

The Irish in Victorian Britain: the Local Dimension

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Although by far the oldest and most numerous ethnic minority in Britain, the Irish have received relatively little attention within British social history or indeed the sociology of migration, race and ethnicity. The literary disciplines have for too long been the focus point of **Irish Studies** and it seems the historical importance of this large, mobile, ethnic and (on the whole) religiously distinct group has been somewhat neglected. At this time, the field is developing with new researchers becoming interested in this moderately "invisible" group. *The Irish in Victorian Britain* has been addressed in two previous volumes, and now this new book of essays, by Roger Swift and Sheridan Gilley. Their first collection of essays entitled *The Irish in Victorian City* (1985) presented an eclectic collection of what was then a relatively new subject area having only been covered substantially in the post-war period by one monograph from J. A. Jackson (who in many ways set the template for this field of study) and two local studies from London and Leeds. That book provided a classic overview of the subject by M. A.G. Tuathaigh before moving into what became familiar themes within the subject. Inherent within the historiography was the view that the Irish community in Britain as subaltern subjects, problematised, criminalised, suffering from various forms of discrimination and delineated as mainly poor Catholic males. That book discussed issues of integration and assimilation, political engagement with working class politics and the media, anti-Irish violence and the use of the "Orange Card" for electoral advantage by the Conservative and Unionist Party in local elections - a historical tendency that is as relevant today within as it was in the 1850s and 60s especially if we consider the refugee status of those Irish fleeing the privations of the Great Famine. Another important strand of that first volume was the significance of the Catholic Church to the migrant Irish community; a significant theme as the Church was itself undergoing a period of post-Reformation renewal that was supported and enriched by the expansion of its Irish born congregations. That first volume also included a number of localised studies on Bristol, York, Edinburgh and a comparative exposition of communal violence in Glasgow and Liverpool. The second Swift and Gilley volume entitled *The Irish in Britain, 1815-1939* (1989) expanded the field of

study and revised a number of the post-Jackson positions, while developing further the themes of settlement, segregation, integration, politics and political literary texts, as well as Irish migrants; influences upon the labour-market and crime. The volume included one particular provincial essay on the town of Stafford.

Now the third Swift and Gilley volume expands this theme of local specificity in the migrant Irish experience, situating the emigrants within their regional economic, political and social contexts. Thus the volume underlines the heterogeneity of the Irish migrant experience and begins to pull away from the post-Jackson historical focus into areas and fields that are under researched. All three volumes include useful bibliographies.

Overall the new volume is a useful exposition of new research in the area that has been bolstered by recent monographs by scholars such as Paul Leary, Frank Neal and Donald MacRaild. A useful introduction by the editors is followed by Paul O'Leary's contribution; an essay focused upon the mainly hostile reaction that *Irish Great Famine* migrants received in Wales. He emphasises the importance a strong sense of regional identity and the specific economic and political context in determining this reaction. O'Leary suggests that the regional study might be more useful than the historiographical micro-study of towns and cities that have dominated the field so far. An example of this new emphasis on the smaller Irish community and the importance of local context is presented by Louise Miskell's interesting account of the Irish in Cambourne Cornwall between 1861 and 1882. Her research challenges some of the historiographical assumptions stemming from the analysis of larger communities that concentrate on the poor, low-skilled, urban dwelling Irish. Miskell argues that the anti-Irish riot of 1882 was determined by the local context in peripheral Cornish society rather than a generic anti-Irishness. She also points briefly to the effect of local contexts in shaping residential patterns and challenges the idea of the 'Irish area' as a construction based as much upon local memory as ethnic clustering. She also points out the fact that the Irish were spread throughout the local economy and not just concentrated in the low-skill labouring sector. As such she presents important evidence of the heterogeneity of Irish experience in nineteenth century Britain as well as the salience of memory and the constructive discursive nature of ethno-geography in its demotic and official resonances.

No regional study of the Irish in Britain would be complete without surveying London. Apart from one monograph published in the late 1970s by Lynn Hollen Lees, there has been little published work, so Jacqueline Turton's examination of the poor Irish in London utilising the work of Henry Mayhew's investigations for the *Morning Chronicle* is long over due. The essay is a useful exposition of Mayhew's early form of methodologically problematic sociological oral history. The piece presents information on routes taken to London from Ireland, settlement, work and social conditions, crime, associational cultures and intolerance. There is much of interest within the essay, although a little weak on the role of prejudice and anti-Irishness, there are some interesting passages and conclusions.

Britain's second city has also been cruelly neglected in published studies. Carl Chinn's somewhat eclectic but worthy essay covers the Irish in early Victorian Birmingham. Empirically focused, his detailed analysis of the 1851 census covers the usual preoccupations of the economic and social historiography; general demography and residence patterns, economic engagement of the migrant, the importance of kinship networks etc.. Although Chinn uses the idea of the "Irish community" somewhat loosely, this essay is the first to focus on the important industrial centre of Birmingham and as such is a welcome addition to the field that has so far been somewhat eclipsed by work on the North of Britain. Frank Neal's contributes another even more empirically detailed "work in progress" on Irish settlement in the North East and North West of England. Using his personal database of over 35000 records of the Irish born and their children, he also focuses on the 1851 census to extract a wealth of detail of the lives of Irish migrants in this area. Again the local economic context is foregrounded in its influence upon settlement and work patterns. The wealth of information, statistics and tables will be of great use to historians and as his work progresses will undoubtedly become a valuable historical resource. Another detailed census study on Stafford is provided by John Herson who has been conducting research into the Irish population of this small town for some time, revealing another aspect of the settled Irish communities of the nineteenth century. Herson has extracted a large amount of detailed information much based upon following individual families. The chapter is especially useful for its inclusion of Protestant Irish. He is able for instance to show that Protestant Irish

migrants were more skilled and therefore more affluent than their Catholic countrymen being overwhelmingly represented in skilled manual or managerial and professional employment. Along with Chinn, the re-introduction of the family network as important is another welcome divergence from the traditional historiography and a great deal of work awaits similar studies elsewhere.

Another strand within all three books is the important role played by the Catholic Church in relation to the majority of Irish migrants. Marie McClelland's contribution examines the role of the Church in providing education for Irish migrants in Hull and in particular the importance of Catholic Nuns. Her description of the history of Catholic education in the town maps the problems and successes of the Catholic institutions in establishing a reliable education for Catholics in the face of some hostility from the local educational institutions and others. The focus of a secular role within the Church's functions was obviously important in the establishment and integration of the Irish Catholic community. Frank Boyce - somewhat at odds with the book's title - takes a look at the Irish Catholic community within the Liverpool docklands from the 19th century, concentrating to some extent on its disappearance from the 1950s to the present day. Utilising archival and oral sources he describes the community now lost and the importance the parish was in cementing group identity. This is a useful and sensitive narrative of the community and one senses almost a note of regret at its passing or rather transformation from a religious into a secular "community centre" focused society.

The political strand of the historiography is covered in three essays, one by John Belchem - ostensibly about the Liverpool Irish middle classes but more focused on the political engagement of the group. Belchem has done much work on the associational culture of the Irish ethnic enclave in Liverpool and declares a mission to rescue the community from "historical caricature and stigma". This essay builds upon his previous work, essentially engaging with the role of the middle class Irish in building an Irish nationalism as well as recording some of the ethnic entrepreneurs of the city. Belchem is quite correct to point out the over-emphasis on poor Catholic migrants within the historiography, there was a notable middle-class Irish element in nineteenth century Britain that is only just coming to light as researchers begin to ask relevant questions. The neglect of the Irish middle classes is connected to the prejudices surrounding the Irish in Britain. Arguably within the British national discourse, the memory of the Irish is still that of an unskilled poor labourer with a drink problem and predisposed to violence. These prejudices have subliminally affected research agendas in the past. A second political essay is provided by John Hutchinson and Alan O'Day who examine the political tensions between the generations of Irish nationalists and "new" upwardly mobile section of middle class migrant more willing to form a new identity for Irishness based upon sport, literature and language in London of the 1890s. Also, Gerard Moran provides an interesting examination of Irish nationalist politics in Lancashire by examining the Brotherhood of Saint Patrick, "the first organisation after the Famine to organise the Irish into a movement focusing on Irish problems, not confining itself exclusively to political issues". This is an important area as the organisational networks of the Irish diaspora have again been under researched. All of these essays in their own way add to the empirical knowledge that is the raw material of historical research and understanding, operating within a conventional social and economic historiography.

However, Mary Hickman in an important essay within the book argues for an alternative historiography for the Irish in Britain. Her inherently structuralist thesis disputes the segregationist/assimilationist model that characterises much of the literature, pointing out that the discourse focuses on the group itself and its relative "successes" or "failures" in relation to the host state/society without problematising the role that the receiving society poses to the migrant. Her critique censures the "inherent empiricism" of most historiography that produces a systematic exceptionalism from the sources, professional knowledge of which becomes a "substitute for thought". Hickman calls for a new approach that systematises the various factors of "race" ethnicity, class, religion, politics etc. to provide a new analysis of how Irish experiences in Britain were configured in relation to these factors. She is very critical of the assimilation model arguing that it disengages migrants from the structural factors such as class and access to employment, undervalues the role of "race" and ethnicity in determining class position and ignores the role the Irish played in the construction of a cross-class racist British nationalism. The role of the state is also transparent in much of the

historiography according to Hickman, the particular articulation of which structures the institutional and cultural context of the receiving society. For Hickman, the Irish in Britain arrived at a crucial time of the British state's nation building project, a project that was concerned with constructing an idea of an homogenised and centralised state and culture. Irish Catholic peasants became within this context the defining "Other" from which a cross class "national-racial unit" was constructed, That is to say Englishness/Britishness. This unit was defined by Protestantism and the inculcation of "respectability", or in other words bourgeois values, into the working classes. Thus the new nineteenth century institutions of police, education, mass media etc. were involved in a nation building project part of which was the construction of a new political subject and thereby the state reconstructed its self and its hegemony. The Irish were problematised within this project and for Hickman the focus of attention for historians should be upon this historical context rather than the relative success or otherwise of Irish migrants integration strategies which has been the legacy of the current historiography. Hickman's thesis presents new challenges to historians in this area and opens up a potentially rich seam of a more cross disciplinary approach utilising some of the concepts and methodologies of sociology, cultural studies and law among others.

The construction of British and Irish national identities were crucial at this point in history, as was the need to shore up what was to become the ascendant economic and political configuration of Britain and elsewhere. Liberal democracy has told many stories about itself within the nation building project of Britain and one has been the idea of assimilation as positive acculturation rather than a negative ethnic suicide. One story that is lacking is how the Irish helped to define who was and was not Irish, English, Scottish, Welsh, Cornish, Manx and British. Lynda Colley's work in this area significantly skirts the role of the Irish and at best is a neglect of the facts. The role of continental and colonial people's was important, but if we are to focus on the role of religion on British identity then the Irish need to be taken seriously as the internal and external "Other" to British nationalism. In light of long term anti-Catholicism, medium term political and anti-colonial agitation at home and abroad as well as medium to short term tensions created by mass migration of impoverished peasants in the Great Famine period, the role of the Irish as a political, religious, ethnic and class antithesis to the bourgeois, freeborn, colonial Protestant Englishman becomes clear.

In conclusion, this new collection opens up some new areas for research within the established historiography with some strands emigrating away from the subaltern slant and numbers game. The shift towards the regional and small scale studies as well as middle class and family networks are to be welcomed as a rich source for future empirical work. The political and religious strands are still under researched and the essays included are important as are the mapping of Irish communities as yet untouched by study or published work. In the light of all the empirical work available and to be done, the introduction of a more theoretical element to the field is a welcome challenge. This said however, the book on the whole sticks closely to received wisdom and scarcely tries to challenge or push historiographical boundaries too far. When compared to other works such as Patrick O'Sullivan's diasporically and cross disciplinarian collections *The Irish in the New Communities* (6 volumes 1992) or Donald MacRaild's *Culture, Conflict and Migration: The Irish in Victorian Cumbria* (1998) and his excellent *Irish Immigrants in Modern Britain, 1750-1922* (1999), this new volume feels a little too content with the received wisdoms of the field. This can suggest - incorrectly - that the past two decades of study on Irish migration and settlement in Britain has moved relatively little.

One stimulating area of research has been opened up by Hickman, however. As the oldest, most prolific and culturally integrated of migrants to the British isles in the modern period, the Irish communities and the reactions they provoked and coaxed from their resident neighbours and vice versa has much to tell us about issues of identity formation, ethnic and religious prejudice as well as nation building, the invention of traditions of ethnic memory and imagined communities at an important time in Britain's history. Many of the patterns of prejudice that the Irish experienced in nineteenth century Britain are remarkably consistent with modern expressions of racism and intolerance towards immigrants. Arguably, the notions of Irish and British are meaningless with out each other. Thus the study of this group in this period should be at the centre rather than the periphery of British history.

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