The Irish Immigrants

Irish immigration[1] to Britain was not a Victorian phenomenon brought about by the failure of the potato crops in the mid nineteenth-century; it had been ongoing since the Middle Ages and was mostly seasonal in its nature. However, it did increase significantly after the French Revolution and wars (1793-1815) which had given Ireland a period of relative prosperity. The historic close ties of Ireland and France were broken by the French troubles and so in Ireland there was a need to have a strong domestic labour-intensive economy. Peacetime conditions resulted in a change back to a less labour-intensive agricultural economy with falling prices, and banking collapses and a marked increase in poverty and thus in migration. Economic reasons remained the cause of most Irish migration until well into the twentieth century. In Middlesbrough, for example with a well-established large Irish community, migration to the town continued until the 1980's when its steel industry collapsed.[2]

There are two other myths about the Irish in Britain that require dispelling, the first being that of transience – that the majority were temporary residents merely coming to Britain as a staging post for further emigration to the United States or Australia. While it is true that during the Great Famine in particular, Britain did become a staging post for better-off migrants, the majority were so impoverished that Britain was always their intended destination and this is borne out by the fact that even when cheap crossings to America were introduced less crossed the Atlantic than crossed the Irish Sea.[3] There was also the fact that migration to Britain could be seen in geographical terms as less permanent than migration to the United States or Australia. It was possible for those in regular work to return to Ireland for family events and with the Union of Britain and Ireland in 1800, Irish migration could be seen as part of the general move of the population from the country into the town.

The second myth that needs to be dispelled is the stereotyped image of the Irish migrant who lived in poverty, was Catholic and wasted money on drink and gambling. As MacRaild points out, the Victorians were responsible for the persistence of this myth for it was these aspects of life in the urban industrial slums that their commentators and writers such as Dickens remarked upon.[4] Perhaps as a means of assuaging their consciences, the Victorian nouveau riche found a convenient scapegoat in the Irish for conditions that would have existed anyway. As pointed out above it was the segregation of wealth from social concern that gave rise to the terrible conditions. The Irish were not the perpetrators of slum life; they were victims just as much as the British migrants to the towns were. The fact that a majority of the Irish were Roman Catholic was an added reason for suspicion and blame for there was still a palpable aura of anti-Catholicism within Britain that only diminished during the late twentieth century. However, it should be remembered that the problems in Ireland were experienced by both Protestant and Catholic communities and migration reflected the ratio of the two communities in Ireland itself. The rise of Orangeism on Merseyside is evidence for the fact that anti-Catholicism should not be equated with anti-Irishness, and questions should be asked whether the conflation of religion with ethnicity is not hidden racism on the part of the Victorians and their heirs.[5]

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[1] Donald M. MacRaild *Irish Immigrants in Modern Britain 1750-1922* (Basingstoke, 1999) is an excellent survey of the problems surrounding Irish migration in both Britain and Ireland. His Bibliographical essay (pp210-219) lists the important texts available. Sheridan Gilley and Roger Swift, *The Irish in the Victorian City (*1985) and *The Irish in Britain 1815-1939* (1989) contain valuable essays by a number of leading historians and M.J. Hickman *Religion, Class and Identity* (Aldershot 1995) is a major history of the Irish in Britain.

[2] See Turnham, *Catholic Faith and Practice in England* (Boydell 2015),

[3] Donald M. MacRaild, *Irish Immigrants,* 3-4

[4] Ibid. 5

[5] Donald MacRaild, Irish *Migrants* summarises the debate that has been taking place in Chapter 6 and discusses the Protestant migrant community in Chapter 4.

There was also a slight sense of anti-Irish feeling emanating from the English Catholic Church, particularly as the Catholicism of the Irish seemed very different, until the mid-century 'devotional revolution' created by Cardinal Paul Cullen.[6] The leadership were faced by the task of ministering to a nominal Catholic population of over 500,000 who had had a different experience of Catholicism in their native country, although the root of the problem was the same as in Britain, namely the Reformation. Despite the fact that Ireland had been able to retain its episcopate and parochial system, the effects of the penal era resulted in a church that did seem to be undisciplined and ill-organised and dependent on Protestant gentry such as the Earl Fitzwilliam who declared in 1850 that as a Protestant landlord in Ireland, he was prepared to build Catholic chapels for his tenants for that was the religion of the population.[7] However, such chapels were small, badly maintained and out of reach for many people as illustrated in 1825 by the Archbishop of Tuam whose archiepiscopal see encompassed the North-west of Ireland:

> *Out of 107 places of worship in the diocese, only eighteen had slated roofs. The others…were thatched and wretched, insufficient to contain the congregations and in many cases the public prayers were celebrated in the open air.*[8]

As a result of having been denied a full public Catholic life during the penal era, there were aspects of popular pre-Tridentine Irish Catholicism that still provided a religious mind-set for many Irish Catholics, particularly those coming from the very deprived rural areas and who formed the bulk of migrants to Britain. Michael Carroll sums up these characteristics as requiring a degree of repetition and orderliness, and a painful penitential experience.[9] As a result, many of the migrants were faithful to a Catholicism that was centred on the home with family prayers, visits to local shrines and holy wells with the attendant rituals of penitence spoken of by Michael Carroll. Festal and communal rites that marked out the seasons and the maintenance of links with the spirit world of leprechauns and fairies were also integral features of the Catholicism of the migrants. They understood the requirement for baptism, but still celebrated 'wakes' at the time of death, a practice that the bishops in both Ireland and England were still discouraging along with other popular 'folk' practices at the end of the nineteenth-century. For example, the Bishop of Middlesbrough, Richard Lacy wrote to his Cathedral clergy in 1898

> *In cases where a 'wake' has been held over a corpse it is my wish and command that the prayers of Holy Church and the funeral rites be withheld from the same. –Let the people be encouraged to pray for their dead.*[10]

This rootedness in a popular peasant culture of the home and pilgrimage rather than a Mass-going faithful both puzzled and embarrassed English Catholics in particular. The priests saw a huge increase in baptisms, but this was not matched by a parallel large congregation at Mass. The policy of the English Vicars Apostolic became one of conversion; not conversion to Catholicism however, but the conversion of the Irish to the British concept of what regular practice of Catholicism meant. On the British mainland, the Irish needed to learn the habit of weekly mass attendance and adopt a Catholicism that was centred on the Mass, the priests and the chapel that was sometimes no more than a rented room or abandoned chapel from another denomination as they moved into better accommodation. In the Victorian slums the chapel became the holy place and the Mass-going population the family.

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[6] The definitive exposition of this is found in Emmett Larkin, 'The Devotional Revolution in Ireland, 1850-1875' in *American Historical Review*, *88:3* (1972). 625-52.

[7] *Yorkshire Gazette* 23.11.1850. p5

[8] http://www.towardsthegoal.com/history/index_eng.html Archdiocese of Tuam accessed 08/04/2009.

[9] Carroll, M., 'Rethinking Popular Catholicism in pre-Famine Ireland' in *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion 34:3* (Sept 1995) 354-365 accessed 03.04.2009 from http//www.jstor.org/stable/1386884.

[10] MDA, Middlesbrough Cathedral Notebook 1914-16 dated 24.01.1898.

There were other problems for the relationship with the Irish in England and Wales. The immigrants were more willing to accept the authority of the priest in matters of religion than the English gentry who regarded them as belonging to the servant class. This acceptance was one factor in the emerging clericalisation of the British Catholic Church during the early nineteenth century. But the authority of the priest did not extend to accepting his political views; there could be no political leadership of the community by the English priest as he was unable to appeal to the intertwined loyalty of fervent nationalism and faith that was characteristic of many Irish migrants. The political leadership of the Irish priest was seen in its fullest expression in the events leading to the Catholic Emancipation Act of 1829. Daniel O'Connell, the Irish radical whose victory at the polls proved to be the catalyst for change had used the influential Irish Catholic Association to ensure his election. It was an Association he had founded in 1823, but it was the priests who organised the Irish peasantry into joining the individual local associations on his behalf.

There was a palpable sense of isolation within the Irish migrant community that was not made any easier by the inability of many of them especially the women to communicate for many of the poorest Irish only spoke Gaelic. This made it difficult for the English priests, but there was some reluctance before the Great famine to import priests from Ireland. This was in part due to the Irish begging priests who arrived in England uninvited and unwanted. They arrived unannounced in areas with significant Irish populations offering an unofficial ministry. Not surprisingly, the Irish would desert the mission chapels and support the begging priests instead, which in turn diverted funds away from struggling missions and obstructed the attempts to inculcate them into native Catholic practice of the faith. But there were other factors involved that emanated not only from the native Catholic population, but the general population also.

The overarching reason for Irish emigration was the need to survive. Both Britain and Ireland had seen a rapid growth in their populations during the early nineteenth century, which required more efficient use of the available land to house and feed people. In England and Wales, the aim of Enclosure had been to make more efficient use of the land to produce food, but with the corollary that many had been forced off the land into the cities that were growing up as a result of industrialisation. In Ireland, a different scenario pertained. The Select Committee Report on the State of the Poor in Ireland in 1830 noted that in Ireland, landholdings were divided and sub-divided in order to give sons the means of a livelihood.[11] Combined with inadequate tillage the condition of the soil deteriorated and affected the production of Ireland's staple diet, the potato crop. Even before 1845, failure of the crop was not an unusual occurrence with resulting starvation and unemployment. This aggravated the status quo that already existed for the peasant farmers, for producing the potato crop only took up three months of the year. For the remaining nine months they were unemployed unless they managed to find work as itinerant seasonal workers in Ireland or Britain. The Great famine of the mid-century was caused by disease, the potato Blight that in conjunction with the ongoing problems caused a catastrophic and complete failure of the crop for several years in succession. It was not confined to Ireland; the Blight also destroyed the potato crop in the Scottish Highland region with similar consequences. In Scotland the Highlanders followed those dispossessed by the Clearances to the new industrial areas of Lowland Scotland. In Ireland, there was no industry to fall back upon for failure of crops; emigration was the only means of survival.

Although the Irish economy was a major cause of emigration, the converse was true in Britain where its burgeoning industrial economy was an invitation for immigration. The infrastructure that was necessary such as building railways, sinking coal pits, constructing docks required a huge number of unskilled labourers that the Irish were willing to provide, undertaking even the most menial of tasks that the native workers were unwilling to take. The pay was low, and the Irish often accepted even lower wages, which was a cause of contention with the native

[11]The Select Committee Report on the State of the Poor in Ireland in 1830 p7

workers who feared it would result in the Owners cutting their wages. To the Irish however, the wages they received were generous in comparison to what they had in Ireland and enabled them not only to live but to send money back home as well. Likewise, the standard of living in the towns was not high in the industrial cottage areas, but the Irish were often found crowded together in the cellars and rookeries in unimaginable squalor, but again it compared favourably to the conditions they had encountered in Ireland. It does not change the fact however that in many ways, the Irish migrants were the lowest stratum of the early and mid-nineteenth century Catholic community in Britain.

As had happened in England, seminary education in Ireland had been forced to be repatriated from the continent during the revolutionary period, which by the mid century gave rise to a priesthood that was well- versed in Tridentine Catholicism reinforced by the iron rule of Paul Cullen, who in 1866 became the first Irish Cardinal. Cullen had enjoyed a stellar career in seminary education, but in 1850 was sent back to Ireland to bring the church into line with Roman law and usage. The "Devotional Revolution" that he instigated began with the Synod Of Thurles in 1850. The "Cullenite" priests displayed a particular style of leadership characterised as both authoritative and intransigent.[12] (By the time he died in 1878 Ireland was regarded as one of the most Catholic places in the world and rich in Catholic Piety. This, in turn gave rise to an over abundance of priests and a vibrant female religious life. Not surprisingly, this carried over into England with invitations from the new bishops for female apostolate orders to open houses in their dioceses and priests to bolster the numbers in the mission field. Many of the Irish priests in this later era were on loan and would return to their home dioceses when there was a vacancy for them to fill. This pros and cons of borrowing can be illustrated by the early actions of Richard Lacy. Appointed the first bishop of Middlesbrough in 1879 he was Irish by birth but trained in England and Rome. Within six months he established an Ecclesiastical Educational Fund to train a 'native priesthood.' These were men who had grown up in the area of the new diocese and knew its traditions and ethos. In 1886 Lacy commended the Ecclesiastical Education Fund to the laity for the receipt of almsgiving and told them:

> *Our wants are great, and our means very limited…our wants are multiplying far beyond the increase of our means. Were it not that we have been enabled to borrow the valuable services of a number of Priests, the work of the diocese could not be efficiently carried out. [1886]*

The borrowing of priests mainly from Ireland provided Bishop Lacy with men able to say Mass, but who were strangers to the diocese and not in a position to develop a coherent identity for the diocese as a whole. Moreover, despite the large numbers of Irish Catholics who had settled in the diocese, the Irish priests were trained for a different situation – that of Ireland where Catholicism and nationalism were natural partners. This was not the case in England, where loyalty to the state had to be constantly proved. Lacy's Advent Pastoral of 1894 makes a response to criticism over the slow progress in recruitment.

> *Sometimes impatience is shown that we have not more Priests, utterly ignoring the fact that so large an average of students fails to persevere… in spite of every human precaution in the selection and training of candidates…Another reason…is to be sought in our limited means…It may be well also to add that an increase in our Priests takes time. The average duration of an Ecclesiastical course is twelve years. [1894]*

By the end of 1902 however, Lacy could inform the people that 'the number of our clergy has steadily increased, and we now have comparatively little need of external help'. His successor

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[12] Jenkins, B., *Irish Nationalism and the British State* (2006 McGill-Queens University) 183

Thomas Shine (1929-1955) however had a different attitude to using Irish priests and each year would welcome around six newly ordained priests to be incardinated into the diocese. His favoured seminary was his own Alma mater, Thurles, which trained men to minister to the Irish diaspora rather than on the Irish mission. Although the number of men eventually dwindled as the century went on, it was still 1982 when the last Irish priest was ordained for Middlesbrough.
The female Apostolic Orders, such as the Sisters of Mercy, thrived in England and many retained English houses into the twenty-first century though by then their numbers were greatly reduced. They attracted English and Anglo-Irish vocations and much of their work centred on Catholic Education and nursing as was many other Apostolic orders. This was often combined with parish work.
Irish immigration never again reached the numbers of the famine years, but it did persist until the middle of the twentieth century and had a profound and lasting effect on the development of the Catholic Church in England and Wales.

Dr Margaret Turnham

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