
‘England People Very Nice’

Multi-Generational Irish Identities in the Multi-Cultural East End

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A key element of the concept of diaspora is longevity of ethnic difference over more than one generation, that is the settledness of migrant populations beyond the migrants themselves. Diaspora has become a very popular notion amongst academics recently, but interest is strongly focussed on ‘new’ diasporas resulting from recent globalisation.¹ As a result ‘old’ diasporas, such as those of the Irish and to a lesser extent the Jews,² are often neglected especially by social scientists, although they offer unusual opportunities to explore these larger time frames. Moreover the widely-accepted erosion of difference of such long-established minority ethnic groups, under a taken-for-granted assumption of assimilation, has unacknowledged political consequences. As Robert Miles points out:

The previously excluded became included in the context of the signification of the ‘new’ intruder and the continuing cultural variation is overlooked in the course of the reconstruction of the nation as culturally homogenous contra another Other.³

There has been a small shift in the exclusion from both academic and policy debates about the ethnicity in Britain of the Jews and the Irish, amongst whom there are important parallels as well as contrasts in positionings and experiences. In 2000, for example, the carefully theorised but politically sidelined Parekh Report on *The Future of Multi-ethnic Britain* identified both these groups as experiencing ‘significant’ racism in contemporary Britain.⁴ This view challenged conventional understandings of ‘race’:

Hostility which uses skin colour and physical appearance as markers of supposed difference does not represent the whole picture. There is also hostility using markers connected with culture, language and religion. The plural term ‘racisms’ is sometimes used to highlight such complexity...

Both [anti-black and anti-Asian racisms] are different from, to cite three further significant examples, anti-Irish, anti-Gypsy and anti-Jewish racism.⁵

At the same time the 2001 Censuses of England and Wales, and Scotland, included for the first time tick-box categories for those of Irish 'cultural background' in the Ethnic Group section and 'Jewish' in the Religion section. Despite many difficulties in interpreting the statistical data provided, the availability of such choices gave the named categories new public recognition and an option for their inclusion in further monitoring procedures.⁶ The wider definition of 'White Irish' was embraced enthusiastically by Irish community and welfare groups who campaigned vigorously in the weeks before the 2011 Census to encourage people of second- and third-generation Irish background to 'tick the box' more confidently than in 2001. The Federation of Irish Societies, for example, used the occasion of St Patrick's Day parades in 2011 to offer onlookers a 'Family Tree' on which people's own, their parents' and their grandparents' birthplace in Ireland could be recorded with a shamrock stamp. This served to inform participants that one Irish grandparent entitled them to claim an authentic Irish identity through entitlement to an Irish passport.

My major interest in addressing the issue of multi-generational identities of at least three generations and possibly more, is to explore processes of change in both the ever-widening diasporic group itself and the society of which it becomes part. Such intersections are socio-economic and cultural as well as demographic, that is the likelihood that there will be a myriad of partnerships inside and outside of the group, producing children of mixed and perhaps many backgrounds. This is a concomitant of Avtar Brah's notion of 'diaspora space' which she defines as:

a conceptual category [which] is 'inhabited' not only by those who have migrated and their descendants but equally by those who are constructed and represented as indigenous. In other words, the concept of *diaspora space* (as opposed to that of diaspora) includes the entanglement of genealogies of dispersion with those of 'staying put'.⁷

Entanglements include those of multi-generational ethnic groups with the so-called 'mainstream' indigenous populations and with other diasporic populations. A particularly interesting mix is that of the Irish and the Jews, who arrived in Britain in large numbers at similar and consecutive periods in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries and occupied parallel

socio-economic, geographical and cultural niches in British society. The East End of London offers an important example of such settlement and subsequent relationships.

Very little attention has been paid to analysing the longitudinal settlement of the Irish in the East End despite their huge demographic contribution to the population from the mid-nineteenth to early-twentieth centuries. In the third quarter of the nineteenth century the Irish were by far the largest migrant birthplace group in the East End, only matched and then eclipsed by the arrival of Jews from Russia and Eastern Europe after the 1880s. In both cases these groups were responding not only to the need to escape from extreme poverty in their home countries, but more importantly to the demand for labour in the expanding industries in the heart of the British Empire. There was a massive shortage of manual labour for the docks and growing engineering and clothing industries close to the City of London on its eastern fringes, which could be met by migrants living cheaply on low wages.

In fact numbers of new immigrants from Ireland peaked in the 1860s so that the diminishing and ageing migrant population was soon overtaken in size by second-generation children. In contemporary reports and accounts these were indistinguishable from their parents in ethnic identification, equally labelled 'Irish'. Reports recorded the stability of settlement amongst the Irish at least until the Second World War. In contrast to the Jewish populations which started to move out of the East End from the 1920s, the Irish 'stayed put' with lower levels of upward social mobility.

Questions which this article will consider include: how strongly and in what ways did a multi-generational Irish population persist in the East End after the huge inflow of the mid-nineteenth century? In what ways was Irishness apparent amongst those of Irish descent? How was it claimed, noticed, recorded and labelled? And finally, what has been the trajectory over time to the present day? What traces remain of this large-scale historical presence? Irishness is understood here to represent a cluster of social and cultural traits signifying the ethnic distinctiveness of people with ties to Ireland. Within the diaspora it is constructed both within and between families whose behaviour, attitudes and beliefs retain continuities from recent migrant or more distant ancestral pasts and in the more public spheres of religious and political identities specific to Ireland. In England Irishness is often identified in contrast to understandings of Englishness, a complex and contested term which derives its meanings from populations with different senses of national origins and belonging, heavily inflected in its turn by the culture of colonialism.⁸

The title 'England People Very Nice' is taken from a controversial new play by Richard Bean performed at the National Theatre in London in 2007, which echoes many strands examined here.⁹ The structure parallels my approach in that it looks back at the past from the present day. It takes the form of a play-within-a-play being devised by a group of asylum seekers in detention, who are attempting to represent the history of migrant settlement in the East End as a way of placing themselves in English society. They deliberately use crude stereotypes to indicate initial revulsion against newcomers by the longer-established settlers, but soften these with humour and a quick gallop on the next stigmatised arrivals. In many ways the play is a vivid realisation of the abstract notion of diaspora space as the themes highlight political tensions around concepts of multiculturalism and indigeneity. It was received with a mix of deep disgust at the perceived reinforcement of offensive stereotypes and appreciation for its positive, inclusive, intentions, underlining the complexity and divisiveness of the issues raised. In a review for *The Times Online* entitled "'England People Very Nice" causes a very English fuss: a riotous romp? Well, "England People Very Nice" at the National Theatre almost started a riot', Kate Muir summed up:

the play has had the best of reviews and the worst of reviews—five stars or one. It's racist—or too politically correct. It's childish—or profound. It's offensive—or ironic. On the blogs, and in the bowels of the *Guardian*, English people have been getting shouty. Naturally, on the night I go, there isn't an empty seat in the house.¹⁰

The reviews were indeed at opposite extremes. In Michael Billington's opinion in the *Guardian* the play 'leaves a sour taste in the mouth' and Nicholas de Jongh wrote in the *Evening Standard*: 'I have never had a more uncomfortable or unpleasant experience at the National Theatre'.¹¹ However Charles Spencer in the *Daily Telegraph* observed that:

beyond the often cheap, though disgracefully funny, jokes, there is wisdom and humanity in this play. Bean shares Daniel Defoe's view that the English have always been a mongrel race, and that it is interbreeding that eventually helps violence and suspicion turn into sometimes grumpy acceptance of successive waves of immigrants.¹²

Similarly William McEvoy in *The Stage* suggested it could be seen as 'theatre in a celebratory popular form which sees comedy as the solvent that dissolves the static ideologies and cultural taboos that bind us'.¹³

The extreme responses to the play being performed at the National Theatre on the South Bank, across the Thames from the East End of London, illustrate the centrality and contested nature the notion of English identity in the twenty-first century. As the play shows, the East End continues to be at the forefront of debates about this issue, because it remains an entry point for immigrants providing cheap labour and in need of low-cost housing. The contemporary multi-generational Irish population in England illustrates both inclusion and exclusion from Englishness. On the one hand anti-Irish racism, more virulent in the later decades of the twentieth century when the conflict in Northern Ireland produced violent actions in England including use of the Prevention of Terrorism Act against members of the 'suspect community' of the Irish in Britain, continued to mark Irish people as 'other'.¹⁴ But they were simultaneously included as core members of the 'white working class', which implicitly signals 'English' with associated assumptions of belonging and entitlement. A long time perspective offers an opportunity to evaluate what is meant by indigeneity and settledness.

In this article I select four salient periods between the mid-nineteenth century and the present to examine the place of the Irish in economic and social life of the East End. My analysis will draw on secondary sources in order to suggest some relevant themes and construct a broad framework within which to discuss the notion of multigenerational persistence of identities, which can be enriched in future by primary data. Surprisingly little academic work has focussed directly on the Irish so there is a heavy reliance on tangential references or indeed absences. Two key sources which address the topic directly include firstly Lynn Hollen Lees's *Exiles of Erin: Irish migrants in Victorian London* (1979) which addresses the earlier period 1851–81 and selects Aldgate, Whitechapel, as one of five sample census districts for more detailed study.¹⁵ The second is John Jackson's article 'The Irish in East London' (1963) which provides a brief but wide-ranging discussion of 'the impact of the Irish on the East End' over four centuries.¹⁶ Although there are detailed references to the Irish in primary sources such as Henry Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor*, researched between 1848 and 1850 and Charles Booth's survey *Inquiry into the Life and Labour of the People of London*, undertaken between 1886 and 1903, little secondary research specifically on this population group appears to have been published.¹⁷

Not surprisingly statistical data is sparse. Birthplace is the only category to have been recorded regularly in the decennial censuses so that the larger Irish community, those of Irish descent, is rapidly lost. Culturally

the English-born children of Irish migrants remain close to their parents so that Irish-born is a limited identity which excludes many who have far more similarities than differences. Often Irish families were large with many second-generation siblings so that the 'Irish' population expanded exponentially in London. Moreover co-residence with grandparents meant that the third generation overlapped with the second and added another layer to the generational mix. These personal and community ties are brought together in the notion of 'embeddedness' which references linked lives across generations.¹⁸

1851–81 East End Irish communities

Conditions experienced by the Irish in mid-nineteenth century London are described in graphic detail by Henry Mayhew. The two principal groups at this date were the Irish and the Jews, but according to Millicent Rose, in Mayhew's accounts:

The Irish however are predominant; for, with their blarney and garrulity, and their gratification (not unmixed with hope of bounty) at being spoken to by a 'gentleman', they provided a willing and entertaining source of information which Mayhew turned to good account.¹⁹

Mayhew identifies the major areas of Irish settlement, centring on Rosemary Lane, in the parish of St George-in-the-East. He recorded the poor cramped living conditions and feckless habits of the community in general, but, unusually, also spoke positively about the attempts by Irish women to keep their homes clean:

In all the houses that I entered there were traces of household care and neatness that I little expected to have seen. The cupboard fastened in the corner of the room, and stocked with mugs and cups, the mantelpiece with its images, and the walls covered with showy-coloured prints of saints and martyrs, gave an air of comfort that strongly disagreed with the reports of the cabins in 'Ould Ireland'.²⁰

It was far more common, however, for contemporary commentators to blame the Irish for lowering housing standards and for this reason they 'naturally attracted far more than their fair share of attention' according to Anthony Wohl.²¹ Typical of the popular view was the Rev. John Garwood's opinion expressed in 1853 that:

The poverty, the quarrelling, the drunken disturbances, the dirt, and the excessive crowding together of the Irish, wherever they form a London colony, cause that they lower the character of every neighbourhood in which they settle, and landlords are often glad at length to refuse them as tenants, and to sweep them away.²²

The most detailed analysis of intergenerational persistence of Irish settlement in the East End in the third quarter of the nineteenth century is found in the work of Lynn Lees. Using census data from the parish of Whitechapel, she shows that even as early as 1851 second-generation Irish people were established in the East End, stretching generations into the more distant past. Indeed she calculated that by 1851 in London as a whole 30 per cent of her sample was second- or third-generation Irish, growing to 40 per cent by 1861.²³ Even this was an underestimate since only households with at least one Irish-born member could be included in the sample. After the age of fifteen children began to move away from the parental home and by twenty most had left, breaking the link with Irish birthplace of the first generation by which they could be counted statistically.²⁴ Moreover very few young married couples lived with their parents.²⁵

The terms 'second- and third-generation Irish' denoted people with strong Irish connections on both sides of their ancestry.

The London Irish generally married within their own ethnic group; there was little intermarriage with people of English ancestry or with continental Roman Catholics. While 24 per cent of the sampled families listed in the 1851 census and 20 per cent of those in the 1861 census contained one English-born and one Irish-born partner, virtually all of the technically English spouses were second- or third-generation Irish. The 'English' men had Irish names and had been born in London; marriage registers from the Catholic churches serving my sample parishes show that most of the maiden names of women marrying Irish-born men were also Irish. First- and second-generation Irish would seem therefore to have intermarried freely.²⁶

A number of factors help to explain intergenerational continuities, one of the most important being geographical clustering and stability over time. Lees points out that the 'the vast majority of the sampled second generation were born in the same parish where their parents resided in 1851 or 1861'.²⁷ Families moved frequently but locally, within a half mile radius. Whilst they lived beside the English population, they did not necessarily mix socially.

Although Irish migrants were not ostracised and locked in an urban ghetto, most were relegated to the side streets and back alleys of their neighbourhoods. They lived close to the English but they remained apart. Ethnicity, operating within constraints posed by London's economic and residential geography, shaped patterns of Irish settlement. The result was a chain of Irish buildings and enclaves located within English working-class territory. Although neighbourhoods were shared, neither geographic nor social assimilation took place.²⁸

Separate Catholic schooling was another important factor in maintaining ethnic boundaries and bringing together marriage partners, as well as re-inforcing difference. In the 1870s educational separation of children was far from complete as Anna Davin has shown.²⁹ More children from Irish Catholic families attended non-denominational Board Schools, either for convenience, from religious indifference or because no Catholic school was available in the neighbourhood. Nevertheless Catholic provision expanded over the period and became a key element in maintaining Irish difference.³⁰ Finally male employment networks where jobs were handed from father to son maintained intergenerational links within the Irish community. The most extreme example was the Stevedores' Union where preference was given to workers' sons who were admitted underage for nominal fees.³¹

Lees also takes intergenerational embeddedness forward to the end of the nineteenth century, arguing that although links were increasingly established between the Irish and the English through shared participation in London trades unions and local politics

the third and fourth generations still clung to the symbols of their ancestors' past and continued to use Irish associations, Catholic groups, and kinship networks to mediate their contact with English urban society.³²

In the second half of the nineteenth century, therefore, the Irish were a major element in the East End population. Through geographical separation, intermarriage, religious difference and occupational clustering, the term 'Irish' was understood to include multiple generations without question. Indeed the association between manual work and Irish origin was taken for granted so that the overwhelmingly Irish ethnic participation in events which came to national public notice, such as the Matchwomen's Strike of 1888 and the Dockers' Strike of 1889 were, and continue to be, seen simply as actions of the East End 'working class'.

The 1888 Matchwomen's Strike

The second case study addresses a series of events which arose directly out of the situation described by Lees. This is the strike against poor working conditions by women working in the Bryant and May match factory located in Bow, a major area of Irish settlement in the East End. Conventional historical accounts of the strike have been critically reworked by Louise Raw to show that the young women working as 'factory girls' were of Irish descent. They were described by their contemporaries as Irish 'by birth or lineage' or 'of Irish extraction', confirming that the Irish community in the East End was recognised by background as well as birthplace.³³ This cultural identity had not previously been noted by historians who focussed instead on the middle-class English woman seen as the leader of the strike, Annie Besant.

Raw used a wide range of local sources to show that Besant became involved in the strike only after local Irish women had initiated the action.³⁴ But the initiators were overlooked because 'not only were they the wrong sort of women from what was, to middle-class commentators, the wrong area but they had the wrong heritage, being largely of Irish descent.'³⁵ She cites Booth's labelling of the matchwomen as 'Irish cockneys', again a clear indication that they were local-born of Irish-born parents or grandparents.³⁶ Interestingly 'cockney' is a contested category; for some only the 'indigenous' can claim the title but this raises questions about the number of generations required to reach this status. In a footnote to his widely cited article 'The "cockney" and the nation, 1780–1988' Gareth Stedman Jones admits this ambiguity, but does not resolve it.

This essay, it should be emphasized, is a very preliminary survey. I am well aware of its incompleteness. For instance, one important historical question which I do not discuss is the extent to which London's Irish and Jewish populations were incorporated within notions of the 'cockney' or excluded from them.³⁷

Raw argues that the Irish backgrounds of the striking matchwomen were not an accident of geographical location and socio-economic positioning, but integral to their initiation of the strike. Their decision to challenge poor working conditions was an outcome of politicisation of their families in Ireland arising from the Home Rule movement in Ireland with its associated anti-English political activism.³⁸ This explanation is accepted as a factor

explaining the Dockers' Strike in the East End in the following year, 1889, but has not previously been linked with the matchwomen. Raw identifies close personal connections between dockers and matchwomen, as siblings and partners and co-habitants of dockside housing areas.³⁹ Such political education was further bolstered by a lack of deference to the middle classes by more recently industrialised immigrants from rural Ireland. Although the 'factory girls' welcomed Annie Besant's support, they did not see it as 'natural' leadership and indeed began their action without it.⁴⁰

The unusual gendering of the strike tied such political attitudes even more firmly into the local community. Just as it was embedded in earlier generations of Irish political culture, so it was passed to children and grandchildren. In the East End women lived longer than men and often supported families financially on a more secure level. They were also key to maintaining the kinship links on which the cohesion of families and neighbourhoods depended.⁴¹ This multi-generational enmeshing of the Matchwomen's Strike is vividly illustrated by Raw's research methods. In 2004 and 2005 she meticulously traced and interviewed three grandchildren of the strikers, each of whom retained memories of stories they had been told as children.⁴² This effectively extends the generations still identifying as Irish into the twenty-first century. One example was the descendant of the striker Mary Driscoll, herself a second-generation woman who had two Irish-born parents. Mary's daughter was described by her own daughter, Joan, as feeling herself to be Irish. Joan, Mary's granddaughter, said that she herself 'inherited this identity'.⁴³

Primary sources could be used to explore these connections in more detail, the major starting point being the reports of Charles Booth based on data generated in the years immediately around the Matchwomen's Strike. Booth's *Maps Descriptive of London Poverty* are a particularly valuable source for the detailed assessment of the quality of Irish neighbourhoods in the East End. Booth's *Notebooks* also record comments on the character of particular streets, noting for example 'Cockney Irish colony in Pell Street',⁴⁴ 'Cockney Irish and a number of prostitutes living in Pennington Street'⁴⁵ and 'Wilson place is an Irish colony'.⁴⁶ But although these are a rich descriptions, Englander observes that Booth was much more interested in the Jews than the Irish and indeed the Poverty volumes do not have an entry for 'Irish' in the index.⁴⁷ He attempts to explain this by pointing out that by the time of Booth's survey Irish communities in the East End were being destroyed by the relentless development of the inner ring of London. He also suggests that by the end of the nineteenth century the Irish were more settled and familiar than the Jews so that the extent of their differentiation

did not register with Booth, raising interesting questions about contemporary perceptions the relative 'indigeneity' of the Irish after three or four generations.

Early twentieth century: the inter-war years

The steady decline in the size of the Irish-born population in the East End continued until the early twentieth century. As census numbers show, in London the lowest point was reached for Irish-born women in 1911 and for men in 1921, after which a sharp rise was recorded in 1931 which continued in the same upward trajectory until 1971.⁴⁸ The ratio of Irish-born to Irish descent was thus at its smallest as the proportion of people with an Irish background continued to expand. Successive censuses provide differently tabulated data so that comparisons are difficult to make beyond the basic birthplace numbers. In 1911, for example, a more detailed geographical analysis is possible as birthplace data was published by London borough.⁴⁹ This showed that each of the four boroughs comprising the East End had Irish-born populations well below 1 per cent of the total. In Bethnal Green, for example, there were only 209 Irish-born women and 164 men, comprising respectively 0.31 and 0.23 per cent of the total. In Hackney the proportions of women and men were 0.60 and 0.51 per cent, and these were only slightly higher in Stepney (0.71, 0.70 per cent) and Poplar (0.72, 0.73 per cent). The highest percentages were recorded in West London, in Fulham (1.33, 0.97 per cent) and Hammersmith (1.19, 1.24 per cent).

At the same time the East End was still regarded as a very 'Irish' place, confirming the multi-generational understanding of the ethnic label. This is illustrated in personal autobiographical accounts and oral histories of the early twentieth century. For example, Gilda O'Neill, in her popular memoir *My East End*, makes numerous references to Irish identities of the inhabitants in her descriptions of 'The Golden Age' from the turn of the century to the 'slum' clearances of the 1950s and 1960s. In a vivid account of St Patrick's Day parades in the early twentieth century her grandmother said:

Always a good excuse for a do, St Patrick's. We'd have a right old knees-up. Lovely party in them days all in together, didn't matter if you was Catholic or Irish or not. Most of us had a bit of Irish in us round there anyway!⁵⁰

Bill Fishman, the oral historian, recording his memories for The Museum

of Childhood in Bethnal Green, was very conscious of Irish and Jewish intersections. He has a particularly rosy view of the relationship between Irish and Jewish boys:

And between eleven and fifteen were the happiest days of my youth [1932–6]. There were other Jewish lads, brought up among Irish dockers' sons and daughters, and I must tell you, I could only say that there was a tremendous rapport between us.⁵¹

Two memoirs which add detailed personal recollections of Irish and Jewish interactions from the forefront of Jewish leadership of the Communist Party in the East End in the 1920s and 1930s are those of Joe Jacobs, entitled *Out of the Ghetto* (1978), and Phil Piratin's *Our Flag Stays Red* (2006).⁵² Jacobs elaborated on friendly connections between the Jewish and Gentile populations, illustrating the blurred frontiers to the 'Ghetto life' in the East End of his childhood. As well as intermarriage, there was intermixing between members of the boxing 'fraternity', stallholders in street markets, frequenters of gambling dens, pawn shops customers and the growing numbers seeking work at the Labour Exchange. In all of these activities Jews and Gentiles 'mixed freely with remarkably little friction'.⁵³ However he conceded that there were also situations where the two groups remained separate, notably in religious attendance, some social organisations, schools and certain streets.

Where there was no direct common activity there was anti-semitism among Gentiles, just as there were anti-Yok feelings freely expressed among Jews.⁵⁴

Whilst he spoke more broadly about Gentiles, Jacobs left no doubt about their cultural background:

These people were descended from an earlier immigration from Ireland. There were other Gentiles in the area but the majority were Catholics. When I first got to know them they had reached something like the fourth or fifth generation, if not more.⁵⁵

A classic example of the ongoing recognition of an Irish population in the East End well after the relocation of the new arrivals to the West End is the anti-fascist demonstration in 1936 known as 'The Battle of Cable Street'.⁵⁶ Many observers commented on the strong Irish Catholic presence. Bill

Fishman noted:

I heard this loudspeaker say ‘They are going to Cable Street’. Suddenly a barricade was erected there and they put an old lorry in the middle of the road and old mattresses. The people up the top of the flats, mainly Irish Catholic women, were throwing rubbish on the police. We were all side by side. I was moved to tears to see bearded Jews and Irish Catholic dockers standing up to stop Mosley. I shall never forget that as long as I live, how working-class people could get together to oppose the evil of racism.⁵⁷

Jacobs confirmed this strong political alliance and the crucial part it played in the success of the demonstration. He specifically pinpoints the contribution of the Irish population in the docklands in contrast to other parts of the working-class East End, which had been swayed by the anti-semitic rhetoric of the British Union of Fascists.

The defeat of Mosley started way back when he failed to gain a foothold in Shadwell and Wapping, where lived the dockers of Irish descent with a strong Catholic background and a long history of working-class struggle behind them. The Jews of East London could not, in my view, have held Mosley back without support from this area to the south of the Jewish areas, which would have found them completely surrounded on October 4th if Mosley had made the headway there which he had made in Bethnal Green, Shoreditch and Limehouse.⁵⁸

His account alludes to a more complex situation where there are clear divisions within the Irish population. A major factor was the ‘fiercely anti-Communist’ Catholic church which demanded that its congregations support the Labour Party and was openly anti-Semitic. Under this influence some Irish tenants had refused to mobilise in support of Jewish community rent strikes.⁵⁹

Many [Irish]...were attracted to Sir Oswald Mosley’s British Union of Fascists (BUF), which in the 1930s built a base among London’s East End Catholics through anti-Semitic agitation, including the denunciation of Jewish landlords.⁶⁰

In analysing the roles of class, gender and ethnicity in these clashes, Henry Srebrnik particularly highlighted the low numbers of Irish women supporting the strikes.

Yet by contrast Piratin wrote eloquently about the solidarities of Jews and non-Jews in the Stepney 'Tenants' Defence League, whose three full-time officials included Tubby Rosen, Harry Conn and Mrs Ella Donovan, names suggesting both Jewish and Irish backgrounds.⁶¹

One thing was in no doubt. Tens of thousands of working-class men and women had organised themselves for a common struggle. There was a common bond between them... Outstanding were the women.

He described the close support given by women on the picket lines so that they would go to kosher or non-kosher butchers for each other 'without any hesitation, and lots of fun' in ways unthinkable for Jews and Catholics in ordinary life.⁶²

Moreover whilst noting the 'vigorous part' played by the Catholic church in campaigning against the Communist Party candidates in Whitechapel and St George's in the London County Council elections in 1945, urging them to 'vote against the Jews', Piratin also recorded the 'many Catholic workers who were genuinely ashamed of the anti-Semitic campaign'.⁶³ Further research is needed to explain these differences in the relationships between the Irish and the Jews, at times very close and at others hostile. Were they based on occupations or neighbourhoods? Did the power of the Catholic Church or the influence of political leaders vary between different sections of the Irish population and in different parts of the East End? How did this change over time?

Despite the Catholic Church's attempts to control their political activism, the Irish provided strong support for the growing Labour Party. Continued recognition of ethnic background in political participation in the 1930s is referenced in Dave Crouch's account of the role of the Communist Party in organising Jewish workers in the East End in the 1930s. He reported that:

By the mid-1930s Stepney was a firmly Labour borough. Seats on the council were more or less equally divided between people of Irish, English and Jewish descent.⁶⁴

Jacobs further described 'the absolute domination of Catholics in the local Labour Party and the Trades Unions', taking for granted a recognition of Irish names by readers.⁶⁵

Here are some of the names of local councillors: John Sullivan, LCC; Jeremiah Long (Jerry), the 'big man' among the Catholics in the Labour

Party; McCartney, McKie, the three O'Briens, Edward James, Julia O'Connor, O'Leary, Leary, Hurley, Jarvis, the two Leweys, Mullan, Carthy, Shaw and Shea. It may have been just a coincidence but even the Town Clerk was a man called W.L. McCarthy. Have I made my point?⁶⁶

The inter-war period provides the strongest evidence that the East End was a diaspora space in which the Irish were intimately entangled in the mixed population. They were not simply identifiable outsiders but a crucial part of the social, cultural and demographic character of the area. As Avtar Brah explained in developing her notion of diaspora space:

In the diaspora space called 'England', for example, African-Caribbean, Irish, Asian, Jewish and other diaspora identities intersect among themselves as well as with the entity constructed as 'Englishness', thoroughly re-inscribing it in the process.⁶⁷

There are many references to people's mixed backgrounds, which often included Irish and Jewish elements as the two major 'white' working-class communities whose worlds overlapped in the East End. For example, Arthur Harding, born in 1886, whose detailed life history Raphael Samuel explored in *East End Underworld*, makes a number of references to characters such as Jimmy Smith who lived in Brick Lane and was 'half Irish and his second wife was Jewish'.⁶⁸

Down Watney Street some of the Jews married the Irish and they produced some right terrors. Usually it was the Irishman who married the Jewess, and the children inherited the worst qualities of both. They were half and half as I used to call them...they had a Jewish name but an Irish character...Dodger Mullins and Timmy Hayes were right specimens. I used them as strikebreakers in 1926...and they recruited some of the Watney Street Irish.⁶⁹

According to Jacobs such marriages were at first strongly resisted, but later accepted.

When his parents [Jewish] heard about this, there was a hell of a row and he was given the usual option of choosing between her and them. These threats were common enough and sometimes were carried out. With time they became less effective and many mixed marriages took place and on the whole proved to be quite successful. Both the couples themselves,

and their families would get on well.⁷⁰ The Irish were thus clearly an identifiable as a named group within the ethnic mix of the East End throughout the interwar period, overwhelmingly constituted by people of Irish descent amplified by a small number of new arrivals. Even the products of mixed marriages retained the labels attached to each 'half'. Religion remained a key identifying factor, the label Catholic often being used interchangeably with Irish.

Family and Kinship in East London (1963) and The New East End (2006)

A fourth snapshot could potentially be captured in the 1950s with the publication of Peter Willmott and Michael Young's classic and highly-regarded ethnography published in 1963 as *Family and Kinship in East London*.⁷¹ However what is particularly interesting about this detailed, in-depth exploration of personal relationships is that it makes no reference at all to the Irish background of a significant proportion of the families, which had been so apparent only twenty years earlier. Yet many of the observations about the society being so meticulously recorded and analysed suggest remarkable continuities with earlier periods, as would be expected from the comments that in Bethnal Green a higher proportion of the residents were born in the borough than in any other London borough and that 10 per cent of women live in the same street where they were born—that is in the 1920s and 1930s.⁷² Moreover distinctive features noted by Willmott and Young include the strongly matriarchal character of East End society in the 1950s.⁷³ Indeed it was still noted in the 1990s in Dagenham where many East End families were relocated.⁷⁴ This characteristic echoes closely Lynn Lees's findings about the Irish population in the later nineteenth century and is also used by Louise Raw to underpin her claims about the strength of family memories in the 'Irish' descendants of the matchwomen.⁷⁵ But the opportunity to connect matriarchy with Irish origins is not taken by the authors and instead it appears to be simply characteristic of 'white working class' families, by implication 'English'.

In the same year, 1963, Jackson drew quite opposite inferences in the conclusion to his longitudinal survey 'The Irish in East London':

The culture of the Irish in East London today is to be found deeply embedded within the culture and traditions of her people. The East Londoner is seldom any longer simply Irish or Jewish but rather has added his own special contribution to a new whole from which it

becomes increasingly difficult to disentangle the ingredients...*No-one today could write about East London without mentioning the Irish* and yet it would be difficult to say where their special contribution lies.⁷⁶

Rather than evidence of assimilation to an overarching white Englishness, Jackson's opinion that the Irish contribution is hard to disentangle can be seen as an example of the operation of the process of creation of diaspora space. Entanglement is how Brah describes the forging of links between the 'genealogies of dispersion with those of "staying put"'. Jackson himself qualifies his statement by observing that traces could still be found. The clearest evidence he found lay in local politics—in 1958 there were 10 councillors with Irish names in Stepney, suggesting continuity with Crouch's and Jacobs's comments noted above on the composition of the Labour Party in the 1930s.

Undoubtedly the centre of Irish settlement in London had shifted much more completely to the west side of the city by the 1950s. Areas such as Kilburn in the borough of Brent had become synonymous with the modern Irish presence, greatly fuelled by the huge inflow of new immigrants.⁷⁷ As Jackson observes:

This position is in sharp contrast to that pertaining in the middle years of the last century when some of the main concentration of an equally heavy immigration from Ireland were to be found in East London spreading eastwards from Holborn through the City to the waterfront areas of Wapping, Shadwell, Shoreditch and Poplar.⁷⁸

By 1961 the highest proportion of Irish-born populations were found in the five boroughs of Hammersmith (10.7 per cent), Paddington (10.6 per cent), St Pancras (8.7 per cent), Kensington (7.5 per cent) and Westminster (7.3 per cent).⁷⁹ In addition there was a large-scale movement out of the East End because of 'slum clearance' after the destruction of housing in the Second World War and the increasingly dilapidated condition of remaining housing, alongside a determined attempt to re-house families in new estates in Essex.

The reassignment of the remaining long-settled working class in the East End in the 1950s to an unstated 'English' category has the consequence of consolidating unified 'whiteness' as a social category and drawing a new boundary between 'indigenous' and 'immigrant'. Yet as Miles pointed out, this can be challenged as a discourse reinforcing the dominant status of 'white' people. Georgie Wemyss illustrates this forcefully in her analysis of

events in September 1993 when Quddus Ali, a 17-year-old Bengali East Londoner, was violently attacked in Stepney by a group of young white men. She argues that apparently fixed territorial categories such as 'Islanders', 'East Enders' and 'Cockneys' are used to legitimate the entitlements of 'locals' and to exclude racial categories of 'outsiders' such as 'Asian'.⁸⁰

Even the new arrivals from Ireland who increased the Irish-born population in the East End during the 1950s, and more sharply in London as a whole, were missed from Willmott and Young's analysis. Although in 1951 the five boroughs taken to constitute the East End had the lowest percentages of Irish-born population of any boroughs in London: Bethnal Green (1.3 per cent), Hackney (1.2 per cent), Poplar (1.2 per cent), Shoreditch (1.5 per cent) and Stepney (2.0 per cent), only slightly higher than in 1911 and all well below the London average of 3.3 per cent Irish-born, by 1961 there had been marked increases in each as part of the massive 'second wave' immigration from Ireland which increased the proportion in London to 5.4 per cent.⁸¹ The 'new' Irish appear as walk-on parts in period entertainment such as the BBC television series *Call the Midwife* which draws on the memoirs of Jennifer Worth in whose trilogy Irish-born women appear in scattered references.⁸² But these presences were not noticed in *Family and Kinship* which focussed on earlier generations without recognising the specificity of their backgrounds.

The sharp numerical decline in the post-war period undoubtedly reduced the Irish contribution to the demographic mix, but the East End also shared the loss of visibility experienced by the wider Irish community in Britain as a consequence of the conflict in Northern Ireland. Many people with an Irish background chose to 'keep their heads down' to avoid the backlash after IRA bombings in British cities.⁸³ In London this was countered in the early 1980s by the decision of the Greater London Council led by Ken Livingstone to recognise the Irish as an ethnic group in 1984 and to allocate funding on the same basis as other minority communities. According to the *Irish Post* in November:

In the Seventies, manifestations of things Irish were scarce on the ground in east London. But what a marvellous revival has taken place in recent years with the emergence of various organisations—all of them committed to cultural and welfare activities, as well as the usual social events.⁸⁴

Lobbying for an Irish Centre in Newham began, based on the sizeable estimate of '7000 Irish-born and at least as many born in Britain of Irish

parents'.⁸⁵

The updating of Willmott and Young's classic study in 2006 under the title *The New East End*, jointly authored by Geoffrey Dench, Kate Gavron and Michael Young, appeared to consolidate and reinforce the homogenisation of the 'indigenous working classes' by race rather than ethnic background.⁸⁶ The argument that this group had been betrayed by welfare policies which prioritised need over entitlement to reparation for war effort, and thus gave an unfair advantage in housing allocation to new immigrants from Bangladesh, was extremely controversial.⁸⁷ The three authors accepted without question the characterisation of the 1950s population as 'extraordinarily homogenous and stable' put forward in the 1963 publication. This time there were a few acknowledgements of the historic Irish input to the area, such as 'to this day a large proportion of the white people in Bethnal Green have Irish surnames', but no further comment was made about how this could mean that the 'white' population was itself diversified—or might share migrant sympathies.⁸⁸ As Robert Moore, one of the most trenchant critics, explained:

Whilst there have been serious conflicts between groups within the area, historically the diverse populations have been able to mobilize across internal divisions and oppose fascists in the 1930s, property developers in the 1980s and 1990s and the racism of both the Liberal Democrats who controlled Tower Hamlets from 1986 to 1994 and the British National Party (BNP). Even with a superficial and outsider's knowledge of the complexity of Tower Hamlets it is obvious that a simple division into black and white (or Bangladeshi and white) will not do, nor will ungrounded reports of white resentment.⁸⁹

Only a few voices have noted in passing the continued presence of an Irish component in the present day East End population. Two 'problem' areas are linked in this way from time to time, but without further discussion of the ethnic connection. One is the association between Irish background and anti-immigration political activity. Phil Cohen argues that the 1980s 'skin-head' culture in the Docklands was a response to the loss of traditional white manual work where public masculinities were on display. He noted that 'much of the impetus for white laborism came from the local Irish population'.⁹⁰ This resonates with wider claims that the controversial far-right English Defence League has strong second-generation Irish connections in its leadership and supporters.⁹¹ A second continuing link is with more general criminal gang membership, fictionalised in the novels of Martina

Cole.⁹² In another critique of *The New East End*, Michael Keith suggests that in itself this may consolidate elements within the 'white' community, which nevertheless retains an ethnic inflection:

White solidarities have emerged out of crucibles of frequently violent conflict that belie the cosy image of the cockney, personified by Irish crime families that retain a hold on some parts of the local drugs trade and the protection rackets.⁹³

A more positive continuity is the association with local Labour politics, in contrast to EDL support, echoing the political split between far right and left wing sympathies in the 1930s within the population of Irish descent. Under the headline 'Fighting back in London's East End', the *Irish Post* published an interview in 1994 with Ted Johns who was 'leading the fight against Fascism' in the Isle of Dogs.⁹⁴

Ted knows little about his great-grandfather, who emigrated to England as a coal trimmer. His grandfather, Tom Murphy, was greeted on moving into Limehouse in London's East End with a hail of bricks. 'They put his windows in because locals assumed the Irish would be competing for their jobs but the fact that Tom was active in trades unions overcame that.'

Ted was born in 1933 and described his fourth-generation Irish childhood in the East End.

Every St Patrick's Day, he'd [grandfather] bring us to a block of flats in Bow named the Fenian Barracks because so many Irish people settled there. They'd be flying the Tricolour and have Catholic parades and street parties, decorating grottos outside front windows. As kids, we'd sit outside them, saying 'penny for the grotto'.

Nobody at school thought it strange that I knew so much about Ireland. The Wapping end of the borough was full of Irish families—the O'Donnells, Connollys and O'Connells. They've all died now, of course, or moved on. It's quite sad.

Vivid Irish connections were thus still present in recent living memory, together with political attitudes from earlier generations passed down in families and communities. Like the descendants of the matchwomen, older residents of the East End can still identify strongly as Irish many generations

beyond the migrants in the nineteenth century. Their cultural links are not simply enclosed within family stories but continue to be expressed publicly in political activity and ideologies.

Conclusion

Although Jackson opened his survey in 1963 with the observation that ‘the impact of the Irish on the East End is *in the main* a phenomenon of the past rather than the present’ (emphasis added), re-defining the area as diaspora space allows us to consider more fully the continuing impact of earlier migrations.⁹⁵ The so-called ‘white working class’ has ethnic origins which can be traced both in its own cultures and in outsiders’ social attitudes. In England more generally there are strong links between the Irish background of the working classes in many areas and the East End is an especially clearly-marked case study.⁹⁶ The overlooking of these connections is not simply a matter of ‘ethnic fade’ and assimilation, but can also be interpreted as part of a process of realignment of the redefined ‘majority’ population against new ‘minorities’. It chimes with the notion of the creation of a ‘myth of homogeneity’ about England’s past, which erases memories of past immigrations.⁹⁷

Within the diversity of the white working classes, different political paths may be chosen both between and within ethnic groups. In the 1930s as has been argued, Irish and Jewish populations came together in anti-fascist demonstrations. Yet at the same time the Irish were asserting their dominance over newer arrivals, some becoming involved in anti-Semitic and later anti-immigration politics. But intermarriage and food choices, such as the possibly fabled origins of fish and chips, also point to the possibility of demographic and cultural fusion between the two groups.⁹⁸

Recognition of multi-generational Irish identities is place-specific at national and local levels. Catherine Nash writes of:

a map of locally specific versions of being of Irish descent that reflect the particular place of Irishness in those countries’ histories of migration and contemporary configurations of categories of ethnicity, race, indigeneity, nationhood and belonging that can intersect, collide and cross-fertilise as they are set in motion and mobilised.⁹⁹

Because of its location close to the heart of the largest city in the British Empire, the East End of London has had an unusually long history of immigrant settlement followed by ongoing entanglements of different

genealogies of dispersal and staying put. The Irish are a major component a complex picture of cooperation and antagonism, vividly portrayed in 'England People Very Nice', but now subsumed into a 'white working class' narrative which omits any reference to their distinctive background. A very different portrait of the East End could be painted if shared migrancy rather than exclusive indigeneity was acknowledged.

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