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The Great Famine and Beyond: Irish Migrants in Britain in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries

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This is a timely and necessary book after nearly a quarter of a century during which a steady stream of specialist monographs and articles on Irish communities in individual British towns and cities has appeared. Even if Irish migration to Britain has not yet become the academic industry which is the fate of the Irish in America, there has, nevertheless, been a proliferation of studies on themes such as migrants' settlement patterns, changes in family structures, religious behaviour and beliefs, education, criminality, political institutions and sport. When topics such as anti-Irish violence, anti-Catholicism and racial stereotypes of the Irish are included, it becomes clear that the field has not been lacking in scholarly attention. The extent and variety of this literature has contributed to a feeling that the field is ripe for stock-taking and re-assessment, and in recent years several scholars (including Don MacRaild, the editor of this volume, and Graham Davis) have written extremely valuable one-volume syntheses of this research. The essays published here make an original and stimulating addition to this process of re-appraisal and also contribute to a re-orientation of research interests.

In broad terms, the essays can be categorised under the following headings: (i) historiographical surveys of the field; (ii) studies which employ the comparative perspective with other branches of the Irish Diaspora; and (iii) contributions which raise methodological questions about the study of migrant groups.

Historiographical surveys by two historians who have themselves edited three key collections of essays on the Irish in Britain set the scene. In an authoritative summation of the existing corpus of historical writing, Roger Swift identifies three broad questions which have dominated debate: Why did the Irish migrate and

settle in particular districts of Great Britain? How were they perceived and why did attitudes change? To what extent did they integrate and was a distinctive ethnic identity preserved? This volume makes significant contributions to answering the first and second of these questions.

In a complementary essay, Sheridan Gilley's lucid survey of the historiography of Irish Catholicism in England is prefaced by a combative passage attacking those social historians who approach the study of religion from a secular point of view. This is an important point, even if its impact will be somewhat muted by the intemperate manner in which it is expressed. It is widely accepted that religion played a larger part in the lives of Irish migrants than it did in the lives of the other inhabitants of English towns and cities (the situation in Scotland and Wales, neither of which are discussed in this essay, was somewhat different). However, the difficulty for historians of religion is that Irish attendance at places of worship was low when compared with patterns of religious practice in post-Famine Ireland. Consequently, Gilley's insistence on the importance of priestly authority in migrant communities in Britain needs severe qualification. The present reviewer's research in Catholic archives in Wales indicates that clerical authority was frequently challenged by Irish lay men and women, especially when the priest was considered to have stepped outside his 'proper' sphere of influence. The politicisation of denominational education following the inception of state education in 1870 and the public support expressed by some priests for the Conservative Party is an important factor here. By overtly participating in political life, the priest left himself open to being challenged on secular grounds. Gilley does not deny the possibility of a social history of religion - in fact, he has been a notable contributor to it in his pioneering studies of Irish Catholicism in London - but most social historians would agree that theological notions of clerical authority are problematic and should not be allowed to delimit the boundaries of historical research.

One of the remarkable facts to emerge from these surveys of the field is that few historians have made explicit comparisons between the Irish in different parts of the globe. However, among the intriguing aspects of this book is the way in which it demonstrates how a notion of an 'Irish Diaspora' has taken root in recent years (see Donald Akenson, *The Irish Diaspora: A Primer*, 1992, and the invaluable collaborative venture *The Irish World Wide*, six vols., 1992-7, ed. Patrick O'Sullivan). The concept has rapidly become an established part of the mental furniture of writers in the field, whereas previously it would have been an exotic and unfamiliar description to apply to the scattering of Irish migrants around the globe. The reasons for the emergence of the term are complex and have been much debated by scholars, but it implies a globalising perspective, encompassing the Irish communities in Australasia, South America and South Africa, as well as those in Britain and North America. To differing extents this globalising perspective informs a number of the contributions to this volume.

In a perceptive essay, Donald MacRaild argues that migration history is a particular beneficiary of comparative methodologies because the phenomenon links countries and continents. Taking the Atlantic world as the context of his essay, he delineates both the commonalties of Irish experiences on both sides of the pond (such as Orangeism and anti-Catholicism), as well as the key differences (such as the salience of race in American life and its comparable absence from the process of locating the Irish in British life). This wide-ranging chapter will be the essential starting point for those who wish to pursue the comparative dimension to Irish migration more generally and it provides an excellent context for two of the essays which follow.

In his closely argued and sophisticated study of Liverpool's Irish 'enclave', John Belchem makes comparisons between 'the two most Irish cities in the world', Liverpool itself and New York. Here, again, race is identified as one of the key factors differentiating the contexts within which the Irish in the two cities lived and worked. According to Belchem, the aim of ethnic Irish middle-class mobilisation in Liverpool was to gain the recognition of the host society; this was a failure because the host population saw it as emphasising Irish apartness. By contrast, the Irish-Americans successfully entered the mainstream by means of their ethnic mobilisation, thus enjoying the 'wages of whiteness'. This is a thesis of seminal importance with far-reaching consequences for understanding the processes of Irish integration and separation in British society.

If it is the structural differences between the Irish on either side of the Atlantic which impresses John Belchem, it is the institutional similarities which emerge from Alan O'Day's sure-footed comparison of the United Irish League of Great Britain and the United Irish League of America between 1900 and 1914. Nationalist politics pervaded all branches of the Irish Diaspora at least since the emergence of the revolutionary Fenian movement in the 1860s. The received wisdom is that nationalism was more eagerly embraced by those who migrated to America than by their compatriots in Britain, distance and the feeling of exiledom making the political heart beat fonder and faster. However, Alan O'Day reaches the initially somewhat surprising conclusion that after 1900, when the Home Rule question appeared to be moving towards its final resolution, both movements suffered from acute difficulties in mobilising the Irish community. Drawing on studies of ethnic mobilisation in eastern Europe he explains this result in terms of the relatively limited ethnicity of migrants.

Taken together, these studies indicate that the comparative mode has the potential to yield important new insights into the experience of the Irish in Britain. There are already indications of the kind of perspectives and debates which such an enterprise might engender: Belchem's and O'Day's essays demonstrate that a comparison between the Irish in Britain and America (and by implication other branches of the Diaspora) must address a combination of the contextual factors influencing ethnic mobilisation as well as the internal dynamics of the group. To be successful, such an enterprise would need to recognise the diversity of migrant experiences within both countries and possibly the ways in which similarities in some domains of social life are matched by stark contrasts in others. It would be instructive to compare not only the larger cities, like Liverpool and New York, but also the smaller ports and industrial towns, as well as the coalfields and other mining settlements. Irish participation in the armed forces of different countries might also yield intriguing insights. The slight literature on the history of Irish women in Britain would certainly benefit from comparison with the more developed literature on Irish women in the United States. Here is one notable area where this book establishes new perspectives and outlines fresh research agendas for the future.

Four essays in the volume raise important methodological questions about the study of Irish migrant communities in mid-nineteenth century British cities. From very different perspectives, each one tackles questions about Irish settlement patterns, associational networks and migrant social organisation. In a well-crafted essay on the Irish in Newcastle upon Tyne, Frank Neal reports what he modestly describes as the 'interim' findings of a project on the north-east of England. Based primarily on data culled from the census enumerators' books for 1851, his essay starts from the premise that 'the establishment of parameters regarding size, spatial distribution, occupational profile and the principal demographic features of the Irish migrants is a necessary but not sufficient condition for undertaking a fuller investigation of the growth and nature of Irish settlements in any area'. He reveals the importance of chain migration from the north-west coast of Ireland to Newcastle and establishes the importance of extended families, lodgers and visitors for bolstering immigrants' income levels. His research also confirms the findings of studies on other British towns which emphasise that the Irish did not inhabit ghettos. On the evidence of this essay the larger study of the Irish in the north-east of England planned by Frank Neal promises to be a major addition to the historiography of the Irish in Britain.

Neal recognises the importance of utilising sources other than the census if a fuller picture of Irish communal life is to be drawn, a point which other contributors pursue. One avenue with considerable potential in this respect is suggested by Mervyn Busteed in his chapter on the Irish in Manchester. While recognising the importance of the census, his principal contribution is the imaginative and creative use he makes of ballad literature to reveal dimensions of Irish cultural life hitherto understudied. Using this data he argues that the residential clustering of Irish migrants was a defensive mechanism designed to cope with latent and overt hostility.

John Belchem's chapter on the Irish in Liverpool, also sees ethnicity as defensive, emphasising that it was not a primordial attribute but a constructed identity, and that ethnic networks provided the benefits of security. This study is an explicit statement of the limitations of the census enumerators' books for understanding the social networks of the Irish. Belchem is careful to distinguish between social space ('the

locus of ethnicity') and geographical space, which was often shared with members of other groups. He identifies successful migrants as 'culture brokers', a group which tends to be obscured by aggregate census statistics.

The theme of ethnic networks of mutuality is continued by Martha Kanya-Forstner in her fascinating study of notions of Irish Catholic womanhood as revealed through the activities of lay networks in Liverpool, especially the work of the St Vincent de Paul Society. Members of the Society ('brothers') were men, while two-thirds of the recipients of relief were women. The distinction between deserving and undeserving poor acquired new resonances, the former being the poor who performed their religious duties, with the priest as final arbiter of the issue, thereby extending his influence in the community. Poverty is revealed here as a gendered phenomenon. Given the paucity of studies of Irish women in nineteenth-century Britain, this essay stands out as a seminal contribution to the field.

Recent writings on Irish settlement in nineteenth-century Britain have drawn attention to the small-town perspective, pointing out that significant numbers of the Irish settled in small numbers in towns like Chester and Stafford, where their experience was very different to the migrants who settled in the large cities. In the smaller towns, it has been suggested, the Irish failed to develop all-encompassing ethnic networks and gradually 'faded' into the host society. By contrast, this volume redresses the balance in favour of the cities. There appears to be a growing consensus here that the larger cities of Irish migration in Britain would benefit from the kind of multi-author treatment accorded the Irish in New York (R. H. Bayor and T. J. Meagher (eds.) *The New York Irish* (1996)). Besides Liverpool, both London and Glasgow would surely be excellent candidates for this kind of study.

Methodological questions of a different kind are raised by several contributors who make use of oral testimony and autobiography to shed light on the nature and persistence of ethnic identity. Colin G. Pooley's study of a Northern Irish Protestant woman who migrated to London in the 1930s to take up a position in the civil service lifts the lid on an understudied aspect of Irish migration. Using a combination of diaries and interviews with his subject, he concludes that the woman in question assimilated easily into English society. Such a conclusion is hardly remarkable given the woman's Protestantism and Unionism, but it is all the more significant because of that. By contrast, Sean Campbell reassesses the uses to which Tom Barclay's much-quoted autobiography, *Memoirs and Medleys: the Autobiography of a Bottle Washer* (1934), has been put as a preamble to his study of the second-generation Irish in England. His reading of this text conflicts with the interpretations of other historians who have read Barclay's testimony as evidence of rapid 'ethnic fade' in the second generation. This is an area which requires more systematic study, not just in terms of a few selected 'classic' texts. This essay robustly questions essentialist definitions of Irishness and undermines claims that the second generation are invisible and easily assimilated. Campbell claims that at issue here is the definition of what it is to be Irish. He makes a case for assessing aspects of the cultural production of non-traditional musicians like John Lydon, the Gallaghers and others in terms of a distinctive Irish dimension. However, he finds that Irish migrants are often uncomfortable with the hybridity of second-generation Irishness and consequently actively seek to inauthenticate it. The message seems to be that what might be described as the institutionalisation of Irishness in the Republic can have its downside for members of a more loosely defined Irish 'community' abroad.

It is not only the parameters of Irishness which have changed since the creation of an Irish State. The political economy of Irish migration to Britain since 1921 has also changed dramatically for those hailing from the Free State (and, from 1949, the Republic); whereas from 1801 Irish migrants had been citizens of the United Kingdom, those who migrated after 1921 belonged to a different legal jurisdiction. In an important essay, Enda Delaney assesses the nature of state intervention in the migration process from 1921 to 1945, during which time debates in Ireland about the constitutional position of the country led to discussion in Britain about restricting immigration. The IRA bombing campaign of 1939 and the onset of war meant that immigration was now regulated, especially as the Free State remained neutral. Delaney estimates that anything up to 150,000 Irish people migrated to Britain during the war years, some two-thirds of whom travelled under Ministry of Labour schemes. Free movement was reinstated in 1945. It struck this reviewer that the political economy of internal migration in Britain changed at roughly the same time, as the

British State began to direct surplus labour from the depressed to the more buoyant regions. Although coincidental developments, a comparison of the two might provide instructive insights to changing attitudes to Irish migration.

At one point in this fine collection of diverse and thought-provoking essays, Don MacRaild quotes a compelling metaphor by Donald Akenson to the effect that the international Irish Diaspora was like a Faberge egg, 'a marvellously complex phenomenon' in which 'details, though fascinating in themselves, are subordinated to the larger picture, since they all interrelate and are all subject to the whole.' While it would be misleading - and unfair - to say that the individual contributions to this book are incapable of standing alone (like the sections of a Faberge egg), it is also the case that taken as whole the volume amounts to much more than a miscellany. The guiding theme of the volume is the persistence of ethnicity and the failure of Irish migrants simply to disappear into British society in the second generation. The Irishness of both migrants and their descendants continued to be important, even for those distanced from the experience of migration itself by several generations. Something of a consensus emerges here that 'ethnic fade' was deferred for far longer than some historians and sociologists have claimed in the past, with only one contributor arguing in favour of rapid integration. The unanswered question is whether Protestant Irish migrants retained a sense of ethnic attachment for as long as did Catholics. The one study dealing with this suggests that assimilation was, in fact, accomplished in the first generation. This is an area where further research is required before confident generalisations can be made. It is also necessary to take full account of the implications of the proliferating studies of Irish settlement in smaller towns, where Irish assimilation appears to have been rapid. Taking these factors into account points to the conclusion that migration is a singular noun but a plural experience. Each migration from Ireland to Britain from the mid-nineteenth century has been characterised by diversity of composition and plurality of experience.

The Great Famine and Beyond is an extremely valuable addition to the historiography of the Irish in Britain and will be warmly welcomed by students of Irish migration more generally. It provides evidence of the continuing vitality of the field and addresses issues of concern to all historians of migration and ethnicity. It will be a key reference point for students and researchers for some time to come.

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[2]

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