

John Best (1835-1904): Ulster to California

Most researchers of John Best have identified neither his 1880 US Federal census entry nor his Immigration record into the USA and, as a consequence, most of the trees for this man at Ancestry.com contain flaws. Some have also included an Irish Tricolour as an illustration attached to his tree. Many have not identified his parents and siblings. This brief paper is an attempt to set the record straight.

Many researchers state that John was born in Tandragee, Ballymore Parish, County Armagh. His date of birth is unclear. Many researchers give 15 May 1835 but, as far as I can see, nobody has found (or at least posted details of) an original source for the place or that date. Nevertheless, a date around 1835 is plausible – although as we will see, the evidence probably points to a date several years later.

On 16 May 1862 John married Eliza (or Elizabeth) Renshaw at Warrenpoint, County Down. The marriage record from *Ireland, Select Marriages, 1619-1898* gives his age as 23, suggesting a birth date of 1839, and identifies his father as Thomas Best. Warrenpoint is some 20 miles south of Tandragee.

We can't be certain of the identity of John's father Thomas for reasons on which I'll expand later.

John and Elizabeth Renshaw had two children in Ireland:

John Edward, born 19 Aug 1864 at Mullaglass, Armagh. Source: *Ireland, Select Births and Baptisms, 1620-1911*

Isabella Agnes, born 7 Dec 1866 at Bessbrook, Armagh. Source *Ireland, Select Births and Baptisms, 1620-1911*

Mullaglass (modern Mullaghglass) is 13 miles south of Tandragee and Bessbrook is next door to Mullaglass and 14 miles from Tandragee

It seems probable (although in my view not proven) that John was a younger son and hence found it necessary to move away from Tandragee to find work as the family farm (actually small-holding) is a better description) would not support him and his family. More of the family farm later.

John's family were protestant: Descendents of English or Scottish migration to Ireland early in the 17th Century. There was – and sadly still is – a sharp line of segregation between the Anglo/Scottish protestant community on the one hand and the Irish catholic community on the other. In John's day the whole island of Ireland was ruled from London. It was never an English or British colony. The fact of rule from London rather arose because the holders of the English and Scottish crowns were also Kings of Ireland. Several researchers attach a picture of the Irish Tricolour to John's family tree. This is historically inaccurate and also misleading. Historically inaccurate since the Tricolour is the flag of the Republic of Eire, which only came into existence in 1922. Misleading since the majority of Anglo/Scottish people in Northern Ireland saw (and still see) themselves as British not Irish. I'm sure that nobody intended any offence in using the Irish flag on John's tree, but it must be recognised that the implication is rather like posing Martin Luther King under the Stars and Bars.

Like millions of other residents of Ireland John, with his wife and two children, migrated to the US. We have no evidence specifically of his motivation but in the overwhelming majority of cases the driving force was economic.

It seems clear that John crossed the Atlantic in the White Star ship *Celtic* and disembarked in NY on 7 Jul 1873. They had travelled in Steerage Class. An extract from the NY immigration record is below. A more complete montage of the record is attached as an appendix.

| | | | | | |
|----|-----------|----|---|-------|---|
| 6. | John Best | 30 | M | Lab. | ✓ |
| 7 | Eliza | 28 | F | Wife | |
| 8 | John | 7 | M | Child | ✓ |
| 9 | Isabella | 6 | F | | ✓ |

The immigration record gives John's age as 30, implying a birth date of c1843.

By the time of the 1880 Federal census the family was living at Big River Township (now Mendocino) in Mendocino County CA. It is unsurprising that this record has been missed by so many researchers since the census entry incorrectly transcribes John's surname as "Bass" rather than Best.

The family in 1880 comprised:

| | | | | |
|-----------|------|----|----------|-----------|
| John Best | | 38 | Farmer | b Ireland |
| Elizabeth | wife | 30 | keeps h. | b Ireland |
| John E | son | 15 | school | b Ireland |
| Isabella | dau | 13 | school | b Ireland |
| Charlotte | dau | 2 | | b CA |

Thus, based on the 1880 census, John was born c1842.

| | | | |
|-----------------|----------|---|-------------|
| Best John W 38 | | 1 | Farmer |
| Elizabeth W 30 | Wife | 1 | keeps house |
| John E. W 15 | Son | 1 | at school |
| Isabella W 13 | daughter | 1 | at school |
| Charlotte E W 2 | daughter | 1 | |

Extract from the 1880 census

The census entry makes it clear that John and his family lived in that part of "Big River Township South of Little River". Little River flows into the Pacific about 3 miles south of the modern town of Mendocino. We can therefore assume that John lived at least 3 miles south of what is now the town of Mendocino but it is by no means clear how far the census district stretched except that Arena, in the very south of the County was a separate district. The difficulty is that, in John's day, there was a string of little logging settlements spread down the coast and John might have lived in or near any of them.



Red highlight: Locations referred to in the 1880 census (not necessarily by the names by which they are shown on the map)

Mendocino itself had been established as a logging community in the 1850s and, by 1880, it was one of a string of similar settlements: Ten-Mile River, Casper and Noyo all north of Mendocino and Little River, Albion, Whitesboro, Navarro, Coffey's Cove, Port Vallejo, Greenwood and Manchester all south of Mendocino and straggling down the coast to Arena.

To slightly misuse the old Irish joke: If you wanted to get to Little River, Mendocino County, CA, then you wouldn't start from County Armagh.

The journey would have been long, tedious and uncomfortable. First a coach to Newry or Dublin; then a packet sailing to Liverpool to join the *Celtic*. Then 10 days or so in Steerage on board *Celtic* to New York.



White Star Line's SS Celtic

This would have been followed by an interminable series of railroads to Omaha NE; 1085 miles over the Union Pacific RR from Omaha NE to Council Bluffs UT; 690 miles over the Central Pacific RR from Council Bluffs UT to Sacramento CA; and 130 miles from Sacramento CA to Oakland CA. Even this rail journey had only been possible with the completion of the trans-continental rail link in 1869. Before that the railhead was at the Missouri River and the only way westward was by wagon train.

From Oakland there was a railroad link as far as Cloverdale in Sonoma County CA and lastly there was around 70 miles by stage to Mendocino.

We don't know what led John to Mendocino County, but it seems inconceivable that he got there by chance. In 1880 the population of "Big River Township south of Little River" consisted entirely of people born somewhere else. The household heads were split about evenly between those born in the USA and those born elsewhere, and the largest contingent among the immigrants came from Ireland. A schedule showing the place of birth of the household heads is attached as an appendix.

We can only guess that word filtered back to Armagh from an earlier migrant from Ireland that there were opportunities to be had in Mendocino and that John reached out and grabbed hold.

The other question of course is how he paid for the trip. A steerage ticket from Europe to New York cost around \$32 in 1870, perhaps including a certain amount of onward railroad travel. For most of the 19th century the exchange rate hovered around \$5: £1 and thus the \$32 ticket would have cost around £6 8s. The typical agricultural labourer wage in Ireland at the time was probably around 7s per week and thus a steerage ticket would have required around 18 week's wages for John. There is a record of a ticket from Bremen to New York at about the same time for a family of 2 adults and three children for a fare of \$75. John's family of course consisted of 2 adults and 2 children, but even so, it is hard to imagine that the cost to him of fares for the whole family was less than 40 weeks wages: An immense amount to save out of net earnings. By comparison an agricultural labourer in California might earn \$1 per day and thus might expend only 11 or 12 week's wages to buy the same ticket. This led to considerable piggy-back migration where successive migrants would send funds home to

pay for relatives or friends to join them. There were a variety of subsidy arrangements to support the cost of migration but it is estimated that rather less than 10% of migrants benefited in this way. We simply don't know whether any of these alternatives were available to John.

Free Passages
TO UNITED STATES AND CALIFORNIA

THE AMERICAN EMIGRATION AID SOCIETY, London, offer facilities for obtaining free, or assisted passages, of First Class or Steerage, to New York, California, or other States of the Union, by the various lines of steamers from Liverpool, Southampton, London, Glasgow and Queenstown.

Particulars may be learned by applying, post paid, and enclosing stamped envelope, with applicants full name and address thereon, to the Agents,
H. STARR & CO.,
 22, Moorgate-street,
 London; E.C.

Nov. 12. (12,452)

Tipperary Vindicator - Friday 10 December 1869

Given the large gap between the birth of John's daughters Isabella and Charlotte, it is entirely possible that he had other children who had either been born in Ireland and died there before 1873 or born in the USA after 1873 and died before 1880. The record is silent as far as I can tell.

The next reliable record for John is the 1900 Federal census, but we can glean a scrap of information about his whereabouts between 1880 and 1900 from records showing the birth place of his son William George, whose Social Security Death record gives his place of birth as Mendocino CA in 1881.

The 1900 Federal census, the transcription of which is badly corrupted, shows John and his family at 789 Haight St, San Francisco. The family comprised:

| | | | | |
|------------|------|------------|-------------------------|---------------------|
| John Best | Head | b May 1832 | age 68, married 38 yrs, | arr 1870, carpenter |
| Elizabeth | Wife | b Jun 1844 | age 55, married 38 yrs, | arr 1870 |
| John E | Son | b Aug 1865 | age 34, single, | arr 1870 |
| Lily E (C) | Dau | b Apr 1878 | age 22, single, | b CA |
| William G | Son | b Aug 1881 | age 18, single, | b CA |
| Alfred E | Son | b Mar 1883 | age 17, single, | b CA |
| Violet | Dau | b Jan 1886 | age 14, single, | b CA |

789 Haight St, San Francisco was on the south side of Haight St just east of the intersection of Scott St. #789 seems to have been replaced by a more modern building. But generally Haight St retains much of its 1900 appearance. This block is on the edge of Haight Ashbury, the hippy nirvana in the Summer of Love. John's age is given as 68. I suspect this to be an enumerator error. It is more likely in my view that John was 58, not 68.



The 700 block of Haight St looking East

To return to John's date of birth, we thus have four data points in total:

His 1862 marriage record suggests dob 1839

His 1873 Immigration record suggests dob 1843

The 1880 census suggests dob 1842

The 1900 census suggests dob 1832 (which I suspect to be an error and which should be 1842).

There is one other problem with the 1900 census: Namely the birth date of John's daughter Lily Emmeline. In 1900 her age is given as 22, implying a birth date of 1878. However Lily (short for Elizabeth) is not on the 1880 census, Not only that but John's daughter Charlotte is on the 1880 census with an 1878 birth date. We can interpret this is at least two ways:

- Charlotte in the 1880 census and Lily in the 1900 census are the same person or
- Charlotte was born in about 1878 and had married or died before 1900 (I can find no record of either) and Lily was born after the 1880 census.

My guess is the second, but it is no more than a guess.

I, like several other researchers have continued to use 15 May 1835 as John's dob. However we have to recognise, firstly that there is no apparent evidence for that specific date and secondly that the four pieces of evidence available to us all point to a slightly later date.

Several researchers suggest that John died on 21 May 1904. This is perfectly plausible since his wife was clearly a widow by 1910, but I can find no evidence for that specific date in 1904.



What of John's origins in Northern Ireland?

We've already seen that John was probably born a few years after 1835 and we've seen from the marriage record of John and Elizabeth Renshaw that John's father was Thomas Best.

This was a relatively unusual name in Ireland at the time. In Griffith's Valuation there are only 9 men in Ireland with the name Thomas Best, namely:

| Forename | Surname | Parish | County |
|----------|---------|-------------|--------|
| Thomas | Best | Aghalee | Antrim |
| Thomas | Best | Tartaraghan | Armagh |
| Thomas | Best | Ballymore | Armagh |
| Thomas | Best | Newry | Armagh |
| Thomas | Best | Blaris | Down |
| Thomas | Best | Shankill | Down |
| Thomas | Best | Newry | Down |
| Thomas | Best | Achonry | Sligo |
| Thomas | Best | Aghaloo | Tyrone |

We know also that John was married at Warrenpoint, County Down and that his first two children were born at Mullaghglass and Bessbrook, both in County Armagh.

On the following map the places associated with John (Warrenpoint, Mullaghglass and Bessbrook) are indicated by red dots surrounded by red circles, and the places associated with the Thomases in Griffith's Valuation are indicated by purple dots surrounded by purple circles.



It is immediately obvious that the locations associated with Thomas at Newry and Tandragee (Ballymore) are most closely aligned with the locations associated with John and that all of the locations associated with Thomas, with the exception of County Sligo (which I've ignored and which is not shown above) are fairly close together.

This is simply another way of expressing the fact that all of the Bests in Northern Ireland came from the same relatively small area.

So which Thomas was the father of John?

If we accept that John was born in Tandragee then the only obvious identification for his father is the Thomas Best who is recorded at Tandragee in Griffith's valuation and who had married Arabella Latta in 1828.

However, it must be said that, if we do not take it as a given that John was born in Tandragee, then his subsequent movements make a birth in Newry more likely.

Lastly, if we start the analysis of the various men named Thomas Best listed in Griffith's valuation then we can eliminate some as potential fathers for John but that process of elimination still leaves us with the following potential alternative fathers:

| Forename | Surname | Parish | County |
|----------|---------|-----------|--------|
| Thomas | Best | Ballymore | Armagh |
| Thomas | Best | Newry | Armagh |
| Thomas | Best | Blaris | Down |
| Thomas | Best | Newry | Down |

The following notes assume the fact of John's birth in Tandragee and hence that his parents were Thomas Best and Arabella Latta.



We know this Thomas from the 1838 Valuation Office Book, of which an extract is set out below and then from the 1863 Griffith's Valuation.

| Country Houses | | | |
|----------------|-------------------------|-------------------|--------|
| 165 | Jerry Swill | House and Offices | 3 12 0 |
| 166 | Thomas Mynnes | House and Offices | 3 12 0 |
| 167 | Thomas Best son and jun | House and Offices | 3 14 0 |
| 168 | A Richard Greenarays | House and Offices | 5 18 0 |
| 169 | Fever Hospital | | 4 5 0 |
| 170 | James Newby | House and Office | 4 2 0 |
| 171 | Lord Mandeville | House and Offices | 10 1 0 |

Extract from 1838 Ireland Valuation Office Book, p9: Ballymore

Griffith's Valuation was a vast Ireland-wide exercise performed by Richard J Griffith in his capacity as Commissioner of Valuation. The primary purpose of the Valuation at the time was to determine liability to pay the Poor rate (for the support of the poor and destitute within each Poor Law Union). It was enormously detailed and now, 157 years after its compilation, it is an invaluable source for Irish genealogy.

The Valuation tells us that Thomas farmed a little over 6 acres of land which he held on a long lease from the Duke of Manchester. The entry concerning Thomas is reproduced below:

| No. and Letters of Reference to Map. | Names. | | Description of Tenement. | Area. | Rateable Annual Valuation. | | Total Annual Valuation of Rateable Property. |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------|----------|----------------------------|------------|--|
| | Townlands and Occupiers. | Immediate Lessors. | | | Land. | Buildings. | |
| | BALLYMORE— | | | A. R. P. | £ s. d. | £ s. d. | £ s. d. |
| 37 | Thomas Best, . . . | Duke of Manchester, . | House, office, and land, | 6 2 25 | 8 15 0 | 2 15 0 | 11 10 0 |

One of the beauties of this record is that it was accompanied by detailed maps showing the location of each property. We thus know exactly where Thomas lived and farmed.

Today, as you drive north on Ballymore Rd going out of Tandragee, you pass 500 metres of modern development before reaching a crest and suddenly arriving at farmland. Everything that you can see on the left hand side (ie western side) up to the hedge line on the hillcrest was Thomas Best's land.

Below is an extract from the map accompanying Griffith's Valuation together with a modern aerial view of the same area. On the Griffith's Map Thomas' property is numbered #37.



In Thomas' day there was evidently a house at the southern end of the property which has since been replaced by a modern house set back further from the road. The image below, copied from Google Street View shows the property looking slightly west of north. In this view the modern house is slightly out-of-shot to the left.



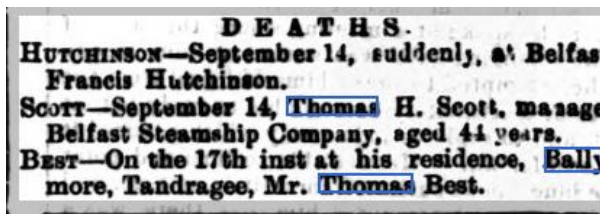
Thomas married Arabella Latta on 3 Jul 1828. The couple probably had the following children:

- Jane born 1829 (one researcher gives 28 Jun 1829 but without citing a source)
- Francis 1830 (one researcher gives 11 Dec 1830 but without citing a source)
- Mary 1834 (one researcher gives 5 Jan 1834 but without citing a source)
- John 1835 (one researcher gives 15 May 1835 but without citing a source)
- Arabella Sarah 1838 (one researcher gives 22 Jul 1838 but without citing a source)
- James 12 Oct 1847

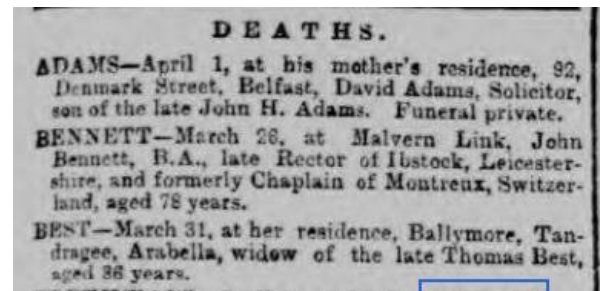
The difficulty is that here, once again, we partially depend on unsourced information that has been added to a family tree on Ancestry.com. Since no source is specified we are left with a dilemma: Has the information been posted by someone who had an impeccable source – maybe a family bible – but who failed to specify it or is it merely a wild guess or a faulty interpretation of data or even a pure fabrication.

Thus I can find no primary evidence for Jane, Francis, Mary or Arabella Sarah. There is impeccable primary evidence for James and we've made an assumption as above concerning John.

Thomas died at Ballymore on 17 Sep 1885. Arabella outlived him by six years, passing away on 31 Mar 1891. After Arabella's death the farm at Tandragee was sold.



Portadown News - Saturday 19 September 1885



Belfast News-Letter - Thursday 02 April 1891

SMALL FARM FOR SALE
 (BY PRIVATE BARGAIN)
 CLOSE TO TANDRAGEE.

TO BE SOLD by private contract That Small Farm in Ballymore, close to Tandragee, containing nearly 7 acres of excellent land, nearly all in grass, with Slated Dwelling and Office Houses, as formerly occupied by the late Mr Thomas Best, held under His Grace The Duke of Manchester at the Judicial Rent of £8 0 0 per annum, the property of MR ROBERT GILLIS. Apply to the owner, or
JAMES FORDYCE, Auctioneer,
 Portadown.

Portadown News - Saturday 31 October 1891



Without going into any detail in this paper, it seems clear that Thomas was the son of another Thomas and that the family may possibly descend from Francis Best who was at Lurgan in the 17th century. If that link proves to be demonstrable then it is likely that the family can be traced further back, probably to Yorkshire in the 16th century. That is a story for another day.

District of New York.—Port of New York.

I, *W. A. Thompson*

Master of the *Bella*

do solemnly, sincerely, and truly *swear*

that the following List or Manifest, subscribed by me, and now delivered by me to the Collector of the Customs of the Collecting District of New York, is a full and perfect List of all the Passengers taken on board the said Steamer *Bella* at *Spain* from which Port said Steamer — has now arrived; and that on the said List is truly designated the age, the sex, and the occupation of each of the said Passengers, the part of the vessel occupied by each during the passage, the country to which each belongs, and also the country of which it is intended by each to become an inhabitant; and that said List or Manifest truly sets forth the number of said Passengers who have died on said voyage, and the names and ages of those who have died.

So help me, God.

Sworn to this

7 July 1873

Wm. A. Thompson

List or Manifest of all the Passengers taken on board the *Bella* is Master, from *Spain* burden *4000* tons, whereof

| NAME | AGE | | SEX | OCCUPATION | The Country to which they were formerly subject | The Country of which they intend to become inhabitants | Tied on the Voyage | Part of the Vessel occupied by the Passenger during the Voyage |
|------|-------|--------|-----|------------|---|--|--------------------|--|
| | Years | Months | | | | | | |

| | | | | | | | | |
|--------------|-----------|--|----------|----------------|----------------|--------------|-----------|----------------|
| <i>John</i> | <i>30</i> | | <i>M</i> | <i>Mariner</i> | <i>England</i> | <i>Spain</i> | <i>at</i> | <i>Stowage</i> |
| <i>John</i> | <i>21</i> | | <i>M</i> | <i>Mariner</i> | <i>England</i> | <i>Spain</i> | <i>at</i> | <i>Stowage</i> |
| <i>John</i> | <i>7</i> | | <i>M</i> | <i>Mariner</i> | <i>England</i> | <i>Spain</i> | <i>at</i> | <i>Stowage</i> |
| <i>Small</i> | <i>6</i> | | <i>M</i> | <i>Mariner</i> | <i>England</i> | <i>Spain</i> | <i>at</i> | <i>Stowage</i> |

Appendix

The 1880 census for the "Big River Township south of Little River" district shows household heads born in:

| | | | | | |
|-----------|----|-----------------|----|-------------|-----|
| Australia | 1 | Holland | 1 | Saxony | 2 |
| Baden | 1 | Ireland | 36 | Scotland | 3 |
| Bavaria | 2 | Italy | 1 | Sweden | 10 |
| Brazil | 1 | New Brunswick | 3 | Switzerland | 1 |
| Canada | 4 | Norway | 6 | Tyrol | 1 |
| China | 1 | Nova Scotia | 13 | Wales | 1 |
| Denmark | 14 | Ontario | 3 | | 150 |
| England | 10 | Portugal | 5 | USA | 177 |
| Finland | 11 | Prince Edward I | 1 | Total | 327 |
| France | 2 | Prussia | 11 | | |
| Hanover | 4 | Russia | 1 | | |

The USA contingent was from:

| | | | | | |
|----|----|----|----|----------|-----|
| AR | 3 | ME | 48 | PA | 5 |
| CA | 7 | MI | 4 | SC | 1 |
| CT | 4 | MO | 12 | TN | 7 |
| IA | 5 | MT | 1 | VA | 8 |
| IL | 11 | NC | 3 | VY | 1 |
| IN | 5 | NH | 3 | WI | 1 |
| KS | 2 | NJ | 1 | Unstated | 3 |
| KY | 1 | NY | 24 | | 177 |
| MA | 8 | OH | 9 | | |