

IRISHNESS IN BRITAIN

INTRODUCTION: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF IRISHNESS

In Ronan Bennett's novel of 2004, *Havoc in its Third Year*, seventeenth-century England is charged with contemporary significance. The 1630s is shown as a time of religious fanaticism and cultural paranoia. Ominous signs of danger are seen everywhere and scapegoats are zealously sought. Then as now it is the immigrant who is most vulnerable, whose construction as Other and as a threat to an entire civilisation justifies the exercise of power and enables the consolidation of hegemony. In Bennett's novel, though, the scapegoated Other is not Muslim but Irish. Employing the lyrical prose of the King James Bible, the novel's narrator guides us through the ethical turmoil experienced by coroner John Brigge as he investigates charges of infanticide falsely brought against an Irishwoman, Katherine Shay. Her guilt, it seems, is predetermined by her ethnicity:

Her accent was unfamiliar and outlandish. The jurymen inclined their heads to consult each other and, as incomprehension seeped in, a slow murmur went up. ... Katherine Shay was a vagrant, a foreigner. She lived as beasts live, without enlightenment. She murdered her child. There could be no doubt about it ...

An undone and lascivious sinner. To the men who were gathered to witness her destruction, it was a concoction to excite their imaginations. And among the women there was a spleen against her, a particular contempt for the unrestraint written into her body and bearing ... Vagrants did these things. The Irish did these things. Brutality was expected.¹

Irishness in Britain clearly signifies a threatening otherness, which is presented as a threat to the integrity of the body politic. It denotes religious and political subversiveness, social barbarity, moral laxity and a wild sexuality. As Brigge later discovers when he ejects a band of beggars from his land, such discourses of otherness are effective in igniting anger and popular xenophobia amongst the indigenous poor: 'We are Englishmen,' these disaffected men and women tell him, 'and must live somewhere' (5-6).

Bennett's analogy between then and now, between the Irish and other racialised immigrants in Britain, reminds us that the Irish are that country's oldest and largest ethnic minority. The significant 'Otherness' embodied by the Irish in Britain over that long period has served a crucial function in cementing the identity and authority of the host nation. From as early as the twelfth century, representations of the Irish in texts such as Giraldus Cambresis's *The History and Topography of Ireland* and *The Conquest of Ireland* have been bound up with the exercise of power and the construction of English and later

¹ Bennett, *Havoc*, 14, 12, 25.

British identity.² Elizabethan 'Englishness', as Stephen G. Ellis has shown, was shaped and defined in relation to the natives of the Celtic fringes.³ Edmund Spenser famously presented the Irish as 'a turbulent, semi-nomadic, treacherous, idle, dirty and belligerent lot', reminiscent of the 'Savages or Indians of North America.'⁴ Then and later, especially during the nineteenth-century formation of the British nation-state, Britishness was to a large extent dependent upon a racial and religious Otherness located in Ireland. But with a stricter border between self and other came an increased awareness of border crossing. Cultural images of Irishness as Otherness offer a barometer of British anxiety at significant social and political moments. Heathcliff, as Terry Eagleton has famously argued, is a symbol of barbarism, wild sexuality and working class insubordination who appears during a year of mass famine immigration, 1847, *Wuthering Heights* itself being set at the Act of Union of 1801.⁵ The Irish, as significant others, were saddled with a range of 'meanings' in these contexts:

an immigrant *untermensch* [for example] which threatened to gnaw at the vitals of English society. Others disliked them for their "Irishness", for displaying all the vices of a troublesome nation which constantly bridled at English control. Some despised them for the complexity of social and economic problems which, apparently, they imported into England (and Scotland), while many bitterly objected to their religion.⁶

The Irish signifier has continued to denote a threat to British national integrity through the twentieth century, the IRA terrorist being its most recent form. According to Anthias and Yuval-Davis, the Irish during the 1970s and 80s were routinely 'considered potential "dangerous IRA terrorists" or at least callous supporters of their actions. The collective criminalization of the Irish, like the collective criminalization of Black youth, does not exist only in the realm of interpersonal prejudice but is also institutionalized by law, via the use of anti-terrorist laws.'⁷ In recent years, though, the perceived threat of the Irish has been superceded. Others have taken over as the most significant threat to the body politic and now, amidst the flux and homogenisation of globalisation, Irishness as a cultural signifier appears to denote a comfortable and nostalgic

² Cambresis describes the 'wild Irish' as cannibals, murderers and robbers indulgent in sodomy and incest: 'Ireland, a countrie, the more barren of good things, the more replenished with actions of bloud, murther, and louthsome outrages, which to anie good reader are greevous and irksome to be read and considered.' Giraldu Cambresis, *The Irish History Composed and Written by Giraldu Cambresis, and Translated into English...*, by John Hooker..., Vol.II of Raphael Holinshead et al., *The First and Second Volumes of Chronicles...* (London, 1577), Epistle Dedicatore. Quoted in Lebow, *White Britain and Black Ireland*, 75.

³ See Ellis, *Tudor Ireland*, 319.

⁴ Edmund Spenser, quoted by Curtis, *Anglo-Saxons and Celts*, 50-1.

⁵ See Eagleton, *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger*.

⁶ Walvin, *Passage to Britain*, 53.

⁷ Anthias & Yuval-Davis, *Racialized Boundaries*, 44-5.

sense of 'home' and family.⁸ Writing of the climate of fear in London after the July 2005 bombings, Sean O'Hagan builds on Bennett's comparison between Britain's historical Irish and contemporary Muslim populations, both of which have suffered guilt by association:

It strikes me ... that Muslims in Britain may become what the Irish in Britain became for a long while: the Other, objects of scrutiny and suspicion and, occasionally, targets for recrimination. Irish bars and businesses were attacked after the Birmingham and Guildford bombings; as I write, a man has been arrested after someone tried to burn down a mosque in Liverpool. In the media, too, a whole community is being held to count for the fanatics in their midst – if, indeed, there can even be said to exist such a monolithic thing as 'a Muslim community'.⁹

Analogies between the Irish and other racialised, immigrant groups are not, of course, unproblematic.¹⁰ In critical circles, objections have long been raised to the inclusion of Ireland under the 'post-colonial studies' umbrella; others, as Popoviciu, Haywood and Mac an Ghaill point out below, have identified the Irish in Britain as 'politically black', to use the words of Director of the Institute of Race Relations in Britain, A. Sivanandan.¹¹ At the same time as being significantly Other in Britain, the Irish are clearly geographically, linguistically, culturally, ethnically similar. Indeed they have often been 'problematically proximate',¹² too close for comfort. Salman Rushdie's diagnosis of Britain's problem – that its history all happened overseas – does not apply in the case of Ireland. But the double bind of Irishness in Britain is that these ethnic and cultural proximities and similarities have also problematised Irish charges of discrimination and claims to recognition in Britain. The British race-relations industry has tended to conflate whiteness with Britishness, with the result that the white Irish are assumed to have assimilated unproblematically into a 'British' identity.¹³ Without the signifiers of difference upon which

⁸ See Negra, 'The New Primitives'.

⁹ O'Hagan, 'Living with Fear'. Ruth Dudley Edwards, in an argument designed primarily to critique the Republicanism of John McDonnell, rightly warns against simplistic conflation of the two very different experiences of the Irish and Muslim populations in Britain. See Dudley Edwards, 'Don't Labour the Irish Immigrant Point'. Charles Moore, in the *Daily Telegraph*, effectively makes the argument for prejudice: 'The Brian Paddicks of the day would have been appallingly negligent [during the IRA bombing campaigns in Britain] if they had not concentrated their investigations among the Irish. And the vigilance of the public, which the police then and now rightly call for, inevitably directed itself towards Irish neighbours, Irish accents, Irish pubs. So it must be with Muslims in Britain.' Moore, 'Telegraph Opinion'.

¹⁰ For a different angle on this comparison of the Irish with contemporary immigrants and asylum seekers, see Garner, *Racism in the Irish Experience*. On the Irish as the 'largest ethnic minority in contemporary Britain', see Anthias & Yuval-Davis, 44.

¹¹ Sivanandan, 'Challenging racism'. On Ireland and postcolonialism see for example Howe, *Ireland and Empire*.

¹² Eagleton, *Heathcliff*, 127-8.

¹³ See Hickman & Walter, 'Deconstructing Whiteness'; and Walter, 'Contemporary Irish Settlement in London'.

conventional discourses of 'race' rely, the Irish, as Liam Greenlade has argued, become invisible in Britain, their presence unrecognised and their political voice unheard:

One feature of Irishness in England is its relative invisibility. This arises in two ways. English racism focuses upon colour of skin rather than ethnicity. In this milieu the Irish are literally invisible until they open their mouths. There are two other senses in which the Irish are invisible. The first arises from an administrative decision of the British government during the 1950s to render them so by treating Ireland as part of the British Isles as a means of avoiding subsequent problems when immigration from the New Commonwealth had to be controlled. In previous waves of migration, during the nineteenth century, the Irish had been visible and subject to as much surveillance as black migrants are today. The second, which is what Fanon's work would predict, comes from an implicit decision of those Irish who came in the post-war period "to keep their heads down and their mouths shut".¹⁴

With the changing demands of a globalised Europe, institutional definitions of racism are themselves slowly changing: Sivanandan, for example, identifies a new racism in Western Europe:

[a racism] that is not just directed at those with darker skins ... but at the newer categories of the displaced, the dispossessed and the uprooted, who are beating at western Europe's doors, the Europe that helped to displace them in the first place. It is a racism, that is, that cannot be colour-coded, directed as it is at poor whites as well, and is therefore passed off as xenophobia, a "natural" fear of strangers. But in the way it denigrates and reifies people before segregating and/or expelling them, it is a xenophobia that bears all the marks of the old racism. It is racism in substance, but "xeno" in form. It is a racism that is meted out to impoverished strangers even if they are white. It is xeno-racism.¹⁵

But, for all the questions raised by this notion of xeno-racism, some Irish people in Britain may think this acknowledgement has come several centuries too late.

The Irish have not always been invisible or silent, of course. As the essays in this special issue of *Irish Studies Review* show, resilience, determination, intelligence and creativity are amongst the things that characterise 'the Irish in Britain'. Yet even to use this phrase or category is to compound invisibility by falsely homogenising an enormously varied group. The recent 'Conquering England' exhibition at London's National Portrait Gallery, curated by Fintan Cullen and Roy Foster, took as its focus successful Irish professionals and

¹⁴ Greenlade, 'White Skin, White Masks', 216.

¹⁵ Sivanandan, quoted by Fekete, 'The Emergence of Xeno-Racism'.

politicians in Victorian London. As Foster argues, however, the 'Irishness' of these success stories can be overlooked if they do not square with the stereotypes favoured by some Irish and British nationalists alike: 'Less immediately glamorous than Fenian revolutionaries or decayed Anglo-Irish Ascendancy, less affecting than Land League agitators or heroic emigrants, they still deserve their place.' Foster goes on to argue the indubitable fact that 'not all Irish emigrants to Victorian London were working class.'¹⁶ A great many certainly were, though. And their sense of identity will have been generated in a complex and hybrid web where national identity serves as one problematic element amongst many. Class, gender, sexuality, kinship, generation: as these essays show, these are just some of the many factors that impact on the significance of Irishness in Britain and affect the articulation of identity.

In 'Migrating Masculinities', Liviu Popoviciu, Chris Haywood and Mairtin Mac an Ghaill focus on constructions of masculinity amongst Irish men in contemporary Britain. Using a multi-disciplinary methodology, their work testifies to the complex interpenetration of class, gender, sexuality and generation as they discuss the ways in which their interviewees – including older, working class and younger, gay Irish men in Birmingham – have generated and articulate productive new identities. Male assertions of Irishness in a different geographical and cultural context are dealt with in Joe Bradley's contribution, 'One Scotland Many Cultures'. This essay centres on the controversy surrounding the promising, Glasgow-born footballer Aiden McGeady's decision to represent the national team not of Scotland, but instead of his grandparents' Republic of Ireland. As Bradley shows, it is an assertion of third-generation Irish identity that has uncovered many of the 'racial' and sectarian faultlines that remain in post-devolution Scotland.

This interest in second and third generation identities is shared in Breda Gray's article 'Curious Hybridities', which concentrates on Irish women who migrated to London during the 1980s and on the ways in which their experience of migrancy was mediated by an anticipation of having 'second-generation Irish' children. As in Popoviciu *et al*, identity as 'transnationality' is a key concern here, as Gray explores the ways in which regimes of family and kinship disrupt or reinforce normative identities. The second generation in Britain is also an important focus for Liam Harte's article, 'Migrancy, Performativity and Autobiographical Identity', particularly their self-narratives. These are demonstrated to be narratives enabling the performance of identities that are diverse, multiple and hybridised. 'Second generation Irishness' is shown to be a 'continuum of multiple and partial identifications rather than a monolithic cultural category'. The enabling effect of Britain's 'diaspora spaces', which is apparent in Harte's article, is also crucial in Tony Murray's 'Curious Streets'. Through detailed analysis of Desmond Hogan's fiction, Murray discusses the theme of displacement and London's potential for

¹⁶ Foster, 'An Irish Power in London', 12.

the construction there of new and enabling identities, bound up particularly with sexuality.

The Czech migrant writer Milan Kundera has written that 'the struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting'.¹⁷ The significance of memory is concentrated in migration, and perhaps especially so in the 'amnesiac culture' of globalisation. The Irish are often, stereotypically, seen to have a special relationship with the past and memory, and the connectedness it seems to offer, recurs as an issue throughout the art and criticism of the Irish diaspora. The constant and elusive presence of the past is not always acknowledged as driven by fantasy. The final contribution to this issue uses a variety of media to explore the fantasies and memories of Irishness in Britain. A previously unpublished essay by the novelist Timothy O'Grady accompanies a series of extracts from *I Could Read the Sky* (1997), a photo-text in which O'Grady's fictional words appear alongside photographs by Steve Pyke. This is one of the most interesting books of recent years to raise these issues of memory and migrancy in relation to the Irish in Britain. Pyke's photographs do not illustrate O'Grady's words in this novel, the two media both represent migrant memory in their different ways; both evoke the fantasies of home which, whether or not they are nostalgic, offer a valuable form of nourishment to these migrant protagonists. The book recalls both the migrant labourers' narratives featured in the photo-texts of John Berger and Jean Mohr, and those of Irish migrant writers in Britain such as Patrick MacGill, Pádraic Ó Conaire and Donall MacAmhlaigh. Fascinating comparisons are set up by these intertexts, as they are by the book's juxtaposition of text and image. Their meaning or significance, though, like the 'home' sought in diaspora memory, is both intriguing and elusive.

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¹⁷ Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, 3.

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