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# The Othered Irish: Shades of Difference in Post-War Britain, 1948–71

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## Abstract

*The main goal of this paper is to consider white Irish immigrants within the context of immigration of colour in post-war Britain. It considers the similarities in the imperial-historical reasons for the immigration of mostly poor rural workers from the West Indies, South Asia and Ireland. The discussion explores the experiences of both white and non-white immigrants in London and Birmingham up to 1971, comparing all three groups but focusing on Irish immigrants. I aim to append the Irish experience to analyses of post-war immigration, which tend to focus on non-white Commonwealth immigrants from the West Indies and South Asia. By exploring the Irish experience, I question existing scholarship which suggests Irish immigrants assimilated into post-war Britain free of the ethnic tensions and difficult conditions that migrants of colour indisputably endured. I also demonstrate the degree to which British historians have disregarded the experiences of Irish people in Britain.*

In February 1966, the Lord Mayor of Birmingham convened a meeting with local political, business and religious leaders to address issues facing immigrants in England's second city. Toward the end of the meeting, the Town Clerk asked whether the Irish should be included in efforts to help immigrants adjust to life in England. Those attending, however, 'generally agreed that the White Paper be confined to Commonwealth Immigrants', concluding 'the Irish could not be included in present discussions'.<sup>1</sup> Two months later, the Lord Mayor did request the presence of

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<sup>1</sup> Birmingham Catholic Archdiocesan Archives (hereafter BCAA), Archbishop's Papers, APD/S/J1, Notes on the Working Party on Commonwealth Immigration held in the Lord Mayor's Conference Room, 3 Feb. 1966. 'Commonwealth Immigrants' refers to immigrants from the Caribbean and South Asia. 'Irish immigrants' refers to those from the Republic of Ireland.

'somebody with an Irish connection' on the committee, acknowledging the Irish faced similar problems to other immigrants.<sup>2</sup> But nothing came of the request.

This somewhat run-of-the-mill meeting symbolises succinctly the uncertain position of Irish immigrants in Britain in the decades following the Second World War. As the Town Clerk's proposition suggests, Irish people were conceived of as foreigners in the 1950s and 1960s, and presumably deserved the same consideration as other immigrants. They had, after all, moved due to a similar colonial relationship. As we shall see, they also resided in the same parts of the major cities, lived in similar conditions, laboured in similar jobs and met comparably derisory attitudes in their new country.

But the Irish were not quite immigrant enough. Their unique historical position meant they could not grab the attention either of British policymakers then or indeed of most British historians since. Inhabiting a unique position as white 'Others', perplexingly placed between immigrants of colour and the host population, they were different, but somehow not deserving. As it turned out, policy intervention would not be directed toward the Irish for decades after this meeting. From the 1960s onwards, while assistance was (rightly) granted to Commonwealth immigrants to confront prejudice and disadvantage derived from historical circumstances, the Irish were ostensibly considered white people moving to a white country.

Accordingly, in the discussion that follows, I situate the Irish in post-war Birmingham and London within the comparative and historical context of Commonwealth immigration and the large immigrant communities of colour in post-war Britain.<sup>3</sup> By including the largest group of immigrants, I aim to add a layer to our understanding of post-war migration. Though British historians, like British policymakers, have disregarded them, the Irish, like people of colour, were transplanted to a different country and culture, placed on the bottom of the same socio-historical ladder and subject to a similar degree of social exclusion.

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It is of course perfectly understandable that the historiography of post-war migration has focused keenly on the experiences of Commonwealth immigrants, and accordingly a large body of work has demonstrated the substantial prejudice encountered by immigrants of colour in England.<sup>4</sup> This chiefly state-centred debate

<sup>2</sup> BCAA, Letter from Lord Mayor's office to Archbishop Dwyer, 13 Apr. 1966.

<sup>3</sup> For studies of other white migrants, see Tony Kushner, *The Jewish Heritage in British History: Englishness and Jewishness* (London: F. Cass, 1992); Panikos Panayi, *The Impact of Immigration: A Documentary History of the Effects and Experiences of Immigrants in Britain since 1945* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999); Becky Taylor and Martyna Sliwa, 'Polish Migration: Moving Beyond the Iron Curtain', *History Workshop Journal*, 71 (2011), 128–46, and Panikos Panayi, *Racial Violence in Britain in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (London: Leicester University Press, 1996) ix, 173.

<sup>4</sup> Kathleen Paul, *Whitewashing Britain: Race and Citizenship in the Postwar Era* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 7. Also see Ian Spencer, *British Immigration Policy since 1939: The Making of Multi-Racial Britain* (London: Routledge, 1997); James Hampshire, *Citizenship and Belonging: Immigration and*

revolves around whether or not the political elite purposely racialised immigration. The central event in this literature is the Commonwealth Immigration Act of 1962, legislation which substantially limited immigration for those of colour, while allowing the Irish freedom to move back and forth. Kathleen Paul has argued that government officials purposely prepared the general populace for immigration controls. This Act she shows was designed to keep those of colour out of the country, and illiberal elites were responsible for increasing racism, not the broader population. Other scholars emphasise the continuation of an English tradition of official tolerance founded upon a long-standing liberal commitment to universal rights. The foremost proponent of this school, Randall Hansen, argues that an ungenerous attitude was more indicative of the broader population, not policymakers.<sup>5</sup>

Both of these perspectives concentrate on Commonwealth immigrants and the political sphere, questioning racism in post-war Britain from a top-down angle of view through analysis of official documents. Though these works rightly show the Irish were excluded from immigration controls, they do not recognise the Irish were also excluded from full participation in society through the post-colonial conditions and attitudes they met.

In a recent comprehensive overview of post-war British immigration Panikos Panayi noted that the presence of Irish people to Britain in the second half of the twentieth century has been largely ignored by historians.<sup>6</sup> British historians, when they consider them, continue to assume the relative inconspicuousness of the Irish indicates easy assimilation. In his highly acclaimed study of post-war Britain, Richard Weight argues that the presence of Commonwealth immigrants somehow directed animus away from the Irish.<sup>7</sup> And in a recent study, Paul Addison asserts Irish people adapted easily in England. Addison notes the difficult conditions, unfair rents and cultural resistance immigrants of colour confronted in their search for housing. To support this, he points to the notorious signs placed in windows to deter prospective renters, signs that as he notes often declared, 'Room for rent. *No Irish*. No Coloureds

*the Politics of Demographic Governance in Postwar Britain* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); Peter Fryer, *Staying Power* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1984); Dilip Hiro, *Black British, White British* (London: Paladin, 1971); Zig Layton-Henry, *The Politics of Immigration: Immigration, 'Race' and 'Race Relations' in Post-War Britain* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), and Robert Miles and Annie Phizacklea, *White Man's Country: Racism in British Politics* (London: Pluto Press, 1984). These and more recent works such as the study from Bill Schwarz focus almost exclusively on immigrants of colour, in Schwarz's case on Caribbeans. See Bill Schwarz, *The White Man's World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>5</sup> Randall Hansen, *Citizenship and Immigration in Post-War Britain: The Institutional Origins of a Multicultural Nation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), v. See also D. W. Dean, 'Conservative governments and the restriction of Commonwealth immigration in the 1950s: The problems of constraint', *Historical Journal*, 35, 1 (1992), 171–94.

<sup>6</sup> Panikos Panayi, *An Immigration History of Britain: Multicultural Racism since 1800* (Harlow: Longman, 2010), 65. See also C. Holmes, 'Immigration', in T.R. Gourvish and Alan O'Day, eds, *Britain Since 1945* (Palgrave Macmillan, 1991), 209.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Weight, *Patriots: National Identity in Britain, 1940–2000* (London: Macmillan, 2002), 145.

No dogs'. In an otherwise all-encompassing study, Addison illustrates how easily the Irish can be ignored.<sup>8</sup> Kathleen Paul, who includes the Irish, considers the Irish as members of a 'British family', whose exclusion from controls demonstrates overt racism toward immigrants of colour.<sup>9</sup> But there was enough exclusion to go around, as we shall see.

In recent years, scholars of Irish origins have conversely made great strides in exploring the post-war Irish experience, particularly that of women. A large body of work by scholars in Sociology and Ethnic Studies has illustrated the post-colonial conditions and their ongoing effects. Mary Hickman has revealed the marginalised position of the Irish as a separate ethnic group. Using social surveys and interviews with older migrants, she has argued the Irish were invisible ethnically and did not settle comfortably as white people. Hickman and others have pointed out that the Irish in England habitually endured discriminating stereotypes ranging from 'Friendly and entertaining to stupid, drunk, cunning, lazy, sectarian and violent'.<sup>10</sup> Other Irish scholars such as Louise Ryan have highlighted the diversity of the white Irish experience from the 1930s onwards, showing that different types of stereotypes existed far beyond black and white. Ryan interviewed twenty-six nurses to highlight the variation in experience and the multiple modes of being an Irishwoman in Britain.<sup>11</sup> Bronwen Walter also highlights the difficult dialectic of assimilation and racialisation endured by white Irish people, demonstrating that the Irish have been excluded from full membership in English society in unacknowledged ways.<sup>12</sup> And Breda Gray has worked to understand Irish Diasporas in Britain and beyond, demonstrating the

<sup>8</sup> Paul Addison, *No Turning Back: The Peacetime Revolutions of Post-War Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 124. My emphasis.

<sup>9</sup> Paul, *Whitewashing Britain*, 110. For arguments suggesting Irish assimilation, see Michael P Hornsby-Smith, *Catholic Education: The Unobtrusive Partner: Sociological Studies of the Catholic School System in England and Wales* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1978). Also John Hutchinson and Alan O'Day, 'The Gaelic Revival in London 1900–22: Limits of Ethnic Identity', in Roger Swift and Sheridan Gilley, eds, *The Irish in Victorian Britain: The Local Dimension* (Dublin: The Four Courts, 1999); William Ryan, 'Assimilation of Irish Immigrants in Britain', PhD dissertation, St Louis University, 1973. Also, Addison, *No Turning Back*, esp. 116–18.

<sup>10</sup> Mary Hickman, *Religion, Class, and Identity: The State, the Catholic Church, and the Education of the Irish in Britain* (Avebury: Ashgate, 1995), 215. Also, Hickman, 'Reconstructing deconstructing "race": British political discourses about the Irish in Britain', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 21:2, 288–307; and Mary Hickman, Joseph Bradley, Bronwen Walter and Sarah Morgan, 'The limitations of whiteness and the boundaries of Englishness: Second-generation Irish identification and positionings in multi-ethnic Britain', *Ethnicities*, 5, 2 (2005), 160–82. See also Máirtín Mac an Ghaill, 'British Critical Theorists: The Production of the Conceptual Invisibility of the Irish Diaspora', *Social Identities*, 7, 2 (2001): 179–201. For the 'vanishing Irish', see Dermot Keogh, Finbarr O'Shea and Carmel Quinlan, *The Lost Decade: Ireland In the 1950s*, (Cork: Mercier, 2004).

<sup>11</sup> Irish nurses in particular she shows contended with ambiguous identities working along nurses of Caribbean origins. L. Ryan, 'Who do you think you are? Irish nurses encountering ethnicity and constructing identity in Britain', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 30, 3 (2007), 416–38; also, L. Ryan, 'I had a sister in England': Family-Led migration, social networks and nurses', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 34, 3 (2008), 453–70. Though we tread similar ground regarding conclusions on the Irish experience I want to explore the historical evidence for such claims.

<sup>12</sup> Bronwen Walter, *Outsiders Inside: Whiteness, Place, and Irish Women*, Gender, Racism, Ethnicity (New York: Routledge, 2001), 116.

complex web of experiences both enjoyed and endured by Irishwomen as migrants, indicating the fluidity of the migrant's identity far beyond one fixed notion of Irishness.<sup>13</sup> All of these scholars demonstrate the subtle complexity of being Irish in England goes beyond simple assimilation.

None of these scholars are historians, however, and all are Irish or of Irish descent. Wendy Webster is a rare British historian who includes the Irish in her analyses, pointing out aptly that 'the four-word sign "no coloureds, no Irish" demonstrates the complexities of post-war migration and the multiple racisms involved'.<sup>14</sup> Recently, in 2007, the Irish historian Enda Delaney offered the first major historical study of the Irish in Britain in forty years. Delaney showed that the Irish were never fully part of either England or Ireland, forced to consider themselves alien. For Delaney, the Irish were stuck in a bewildering position as 'Halfway house exiles', part 'normal', part "other".<sup>15</sup> The most thorough account of the post-war Irish experience, Delaney's work, however, excludes any comparison with immigrants of colour.

As Ryan and Webster have argued, the Irish highlight a range of imperial legacies that go beyond just 'racism'.<sup>16</sup> There existed, as Stephen Fielding notes, a well-established 'ingrained hostility to Catholics and the Irish, which was deeply embedded in English society', derived from the colonial past.<sup>17</sup> Kevin Kenny notes in his study of the Irish in the British Empire, 'The connection between Irish emigration and colonialism has not yet been explored in any sustained fashion.'<sup>18</sup> By merging Irish with Commonwealth immigration, my aim is not to suggest Commonwealth and Irish immigrants met exactly the same circumstances. Rather it is to disrupt the racial binary that characterises most studies of post-war migration, to show that the Irish relationship was shaped by similar derisory attitudes and a parallel historical legacy of unequal colonial relations. If the short-term experience of Irish immigration differed in degree to that of Commonwealth immigration, the long-term historical causes were almost identical. I broaden the scope to show certain segments of the

<sup>13</sup> See Breda Gray, *Women and the Irish Diaspora* (London: Routledge, 2004), 17; also Louise Ryan and Wendy Webster, *Gendering Migration: Masculinity, Femininity and Ethnicity in Post-War Britain* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008) and Mary Lennon, Marie McAdam, and Joanne O'Brien, *Across the Water: Irish Women's Lives in Britain* (London: Virago, 1988).

<sup>14</sup> Wendy Webster, *Englishness and Empire 1939–1965* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 155; see also Webster, 'Immigration and Racism', in Paul Addison and Harriet Jones, *A Companion to Contemporary Britain: 1939–2000*, (Oxford, Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 97.

<sup>15</sup> Delaney, *The Irish in Postwar Britain* (Oxford: University Press, 2007), 4, 209, 175.

<sup>16</sup> Ryan and Webster, *Gendering Migration*, 99.

<sup>17</sup> Steven Fielding, *Class and Ethnicity: Irish Catholics in Britain, 1880–1939* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Open University Press, 1993), 6. Joseph Lennon notes too that 'Irish culture long found parallels with representations of Asian and West Asian cultures; both long signified alterity and had colonial histories.' Joseph Lennon, *Irish Orientalism: A Literary and Intellectual History* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2004), 371.

<sup>18</sup> Kevin Kenny, *Ireland and the British Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 2006), 15. On Ireland's relation to post-colonial studies, see also Stephen Howe, *Ireland and Empire: Colonial legacies in Irish History and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

population were prejudiced toward a wider group of immigrants, including the Irish – at home, at work and in the wider cultural milieu, with consequences for Irish life in Britain.

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Attempting to evaluate attitudes is an inexact science, and to be fair to the self-conceived ‘tolerant English’, the 1950s and 1960s were a difficult time to absorb three very diverse strands of migrants. Faced with post-war rebuilding, prolonged austerity and the trauma of war, English people were ill prepared for the culture shock that came along with immigrants from the crumbling empire. Indeed the 1948 British Nationality Act arguably demonstrated just how tolerant Britain was. This legislation after all provided the legal means for imperial subjects to enter Britain, regardless of skin colour, origin, or in the Irish case, a history of uninhibited agitation and even wartime neutrality.

I am more interested in overt intolerance than tacit acceptance, however, since this impacted the immigrant experience more acutely. Immediately following a war won with much colonial assistance, mentalities formed over centuries in an imperial milieu did not disappear quite as swiftly as imperial power.<sup>19</sup> Like the West Indies, India and Pakistan, Ireland suffered from a huge surplus of labour in the post-war period, and the imperial economic relationship shaped attitudes toward immigrants. The decline of the centuries-old British Empire and the persistence of attitudes derived from an imperial past were central to the historical context of post-war immigration. Paul Gilroy wryly notes the fundamental fact that ‘the immigrant is now here because Britain was out there’.<sup>20</sup> This simple geographical and historical relationship meant immigrants faced daunting attitudes and conditions.

After the war, migrants from the rural peripheries of empire had little choice but to take the opportunity to move to its urban heart, entering a strange environment of factories, cold houses and grey streets in the big cities. Much concern was generated in response to the increasing numbers of newcomers who began arriving in the 1950s from Ireland, South Asia and the Caribbean. In the period itself, numbers were bandied about without much foundation, as data was rarely reliable. Only at the end of the 1960s were statistics harnessed to show roughly how many immigrants were actually in the country, and there were more Irish than South Asians and West Indians combined. If the three groups moved in similar circumstances, they did not move in similar numbers:

<sup>19</sup> See Chris Waters, “‘Dark Strangers’ In Our Midst: Discourses of Race and Nation in Britain, 1947–1964”, *Journal of British Studies*, 36, 2 (April 1997), 207–38. Also, Bill Schwarz, ‘“Claudia Jones and the West Indian Gazette”: Reflections on the Emergence of Post-colonial Britain’, *Twentieth Century British History*, 14, 3 (2003): 264–85, 265.

<sup>20</sup> Gilroy, *Has it come to this?* in Howe, ed., ‘The New Imperial Histories Reader’, 335.

*Total Immigrant Population in England*

1951

South Asians: 41,000

West Indians: 15,300

Irish: 472,100

1961

South Asians: 110,000

West Indians: 171,800

Irish: 644,400<sup>21</sup>

In 1971, there were around 237,000 migrants from South Asia and 488,000 from the Caribbean.<sup>22</sup> By then, there were close to a million Irish people living in England. Present in huge numbers, the Irish were overlooked by policymakers, though humbler folks living and working alongside them were acutely aware of their presence, as we shall see in the next two sections.

**Dickensian ‘digs’**

Like Commonwealth immigrants, Irish tenants endured endemic housing abuse in the 1950s and 1960s. And like immigrants of colour, the typical Irish migrant found lodging in the first place available after arrival, often living crowded together in the poorer parts of Birmingham and London. For all immigrants, renting was the chief option available. In 1967, while 91% of Jamaicans, 84% of Indians and 82% of Pakistanis rented, 92% of Irish paid rent, owning their homes the least of all four groups.<sup>23</sup> Though many English rented too, immigrants notably endured difference along with dearth. Placed on the bottom of the socio-economic ladder due to their status, newcomers of Commonwealth or Irish origin were affected disproportionately by inadequate housing provisions.<sup>24</sup> Catholic Church workers persistently cited housing as the gravest problem facing Irish immigrants, and were exasperated at an inability to assist so many distressed persons. Advocates of the Irish complained through the 1950s that they could do little to empower tenants against landlords in Birmingham.<sup>25</sup> In 1961, the Catholic Church in Birmingham initiated a scheme to help Irish couples

<sup>21</sup> E. J. B. Rose, and Institute of Race Relations, *Colour and Citizenship: A Report on British Race Relations* (London: for the Institute of Race Relations by Oxford University Press, 1969), 72, citing census figures.

<sup>22</sup> From 1971 Census, cited in Muhammad Anwar, Patrick Roach and Ranjit Sondhi, *From Legislation to Integration? Race Relations in Britain*, 2.

<sup>23</sup> Robert Davison and Institute of Race Relations, *Black British: Immigrants to England* (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), 53.

<sup>24</sup> See J. Stevenson, ‘The Jerusalem that Failed? The Rebuilding of Post-War Britain’, in Gourvish and O’Day, ed., *Britain Since 1945*; also, Fred Berry, *Housing: The Great British Failure* (London: C. Knight, 1974).

<sup>25</sup> BCAA, Archbishop’s Papers, Facts Regarding the Life of Irish Catholics in Birmingham, 1954, AP/J6, Irish Centre, Birmingham, 1952–1963.

find homes, as one priest set out purposefully to 'destroy the fixed notion the Irish have that (shoddy) digs are good enough'.<sup>26</sup>

Social studies from the 1950s reveal both the awful environment many Irish lived in and the persistence of colonial attitudes. Citing the prevalence of the 'ignorant and shiftless Irish' in a London study, the noted Spinley Report described one Irish home where 'The beds have the usual bedding and stained mattresses, probably smelling of stale urine. Apart from the beds, there is a table, some wooden chairs, a cupboard. The most noticeable characteristic of the house is the strong and unpleasant smell.'<sup>27</sup> The church justly decried circumstances where an Irish 'family of four (paid) excessively high rents, while having to sleep, eat and cook in the same room'.<sup>28</sup> Around the same time, those sponsoring the construction of an Irish Centre in Birmingham found 'lads sleeping six to a room with twenty-seven total in one house; fellows sleeping in public lavatories; girls being given only one sheet for warmth having to sleep in their clothes'.<sup>29</sup>

Indeed Irish migrants lived much more like those of colour than the English. The principal metric used to measure housing conditions and scarcity in the 1950s and 1960s was persons-per-room. In a comparison of housing density in London from 1961 to 1966, the overall 'Level of Housing Amenity', as it was called, was as follows, with '1' constituting the highest score. Conspicuously, the Irish score resembles those of immigrants far more than it does their white counterparts:

Indians	3.0 to 2.8
Pakistanis	4.3 to 5.2
Jamaicans	5.7 to 4.2
Irish	3.7 to 2.6
English	1.4 to 1.4 <sup>30</sup>

Studies of race relations focused on people of colour reveal the Irish also lived in the same parts of town as other immigrants.<sup>31</sup> While white English people moved away from areas with increasing numbers of 'coloureds' in Birmingham or London, the Irish remained.<sup>32</sup> Indian researchers found that though English tenants refused to rent accommodation owned by Asian landlords, the Irish were less bothered by the notion, living wherever they could in the circumstances. As Desai noted in 1963,

<sup>26</sup> 'Housing Plan to Aid Irish', *Birmingham Evening Mail*, 18 Mar. 1962.

<sup>27</sup> B. M. Spinley, *The Deprived and the Privileged: Personality Development in English Society* (London: Routledge and K. Paul, 1953), 40.

<sup>28</sup> BCAA, Irish Centre, Birmingham 1952–1963, 'Suggested scheme for a centre in Birmingham'. Also, BCAA, Archbishop's Papers, AP/J6, Letter from Rev. Hickland, 21.1.1957, Annual Report from the Birmingham Irish Centre, Mar. 1959–Mar. 1960.

<sup>29</sup> 'Suggested scheme for a centre in Birmingham'.

<sup>30</sup> Rose, *Colour and Citizenship*, 121.

<sup>31</sup> John Rex and Robert Samuel Moore, *Race, Community and Conflict: A Study of Sparkbrook* (London: published for the Institute of Race Relations by Oxford University Press, 1967), 11.

<sup>32</sup> See Rashmi Desai, *Indian Immigrants in Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), 32–3, 48.



'Only Irish, West Indians and Pakistanis willingly accept accommodation in Indian houses.'<sup>33</sup> In 1961 census data for the notoriously immigrant-heavy and run-down Tower Hamlets area in London, 8,916 were of Irish origin, 3,084 South Asian, and 3,126 from the Caribbean.<sup>34</sup>

As scholars such as Bronwen Walter have shown, a simple dichotomous attitude toward black and white immigrants fails to explain post-war migratory experiences; being Catholic differentiated Irish immigrants in Britain.<sup>34</sup> And indeed through the 1950s and 1960s, the Catholic Church found persistent examples in Birmingham of tenant desperation among Irish immigrants, usually stemming from fractured relations with landlords, with such 'typical cases' including young couples with children forced out into the streets.<sup>35</sup> The black-white binary of post-war migration is further complicated by the fact that landlord prejudice worked in all directions. Often the choice was between bad housing and no housing. The migrant Mary Gilligan recalls having to return home to Ireland due to frustration searching for accommodation in London.<sup>36</sup> The notorious signs stating 'No blacks, no dogs, no Irish' are cited in memoirs of many Irish people like those of Commonwealth immigrants, with boards proclaiming 'No Irish Need Apply'.<sup>37</sup> One Irishman recalls the immediacy with which immigrants were made unwelcome: 'I went straight to London, tried to get digs, but on the notice board, was the usual, "No blacks or Irish need apply"'.<sup>38</sup>

Property owners' propensity to discriminate worked for and against all immigrant groups. In 1956, one Irish newspaper declared that in Birmingham 'hundreds of young Irish newly-weds desperate for a home (were) being exploited by get-rich-quick landlords, many of them coloured'.<sup>39</sup> A few years later, newspapers in the Midlands suggested vice squads should root out rapacious landlords of colour. Highlighting the greater tendency of West Indians and South Asians to buy homes compared to the Irish, one Midlands MP in 1963 suggested a fund to help whites buy homes.<sup>40</sup> Lord Elton, the noted parliamentary beacon of anti-immigrant bias, claimed in 1965 that Pakistani and Indian landlords were guilty of 98% of landlord abuse toward tenants.<sup>41</sup> The noted social researchers Rex and Moore, considerably more sympathetic to immigrants, found too that Asian landlords were generally insensitive to tenants'

<sup>33</sup> 1961 Census Data, cited in Elizabeth Burney, *Housing on Trial*, 1st edn (Oxford University Press; 1967), 83.

<sup>34</sup> Walter, *Outsiders Inside*, 160, 87.

<sup>35</sup> Facts Regarding the Life of Irish Catholics in Birmingham, 1954.

<sup>36</sup> See Anne O'Grady, *Irish Migration to London in the 1940's and 1950's* (London: PNL Press, 1988), 13.

<sup>37</sup> See the short interview at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zS-05fZZN4g>, in which an Irish labourer explains English people conceiving of Irish labourers as savage (0.45), (last visited 13 Sept. 2014).

<sup>38</sup> "'I Only Came over for a Couple of Years . . .'" Interviews with London Irish Elders', by David Kelly in collaboration with the Irish Studies Centre, London Metropolitan University, Interview with John Thompson.

<sup>39</sup> 'Brum Landlords Exploit Irish Couples', *Irish Weekly Independent*, 9 Apr. 1956.

<sup>40</sup> 'Coloured folks dominated house buying', *Warley Courier*, 16 Jul. 1963.

<sup>41</sup> Godfrey Elton, *The Unarmed Invasion: A Survey of Afro-Asian Immigration* (London: G. Bles, 1965), 52.

rights.<sup>42</sup> Of course, Irish migrants mistreated each other too, as Catherine Dunne's interviews demonstrate. Her interviewees recall that 'Mayo people always stuck together, and Dubliners preferred to avoid "culchies"'.<sup>43</sup> Irish landlords had few scruples about profiting from their compatriots. In 1951 one Dubliner complained to journalists that his landlady from Wexford ignored his complaints, noting 'None of the beds had pillows or sheets and the food was bad.'<sup>44</sup>

Throughout the 1960s Irish people lived like their fellow migrants. Census statistics from 1966 showed Irish home-life mirrored that of other immigrants, skin colour notwithstanding.<sup>46</sup>

	Average number of children in families	Percentage of families with 3+ children:
Irish	2.52	42
West Indian	2.43	35
Indian	2.35	36
Pakistani	2.30	34
English	1.85	20

Immigrants from all origins met isolation and hardship amid such conditions. The author John O'Donoghue captured succinctly the circumstances Irish immigrants faced that post-war histories fail to capture: 'The personal upheaval, the inadequate preparation given by one cultural background for life in another, the heartaches, fears and uncertainties which all immigrants experience "in a strange land"'.<sup>45</sup> The sociologist John Jackson similarly grasped the common immigrant condition, pointing to the loneliness of living in unkempt 'digs'.<sup>46</sup> An Irishman interviewed in 1965 told a filmmaker that to counter loneliness he comforted himself by staring at the moon, as it was the same moon he had seen in Ireland.<sup>47</sup>

As the 1970s approached, animosity to Commonwealth immigrants sharpened, which perhaps explains scholarly attention to people of colour. The immigration discourse took a particularly nasty turn after Enoch Powell's infamous 1968 speech in Birmingham. Focused on the imaginary old white lady 'who could not walk her street or feel safe in her house for fear of wide grinning pica-ninnies', Powell reaffirmed the direct connection between housing and prejudice. Due to the presence of immigrants, English people could not feel 'safe in their own homes'.<sup>48</sup> Though

<sup>42</sup> Birmingham City Archives (Henceforth BCA), MS 2141/A/7/9, Cuttings on race bill, 'The Immigrant', *Birmingham Planet*. Also Rex and Moore, *Race, Community and Conflict*, 136.

<sup>43</sup> Catherine Dunne, *An Unconsidered People: The Irish in London* (Dublin: New Island Books, 2003), 37. The derogatory term *culchies* denotes those from outside of Dublin.

<sup>44</sup> 1966 census statistics, cited in W. Ryan, 'Assimilation of Irish Immigrants in Britain', 74.

<sup>45</sup> John O'Donoghue, *In a Strange Land* (London: Batsford, 1958), 70.

<sup>46</sup> Jackson, *The Irish in Britain*, 71.

<sup>47</sup> From the 1965 Philip Donnellan documentary, *The Irishmen*, cited in O'Grady, *Irish Migration to London in the 1940's and 1950's*, 9.

<sup>48</sup> London School of Economics (LSE)/Longden/9/19, 'Powell and his Allies', from Labour Research Department 1969.

Powell is famous for openly expressing nativist hostility to blacks and Asians, he was at least consistent in his bigotry, proclaiming he wanted the Irish out too.<sup>49</sup> Nor was he alone. Aside from the unspoken opinions of many in England, even the Liberal Party had a wing that wanted the Irish ousted too, insisting if others be restricted, so should the Irish.<sup>50</sup> The Irish were not part of a putative British family, even ambiguously so, as Kathleen Paul suggests. One person who wrote to the *Observer* felt compelled to ask in 1970 why the Southern Irish were not restricted too, given they entered the country ‘at a rate of 50,000 per annum each year?’<sup>51</sup>

Otherwise, little changed. In 1971, the average number of people per home in England was 2.89 for English people, while for the Irish it was 4.14 per house, and for those of colour 4.73.<sup>52</sup> Irish immigrants moved in similar post-colonial circumstances as immigrants of colour, to housing in the same parts of the same cities, they met the same kinds of attitudes, and they succumbed to the same landlord-tenant power dynamic in search of dilapidated housing. When they awoke each morning to go to work, they performed the same types of jobs, in the same conditions, with the same limited options derived from historical-imperial circumstances. Noel Kelly, an Irish worker who moved in the early 1950s, illustrates the close connection between work and lodgings for the typical labourer from Ireland:

There used to be a camp on the site which saved you from going into bad digs, usually the grub was good. Once on the camp (there was) no rations. Meat, eggs, stuff like that might be short, but you’d have porridge, bread, plenty of potatoes, vegetables, etc, it kept you going.<sup>53</sup>

### ‘Hard the work and long the day’

For all three major migrant groups, moving to Britain in the 1950s and 1960s meant living anywhere they could and working where they had to. Migrants moved due to the colonial relationship that prompted emigration in the first place. Scholars agree that both immigrants moved for work because of imperial economics.<sup>54</sup> Caribbeans, Asians and Irish were forced to leave homelands saddled with poverty, riots, famine and division.<sup>55</sup> In such circumstances, official records predictably reveal an enduring

<sup>49</sup> ‘Powell raises questions of Irish Republic citizens in Britain’, *The Times*, 28 Aug. 1969.

<sup>50</sup> ‘New committee, Irishmen, and Liberals’, *The Guardian*, 22 Sept. 1966, Letter to the editor from Dermot Whall, Birmingham.

<sup>51</sup> ‘Keeping down family size’, *The Observer*, 6 Dec. 1970.

<sup>52</sup> ‘How the city’s Irish live’, *Birmingham Post*, 23 July 1971.

<sup>53</sup> ‘“I Only Came over for a Couple of Years . . .”’, Interview with Noel Kelly.

<sup>54</sup> See James Walvin, *Passage to Britain: Immigration In British History and Politics* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1984), 14; also Jim Tomlinson, ‘The Decline of the Empire and the Economic “Decline” of Britain’, *Twentieth Century British History*, 14, 3 (2003), 201–21.

<sup>55</sup> For the dire state of mid-century Jamaica, see Thomas C. Holt, *The Problem of Freedom: Race, Labor, and Politics in Jamaica and Britain, 1832–1938* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 397. Riots in the 1930s forced the Colonial Development and Welfare Acts of 1940 and 1945 and ultimately independence in 1962. For India, Nicholas Dirks considers British wealth extraction part of a prolonged extortionate use of land revenue and monopolisation of the Indian economy, which the British used to bankroll both its imperial and metropolitan dominance. See Nicholas Dirks, ‘Coda,

mindset of contempt toward immigrants of any colour, even while their labour was so desperately needed. The title of the first official attempt to grapple with immigration, ‘The Working Party on the Employment in the United Kingdom of Surplus Colonial Labour’, revealed that colonial labour existed in surplus due to a lack of work in colonial peripheries. The sudden move from colonised to industrial nation sustained hard-to-erode imperial stereotypes for Commonwealth immigrants. Labour MP Lena Jeger, like other officials, received letters in the 1950s ostracising ‘lazy darkies who go straight on the dole’.<sup>56</sup> Union leaders made frequent note of prejudice toward immigrants of colour. As one Trade Union reported sympathetically in 1959, ‘Everything the coloured worker does is viewed with condescension due to their arrival unskilled, and a confidence of white superiority.’<sup>57</sup>

Similarly, Ireland’s inferior economic position contributed to persistent affronts toward the Irish population. Like their counterparts, Irish workers endured low-paid jobs, long hours, and frequent derision. After the war, one of the country’s largest employers, the National Coal Board, objected to the practice of bringing Irishmen into the mines. Irish labour was considered inherently unreliable; supervisors found Irishmen ‘unsatisfactory, a bad influence in the pit and in the hostel’.<sup>58</sup> One government official articulated the fractious relationship and persistence of colonial attitudes in 1951, grumbling, ‘The less said about Irishmen, the better.’<sup>59</sup> And a Labour Department minister thought Ireland’s persistently fraught labour conditions and poverty were due to the essential nature of the Irish rather than the colonial context or imbalanced trade relations: ‘It was their characteristic predisposition to cause trouble,’ he surmised.<sup>60</sup> They were at best a necessary nuisance.

Part of the problem was that so many Irish people, like other groups, came from farms and field where they had worked at a different pace. Unused to an industrial work environment, Andy Higgins recalls work in England as a ‘very strange experience, I’d never worked around machines, had no training. (I) did not know how to behave on jobs of such magnitude’. The noise and the attention to detail required for industrial work would have been shocking enough if good training was supplied, but in the rushed environment of post-war Britain, immigrants had to grapple with the situation without much assistance.<sup>61</sup> As Irishman Pat McCann put it, from his perspective London was ‘A vast metropolis, I’d never worked before,

The Burden of the Past: Colonialism and the Writing of History’, in *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), cited in Stephen Howe, ed., *The New Imperial Histories Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2009).103, fn11.

<sup>56</sup> LSE/Jeger/6/7, Colour Problem, Letter from Mrs K. Groves to Lena Jeger, 6 Sept. 1958.

<sup>57</sup> See the University of Warwick Modern Records Centre, ‘Report of Proceedings at 91st Annual Trades Union Congress’, 7–11 Sept. 1959, 428. To its credit, the powerful TUC increased its activism to stem colour prejudice, devoting more space to the issue in its annual reports every year thereafter.

<sup>58</sup> National Archives, London, (hereafter UKNA), Ministry of Power, Manpower, 1951, UKNA: PRO, POWE 37/237.

<sup>59</sup> Social Survey, Irish Immigration Research Officers Correspondence, 1961–63, UKNA: PRO, RG40/230. See also Jackson, *The Irish in Britain*, 108.

<sup>60</sup> Irish Republic Labour Report, 1963–66, UKNA: PRO, LAB 13/1741.

<sup>61</sup> ‘“I Only Came over for a Couple of Years . . .”’, A Higgins (9. 30).

only in farming, didn't know which way to turn, completely lost, didn't know even how to go about getting work.'<sup>62</sup> Used to rural economies and typically unskilled, those from all three origins met inherently distressing – yet decidedly similar – work conditions in the empire's economic heartlands of Birmingham and London.

Though some Irishmen worked in agriculture, most worked on construction sites or other alien environments such as coalmines and metal foundries. Charles MacNamara recalls the mind-numbing drudgery of the hectic factory environment: work was 'clean but noisy, people went deaf. [The] production system destroyed people's minds'.<sup>63</sup> Thomas Bourke, who moved in 1950 from the West of Ireland, found himself facing a blast furnace within days of arrival. He concedes he 'just couldn't take the heat', and accordingly moved on to a new job.<sup>64</sup> Though Louise Ryan has studied the many Irish women who worked in nursing and domestic service, factory work was common for women too.<sup>65</sup> Church records from the 1950s express dismay that so many girls worked in 'harsh factories'. One priest complained that 'only last week, due to inadequate training, one lost her finger.'<sup>66</sup>

Irrespective of attitudes or conditions, the vast majority of Irish moved to work, and worked hard. A 1961 Board of Trade survey found that within one week after arrival, 63% of Irish found work, and within a month over 90% did so.<sup>67</sup> A ministerial committee researching Irish people in England, titled 'The Irish problem', found that in 1962 and 1963, very few Irish immigrants were unemployed.<sup>68</sup> Individual memoirs illustrate that the fear of hunger required walking around asking for work. Noel Kennedy recalls, 'I got off the train Sunday night, didn't know where I was, walked up and down all day. Got a job Tuesday morning.'<sup>69</sup> Another Irishman tells how he immediately made his way to London, explaining he 'found somebody in Camden Market who took an interest in me, gave me a couple of bob and gear to sell, and that is how I started off surviving economically'.<sup>70</sup> Yet as with other groups, the focus was often on the irresponsible few, rather than the vast majority of Irish. In 1967 *The Times* reported a London magistrate scolding a jobless Irishman: 'It is

<sup>62</sup> "'I Only Came over for a Couple of Years . . .'", Pat McCann (6.38); Clarence Ollson Senior and Douglas Manley, *A Report on Jamaican Migration to Great Britain*, (Kingston: Printed by the Govt. Printer, 1955), 31–2.

<sup>63</sup> Interview with Charles MacNamara, 22/5/2001. Partner: Luton Museum Service (LMS), Reference: LTNMG 2002/266/2. Date(s): 2001, Community: Irish Community, Theme: Settling: <http://goo.gl/OZb1zk> (last visited 16 Sept. 2014).

<sup>64</sup> Interview with Thomas F. Bourke. First part of oral history interview with Thomas F. Bourke, born in County Mayo, 2001. 1932LTNMG 2002/264/1. Community: Irish Community: <http://goo.gl/qwCD7X> (last visited 16 Sept. 2014).

<sup>65</sup> L. Ryan, 'I had a sister in England': Family-led migration, social networks and nurses', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 34, 3 (2008), 453–70.

<sup>66</sup> BCAA, Archbishop's Papers 1929–1965: Irish.

<sup>67</sup> UKNA: PRO, RG 40/230, Social Survey, Irish Immigration Research Officers Correspondence, 1961–63.

<sup>68</sup> UKNA: PRO, HO 344/284, Memorandum on the Irish problem for the ministerial committee, Nov. 1964.

<sup>69</sup> "'I Only Came over for a Couple of Years . . .'", Noel Kennedy. (7. 40).

<sup>70</sup> "'I Only Came over for a Couple of Years . . .'", Tom Timmins (9. 00).

scandalous that people like you should live on social security. There are hundreds of young Irishmen coming over here and doing it.<sup>71</sup>

Anxiety over self-expression compounded derision and tension. West Indians faced issues due to their dialect, and South Asians had to surmount a challenging language barrier. However, Irish people also encountered otherness through their accents too. As Irish scholars have shown, a subtle and at times not-so-subtle aura of undisguisable difference prevailed, exposed by the correction of their usage of the English language. Breda Gray showed female Irish workers recall the constant correction of their use of the English language.<sup>72</sup> And as Ryan and Webster demonstrated, some Irish who migrated struggled to communicate with Londoners upon arrival. One interviewee complained, ‘they didn’t understand us. It was really, really hard.’<sup>73</sup> Others were silenced in the workplace. One woman recalls, ‘I got into trouble straight away because it was not fashionable to have an Irish accent and work in an office. I was told not to answer the phone.’<sup>74</sup> Donall Mac Amhlaigh has shown how male Irish labourers struggled to understand English workers building the roads.<sup>75</sup> Innocent communication problems reinforced the well-worn trope of the feckless paddy. One home-helper recalls that ‘After being told to fetch some shopping, I picked up bananas instead of swedes, not knowing what swedes were.’ The inevitable outcome she notes was ‘being told you’re thick’.<sup>76</sup>

At best, the Irish found steady work in nervous circumstances. At worst, they met death. Asked about the frequency of injuries and deaths at work, one Irish labourer replied: ‘Ah Jaysus, yeah, there was a big fella walking off a high-cast bearing on a Sunday morning, we were only after starting, a fine man, 6’ 4” or 5”, hit the ground like a tonne of bricks, never moved, splattered all over the concrete.’<sup>77</sup> Though this was thankfully rare, more prevalent was the simple solitude and sadness associated with leaving home. As one Irishwoman frankly put it, ‘I didn’t want to leave, who does?’<sup>78</sup> Another who moved in the 1950s told church aides yielding, ‘I decided I would go as the thousands of others go, with just a few pounds, accepting their ways of living (and the) working conditions.’<sup>79</sup> Migrants point to the lack of alternatives: ‘With no work (in Ireland), we were just expecting something better than we had at home’, which is, after all, about just about what they received.<sup>80</sup> Perhaps the Irish

<sup>71</sup> ‘Hundreds of Irish on Social Security’, *The Times*, 8 June 1967.

<sup>72</sup> Gray, *Women and the Irish Diaspora*, 139–40.

<sup>73</sup> Cited in Ryan and Webster, *Gendering Migration* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1998), 125; see also the oral histories conducted in the 1980s by O’Grady, in *Irish Migration to London in the 1940’s and 1950’s*, esp.14.

<sup>74</sup> <http://www.movinghere.org.uk/stories/story31/story31.htm?identifier=stories/story31/story31.htm> Emmigration (sic) from the Land of Saints and Scholars, 1965 . . . Contributed by Anon. (last visited 13 Sept. 2014).

<sup>75</sup> Donall Mac Amhlaigh, *An Irish Navy: The Diary of an Exile*. (London: Routledge and K. Paul, 1964), 6.

<sup>76</sup> M. Lennon, McAdam and O’Brien, *Across the Water*, 63, 96–7.

<sup>77</sup> “‘I Only Came over for a Couple of Years . . .’”, Andy Higgins (10.20).

<sup>78</sup> “‘I Only Came over for a Couple of Years . . .’”, Madge Messenger (2.39).

<sup>79</sup> BCA, LP 21.7, The Church and the Emigrant, from “The Furrow”, 1958, ‘A Worker in Birmingham’.

<sup>80</sup> “‘I Only Came over for a Couple of Years . . .’”, Interview with Andy Higgins (01 27).

workers' poem, 'The Exile Song', best captures the combination of nostalgia for home and the harsh reality of living as immigrant labour, forced to move due to a colonial past:

Hard the work and long the day,  
 Though I'm many a mile away.  
 Kiss the children for me, Mary,  
 Do not let them grieve,  
 Tell them how I'm working for them,  
 Why our home I had to leave.<sup>81</sup>

### The common colonial legacy and ethnic otherness

Pointing to the melancholy nature of the post-war immigrant experience might be regarded as syrupy, and be reasoned away as an inevitable part of life in the 1950s and 1960s. Conditions for lower-class English workers were hard too, and there was a great deal of acceptance toward all groups. Compared to other European nations, Britain's overall record regarding prejudice is hardly disgraceful. Yet by exploring immigrant life at home and at work, away from the halls of power, the parallel historical-imperial circumstances facing immigrants of all colours is unearthed.

So too is the continuity in colonial condescension. It is no surprise those in power had few reservations adopting scornful attitudes that toward South Asians. One official candidly declared in 1951: 'I can't believe it was the intention of the 1948 Act that we. . . should become the dustbin for the refuse of these two countries (India and Pakistan).'<sup>82</sup> Hugh Dalton's 1950 diaries showed no shame in labelling the non-white colonies as 'pullulating poverty-stricken, diseased nigger communities'.<sup>83</sup> But the civil servant Sir John Maffey wrote to Clement Attlee in 1948 he considered the Irish a 'vendetta-minded people'.<sup>84</sup> The doctor who spoke to Mass Observation researchers in 1939 may not have represented the majority of doctors, but nor was he alone: 'I have always thought the Irish wanting in a sense of reality . . . and have considered them paranoiac. I have good friends that are Irish. These latter are, however, Protestant, which in my opinion, means greater intelligence.'<sup>85</sup> Such attitudes prevailed well into the post-war era.

Present in such great numbers, the Irish, however, inhabited a perplexing position that merged questions of religion and class, serving, in Breda Gray's term, as 'unnoticed labour'.<sup>86</sup> Though their contribution to the economy was not noticed,

<sup>81</sup> BCA, 2/74. Irish Navvy Poems, 'The Exile Song'.

<sup>82</sup> Request for a declaration of the Pakistani Citizenship Act as a citizenship law under section 32 (8) of the BNA, Treaty Department; Nationality, 1951. UKNA. FO 372/7089, Treaty Department; Nationality, 1951.

<sup>83</sup> From Dalton's diaries, cited in Mike Phillips and Trevor Phillips, *Windrush: The Irresistible Rise of Multi-Racial Britain* (London: HarperCollins, 1998), 75.

<sup>84</sup> Rugby to Attlee, 17 Nov. 1948. UKNA: PRO, CAB 21/1843.

<sup>85</sup> Directive on Race, June 1939, Tom Harrison Mass Observation Archive, University of Sussex, quoted in Fielding, *Class and Ethnicity*, 131.

<sup>86</sup> Gray, *Women and the Irish Diaspora*, 133.

their status as inferiors surely was. Like immigrants of colour, Irish people were mindful of the structural bind that placed them in England. As one Irishwoman put it, ‘We always knew we were different. We openly discussed it. We were aware we were thought to be inferior people, useful, likable in many ways . . . on the whole intellectually inferior; we were stupid, stupid people.’<sup>87</sup> Similarly, the Irishman Joe Davis recalls, ‘My own experience is yes, the Irish were abused in ways. Things happened to me – a fella spat over the counter at me and all this carry-on.’ He goes on to note, ‘But these things happen. You forget them.’<sup>88</sup> In 1961, one immigrant protested the assumption that Irish people chose to migrate, noting ‘They talk as if Irish people regarded emigration to Britain as the next thing to attaining heaven.’<sup>89</sup>

Perhaps due to decades, indeed centuries, of condescension from their island neighbours, Irish immigrants found disparaging slurs ordinary? Those of Irish origin were of course conscious of a generalised resentment. As one put it, ‘I discovered the very name Irish had almost a criminal air about it, a backwards species viewed with suspicion. Things like, “So you’re one of the little people” and [being] the butt of Irish jokes.’<sup>90</sup> One Irishwoman stated rather reticently when interviewed, ‘we were discriminated against in those days’.<sup>91</sup> Yet, when colleagues persisted with jokes, the Irish tendency was to ignore it; one car worker noted casually in his memoirs, ‘Good atmosphere, though some Irish jokes.’<sup>92</sup> The broader culture replicated this characterisation. In a popular 1970s television series, *The Comedians*, anti-Irish jokes were second only to anti-Pakistani quips.<sup>93</sup> Indeed it was partly in response to such jokes that an Irish response eventually emerged in the 1980s to counter long-standing perceptions.<sup>94</sup>

Though surely small comfort, the difference in skin colour meant Commonwealth immigrants at least knew they were dissimilar. Bereft of a voice to broadcast their circumstances, the Irish were not conceived of as an ethnic minority and missed out on the attendant state services or gradual modification of attitudes that came with that status. As Hickman and Walter have illustrated, continued persecution

<sup>87</sup> Irish Studies Centre, London Metropolitan University, Gaelic League file, Anne Lynch, *The Irish in Exile: Stories of Emigration* (Community History Press, n.d.)

<sup>88</sup> ‘Reminiscences of Joe Davis’, *Irish Post*, 16 Feb. 2000.

<sup>89</sup> BCA, MS 2141/1/7/4. 1964–71. The Irish and the immigration bill.

<sup>90</sup> Interviews with elderly Irish women in London, 1997–98. Irish Studies Centre, London Metropolitan University ‘Continuing the oral tradition’; also the thirty oral history interviews carried out by O’Grady in *Irish Migration to London in the 1940’s and 1950’s* (1988) and the oral history DVD, ‘“I Only Came over for a Couple of Years . . .”’.

<sup>91</sup> ‘Continuing the oral tradition, Interviews with elderly Irish women in London’, 1 (1997–98), 7.

<sup>92</sup> Interview with Charles MacNamara, 22/5/2001. Partner: LMS, Reference: LTNMG 2002/266/2. Date(s): 2001, Community: Irish Community, Theme: Settling: <http://goo.gl/OZb12k> (last visited 16 Sept. 2014).

<sup>93</sup> Cited in Kevin O’Connor, *The Irish in Britain* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1972), 164.

<sup>94</sup> See in the Haringey (London) magazine, ‘Racism: Anti-Irish jokes: Why we’re not laughing’, *The Irish Voice*, 3 (1986), Haringey Museum and Archive Service, Bruce Castle Museum, ldbcm2002.81.



of Irish people lasted well into recent years.<sup>95</sup> Though Irish people inhabited an ambivalent racialised position, they were subject to the same iron rule, as Walter notes, that ‘power relations underpin emigration’.<sup>96</sup> By the 1980s Irish marginalisation would slowly gain attention, though in 1993 representatives from the London Irish Women’s Centre could still claim plaintively: ‘When immigrants of colour run into discrimination, they are able to appeal as “ethnic minorities” with some authority and confidence. Their place in the social infrastructure of employment, housing and health is measured in a way that ours is not.’<sup>97</sup>

In stark contrast, the influence of the colonial legacy on Commonwealth immigrants was public knowledge and invited an immediate riposte from immigrants of colour. Organisations such as the National Committee for Commonwealth Immigrants, the Indian Workers Association, the British Caribbean Association, the National Federation of Pakistani Associations or the Campaign Against Racial Discrimination, among others, offered a rallying point for immigrants of colour by the 1960s, and at the very least forced English people to assess their attitudes toward immigrants. All of these groups pointed to the ongoing impact of imperialism, ensuring both ordinary people and illustrious officials knew immigrants of colour merited assistance.

Like Commonwealth immigrants, the Irish lived and worked in grim post-imperial circumstances. And like Commonwealth immigrants, they met hostile attitudes derived from a long-standing colonial relationship. Caught in the middle of an ambiguous paradigm of post-war prejudice, they were ‘immigrant enough’ to invite disregard and contempt as second-class citizens, but not enough to warrant consideration as foreigners. Easily identified imperial racism toward Commonwealth immigrants inspired active organisation and agency, resulting in improved treatment and a greater voice in ensuing decades. Yet a more ambiguous but equally pernicious historical condescension toward the white Irish induced minimal state attention and a negligible role in the cultural conversation.

Indeed, the effects of Irish inconspicuousness only began to receive scholarly or popular attention in the 1980s. As Liz Curtis has shown, there were consequences of Irish people’s ambivalent status.<sup>98</sup> In 1981, the Irish in Britain Representation Group’ stated its founding purpose was to counter the lack of ‘effective representation of our interests in social, cultural or political matters’.<sup>99</sup> A lament-like preface to the

<sup>95</sup> See Mary Hickman, Bronwen Walter, and Great Britain, Commission for Racial Equality, *Discrimination and the Irish Community in Britain: A Report of Research undertaken for the Commission for Racial Equality* London: Commission for Racial Equality (1997).

<sup>96</sup> Walter, *Outsiders Inside*, 14.

<sup>97</sup> *The Irish Times*, 10 June 1993, 4. Only in 1995 did the Commission for Racial Equality agree to a long-sought Irish category for use in ethnic monitoring systems.

<sup>98</sup> Liz Curtis, *Nothing but the Same Old Story: The Roots of Anti-Irish Racism* (London: Information on Ireland, 1984); see also, Mac An Ghaill, ‘British Critical Theorists’, 179.

<sup>99</sup> See ‘Internal Exile’, *The Irish Voice*, 3, 1986. Haringey Museum and Archive Service, Bruce Castle Museum, ldbcm2002.81. *The Irish Voice* is the community magazine for the Haringey Irish in Britain Representation Group (IBRG), 1987: Community: Irish Community. Out of those that would eventually work to change attitudes in England, the Federation of Irish Societies was formed

1987 book *The London Irish* noted, 'The Irish in terms of the race debate can be seen as a forgotten community.'<sup>100</sup> In 1988, researchers found that the Irish suffered more mental illness than any other immigrant community. The mental health group MIND contended that invisibility as an ethnic group had hindered recognition of social problems and consequent possibilities for treatment.<sup>101</sup> In 1991, *The Sunday Mercury* in Birmingham went so far as to claim the Irish were the only immigrants who fared worse in Britain than in their own country.<sup>102</sup> Accordingly, the Irish were not perceived of as an ethnic group until the 1990s, with a severe bearing on the population who moved after the war. Though state energies were focused on Commonwealth immigrants to confront the colonial legacy, it never occurred to anyone to do the same for the Irish; they were ostensibly just white people moving to a white country, left to their own devices.<sup>103</sup>

### Conclusion: Different degrees of derision

My intent here is not to suggest an identical immigrant experience in the post-war decades. There were of course differences, among and within groups and the Irish were no different in the variety of their experience, as scholars have shown.<sup>104</sup> Undoubtedly, it was harder to walk the streets if one's appearance indicated origins in South Asia or the Caribbean rather than Cork, Galway or Dublin. The Irish position, when placed next to that of Commonwealth immigrants, points to both similarity and difference. By inhabiting a middle zone between 'immigrant other' and 'white citizen', Irish people could integrate comparatively easier, distancing themselves from

in 1973 to promote Irish pride. The IBRG pointed to a new approach, forming in 1981 to foster a more positive identity for the Irish and to counter stereotypes.

<sup>100</sup> Irish Studies Centre, London Metropolitan University, *The London Irish* (1987). See too Mary Tilki, and Louise Ryan, Alessio D'Angelo, Rosemary A Sales (2009), 'Forgotten Irish, Project Report', Middlesex University.

<sup>101</sup> See P. J. Aspinall, 'Suicide amongst Irish migrants in Britain: A review of the identity and integration hypothesis', *International Journal of Social Psychiatry*, 48, 4 (1 Dec. 2002), 290–304. Also J. K. Cruickshank, 'Mortality in second-generation Irish people living in Britain and Wales', *BMJ*, 313 (1996), 753, and Liam Greenslade, 'Na daoine aird: Irish people and mental health problems', *International Journal of Psychology and Psychotherapy*, 11, 2 (1993), 1986. See also Máirtín Mac an Ghaill and Chris Haywood, 'Young (male) Irish: Postcolonial ethnicities: Expanding the nation and Irishness', *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 6 (2003), 386–403.

<sup>102</sup> *The Sunday Mercury*, 23 Mar. 1991.

<sup>103</sup> For government efforts to solve problems of integration for non-white migrants, see Cabinet office, Commonwealth Immigrants: Integration. 6/15/39/1, UKNA: PRO, CAB 21/5287. Between 1967 and 1970, the National Foundation for Educational Research worked to better understand difficulties faced by ethnic minorities adapting to life in Britain. Focused on all the major immigrant groups, it did not consider the Irish. Letter from Miss Joyce Smith, assistant to the Secretary of State to Lord Bridges, 14 Nov. 1973. UKNA: PRO, PREM 15/1717. An article in a Birmingham newspaper in 1992 called for Irish people to begin to consider themselves an ethnic minority, noting the Labour Party had recognised the need since 1984. BCA, Unclear Title. 10 June 1992. BCOL. 941.5.

<sup>104</sup> Gray, *Women and the Irish Diaspora*, 107.

undesirable cultural connections with 'Irishness'.<sup>105</sup> Though feasible, this was less readily available for those of colour; a Jamaican, an Indian, or a Pakistani was always perceived by English people as just that. Geographical proximity to home also offered greater options for Irish people to move back and forth, and many did.<sup>106</sup> Having made such a long, arduous journey, Commonwealth immigrants were not likely to return upon a whim, regardless of conditions. But these points do not diminish the marked equivalence of the Irish and Commonwealth immigrant experience. They certainly do not suggest Irish people lived in England free of condescension or discomfort, assimilating as whites in a white country.

Questions concerning which segments of society were most prejudiced in post-war Britain or the racism of particular legislation are important, and scholars have rightly addressed them. Decades of scholarship on the iniquities of 'coloured prejudice' have rightly exposed the hardship facing immigrants from the Commonwealth. But we delve deeper into the post-war immigrant experience when we consider the lives of immigrants of all colours, in the places they lived and worked, rather than amid the quaintly worded quagmire of legislation. We begin to discern the varieties of prejudice encountered by people of all shades when we include the Irish as colonised whites.

After the war, almost a million Irish people entered Britain alongside their Commonwealth counterparts. By exploring the actual lives of these migrants we counter the conventional wisdom that the white Irish moved merrily to Britain and integrated accordingly. If the comments of one down-on-his-luck Irishman in London do not perhaps represent 'the Irish' *in toto*, they do depict daily life for so many migrants, regardless of colour: 'I lived in Birmingham, working regularly in the building. I would drink from Thursday to Sunday. The rest of the week would be sort of hell, but I always seemed to manage in some way.'<sup>107</sup> Every immigrant community endured contempt and squalor in post-war Britain. But none came in such large numbers as the Irish or made the same overall contribution to post-war reconstruction. Irish people then were trapped in the middle of a polarised immigration discourse with no conceptual room for them, either for policymakers or for historians of Britain since.

And as the 1970s began, attitudes toward the Irish in Britain were about to darken markedly. Irish difference might have been rendered in subtly shaded derision through the 1950s and 1960s, but it would be accentuated clear and starkly once the IRA restarted their campaign to broadcast grievances regarding the British in Ireland. On November 21st, 1974 two horrific bombings set off by somebody in the IRA in popular city centre pubs in Birmingham murdered 21 people and injured 182. The six Irishmen arrested and imprisoned for sixteen years for the bombings were subsequently released, having been forced to make confessions based upon inadequate

<sup>105</sup> Mary Hickman, et al., 'The limitations of whiteness and the boundaries of Englishness', *Ethnicities*, 5, 2 (2005), 160–82, 67.

<sup>106</sup> Ernest Krausz, *Ethnic minorities in Britain* (Paladin, 1972), 125.

<sup>107</sup> O'Connor, *The Irish in Britain*, 153, 160.

evidence. Those responsible are still unidentified, providing no closure to the tragedy, or more importantly, to the families of the victims.

In the week following the bombings, the Home Secretary, Roy Jenkins, rushed through Parliament the Prevention of Terrorism Act of 1974. This was an act of law specifically aimed at Irish radicals, who Jenkins argued constituted a 'clear and present danger'.<sup>108</sup> However, reservations regarding the Irish amid such emergency legislation could easily be broadened to embrace 'Irish people' in the mind of the public. Enacted only eight days after the bombings, the legislation contributed to circumstances whereby the majority Irish in Britain could be conflated with the tiny minority willing to perform violent acts to protest against past and present. With ongoing IRA violence worsening conditions, a spirit of anti-Irishness skyrocketed in the years to follow. In such an environment, any Irish person could conceivably be sympathetic to the IRA, or worse, a member of the organisation. Many English had suspected the worth of the Irish as citizens following the war. By the 1970s widespread misgivings toward their very presence on English soil prevailed, a historical irony if ever there was one.

<sup>108</sup> Hansard (HC) Vol.882 col.35 (25 November 1974), Roy Jenkins.

**L'altérité des Irlandais: Nuances de différences dans la Grande-Bretagne de l'après-guerre, 1948–71**

Cet article a pour objectif principal de considérer les immigrants irlandais blancs dans le contexte de l'immigration des 'personnes de couleur' dans la Grande-Bretagne de l'après-guerre. Il considère les similarités entre les raisons impérial-historiques qui ont poussé à l'immigration des travailleurs agricoles pauvres, pour la plupart, venus des Antilles, de l'Asie du Sud et de l'Irlande. La discussion explore l'expérience des immigrants blancs et non blancs à Londres et Birmingham jusqu'en 1971, et compare les trois groupes ci-dessus, mais en s'intéressant de plus près aux immigrants irlandais. Le but de l'auteur est d'ajouter l'expérience vécue par les Irlandais aux analyses de l'immigration de l'après-guerre, qui ont eu tendance à se focaliser sur les immigrants non blancs des pays des Antilles et d'Asie du Sud appartenant au Commonwealth. En explorant l'expérience irlandaise, il remet en question les études qui suggèrent que les immigrants irlandais se sont assimilés dans la Grande-Bretagne de l'après-guerre sans avoir à affronter les tensions ethniques et les conditions difficiles indubitablement rencontrées par les personnes de couleur. Il montre en outre à quel point les historiens britanniques ont négligé l'expérience des Irlandais en Grande-Bretagne.

**Die ausgeschlossenen Iren: Nuancen des Andersseins in Großbritannien 1948–71**

Dieser Beitrag konzentriert sich auf die Erfahrungen weißer Immigranten aus Irland im umfassenderen Kontext der Einwanderung Farbiger nach Großbritannien im Anschluss an den Zweiten Weltkrieg. Er beleuchtet die Ähnlichkeiten imperial-historischer Gründe für die Einwanderung meist armer Landarbeiter von den Westindischen Inseln sowie aus Südasien und Irland. Dabei werden die Erfahrungen weißer und nicht weißer Einwanderer in London und Birmingham bis 1971 untersucht. Alle drei Gruppen werden verglichen, doch der Schwerpunkt liegt auf irischen Einwanderern. Frühere Studien zur Immigration in den Nachkriegsjahren konzentrieren sich in der Regel auf nicht weiße Einwanderer aus Commonwealth-Gebieten wie den Westindischen Inseln und Südasien. Dieser Beitrag hat es sich zum Ziel gesetzt, sie durch eine Analyse der Erfahrungen irischer Einwanderer zu ergänzen. Diese Analyse stellt bisherige Forschungsergebnisse in Frage, denen zufolge irische Einwanderer sich unberührt von den ethnischen Spannungen und schwierigen Bedingungen im Großbritannien der Nachkriegszeit einlebten, unter denen farbige Migranten zweifellos zu leiden hatten. Dabei wird deutlich, wie stark britische Historiker die Erfahrungen der irischen Bevölkerung in Großbritannien bisher vernachlässigt haben.