

Irish/Jewish diasporic intersections in the East End of London: paradoxes and shared locations

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Surprisingly little attention has been paid to parallels and intersections between the Irish and Jewish populations in Britain despite similarities in their historical periods of settlement, geographical locations and social positionings. Most of what is known is buried in a variety of printed contemporary observations and scattered comments in secondary historical narratives. This paper explores some of these sources and raises questions about what shape a linked and comparative analysis might take.

One reason for the continuing absence of such a study is the ‘forgetting’ of earlier phases of immigration into Britain in the surge of interest and concern in much more recent arrivals. The current fascination with the notion of diaspora focuses on the explosion of transnational population movements in the last two decades, with a smaller number of references to the large post-War movements from the Caribbean and South Asia in which ‘the Empire struck back’. But earlier settlements, in which Irish and Jewish migrants played major roles, are rarely mentioned. They have become labelled ‘white’ and therefore part of the ethnic majority, in a process which epitomises the confusion between ‘race’ and ethnicity in Britain. As Robert Miles observed:

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 Other¹.

¹ Robert Miles, *Racism after “Race Relations”*, London, Routledge, 1993, p.117 (emphasis added).

The ‘myth of homogeneity’ which Mary Hickman² identifies has effectively silenced members of the Irish and Jewish diasporas despite the unfinished histories of exclusion and discrimination against both groups. However some small changes have recently taken place and these are discussed below.

The Irish and Jewish populations in Britain share several important theoretical locations. Firstly, both are long-established diasporas with histories stretching back over at least eight hundred years, although in both case the later nineteenth century was the period of mass immigration. For both these inflows were the consequence of, or greatly augmented by, political positioning of minorities in relation to European state power so that a key component was people who could be classed as refugees. The Irish were a colonised minority within the British state between 1801 and 1922 which triggered emigration, most notably as result of the Great Famine of 1847-51, also known as the Great Starvation by those who trace its disastrous scale to failures of British support.³ The Jews were a religious minority facing frequent outbreaks of persecution, especially in pogroms in Russia and Eastern Europe in the 1880s and 1890s. Britain was a place of refuge for both groups and also a staging post for migrants en route for the freer society of the United States.

Secondly both groups are identified by religion as a key marker of difference and as the basis of discrimination in Christian and Protestant Britain. Anti-Semitism and anti-Catholicism have been powerful processes of social exclusion, with legal bases in the past and ongoing residues within British culture. Although there are parallels here, there are also strong antagonisms between the two groups, hence the presence of a paradox. Catholics have been at the forefront of anti-Jewish attitudes and behaviour – many older people can recall hearing and using the label ‘Christ-killers’ in taunts against Jews.⁴ A major form of intersection between the two ethnic groups has been hostility and the reinforcement of majority rejection of Jewish culture by the Irish. There has been Jewish

² Mary Hickman, *Religion, Class and Identity*, Aldershot, Avebury, 1995, p.2.

³ Robert Moore, personal communication.

⁴ Jeremy Cohen, *Christ Killers: The Jews and the Passion from the Bible to the Big Screen*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

retaliation, but the positions of the two groups in relation to hegemonic Britishness are not symmetrical.

Thirdly, the Irish and the Jews in Britain share exclusion from unconditional whiteness. The sub-text that whiteness is a property of Englishness means that groups who are placed outside this national category cannot assume that they will be considered white, whatever their skin colour. In the nineteenth century this distinction was clear because it also had a class basis. The English working classes were also outside the boundaries of whiteness, which was a category reserved for the middle and upper classes.⁵ During the early years of the twentieth century inclusion into whiteness was extended to the respectable working classes, who entered into a 'welfare pact' whereby the taxes of the wealthier were used to improve the education and housing conditions of manual workers who then ensured the successful functioning of the economy to the advantage of all. However the whiteness of the remaining 'underclass' remained uncertain and it is arguable whether it is complete today, especially when linked with ethnic difference. Both Irish and Jewish populations occupied this marginal territory, entering Britain at the lowest end of the social scale in the nineteenth century and to differing extents continue to occupy these positions, especially in the case of the Irish.

These similarities have placed present-day Irish and Jewish populations as new entrants to distinct census categories in 2001. The Irish were the first group to be named in a sub-division of the previously large undifferentiated 'White' category in the 'ethnic question'. Jews on the other hand were included in a list of selected religions, which contained different choices in England and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. A key contrast between the internal nations was the decision to present Christianity as a single inclusive category in England and Wales and as a series of separate choices in Scotland (Church of Scotland, Roman Catholic, Other Christian) a Northern Ireland (Roman Catholic, Presbyterian Church in Ireland, Church of Ireland, Methodist Church in Ireland). The sub-division of 'Christian' reflected the perceived significance of 'sectarian' differences in these locations. They were not deemed

⁵ Alistair Bonnett, *White Identities: Historical and International Perspectives*, Harlow: Pearson Education, 2000, Chapter 2.

to be important in England and Wales, despite evidence that anti-Catholic attitudes have persisted especially in locations such as Liverpool. However in Scotland the issue is much more fraught as violent confrontations at Celtic v. Rangers football matches testifies.⁶ Here the inclusion of Catholic – additionally othered as ‘Roman’ - added a marker of Irish ethnic difference, allowing the impact of multigenerational Irish ancestry to be identified in combination with indices of disadvantage such as poor health and low socio-economic position.⁷ In Northern Ireland religious difference continues to resonate more openly as a key cultural and social marker.

Parallels between the ethnic positioning of the Irish and Jews as white groups who can experience racist treatment were also recognised in the influential Parekh Report published in 2000.⁸ Unlike the vast majority academic analyses and policy reports in Britain, the Report of the Commission on Multi-ethnic Britain specifically widened its remit to include three white racialised groups – the Irish, Jews and Travellers. Key theorists who were members of the Commission, including Stuart Hall and Bikhu Parekh, had shifted their viewpoints to unsettle the fixity of the black/white binary. In a chapter entitled ‘Rethinking the national story’ the authors nuance the relative positioning of the Irish and the Jews. Whereas only the latter were specifically labelled as outsiders (‘aliens’) in 1905, in reality the Irish were, and remain, in a similar location:

During the nineteenth century, the Irish were increasingly seen as a race apart. Anti-Irish and anti-Catholic sentiment remained critical to the notions of otherness that underpinned national identity. At first sight this is a paradox, for the immigration legislation of the

⁶ Joseph Bradley, 2006 ‘Sport and the contestation of ethnic identity; football and Irishness in Scotland’, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* vol.32, no.7, pp.1189-1208.

⁷ Patricia Walls, ‘Religion, ethnicity and nation in the census: some thoughts on the inclusion of Irish ethnicity and Catholic religion’, *Radical Statistics*, 78, 48-62, 2001.

⁸ Runnymede Trust, *The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain: the Parekh Report*, London, Profile Books, 2000.

1960s, modelled on the Aliens Act of 1905 (which was principally directed at Jewish immigrants), defined the Irish as insiders. It was the New Commonwealth immigrants who were the aliens. Race was not specifically referred to, but the subtext was that the Irish were insiders because they were white. However, this belated attempt to include them did not substantially change the position of the Irish in Britain. They remain Britain's 'outsider-insiders'⁹.

As well as similarities in parallel positioning as significant white ethnic groups, there is also evidence that the Irish and Jewish populations in Britain have intersected with each other. This is an under-examined aspect of the 'diaspora space' of England, which Avtar Brah drew attention to in her path-breaking book *Cartographies of diaspora*.

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.¹⁰

These intersections arise out of shared geographical locations. Both the Irish and the Jews settled in the inner city 'slums' allocated to poor immigrants in the nineteenth century, where housing was cheapest and there was greatest access to low-paying manual work. Many remained in these cities, the upwardly mobile moving out of the 'ghettoes' into more prosperous suburbs. Today two-thirds of the Jews in Britain live in London, together with one-third of the Irish population. Other significant groupings of Jews are found in Manchester (10%), Leeds, Glasgow, Birmingham, Brighton and Bournemouth, most of which also have large Irish populations.

Within London the East End has been a major site of settlement for both groups, especially from the 1870s until the Second World War. This chapter makes a preliminary exploration of secondary sources to outline some of the intersections between

⁹ *Ibid.* p.33.

¹⁰ Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*, London, Routledge, 1996, p. 209 (emphasis added).

the Irish and Jewish populations. The sources consulted so far draw on oral histories and contemporary newspaper accounts as well as fictional work including novels, short stories and plays. A key question is the nature of, and balance between, positive and negative experiences of connection. How far did Jewish and Irish populations share their lives and co-operate economically and socially? How far did they compete and discriminate against each other? How did these two attitudes co-exist? Did they change over time? Were different genders, age groups and social classes involved in distinctive ways? The lack of academic attention to these issues, whilst acknowledging their interest and importance is illustrated by a footnote to Gareth Stedman Jones's influential study of 'The "cockney" and the nation, 1780-1988'.

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.¹¹

The East End of London: a case study of Irish-Jewish intersections

Despite numerous separate references to the presence of both groups in the East End of London in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, only one account which directly considers them together appears to have been produced. In 1990 Lara Marks published *Working Wives and Working Mothers: a Comparative Study of Irish and East European Married Women's Work and Motherhood in East London 1870-1914*.¹² This study compared a particular section of the populations – married women – and provides very valuable background to their lives. However it does

¹¹ Gareth Stedman Jones, 'The "cockney" and the nation, 1780-1988' in David Feldman and Gareth Stedman Jones (eds) *Metropolis. London*, London, Routledge, p.317.

¹² Lara Marks, *Working Wives and Working Mothers: a Comparative Study of Irish and East European Married Women's Work and Motherhood in East London 1870-1914*, London, University of North London Press, 1990.

not attempt to explore intersections between these groups, which will be the focus of this case study.

Marks's study clearly describes parallels in the lives of Irish and Jewish women. Both groups experienced a great deal of hostility from the local population, which she judges to be 'comparable antagonism', as they competed for housing, employment and charitable relief. In both groups there were strong images of women as domestic homemakers, who were responsible for passing on religious beliefs and practices to their children. They thus occupied a major role in preserving the cultural difference which centrally defined the ethnic group. Finally both groups expected women to make a major economic contribution to the household.

However there were also important contrasts. One was in the types of work done: both were involved in street selling and paid domestic production such as sewing, washing and home piece work. But a major difference was the ubiquitous employment of Irish women as domestic servants and the prohibition of Jewish women from undertaking paid work in other people's homes. Moreover whereas Jewish women were represented in a largely positive light and praised as careful homemakers, the image of Irish women was far more negative. They were considered neglectful of their children, prone to alcoholism and slovenly.

Whilst this study paints a vivid picture of immigrant East End lives, ways in which they intertwined must be gleaned from a range of other sources. This evidence may be organised within spatial categories appropriate to the local framing of the case study. People's lives intersected at three nested scales – the household, the street and the wider sector of the East End.

The presence of Irish women as servants in Jewish households was an important form of intersection between the two populations. At a very intimate scale Irish women were part of Jewish family life in a way which was not reciprocated. Whereas Irish women observed and took part in cleaning, cooking, child and elder care for Jewish families, Jewish people did not have this close relationship with Irish families. Irish women were employed by Jewish families for a number of reasons. The shared location of 'comparable antagonism' meant that English families were less

willing to employ Irish women, especially earlier in the nineteenth century when the Famine refugees were despised as dirty, ill-educated and lacking basic domestic skills. Lynn Lees describes the situation in the 1850s when

Irish servants abounded in London. Allegedly saucy and incompetent, they seem to have taken up the less desirable posts in the metropolis. And many more Irish women wanted such jobs than could find them...One said in 1853 that positions were almost impossible to find. Girls usually had to accept work either in a pub *or with an East End Jewish family*, where they were paid only one or two shillings a week plus board.¹³

Shared geographical locations were also a reason for this relationship. Irish women were employed on both a full-time and casual basis for different socio-economic sectors of the Jewish population. The middle classes engaged live-in servants whilst the poorer elements gave assistance when required, often on Friday nights and Saturdays when strictly religious Jews did not undertake any household tasks. Irish women and children came in to light fires and carry out necessary chores. In an oral history recorded by Jerry White, an occupant of the Rothchilds Buildings, an East End tenement block said:

Susie, an Irish woman, lived in one of the lodging houses in Flower and Dean Street and she used to do work for my mother. She used to clean up the flat and go little errands – mother was getting on. This was after I'd married and left the Buildings [about 1919].¹⁴

Shared neighbourhoods also led to more public associations outside the home. This was especially true of children who went to the same schools and played together in the streets. Records of these relationships give both positive and negative accounts. On

¹³ Lynn Lees, *Exiles of Erin: Irish Migrants in Victorian London*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1979, p.95 (emphasis added).

¹⁴ Jerry White, *Rothchilds Buildings: life in an East-end tenement block 1887-1920*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980.

the one hand Bill Fishman in the oral archive of the Victoria and Albert Museum remembers his childhood very warmly:

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.¹⁵

But other evidence suggests much more contested and divided interactions at the neighbourhood level. Many remember ethnic gangs who chanted hostilities at each other. Even stronger physical violence was used to enforce residential boundaries. A report in the *Eastern Post* newspaper in 1901 included the following item in language which suggests that the readers would feel sympathy for the Jews who were being unjustly treated:

When a Jewish family tried to move into a largely Irish dockland street, people poured out from every house, smashed up the van, and routed 'the unfortunate foreigners'.¹⁶

The consequence was a high degree of physical separation at the street level. In an interesting conflation of 'indigenous', 'Irish' and 'English', David Englander comments:

The assertion of Jewish territoriality was contested street by street by an indigenous population that was alarmed by the inflationary influx on rented accommodation...In streets colonized by Jewish and Irish immigrants tensions ran high. Thus Duke Street and Black Lion Yard, with their mixed populations, were both considered dangerous...The trend, though, was towards complete segregation at the residential scale; streets tended 'to become all Jewish or remain all English'.¹⁷

¹⁵ Bill Fishman, http://www.vam.ac.uk/moc/childrens_lives/east_end_lives/Lifestories/bill_fishman/index.html.

¹⁶ Chaim Bernant, *London's East End: Point of Arrival*, London, Eyre Methuen, 1975, p.147.

¹⁷ David Englander and Rosemary O'Day (eds), *Retrieved Riches: Social Investigation in England 1840-1914*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998, p.306 cited in

Although intermarriage was frowned upon, friendship and familiarity also led to more intimate relationships. This is illustrated by a short story published in 2002 by Steve Maltz, entitled 'Bessie's indiscretion' which provides a fictional account of a liaison between a Jewish woman and an Irish man in the Second World War.¹⁸ Bessie knew Harry from school and met him again as an adult when he had become a shopkeeper in the locality. A key incident occurred when they were both sheltering in an air raid shelter during the massive bomb attacks of 'the Blitz' in 1940. Harry plied Bessie with drink and then persuaded her to have sex with him although she was a married woman. She became pregnant, the child was born and given up for adoption and sent to Ireland. Bessie went back to her husband and children and the family moved away to Essex when housing was cleared in the rebuilding programme in the East End after the War. The story ends with the return of 'Hymie Flanagan' as an invited and welcome stranger to his mother's eightieth birthday party.

Even if not common or widely accepted, marriages and partnerships did take place between Irish and Jewish people as well as a wider mix of ethnicities. In her memoir, *My East End*, Gilda O'Neill places herself in the following way:

[...] 'it is a history of which, with my mongrel, English, Irish, Scottish, Welsh, Jewish, East End background, I am very much part'.¹⁹

Finally, at a wider spatial scale, were public demonstrations of political solidarity. More organised and public expression of shared positioning and support was the response to fascist anti-Semitism in Britain in the 1930s. The most celebrated case was the so-called 'Battle of Cable Street' on October 4 1936 when the

Laura Vaughan, 'Mapping the East End "Labyrinth"', in *Jack the Ripper and the East End*, London, Random House, 2008, pp.218-37.

¹⁸ Steve Maltz, *Bessie's indiscretion*

<http://www.londonjewishtours.com/jews.htm>.

¹⁹ Gilda O'Neill. *My East End: Memories of Life in Cockney London*, London, Penguin, pp.XXII-III.

British Union of Fascists led by Oswald Mosley, planned to march through the East End of London. There was a strongly organised response by a coalition of anti-fascist groups, estimated at about 300,000 who erected roadblocks. The police made a strenuous effort to allow the march to proceed, allocating over 10,000 officers to the task of clearing the streets and arresting 150 demonstrators. However the demonstrators succeeded in forcing the march to be abandoned.

Many observers noted the strong representation of the local Irish population amongst the anti-fascist protesters. Bill Fishman, who lived in the area as a child and young man, recorded in his memoir:

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.²⁰

It is interesting to contrast this widely recognised and approved evidence of Irish-Jewish solidarity with the earlier account of forcible ejection from an Irish neighbourhood. Several possible explanations for the apparent contradiction could be explored. Relationships may have mellowed between 1901 and 1936 as result of greater familiarity and the growth of friendship and political sympathies. The particular revulsion against fascism may have overridden lesser conflicts. There may have been a geographical pattern to the anti-Semitic reactions of Irish people, based on defending specific neighbourhoods and occupations. Finally different groups amongst the Irish population may have held different attitudes towards Jews. Thus the Cable Street protesters are described as 'left wing' and 'organized in part by the

²⁰ Bill Fishman http://www.vam.ac.uk/moc/childrens_lives/east_end_lives/Lifestories/bill_fishman/index.html.

British Communist Party'²¹, which may distinguish them from other sections of the population who held different political beliefs. These changing patterns of co-operation and conflict, both spatially and over time, require more detailed investigation.

The importance of historical context in relationships between the 'waves' of immigration into the East End of London is the theme of a controversial play presented at the National Theatre in London, on the other bank of the River Thames, in 2009. Entitled provocatively *England People Very Nice*²², it was seen as a 'riotous romp' through two centuries of history.

Each scene begins with revulsion at the newcomers [Huguenots, Irish, Jewish, Bangladeshis], and ends with the expulsion of the old residents. And yet in each scene the idea of Englishness is remade by romance.²³

The play uses humour to suggest that Englishness is indeed forged out of 'mongrel' backgrounds and that intermarriage seals acceptance after a generation. Reviews of the play were polarised between positive recommendations of its wit, exuberance and refreshing honesty and strong condemnation of its stereotyped imagery and the derision towards multiculturalism it appeared to invite. Kate Muir emphasised the latter viewpoint in her review headlined '*England People Very Nice* causes a very English fuss':

Orthodox Jews being pelted with bacon sandwiches, barking blind imams with coathanger hooks for hands, incestuous Irishwomen with one-eyed babies, hijabed teenagers doing a 9/11 rap, Jamaicans complaining about 'rivers of blood', and French frogs shagging. All stereotypes are equally welcome in the National Theatre's production of *England People Very Nice* – yet English people are throwing a tantrum about it.

²¹ Alexander Goldberg, www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2009/jun/02/battle-cable-street-vote.

²² Richard Bean, *England People Very Nice*, London, Oberon Books, 2009.

²³ Kate Muir, *Times Online*, 7 March, 2009.

Last week rowdy English intellectuals of Bengali and Irish descent stormed a discussion with playwright Richard Bean. They jumped onstage, called Bean a racist and demoniser, waved placards and demanded a debate, until politely asked to leave.

The theme of a mixed ethnic history and its ongoing resonances produced very varied reactions amongst people of different social classes, political sympathies and ethnic backgrounds in the local and national populations.

Conclusion

The period of greatest intensity of Jewish and Irish ethnic difference in the East End of London was associated with major immigration in the last decades of the nineteenth century until the start of the Second World War. It involved the new migrants themselves and the children and grandchildren who grew up in their households. Although social intermixing took place, cultural differences based particularly around religious beliefs and practices ensured that distinctive backgrounds remained salient.

The War period radically altered these patterns for a number of reasons. Bomb damage resulting from the targeting of the docks destroyed neighbourhoods and resulted in re-housing on the eastern outskirts of London in the 1950s. The reconstruction of the British economy also led to immigration from new sources in the post-War period, so that different ethnic groups became the largest part of the population. Most distinctively the Bangladeshi population grew over the second half of the twentieth century.

Alongside these changes was a re-labelling of older immigrant groups and their descendants as 'the white working class', implicitly or explicitly described as 'English'. The classic sociological study of the East End, Willmott and Young's *Family and Kinship in East London* (1963)²⁴ made no mention of ongoing differences within the working class population they analyse in substantial detail.

²⁴ Peter Willmott and Michael Young, *Family and Kinship in East London*, London, Penguin, 1963.

Reasons for this changed representation still need to be teased out, but may include many factors. The shared experiences of wartime may have cemented a new national identity in which former differences were downplayed. Wendy Webster describes the change from the senses of regional division in the 1930s, especially a North-South economic and social split epitomised by the Jarrow marchers, to a more united national spirit of prosperity in the 1950s.²⁵ In addition to 'slum clearance' into Essex, outmigration from the East End to West London – Kilburn and Ealing in the case of the Irish and Golders Green and Stamford Hill for Jews – reduced the size of each community. Moreover the arrival of 'black' immigrants from the Caribbean and especially South Asia, appeared to reinforce the notion of a 'natural' black/white binary which overrode divisions within the 'white' population. The up-dating of this survey by Dench, Gavron and Young *The New East End* (2006)²⁶ gave additional support to the 'white indigenous' versus 'Bangladeshi others' split by offering the contentious view that the former felt betrayed by the decision by liberal 'do-gooders' to give more weight to need than entitlement in the distribution of welfare resources. However this interpretation was strongly criticised within the academic community on the grounds of its untheorised acceptance of, and thus support for, the 'politics of resentment' which fuelled negative attitudes towards immigrants by so-called indigenous white working class populations.²⁷

Questions which remain to be addressed therefore focus on the continuing significance of Irish and Jewish backgrounds in the East End of London. Have they disappeared over time because of

²⁵ Wendy Webster, *Imagining Home: Gender, 'Race' and National Identity, 1945-64*, London, UCL Press, 1998, p.67.

²⁶ Geoffrey Dench, Gavron, Kate and Michael Young, *The New East End: Kinship, Race and Conflict*, London, Profile Books 2006.

²⁷ See for example Chris Jones, 'New myths of the East End', *Socialist Review*, April 2006; Michael Keith, 'Between being and becoming? Rights, responsibilities and the politics of multiculturalism in the new East End', *Sociological Research Online* 13 (5) 9, 2008; Robert Moore, , 'Careless talk': a critique of Dench, Gavron and Young's *The New East End*, *Critical Social Policy* 28:3:349-360, 2008; Vron Ware, 'Towards a sociology of resentment: a debate on class and whiteness', *Sociological Research Online* 13 (5) 9, 2008.

assimilation, 'ethnic fade', intermixing and/or hybridity? Or do elements remain in an identified form – forgotten, suppressed? If so, can they help to explain neglect of the 'poor white' populations whose difficulties sometimes surface in indices of social deprivation and educational disadvantage? Is descent from ancestral outsiders a part of 'Englishness' which needs to be acknowledged? Might it challenge the binary of inside/outside which is otherwise taken for granted as a legitimate categorisation of the population?