

The Francis Xavier O'Brien Problem

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You are standing in the baggage room at the airport, waiting for your luggage to catch up with you. Idly, you notice the various initials on the other suitcases, trying to reconstruct the names of their owners. There's E.E.E.—could that be Elizabeth Eugenia Everett? Or Ebenezer Edgar Esterhazy? And J.F.K.? Surely that couldn't be———?

In the next row, a large brown suitcase catches your eye. The initials on it are a bit faded, and you strain to read them. F.X.—what's that last initial?—yes, F.X.O'B. Why, of course! As the owner of this bag bends over to pick it up, you turn confidently to him. "Mr. Francis Xavier O'Brien, I presume?" The chances are at least nine in ten that you have addressed this total stranger by his correct name.

There is probably no other set of initials having such a strong predictive quality. The reason for this, of course, is a cultural one. The surname O'BRIEN is overwhelmingly the most common American surname beginning with O'B, and most O'Briens are of Irish Catholic ancestry. What is more fitting than to name a son after one of the founders of the Jesuit order, Saint Francis Xavier?

To find out how well these initials predicted the name, I carried out a brief survey in a dozen telephone directories covering several large East Coast cities. Specifically, I looked for all telephone entries giving a first name beginning with F (not just the initial), a middle initial X, and a surname beginning with O'B. I decided to regard FRANK as equivalent to FRANCIS, arguing that most Franks were christened FRANCIS but shortened the name to FRANK because of the feminine association with FRANCES. I found 14 Francis X. O'Briens and 3 Frank X. O'Briens, but no others.

How about it, logologists of America? Can you discover any F. X. O'B's who are *not* Francis Xavier O'Brien—perhaps Francis Xavier O'Boyle, or Frederick Xander O'Byrne?