream Protestant Americans. In contrast to this, a combination of the Duncans' rural settlement, agricultural knowledge, and Presbyterian faith allowed them to assimilate quickly into American society. These factors aligned David and his family with typical Protestant American values, permitting them to live unaffected by the xenophobia that plagued the Irish-Catholic immigrant population.

Throughout the first half of the nineteenth-century, there was a surge in Irish immigrants journeying to America, compounded by the Irish Potato Famine of 1846 to 1850. As an influx of

¹ "U.S., Naturalization Records, 1840-1957," digital image, s.v. "David Boyle Duncan" (b. 19 Nov. 1848), *Ancestry.com*.

² 1860 United States Federal Census, Pinckneyville, Perry County, Illinois, digital image, s.v. "James Duncan," *Ancestry.com*.

³ 1860 United States Federal Census, Pinckneyville, Perry County, Illinois, digital image, s.v. "David Dancan [sic]," *Ancestry.com*.

⁴ Joshua Bolles Garritt, Andrew Harvey Young, and Paul Prentice Boyd, compilers, "Alumni Record," *Bulletin of Hanover College*, vol. 5, no. 11 (1913): 49.

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immigrants continued, religious beliefs became one of the ultimate components in the judgment of newcomers to America, which adversely impacted the Irish-Catholic population.⁵ At the time of the Irish diaspora, America mainly consisted of Protestant denominations, each of which sought to protect their ideals from the Catholic faith.⁶ Historian Stephen Brighton emphasizes how many Protestants feared Catholics due to their loyalty to the Pope, believing there was a plot threatening to overthrow non-Catholic America. The perceived “anti-Christian” nature of Catholicism led to the “Wild Irish” stereotype which, “was used to reinforce the notion that all Irish Catholics were Barbarous.”⁷ The growing concern about morality in America was further compounded by Irish public drinking culture and behavior. These aspects especially disturbed mainstream Americans who valued temperance. The image of the “Irish Immigrant” was thus formed, born out of anxiety and hatred. Despite their prominence in the nineteenth-century though, the Irish-Catholics were not the first Irish immigrants to America. An article from the American Catholic Historical Society from 1901 details that, prior to the nineteenth-century, Irish immigration was almost entirely Ulster Presbyterian. It furthermore goes on to describe that, “Presbyterian Irish, finding the English government harassing, … came to America.”⁸ The Duncan family appeared to follow in the footsteps of these Presbyterian Irish who came before them instead of falling into the patterns of typical Catholic Irish immigrants.

⁵ Sarah Vosmeier, lecture for “American Immigration History,” Hanover College, Sept. 20, 2024.

⁶ Lawrence J. McCaffrey, “Irish America,” *The Wilson Quarterly*, vol. 9, no. 2 (1985): 78–93.

⁷ Stephen A. Brighton, “Degrees of Alienation: The Material Evidence of the Irish and Irish American Experience, 1850-1910,” *Historical Archaeology*, vol. 42, no. 4 (2008): 132–53.

⁸ “Early Irish Immigration to America. Few Catholics,” *The American Catholic Historical Researches*, vol. 18, no. 3 (1901): 99–103.

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After they arrived in New Orleans, the Duncan family avoided settling in a bustling capital and instead established a home in the small town of Pinckneyville, Illinois.⁹ Pinckneyville provided the backdrop for David Boyle Duncan's childhood. Before the family's arrival, the 1850 census from Perry County, where Pinckneyville was located, lists a plethora of Irish families who had already settled there.¹⁰ These families could have been a part of the original wave of Ulster Presbyterians, leading the Duncans to relocate to an area with an established Presbyterian population. The Duncans' religious faith would have made their experience in America, and their ability to integrate into its culture, much easier than demonized Irish-Catholics.¹¹ Religion continued to be an extremely significant aspect of David's life as well when he decided to attend the Presbyterian Hanover College. The small number of men who attended college in the nineteenth-century mainly did so to become ministers, which was the case for David.¹² Surviving diary entries of Charles Alling, a student at Hanover in 1884, describe the high level of respect awarded to ministers at the time: "The noblest calling a human being may choose; to be a co-worker to the Almighty."¹³ After his graduation, David Duncan's entire migration across the United States revolved around his occupation as a pastor, moving from one church to the next.¹⁴ The secure job of a pastor improved his opportunities and social status

⁹ 1860 United States Federal Census, Pinckneyville, Perry County, Illinois, digital image, s.v. "David Dancan [sic]," *Ancestry.com*.

¹⁰ 1850 United States Federal Census, Perry County, Illinois, digital image, s.v. "Joseph Tod," *Ancestry.com*.

¹¹ Lawrence McCaffery, "Ireland and Irish America: Connections and Disconnections," *U.S. Catholic Historian*, vol. 22, no. 3 (2004): 1–18.

¹² Sarah Vosmeier, lecture for "Studies in American Cultural History: The Middle Class," Hanover College, Feb. 3, 2025.

¹³ Charles Alling, Student Diary, 1883–1884, entry Thursday, 17 Jan. 1884, Hanover College History Department, para. 14, history.hanover.edu.

¹⁴ 1900 United States Federal Census, Ashland, Ohio, digital image, s.v. "?? B. Duncan," *Ancestry.com*.

significantly more than that of Irish-Catholic priests in cities. Had David been Irish-Catholic and followed down the path of priesthood, he would have remained an outcast as a “popist.”

In addition to their religious beliefs, David and his family also maintained an agricultural lifestyle that was essential to their prosperity. The blights facing the major potato crops in Ireland led to mass starvation and poverty. Families came to America, similarly to the Duncans, in search of a better life. Most Irish immigrants opted to settle in urban areas, feeling discontented with the outcome of their past agricultural occupations. The majority of Irish farmers were not very eager to build a new life through the same systems that failed them back home, leading many to take jobs in factories.¹⁵ Newly industrialized cities offered a multitude of job opportunities particularly for unskilled laborers who were new to factory work. New York, Boston, and Philadelphia were just a few of the locations that offered such job opportunities. Irish immigrants were so prominent in these areas that by 1890 almost one-third of all New Yorkers were Irish.¹⁶ Despite their popularity, living in these cities was not easy for many and only added to the stigma surrounding immigration. Mainstream Americans were uncomfortable with the concept of overcrowded cities full of non-American workers doing undesirable jobs. Cartoons from the time such as *Outward Bound* by Erskine Nicol depicted an Irish man as being unhygienic and raggedy, staring at a poster on voyages to New York.¹⁷ The Duncan family, however, defied this caricature and not only settled in a rural area but also continued to be farmers.

¹⁵ Sarah Vosmeier, lecture for “American Immigration History,” Hanover College, Sept. 20, 2024.

¹⁶ Linda Dowling Almeida, *Irish Immigrants in New York City, 1945-1995* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001), 12.

¹⁷ Erskine Nicol, *Outward Bound*, ca. 1840/1860 [not after 1867], in “An Irishman Looks at a Poster Advertising Voyages to New York and Resolves to Emigrate,” lithograph with watercolor image, 26 x 19.2 cm., Wellcome Collection, London.

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When looking back at David's childhood in the 1860 Pinckneyville census, James Duncan is indicated as the head of the household, working as a farmer with the help of his eldest son who was also a farm laborer.¹⁸ The Duncans' agricultural lifestyle laid the foundation for skills that would become relevant later in David Boyle Duncan's life. David was eleven at the time of the 1860 census and, like his brother, would have helped around the farm, leading him to develop his own knowledge of farming techniques.¹⁹ At age 71, after serving as a pastor for many years, David returned to his roots, becoming a farmer himself.²⁰ The skills necessary to farm in combination with his Protestant faith helped provide him with a pathway to careers common amongst mainstream Americans. Here David did not differ much from his neighbors despite being an immigrant, many of whom were farmers and typically remained in the state in which they were born.²¹ The small towns in which David resided also allowed him to live a life that was not limited by the stigma of immigration. Throughout his lifetime, David lived in Pinckneyville, Illinois; Ashland, Ohio; Fairfield, Washington; and Richfield, Idaho—none of which ever reached a population of over 4,000 people while David lived there.²² The slower-paced movement of midwestern and northwestern America was considerably different than the trading hubs of coastal cities. This added yet another advantage to David's life experience as an

¹⁸ 1860 United States Federal Census, Pinckneyville, Perry County, Illinois, digital image, s.v. "David Dancan [sic]," *Ancestry.com*.

¹⁹ 1860 United States Federal Census, Pinckneyville, Perry County, Illinois, digital image, s.v. "David Dancan [sic]," *Ancestry.com*.

²⁰ 1920 United States Federal Census, Richfield, Lincoln County, Idaho, digital image, s.v. "David B. Duncan," *Ancestry.com*.

²¹ 1900 United States Federal Census, Ashland, Ohio, digital image, s.v. "?? B. Duncan," *Ancestry.com*.

²² 1870 United States Federal Census, Pinckneyville, Perry County, Illinois, digital image, s.v. "James Duncan," *Ancestry.com*; 1900 United States Federal Census, Ashland, Ohio, digital image, s.v. "?? B. Duncan," *Ancestry.com*; 1910 United States Federal Census, Fairfield, Spokane County, Washington, digital image, s.v. "David B. Duncan," *Ancestry.com*; 1920 United States Federal Census, Richfield, Lincoln County, Idaho, digital image, s.v. "David B. Duncan," *Ancestry.com*.

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Irish immigrant. He was able to build a life for himself within these towns and married three times, all to American women.²³ The normalcy of his life would have been unachievable had David not had the opportunity to grow up in rural towns built upon Protestant values.

After his arrival in America, David's life became that of a typical pastor living in the midwest during the nineteenth-century. Throughout his life, he was able to attain a higher education at Hanover College, which was not common among other Irish immigrants. The Duncan family's experience in America did not fit the preconceived stereotypes that many pictured whenever they heard the term "Irish immigrant." Instead, they reflected a smaller percentage of Irish-Presbyterians who settled relatively comfortably amongst a mostly Protestant nation. A mixture of religion, skills, and locations were key components in David's ability to succeed in America as an immigrant, shaping his life for the better.

²³ "Indiana, U.S., Marriages 1810-2001," s.v. "David B. Duncan" (m. 18 June 1913), *Ancestry.com*.

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