

# President Barack Obama

## *Family history and modern America*

BRIAN MERCER WALKER

On 17 March 2009, President Barack Obama marked St Patrick's Day at the White House in Washington, DC. His guests from Ireland included Taoiseach Brian Cowen, who not only presented him with a bowl of shamrock but also referred to the President's ancestor, Fulmouth Kearney, who had come to America from Ireland in 1850. The President gracefully accepted the shamrock and acknowledged his ancestor. He remarked, however, that he had only learnt recently of his Irish ancestry, and he joked that this information would have been very helpful when he first entered politics in Chicago! In this article, attention will focus first on how President Obama's link with Ireland was revealed. Secondly, we will examine our current understanding of the position in modern America of the numerous descendants of all those emigrants who came from Ireland, particularly from Ulster, and use information about his particular family background to cast some light on this matter.

Two years earlier, on 12 March 2007, Ancestry.Com, the genealogical organisation, published a press release on the family background of presidential candidate, Senator Barack Obama. His Kenyan ancestry through his father, also called Barack Obama, was already well-known. His background on the side of his mother, Ann Dunham, was little known until this point. While most of the roots of his mother's family tree went back to the beginning of the nineteenth century and earlier in America, investigation had shown an important link to an 1850 emigrant from Ireland. Senator Obama's mother was the daughter of

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Stanley Dunham and Madelyn Payne, both originally from Kansas but resident later in Hawaii. The young Barack spent much of his childhood with his grandparents in Hawaii. Stanley Dunham was a son of Ralph Dunham and Ruth Armour, both also of Kansas. Ralph Dunham's father was Jacob Dunham while his mother was Mary Kearney: they lived in Kansas but had come originally from Indiana. Mary Kearney was daughter of Charlotte Holloway, born in Ohio, and Fulmouth Kearney, born in Ireland.<sup>1</sup>

The sources for this information came from birth and marriage certificates, and census returns. Census schedules for Ohio and Indiana, 1850–70, included Fulmouth Kearney and recorded that his place of birth was Ireland. What these sources did not show, however, was from where in Ireland Kearney had come. In the quest which followed to find Kearney's exact place of origin, the leading role was taken by genealogist Megan Smolenyak, who sought to construct a picture not only of Kearney but also of his family in the hope that this would cast light on him.<sup>2</sup> Checking New York passenger lists, she located aboard a ship, the *Marmion*, which came to New York in March 1850, a 19 year old labourer from Ireland called Fulmouth Carney, clearly another spelling of Fulmouth Kearney. This first name, sometimes Fulmuth, Fulmouth or Falmouth, is highly unusual, and it is not clear whether it is a proper name or a nickname. Nonetheless, its rarity assisted greatly the search for this person. The passenger list recorded that he was bound for Ohio, which was also the destination of two others from Ireland recorded after him, William and Margaret Cleary. An 1850 census return for Wayne Township, Ohio revealed that all three were residing together, which suggested that there might be a family link between them.

The 1860 census returns for Ohio again recorded these three individuals, but Fulmouth was at a different address from the other two. Present in the Cleary home in 1860, however, was an elderly couple, Joseph and Phoebe Kearney, which raised the possibility that they were the parents of Margaret and also Fulmouth Kearney. Continuing her researches into New York passenger lists, Megan Smolenyak was able to discover that Phoebe Kearney had emigrated to America in 1851 with two children, Mary and William: Joseph Kearney had come in 1849. Then she located an Ohio will dated 1848 of a Francis Kearney who

left land to his brother Joseph, 'if he comes to this country'. All this suggested that Fulmouth Kearney's move to America in 1850 was part of a family chain migration. Finally, search among graveyard records in Ohio revealed the graves of Joseph and Phoebe Kearney in Fayette county. Of critical importance, the gravestone inscription of Joseph Kearney, who died 1875, stated that he came from Moneygall, King's Co. (later Co. Offaly).

Attention shifted to Ireland, particularly to the Diocese of Limerick and Killaloe. Eventually success was achieved due to the efforts of Canon Stephen Neill, rector of the parish of Templeharry which included the town of Moneygall. In the parish registers of the Moneygall Church of Ireland church, Canon Neill found records of the marriage of Joseph and Phoebe Kearney and of the baptism of their children, Margaret, William and Mary. A problem remained, however, concerning Fulmouth Kearney. There was no mention of him in these records, although there was an entry in the baptismal register for a Timothy Kearney for May 1829, which fits in with what we know of the age of Falmouth Kearney. It is very likely that Timothy and Fulmouth are the same person.

At this stage, one would have to say that these possible connections between President Obama's ancestor, Fulmouth Kearney, and the Kearney family of Moneygall and Ohio are interesting but hardly conclusive. One final piece of evidence, however, draws all these pieces of information together and makes a very strong case for accepting such connections. Megan Smolenyak has pointed out the significance of the names of Fulmouth Kearney's nine children which are known from census returns. One of their names was Martha, the same as his wife's mother, while another was Elizabeth, for some unknown reason. All the others, clearly, are those of Fulmouth Kearney's parents, siblings and uncle. So, two are named Joseph and Phoebe (after his parents), Mary Ann, Margaret and William (after his two sisters and a brother), and Francis (after his uncle). A final child was called Fulmouth. From all this evidence it is reasonable to conclude that, in all probability, Fulmouth Kearney was indeed a member of the Kearney family, formerly of Moneygall, Co. Offaly, Ireland.

Although President Obama was unaware until recently of his family connection with Ireland, the same cannot be said of many of his fellow

Americans. When in 1980 the U.S. census for the first time asked people to declare their ancestry some 40 million recorded Irish.<sup>3</sup> The 1980 *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups*, sought to provide information on those in America with an Irish background.<sup>4</sup> The volume pointed to two main groups. First, there was what was believed to be the largest section, namely Irish Americans, comprised primarily of descendants of emigrants from Ireland during and after the Great Irish Famine, and usually Catholic in background. Secondly, there was a smaller section called Scotch-Irish, that is mainly descendants of Scottish emigrants to Ulster who then moved to America in the eighteenth century, and who were normally Protestant. The 1980 census, however, gave no indication of how the 40 million Irish actually fell into any of these categories because it recorded neither people's religion nor the number of Scotch-Irish. People did describe themselves as Scotch-Irish in 1980 but the census authorities thought that this meant in many cases people who were of both Scottish and Irish ancestry, and so their figures were just added into both the Irish and the Scottish numbers, rather than tabulated separately.<sup>5</sup>

While the 1980 census gave only a partial picture of the make-up of the Irish in modern America, other sources provided valuable insights into this matter, and not a few surprises. From the 1970s a number of opinion polls sought to investigate the composition of the main ethnic groups in America and to cover areas not dealt with by the census. These polls included an Irish but not a Scotch-Irish category. The first interesting thing which the polls revealed was that Protestants made up the largest section of those people who identified themselves as Irish in contemporary America. For example, a Gallup survey of the 1980s estimated that of those Americans who said that their primary ethnic group was Irish, 54% were Protestant.<sup>6</sup> Recently, the 2006 survey of the National Opinion Research Centre (NORC) of the University of Chicago reported that of those who described their first ethnic identity as Irish, 48% were Protestant, 29% were Catholic and 23 % were other or no religion.<sup>7</sup>

How do we explain this high proportion of Protestants among the Irish in America? Professor Don Akenson has pointed to the importance of the time of arrival of the various groups in America.<sup>8</sup> The first waves of emigrants from Ireland came throughout the eighteenth cen-

tury, predominantly from Ulster, and were mainly Presbyterians, descendants of earlier Scots settlers in Ulster. The bulk of Catholic emigrants, who were more numerous, came later, especially after the Famine. Other factors are also relevant to explain the high number of Protestants among the Irish in America today (see below, two penultimate paragraphs), but this early arrival of Protestants from Ulster, plus a simple multiplier element, is a very significant factor in the high number of their descendants today. Further evidence to support this argument can be seen in the findings of the NORC surveys of the 1970s which revealed that, in its sample, some 40% of Irish Catholics were at least fourth generation in the US, while around 80% of Irish Protestants were.<sup>9</sup>

The second interesting thing revealed by the polls related to the social and economic position of these two sections in modern America. The NORC surveys of the 1970s sought to grade the different ethnic groups in relation to major indices of occupational and social success, such as income, education and professional careers.<sup>10</sup> What the surveys revealed was that as an ethnic group Irish Catholics had become among the highest-ranking groups. They also revealed that as an ethnic group Irish Protestants were among the lowest. How do we account for this disparity? The answer to this lies primarily in geographical and social differences between the two groups which were revealed by the polls in the 1970s. A majority of Catholics lived in the more prosperous North East and North Central USA, and were overwhelmingly urban, while a majority of Protestants lived in the less prosperous South and, while mostly urban, included a significant rural section. Professor Timothy J. Meagher has described how the settlement of Irish Catholic emigrants in northern metropolitan regions 'permitted their children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren to take advantages offered by the dynamic centers of the world's most dynamic economy'.<sup>11</sup> There were fewer opportunities in the South, especially in the Appalachians, during the twentieth century, until the last decades.

The 1990 census for the first time recorded those people who chose to identify their ancestry as Scotch-Irish. A total of 5,617,773 decided to do so. The 2000 figures record a figure of 4,319,232 for Scotch-Irish and 30,528,492 for Irish. The 1990–2000 fall in numbers in both cases has been attributed to more people declaring their ancestry as

American. The figures for those who described themselves as Scotch-Irish are substantial: they are similar to the figures of those who self-identified as Scottish, 5,393,581 in 1990 and 4,890,581 in 2000.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, these Scotch-Irish figures cannot be taken as a complete picture of Protestant emigrants from Ulster. We have already observed that around half those who record an Irish background are Protestant, but those who list a Scotch-Irish ancestry are only 15% of the combined Irish and Scotch-Irish figures in 2000, a total of some 35 million. This leaves a very sizeable number of the Irish in America who are Protestant (and others who were formerly Protestant but now list no or other religions), but do not call themselves Scotch-Irish. Who exactly are these people?

One answer to this question, and probably the main one, is that many millions of people today are also descendants of the early arrivals from eighteenth century Ulster, often from a Presbyterian and Scottish background, but they identify as Irish rather than Scotch-Irish. We get a good insight into this matter when we look at the regional distribution of those who say they are Irish in modern day America. The greatest number of those who record an Irish ancestry are to be found, not in the North East, as one might expect, but in the South. The 1990 figures, for example, show that of the 39 million who recorded an Irish ancestry, 33% were in the South and only 24 % in the North East.<sup>13</sup> One hundred years earlier, the U.S census reported on the place of birth of individuals and their parents, which helps us to see where emigrants from Ireland during and after the Famine settled in America.<sup>16</sup> Out of 4 million in 1890 who recorded Ireland as their country of origin, only 5% were to be found in the South, while 64 % were in the North East. Obviously, there has been population movement since 1890, but it is clear that this high number of people in the South who call themselves Irish today must be attributed in large part to the influx of emigrants, primarily from eighteenth century Ulster, before the Famine.

Why do many of the descendants of eighteenth-century Ulster emigrants self identify as Irish rather than Scotch-Irish? The answer is that in the eighteenth century their ancestors were often called, and, eventually, came to call themselves Irish. Professor Michael Montgomery has given good examples of how the term Scotch-Irish was also used

in this period.<sup>15</sup> Nonetheless, Irish was a more common designation and this is still the case. The term Scotch-Irish would take on added emphasis in the late nineteenth century, and it remains an important source of identity for many people. At the same time, it is clear that many other people from an eighteenth century Ulster background continued to describe Ireland as their country of origin and their ancestry as Irish. Senator John McCain and his wife, Mrs Cindy McCain, are examples of people with this Irish identity. Senator McCain has written proudly about his Scottish ancestors who came to Ulster and then moved to America. During the presidential election Mrs McCain responded to a question about race by saying; ‘Yes, you know, Mr Obama is an African-American man, and yes, we’re Irish. And isn’t that a wonderful thing for America.’<sup>16</sup>

There are other explanations which help to account for the large number of people in America today who are Protestant and retain an Irish identity. We must take into account Catholics who became Protestant. It is now reckoned that the eighteenth century emigration from Ireland included significant numbers of Catholics.<sup>17</sup> In the American colonies, however, Catholic church structures were very weak. The first Catholic diocesan bishop for America was consecrated only after the American Revolution, and there was a shortage of clergy. In eighteenth century America, many Catholics became not just Protestant, but, more importantly, Baptist or Methodist, in part because their structures were more suitable for frontier conditions.<sup>18</sup> Many Presbyterians also became Baptist or Methodist, often for the same reason. In nineteenth and twentieth century America, with its highly mixed society, other Catholics became Protestant. For example, Ronald Reagan whose father was from an Irish Catholic background and whose mother was from a Scots Presbyterian background, was brought up in his mother’s faith. We may note that a recent *Pew* report on religion in the US found that 28% of people had left the faith in which they were raised, in favour of another religion or no religion at all.<sup>19</sup>

Finally, the example of President Barack Obama’s ancestor, Fulmouth Kearney, points us to two other important explanations for the background of many of these Protestant Irish in America. Fulmouth Kearney was a member of the Church of Ireland and he left Ireland in

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1850. A number of historians, such as Professors Joe Lee and Don Akenson, have pointed out that the considerable numbers of emigrants, in the eighteenth century and later, who were members of the Church of Ireland, have often been ignored.<sup>20</sup> Many came from Ulster, but many came as well from other parts of Ireland, such as President Obama's ancestor. It remains true that the first waves of emigrants from Ireland to the American colonies in the eighteenth century consisted predominantly of Presbyterians from Ulster, but we should not ignore significant numbers of members of the Church of Ireland.<sup>21</sup> We must also note that Fulmouth Kearney emigrated in the mid nineteenth century, a reminder of the many Protestants from Ireland, Presbyterian and Church of Ireland (and also Methodist), who continued to emigrate to America during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, including during the Famine.<sup>22</sup> These later emigrants help to explain the spread of Protestant Irish to various parts of America, outside the South.

In the entrance to the Church of Ireland parish church in Banbridge, Co. Down, there is a memorial plaque to the White family, erected in 1920 by James White of Chicago. It states that he donated a peal of bells to the church with the proviso that every Halloween the bells should be rung to the tune of 'Home, sweet home'. On the 1st of November this year, as in every year since 1920, the sound of 'Home, sweet home' rang out over Banbridge. This serves to remind us not just of the White family but also all those other families, from diverse backgrounds, who have gone to America from Ireland. Their descendants today are first and foremost Americans, but still they acknowledge their old home and the land of their ancestors.

Professor Brian Walker is currently doing research on people of Irish or Scotch-Irish ancestry in America today. He will be happy to hear from people with interesting accounts of their family history. He can be contacted at Queen's University, 21 University Square, Belfast BT7 1NN, Northern Ireland or [b.m.walker@qub.ac.uk](mailto:b.m.walker@qub.ac.uk)

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NOTES

- 1 For an extensive family tree which covers both President Obama's parents see *The Times*, 6 Nov. 2008
- 2 See Ancestrymagazine.com, 3 Dec. 2008.
- 3 *U.S. Census, 1980: Ancestry of the Population by State: Supplementary Report*. PC-S1-10, p. 2
- 4 Stephen Thernstorm (ed) *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press).
- 5 *U.S. Census 1980: Supplementary Report*, p. 6.
- 6 D.H. Akenson, *The Irish Diaspora: a Primer* (Institute of Irish Studies, Belfast, 1993), p. 219.
- 7 National Opinion Research Centre, *General Social Survey, 2006*. I am grateful to Dr Ian Shuttleworth of the School of Geography, Archaeology and Palaeocology for helping me to understand this data.
- 8 D.H. Akenson, 'The Irish in America: Catholic or Protestant' in *The Irish Review*, 11, Winter 1991/1992, pp. 19-20.
- 9 *Ibid*, p.20.
- 10 Akenson, *op.cit*, 1993, p. 38.
- 11 T.J. Meagher, 'Irish' in E.R. Barkan (ed) *A Nation of Peoples: a Sourcebook on America's Multi-cultural Heritage* (Greenwood Press, Connecticut, 1999), p. 285.
- 12 *U.S. Census 2000: Ancestry 2000*, report issued June 2004. By Angela Brittingham and G.P. de la Cruz.
- 13 *U.S. Census 1990: Detailed Ancestry groups for States*, 1990 CP-S-1-2.1
- 14 J.J. Lee and M.R. Casey, *Making the Irish American: History and Heritage of the Irish in the United States* (New York University Press, New York, 2007), p. 689.
- 15 Michael Montgomery, 'Nomenclature for Ulster emigrants: Scotch-Irish or Irish?', *Familia*, 20, 2004, pp. 16-36.
- 16 Reported in *Irish Times*, 18 Oct. 2008.
- 17 For example, see David Doyle, 'The Irish in North America' in J.J. Lee and M.R. Casey (ed), *Making the Irish American: history and Heritage of the Irish in the United States* (New York University Press, New York, 2007), p. 179.
- 18 Kevin Kenny, *The American Irish: a History* (Longman, Harlow, Essex, 2000), pp. 72-3.
- 19 PEW Forum on Religion and Public Life, report dated 6 Nov. 2009. <http://pewforum.org/rssfeeds/rss.xml>. U.S. Religious Landscape Survey
- 20 Akenson, *op.cit*, 1993, p.222; Lee and Casey, *op.cit.*, p. 4
- 21 Kerby A. Miller *et al*, *Irish Immigrants in the Land of Canaan: Letters and Memoirs from Colonial and Revolutionary America* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2003), p. 4.
- 22 Reginald Byron, *Irish America* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1999), p. 52.