

The 'Irish Factor' in Jevons' Statistics: a Note

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Following the Irish emigration of the late 1840s and 1850s to London, Birmingham, Liverpool and Manchester, there were loud protests about the presence of the Irish from "educated people who lived in the respectable neighbourhoods of those cities and from the indigenous working classes who had to 'suffer' them not just as neighbours but as serious rivals for jobs" [Curtis 1968, p.91]. Much of this criticism was couched in terms of the notion of 'race', "that amalgam of ostensibly scientific doctrines, subjective data and ethnocentric prejudices". The Irish Celts (as opposed to the Protestant landlords and population of Ulster) were viewed as idle, dissolute, violent, intemperate, dirty, garrulous and emotionally unstable. In particular, the Irish were "uncivilized ... [and] downright barbarous" since they "did not know the difference between dirt and cleanliness" [ibid. pp.19,57]. One 'educated person from a respectable neighbourhood' who both reflected and contributed to that racial stereotype was W. Stanley Jevons and this note draws attention to the ways in which the stereotype can be found in his statistical work.

In his article on "Experimental Legislation and the Drink Traffic", first published in the February 1880 *Contemporary Review*,¹ Jevons noted that policy proposals to reduce the sales of "liquor" had to take account of the different conditions which prevailed between countries and between "towns" in the same country. There was, for example, a marked difference between "the orderly polished lower-class population in Sweden...and that of our great, busy, turbulent Anglo Irish towns". Moreover, there were "extraordinary and profound" differences in "intemperance rates" between English towns. These could be explained, in general, by reference to factors such as "magnitude, race, occupation, and local government". However, a more precise explanation was required, particularly because the final report of the Select Committee of the House of Lords on Intemperance (issued April 1879) had acknowledged that it was "thoroughly bewildered on the subject" [Jevons 1883, p. 268]. Jevons' comment that he would, "perhaps, draw attention [to this question] on a

separate occasion" [ibid.] reflected his previous attempt to obtain more detailed information to settle the matter. In April 1879, after the publication of the House of Lords report and as he was working on the *Contemporary Review* article, Jevons prepared a printed circular asking for more detailed and accessible statistics. (A copy of the circular is printed as an Appendix below).²

Although Jevons gave his home address for any respondents to the circular, he identified himself as Professor of Political Economy at the University of London and as one of the "Honorary Secretaries" of the London Statistical Society. Noting that, if the inquiry proved successful, the information would be published "through" the Society or in the *Contemporary Review*, Jevons focused on "the want of detailed information" concerning drunkenness published in national reports such as the Census. He suggested, however, that the problem could be overcome if "the reports usually presented by the Chief Constables to the Corporations of their cities or boroughs, or the County authorities" were made "accessible in a collected form". It was this type of statistical information which Jevons sought from his potential respondents.

So far, there is little that is particularly noteworthy about the circular except perhaps that it illustrates the lengths to which Jevons went to obtain statistics. However, this was far from an 'innocent' or 'neutral' enquiry. For Jevons made clear that he wanted a particular type of information to support an argument already decided on. What was really required was "detailed information concerning the character, and especially the nationality of the persons apprehended for drunkenness". More specifically, "the principal point on which I need information relates to the proportion of the drunken who are of Irish birth or extraction; there is reason to think that the differences of drunkenness are much a matter of race, a fact which, if established, would remove many false inferences". This claim, that it was those of 'Irish birth or extraction' who were largely responsible for a number of social maladies was a persistent theme in Jevons' writing.

The theme was first made clear when Jevons was selected as President of Section F (Economics and Statistics) of the British Association for the Advancement of Science in 1870. The appointment signalled the "recognition of his work on statistics, since his Presidential Address was on that topic and was published in the *Journal of the Statistical Society*" [Stigler 1982, p. 354]. Jevons' Address³ was delivered in Liverpool, the second-largest city in England, with the greatest population density, severe overcrowding and slum inhabitants who "seemed to live beyond the reach of law and order. The poorest neighbourhoods were heavily Irish" and, although the proportion of Irish immigrants had declined since the 1850s, they "were still abundant enough to feed stereotypes of the Celt as a subhuman species, addicted to drink and bloodshed" [Behlmer 1982, p. 49]. Jevons employed that stereotype to explain why some large towns had excessive mortality rates.

Referring to the "excessive mortality in great towns" such as Manchester, Salford, Liverpool, Glasgow and Dundee, Jevons observed that "it would seem as if we were entirely at fault, and that all our officers of health, sanitary commissioners, and the improvements of science and civilisation, cannot prevent nearly twice as many people dying as would die in a healthy and natural state of things". However, the explanation for the "high and mysterious mortality" was the presence of "a poor Irish population": "the great towns which are unhealthy agree in containing a large

proportion of Irish, and agree in nothing else which I can discover". That explanation would "relieve us from some perplexity, give us more confidence in sanitary measures, and point out exactly where most attention is needed" [Jevons 1883, pp. 208-9]. Presenting a series of statistical tables which he claimed gave his argument an "almost...conclusive character", Jevons added that, in towns with the greatest mortality rates, "it may not be unworthy of remark, that...the [numbers and hence proportion of] Irish women are in excess of the men" [*ibid.*, pp. 213-6].

A refutation of this argument appeared almost immediately. In a paper presented to the Manchester Statistical Society, T.R. Wilkinson showed that the statistics Jevons had provided could not support his conclusion.⁴ For example, Dundee and Paisley had an average of 20.9% of Irish in the population, with a high average mortality rate (26.9/1000). Yet Sheffield and London had a similar mortality rate (26/1000) but a low proportion of Irish (5.4%). Much the same point could be made by comparing Paisley, with an Irish population of 18.1% and a mortality rate of 26.5/1000, with four large 'towns' (Newcastle, Leeds, Birmingham and Sheffield) which had a higher average mortality rate (27.5/1000) and a comparatively low proportion (7.25%) of Irish inhabitants [Wilkinson 1871, p. 51]. The important case of Paisley was difficult to identify in Jevons' account, however, because he placed it in a separate table from most of the other towns [Jevons 1883, pp. 214-5].

Despite the publication of Wilkinson's devastating paper, Jevons continued to repeat his claim and to grasp at any statistics which could be construed as supporting it. In 1874, for example, he wrote to his brother:

"I am going again into the subject of mortality, and the effect of the Irish population on mortality in English towns. The volume of the *United States Census* which you gave me has just supplied some data quite countenancing my theory. Thus in the States of higher mortality the proportion of Irish deaths to all deaths is 8 per cent. In the States of lower mortality the proportion of Irish deaths is only two per cent, a very striking difference, which quite accords with other facts. Applying the same kind of calculation to German deaths the proportions are 4.4 per cent and 3.0, showing little evidence of any connection" [Black 1973-81, IV, p. 55]

In the following year, Jevons told his students at Owens College that "the way the Irish live, especially, in some of our large towns and in some parts of their own country, makes it a priori probable that they die fast" [Black 1973-81, VI, p. 59]. That mortality rates were linked directly to drunkenness was made clear in 1879 after Jevons' circular (see above) had been printed. Although there is no record of any response to the circular in the Jevons Archive, later in the year Jevons informed a meeting of the London Statistical Society that the "real explanation" for the high "rates of mortality and the degrees of drunkenness in the northern towns" was the proportion of Irish in the population. Moreover, he amplified his argument by suggesting that the working class in England could undergo a genetic deterioration due to a change in its racial composition: "The Irish migrate into England, but it is doubtful whether they migrate out of it again. Now if the Irish should continue to migrate into England and the English migrated to Australia, and all parts of the world, the result would obviously be that our population would become Celticised" [Jevons 1879, p. 640].

It was the same story in another *Contemporary Review* article in 1882 where Jevons argued that, until "statists" understood that "the different towns and counties of

England are to a great extent peopled by races of different characters, it will prove impossible to understand the profound statistical discrepancies which they exhibit". Although an "opposite opinion" had been expressed by Wilkinson, "[r]enewed and very careful inquiry has...quite satisfied me as to the correctness" of the argument given in 1870 on the connection between the Irish and high mortality rates [Jevons 1883, p. 159]. It is extraordinary that, without meeting Wilkinson's argument or producing any new statistical without meeting Wilkinson evidence, Jevons continued to repeat his racial claims about the Irish while characterising Wilkinson's paper as simply an 'opposite opinion'.

Unlike Jevons, Wilkinson did not reply on official mortality statistics only. His paper also reported the results of detailed studies of the Manchester slums which were used to reinforce his argument that mortality rates would be greater in the large towns where "the population is more densely packed" and where sanitary conditions were unsatisfactory.⁵ Kidd [1985] and Seed [1982] have emphasised that the Manchester middle class did not speak with one voice on poverty and such divisions were reflected by Jevons and Wilkinson in the early 1870s. While Jevons attacked the 'character' of the 'lower classes' [cf. White 1992a] and blamed the Irish for 'excessive' mortality rates, Wilkinson concluded his paper with the following:

"the high rate of mortality in large towns is caused by an increasing proportion of the very poor to the whole population, rather than by a large proportion of poor Irish...[T]he commonest labourers, the means of whose daily living is precarious, those also who prey upon society in various ways, as well as those multitudes of people who continually attend to the roughest drudgery of the world, remain mostly in the centre of our cities, where if not by their labours, their sufferings, and their sorrows, at least by the voluminous records of their deaths, they make them selves known to society" [Wilkinson 1871, p. 55].

Jevons' racism has gone virtually unremarked by historians of economic thought even though it pervades his work, including *The Theory of Political Economy* [White 1992b]. So far as his statistical work is concerned, the relevance of identifying it can be illustrated by one historian's reference to Jevons "missionary fervour" and "earnest social concern and commitment" which was "balanced by three vital checks: (1) a genuine strenuous concern to find out empirically about the lives of the poor and those to whom he was aspiring to do good; (2) an insistence on the discipline of careful empirical testing, as far as possible; (3) a fundamental cautious and critical fallibilism regarding the principles of science" [Hutchinson 1982, p. 373]. As examples of this "philosophical caution and critical fallibilism", Hutchinson (*ibid.*, p. 374) cites Jevons' statements in his *Principles of Science* that an analyst should exhibit a "perfect readiness to reject a theory inconsistent with fact". Indeed, "the more a man loves his theory the more scrupulous should be his attention to its faults" and he should suspend "judgement when the data are insufficient" to support an argument [Jevons 1887, pp. 586, 592]. Clearly, however, Jevons' treatment of the Irish with regard to intemperance and mortality statistics violated all of Hutchinson's 'vital checks' as well as those principles of good scientific behaviour which Jevons enunciated in the *Principles of Science*.

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Notes

1. Jevons 1880, reprinted in Jevons 1883, pp 253-276.
2. A copy of the original circular is in the Jevons Archive, John Rylands Library, University of Manchester, JA6/33/4.
3. Jevons 1870, reprinted in Jevons 1883, pp. 194-216.
4. Apparently some concern had been expressed in the Society about Jevons' characterisation of the Irish in the 1870 paper. Wilkinson reported that, after the paper was published, the "later President of our Society ... suggested ... that it might be useful to look into the figures bearing on this subject" [Wilkinson 1871, pp. 49-50]. Since Jevons was President of the Society in 1869/70 and 1870/71, the 'late President' was presumably his predecessor, William Langton.
5. As an example, Wilkinson cited his study of a number of courts with back-to-back houses in the Knott Mill district of Manchester (where the mortality rate of children in Irish was less than that for English families). There were two "privies" at the end of each court for 27 houses and cellars: "The privies to these places are also the receptacles to these dwellings for all their refuse. I have seen them on several occasions overflowing, and the coozing liquid crawling like a venomous reptile down the centre of the court" [Wilkinson 1871, p. 54]. These 'conservancy' or 'privy-midden' sewerage systems were subsequently acknowledged to produce a high infant mortality rate [Dyhouse 1978, p. 251].

Appendix

2, The Chestnuts, Branch Hill,
Hampstead Heath,
London, N.W.

12 April 1879

Sir,

In the course of some investigations concerning the prevalence of drunkenness in different parts of the United Kingdom, founded chiefly upon facts given in the Reports of the Select Committee of the House of Lords on Intemperance, I have been much impeded by the want of detailed information concerning the character, and especially concerning the nationality of the persons apprehended for drunkenness. The official reports of the Inspectors of Constabulary as presented to Parliament likewise fail to give the requisite information. There is reason to believe, however, that the reports usually presented by the Chief Constables to the Corporations of their cities or boroughs, or to the County authorities, often contain details of great statistical interest and importance; but these reports, being locally or privately printed, are not, so far as I know, anywhere accessible in a collected form.

As I am very desirous of entering minutely into the study of this most important subject, with a view to elucidate, if possible, the extraordinary and at present unaccountable differences which exist between the apparent rate of drunkenness in different cities, towns, and counties, I take the liberty of asking whether you have at your disposal any printed copy of a report or reports, giving such details concerning the apprehensions for drunkenness as would be likely to serve my purpose, and, if so, whether you can kindly send me such report or reports, to be used by me under

such conditions as you think proper to name.

I may add that the principal point on which I need information relates to the proportion of the drunken who are of Irish birth or extraction; there is reason to think that the differences of drunkenness are much a matter of race, a fact which, if established, would remove many false inferences. But, though the Census reports of course contain full information concerning the nationality of the population, I find that more direct information is needed concerning the character of the drunken. Any facts or hints which you could give me on this point would be of great value.

The results of my inquiry, if thought to be sufficiently successful, will probably be published either in the *Contemporary Review*, or through the London Statistical Society.

I am, Sir,

Yours obediently,

Professor of Political Economy in University College, London, and one of the Honorary Secretaries of the Statistical Society.

P.S. - Any documents or reply with which you may kindly favour me will reach me most promptly if addressed to Hampstead, as above.

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