7

Placing Irish women within and beyond the British Empire: contexts and comparisons

Bronwen Walter

Women have been leaving Ireland to settle abroad over many centuries. Although their scattering has been on a global scale, including locations both with substantial numbers and with small pockets, there has been a particular emphasis on the English-speaking world, shadowing the colonial enterprise of the larger neighbour, Britain. This chapter aims to explore different contexts in which settlement has taken place, both geographically and socially. It will draw on existing secondary sources, which frequently document in detail women’s experiences in particular national situations but could also be interrogated to raise new questions about Irish women’s ‘places’ in different societies. In this way it may provide a more coherent framework for thinking about Irish women in the diaspora, as well as including Irish women in a larger global picture.¹

The notion of ‘placing’ is central to this discussion. It references the specificity of particular named locations at many scales from household and family to neighbourhood, region and nation. It also denotes social positioning, linking with class and social mobility, ethnic mixing and a range of other identities which may be claimed and ascribed. Irish women are ‘placed’ by themselves, members of their own ethnic group and by others, as well as by writers and artists who represent their lives in print and visually. Placing, rather than the more usual association of diasporas with displacement, indicates concern with new attachments and identifications for women and their descendants.

Such a broad project could take many directions. Three will be attempted here, each drawing on case studies. The first is an exploration of intersections between Irish women and members of other diasporic groups in Britain, examining similarities and differences in their lives. The second compares Irish women’s experiences of different destinations within the British Empire and its Commonwealth successor.² Finally parallels are drawn with a diaspora outside
the English-speaking world where social and political similarities point up important facets of women’s diasporic experiences.

Each of these approaches relies on different modes of comparison – between ethnic groups, between nations of destination, between diasporas from different national origins. Perhaps surprisingly work of this kind appears to be rare. In setting out a new research agenda in 2008, John Solomos and Martin Bulmer, editors of *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, observed:

We have been able to publish relatively little in the journal on comparative analysis of ethnic and racial relations. This is partly a reflection of the relative dearth of empirically grounded research that is comparative in focus, and perhaps the difficulty in getting such projects funded by nationally based bodies. It remains necessary, however, to develop comparative analyses of race and ethnic issues more fully and we would welcome the opportunity to consider such papers.3

These reflections echo opinions directly related to the Irish diaspora. Kevin Kenny noted that: ‘Current conceptions of diaspora rarely contain an explicit comparative dimension.’4 He advocated a new approach: ‘What is needed is a migration history that combines the diasporic or transnational with the comparative or cross-national.’5 In attempting to discern ‘Where Irish studies is bound’ Liam Harte also drew attention to opportunities offered by joint programmes of area study to challenge an ongoing deficit; ‘Irish and Scottish studies … have the added advantage of encouraging comparativist perspectives, of which there is still a marked dearth’ (emphasis added).6

The problems which have impeded the embrace of comparative approaches, broadly identified by Solomos and Bulmer, were fleshed out by Kenny from the perspective of an historian. He listed four methodological issues, namely the need to master more than one national historiography, the tendency for projects to become unwieldy, the submergence of narrative history by schematic analysis and the absence of institutional and financial support. Whilst the third may be of less concern to social scientists whose approach is likely to be thematic, the issues of large size and lack of funding apply to most disciplines.

However, set against these obstacles are a number of important advantages which can enhance the more traditionally mono-ethnic studies of the Irish diaspora. At a group level, these include opportunities to broaden the impact of research on Irish women by focusing on their places in the multi-ethnic societies of which they are part. This is particularly important in the case of the Irish, whose identities are often conflated with the ‘white mainstream’, especially British populations.7 Comparative studies may highlight shared positionings with other minority ethnic groups which are frequently overlooked because of the emphasis on ‘whiteness’ and native English language. Submerged identities, especially in second and subsequent generations, may be recognised when parallels become apparent.

At a national level, comparative studies of Irish women’s experiences in
different destinations within the English-speaking world give greater weight to political, social and economic contexts than will be obvious in single-nation cases. What is taken for granted by researchers studying their own societies will be ‘made strange’ when differences surface, perhaps in everyday occurrences not previously considered worthy of notice. Conversely similarities may take on added significance if they appear in contrasting situations. Finally comparisons between diasporas from different national and ethnic origins may locate Irish women as part of global processes outside the English-speaking world where the majority of research to date suggests they belong. In all these cases the dangers of the ‘ghettoisation’ – and sideling – of Irish Studies are reduced and a more ‘mainstream’ acceptance of Irish ethnicity may benefit both academic and policy agendas.

**Intersections: shared group spaces**

Although Avtar Brah’s concept of ‘diaspora space’ has been widely acclaimed as a valuable tool, few attempts have yet been made to operationalise some of its most creative possibilities. Amongst these is the intriguing observation that ethnic groups mix amongst themselves as well as with the majority ethnicity, and that the so-called ‘mainstream’ population itself is continuously constructed by these processes.

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.⁸ [Emphasis added]

As one of the oldest and longest established diasporas the Irish have intersected with all of these groups at different time periods and with different consequences. Often such contacts have been overlooked and the Irish have been treated as part of the ‘white’ majority, especially in later generations. Taking a comparative approach to minority ethnicities will challenge conventional research strategies which underplay or ignore altogether Irish difference, whilst acknowledging ways in which closeness to white English cultures may be evident.

Two case studies are introduced here. The first is a comparison between Irish and Jewish women settling in the East End of London from the later nineteenth century. Despite obvious similarities in the theoretical locations of Irish and Jewish ethnicities, there have been remarkably few studies which place them side by side, although this was their geographical experience in a number of British cities, including Manchester and Leeds.⁹ Outside London there are only snippets of evidence about the social relationships of Jewish and Irish women. In Greater Manchester for example the Jewish Museum records Jewish and Irish nurses
working together in the hospital on Cheetham Hill, the centre of settlement for both groups. Strangely the website does not mention this link in its list of diasporas with which the Jews in Manchester overlapped and intersected, including those from Russia, the Austro-Hungarian Empire and in the post-World War Two period, Egyptians, Hungarians and Iranians. Perhaps this reflects a view that antagonism between the two groups was the most common experience. This would accord with the account of ‘Mary’ interviewed in the 1990s. She reported the anti-Jewish attitudes of her Irish family in Bolton: ‘I went for a job at Moses Gate [early 1940s], but they were Jews so my cousin’s wife wouldn’t let me take it because they were Jews’.

One study interestingly makes direct comparisons between the two populations, Lara Marks’s 1990 paper *Working Wives and Working Mothers*. Marks identifies a number of parallels between Irish and Jewish women’s lives but also some major contrasts. The differences included the nature of paid work: whereas both groups of women were engaged in street selling, Irish women also played a major role as domestic servants in private households and carried out home piece work. Jewish women on the other hand took in sewing and washing, but did not enter other households in a paid capacity. Popular images of women in each group contrasted: those of Irish women were more negative – they were considered neglectful, slovenly and prone to alcoholism, whereas Jewish women were respected for the high quality of childcare.

The two groups also intersected and co-operated at several spatial scales. At the closest level Irish women were frequently employed as domestic servants in Jewish households, both for wealthier families who could afford to employ additional help and by poorer families who could not manage daily tasks unaided. In part this indicated a hierarchy of ethnic acceptability in London, where both groups were close to the bottom. As Lynn Lees noted:

> 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.

Later in the nineteenth century more prosperous Jewish families had come to rely on longstanding family servants, as Israel Zangwill’s fictional character in *Children of the Ghetto* (1892) illustrated:

> Mary O’Reilly, as good a soul as she was a Catholic, had lived all her life with Jews, assisting while yet a girl in the kitchen of Henry Goldsmith’s father, who was a pattern of ancient piety and a prop of the Great Synagogue. When the father died, Mary, with all the other household belongings, passed into the hands of the son, who also came up to London from a provincial town, and, with grateful recognition of
her motherliness, domiciled her in his own establishment. Mary knew all the ritual laws and ceremonies far better than her new mistress ...  

In this account Mary’s qualities deriving from her Irish cultural background, which included religious observance, domestic skills, a caring approach to children and an awareness of the importance of ritual, meshed closely with the Jewish culture of the Goldsmith household and were highly valued.

At the same time shared poverty provided the setting for small paid services between neighbours. Jerry White recorded the memories of one tenant in his oral history of Rothschild Buildings:

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]. Susie was very trustworthy, although she drank. And I’d go up to the lodging house to ask Susie if she’d come over and look after my eldest baby when we went out. It was a terrible place. It smelt awful, it was horrible. Her room, which she had to herself, was terrible; very dilapidated, really shocking.

As a consequence of these intimate connections, not surprisingly mixed relationships developed, though the extent of these is hard to assess. Certainly there are references to children of Jewish/Irish parents. For example, Bill Fishman, the oral historian and vivid raconteur, speaking of the 1920s, recounted: ‘And we used to have an odd Jewish woman come in, of Irish descent, and we always gave her a penny or tuppence’ (emphasis added). Similarly Gilda O’Neill describes her own mixed ancestry in her memoir My East End (1999): ‘it is a history of which, with my mongrel, English, Irish, Scottish, Welsh, Jewish, East End background, I am very much part.’

But not all interactions were positive and the balance of friendly cooperation and mutual antagonisms is clearly complex and needs to be further teased out. Evidence at present appears to be very mixed. Chaim Bermant, in London’s East End cited a report in the Eastern Post in 1901 describing a situation ‘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”’. Yet Bill Fishman, writing about a slightly later period, the 1930s, observed:

between eleven and fifteen were the happiest days of my youth [1932–36]. 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.

Referring elsewhere to a political event significant at the national scale, Fishman reinforced this view in his personal account of the so-called Battle of Cable Street on 4 October 1936, when the British Union of Fascists, led by Oswald
Mosley, planned to march through the East End. An estimated 300,000 members of anti-fascist groups erected roadblocks and although over 10,000 police attempted to clear the road for the march and 150 demonstrators were arrested, the march was abandoned.

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. 21 [Emphasis added]

But again there is conflicting evidence. In an almost diametrically opposed account, Henry Srebrnik’s research showed that:

Despite strenuous recruiting efforts on the part of the STDL [Stepney Tenants’ Defence League], the number of Irish women involved in left-wing political activities in Stepney remained low. Indeed, many more of them, like their male relatives, were attracted to Sir Oswald Mosley’s British Union of Fascists (BUF), which in the 1930s built a base among London’s East End Irish Catholics through anti-Semitic agitation, including denunciation of Jewish landlords. 22 [Emphasis added]

It is particularly striking that both these accounts reference Irish women, indicating their involvement outside the home in neighbourhood politics with wider national and international implications.

Sources are quite widely available for the period leading up to World War Two, including newspaper accounts, records of political movements and oral histories. However there is a sudden drop in commentary on the Irish presence in the East End of London in the 1950s. In part this reflects the relocation of longstanding families of Irish descent as result of bomb damage and ‘slum clearance’ to outer suburbs to Essex in the east, as well as the growth of major clusters of Irish neighbourhoods to the inner west London boroughs of Camden, Islington and Brent. But it also appears to signal the conflation of the so-called ‘indigenous’ working-class population into a ‘white English’ category. 23 For example the major sociological study of the East End, Peter Willmott and Michael Young’s Family and Kinship in East London (1963), makes no reference to the ethnicity of the families it describes. 24 Interestingly it does place a very strong emphasis on the intergenerational importance of mothers which suggests that the very large number of Irish women known to be present in the 1930s are likely to figure amongst this now unattributed population.

The recent follow-up study, Geoff Dench, Kate Gavron and Michael Young’s The New East End made similar assumptions when it noted the dispersal of Jewish populations in the 1950s and that ‘others had assimilated into what was an unusually stable local community’. 25 However intriguingly they also suggest
continuities, including the observation that a large proportion of the white population in Bethnal Green have Irish surnames. This would of course exclude women of Irish descent who married into other ethnic groups so that the actual numbers with Irish ancestry may be much higher. They also offer the view that the yuppie/white working social class gap may be more significant than that between the Bangladeshi/old white working class, ‘many of whom are the offspring of previous immigrants’. However these traces of Irish roots are more usually overlooked and the ‘white’ Eastenders are implicitly ‘English’ in origin.

The second case study focuses on the post-War period when a different set of intersections between Irish women and members of other diasporas in Britain was established. These relationships, involving ‘mixed-race’ partnerships, are quite frequently noted in research accounts, but often the Irish women are simply described as ‘white’ without further comment on their distinctive ethnicity. One example is Vicki Harman’s report on the findings of her study of lone white mothers of mixed-parentage children. One of the thirty in the sample described her children as ‘Irish and North African’, but there is no elaboration, and indeed other Irish women could have been included in the ‘white’ sample without mention. A clearer set of statements is made by Jayne Ifegwunigwe in her classic study Scattered Belongings, where two of the six detailed case studies relate to sisters with an Irish mother and African Caribbean father. On the one hand Ifegwunigwe asserts that: ‘the primary culture the women I spoke with is White English’ although she later elaborates:

_Griottes_ Sarah and Akousa grew up in an African Caribbean community in Liverpool with their White Irish mother and a certain degree of consistency about being métisse, Black but not White, and Caribbean.

A much more direct recognition of the significance of shared racialised backgrounds was provided by Frances Twine’s (2004) interview with Taisha, daughter of a 1950s Irish migrant mother and Barbadian father.

Recalling her mother’s practices when she was a child, she argued that her mother routinely discussed race and racism with her and thus provided her with a vocabulary for thinking about the political meaning of being black, Irish and British heritage. In her analysis of why she became strongly identified with the African Caribbean community and why she shifted has from self-identifying as ‘mixed race’ to a ‘black’ woman, Taisha cites the alternative history lessons that her mother provided at home.

This clear awareness of the parallels between Irish and other racialised diasporic backgrounds in Britain was echoed by Tariq, a middle-class participant interviewed in London in 2001 for the _Irish 2 Project_ which explored second-generation Irish identities. He said:
I guess for me my mum has never been white in the sense, not that she is not white in colour, but she is not British, she has never been white in any kind of way of identifying herself. For me I had a notion of what the implication was to be white on that form [the 2001 Census], there was almost this ‘them’ and ‘us’ feeling about it, ‘inside’ or ‘outside’ feeling about it. My mum is Irish she has the same attitude towards Britishness, more so than I do. English, no way.34

Although there is no space on the UK censuses to register mixed heritage identities other than by accepting the homogenising category ‘White’ as one of the cultural backgrounds, such identities are becoming more visible in everyday life.35 One vivid representation is the film East is East which features Ella, a wife and mother of Irish background, who is married to George, a Pakistani man, in 1970s Manchester.36 Once again reviewers of the film categorised Ella variously as British and English, but her Catholicism, fleeting images of shamrocks on St Patrick’s Day and a map of Ireland in the home clearly indicate her Irish family origins. The growing size of the mixed heritage population in Britain, estimated to increase by 93 per cent between 2001 and 2020 to make up 2 per cent of the total population, means that disentangling the ‘white’ contribution will become increasingly significant in the recognition of cultural backgrounds.37 Acknowledging the cultural specificity of ‘white’ heritages would add support to emerging debates around the concept of creolisation, which have flowed outwards from an earlier focus on global locations where ‘race’ is a major component of difference, to understandings that ‘humankind is refashioning the basic building blocks of organised cultures and societies in a fundamental and wide-ranging way’.38

Comparative experiences of Irish women within the British Empire

Comparisons between the experiences of Irish women in different parts of the diaspora are rare. Attempts have been made to identify similarities and differences between the largest destinations, the USA and Britain,39 but elsewhere research on Irish women is focused on studies of single societies.40 A comparative approach reminds us of the importance of context. Women from very similar backgrounds in Ireland, and their descendants, may lead very diverse lives by moving to different parts of the world. It also highlights variations within migration flows – at different historical periods and from different places of origin, social classes and religions.

The case studies juxtaposed here, Newfoundland and New Zealand, share one important dimension – movement to parts of the former British Empire which have retained their postcolonial political ties with the United Kingdom.41 They are both relatively small societies, but in other ways there are important contrasts. Newfoundland, which was a separate Dominion until a very closely contested referendum in 1949 brought it into confederation with Canada, was settled by fishery workers from England and Ireland from the mid-seventeenth
century until the mid-nineteenth century. New Zealand was colonised much later – in the second half of the nineteenth century – and settlement has continued on a smaller scale until the present day. Indeed its popularity is growing in the recent explosion of new emigration from Ireland as it becomes ‘an increasing home to a growing number of Irish migrants seeking a fresh start in the southern hemisphere’.

Irish-born women and their descendants in Newfoundland have long ancestral timelines, many beginning in the eighteenth century. In contrast to most other locations in the diaspora, women’s emigration to Newfoundland was actively discouraged in the earlier decades in an attempt to retain the pattern of male seasonal migration, rather than permanent settlement. The British Government used the Newfoundland cod fishery to train seamen for the navy, whilst English merchants wanted to keep the cod trade in their own hands rather than allow small local boat owners to enter the trade. As a naval officer, Captain Francis Whele, wrote in 1684: “Soe lange as there comes noe women they are not fixed.” However the tide could not be stemmed for long and permanent households were established in the early to middle years of the eighteenth century. Irish women were arriving as servants and quickly established households in partnerships with Irish and English fishermen.

Again in contrast to other areas of settlement in the diaspora where women were recruited primarily for reproductive purposes – both maintaining households and bearing children – Irish women in Newfoundland were an integral part of the dominant industry, the fishery. This distinctive economy, based almost exclusively on large-scale cod fisheries which supplied Europe, North America and the Caribbean, gave women specific roles in family-based enterprises. In some cases these involved direct employment in the shore-based aspects – splitting, drying, packing – and in others support functions including child-rearing, gardening, food production and medical care. Wileen Keough, author of The Slender Thread, a rich historical account of Irish women’s lives in Newfoundland, offers her own maternal family tree as an illustration of the range of ways in which women were central to the economy and society over at least seven generations. Her ability to document such an extensive timeline owes much to the striking continuity of place in the ancestries of Irish families. Fishery buildings – or ‘rooms’ – were passed down generations, in similar ways to small farms in Ireland where the ‘name on the land’ was preserved. Oral histories, again echoing traditions in Ireland, ensured that children were reminded of the precise trajectories of their family origins often over several hundred years, reinforcing the evidence of their own eyes in homes and localities.

My maternal roots are in the area, and I have encountered there a tradition of strong, resourceful Irish Newfoundland foremothers: my great-great-great-great-grandmother Catherine, who raised a large family in Ireland, often alone while her husband worked at the Newfoundland fishery, until she finally joined him on the southern Avalon in the 1790s; my great-great-aunt Margaret, who came
out from Ireland, became mistress of a planter household, and inherited from her first 
husband land and fishing premises—property which she gave to her brothers upon 
her remarriage and which is still in the family today; my great-great-aunt Sally, 
who provided board and medical services to fishermen to earn extra income for her 
family; my great-grandmother Bridget, who nursed her family alone during a 
diphtheria epidemic, carrying the black waste of infection down to the sea in the 
early morning under the watchful eyes of the quarantine officer; my great aunt 
Sarah, who kept a gracious three-story home in Shore’s Cove on the proceeds of a 
shebeen she ran on the side; my grandmother Julianne, her hands as large as oven 
mitts and work-roughened from making fish and hay and clothing and endless loaves 
of bread to feed her brood of twelve; my own mother, Gertrude, whom a priest 
warned my father not to marry because Southern Shore women had ‘far too much 
to say for themselves’. [Emphasis added]

Keough’s story highlights the early origin of her family with a four-times great 
grandmother, Catherine, joining her husband, a single male fishery worker, to 
create a permanent household. Her three-times great aunt, Margaret, arrived as 
a single woman and married in Newfoundland, establishing fishing ‘rooms’ 
which are still owned by the family. In subsequent generations, women provided 
key services of medical care and board and lodging to members of the 
community as well as their own families. Sarah was upwardly mobile and able to 
move to a more substantial local house by successfully providing illicit liquor to 
the community. The unusual economic and social independence of this line of 
women is underlined by the final comment by the priest, strongly disapproving 
of such an aberration by local women from the model of a meek Mary tradition-
ally demanded of Catholic women.

An interesting form of further comparison, which is not apparent in this case 
study, is that between the Irish population of Newfoundland and members of the 
English diaspora who lived alongside them. As already suggested intermarriage 
was quite common, especially in the early years when Catholic and Protestant 
institutions had not been rigidly established. Newfoundland offers an unusual 
example of English migrants ‘becoming Irish’ in religion and speech patterns 
through mixed marriages with Irish women, but retaining English surnames. 
Alongside such intersections, however, parallel lives also developed, strengthening 
over time as churches exercised their exclusive claims and geographical separa-
tion increased.49

A very different pattern of settlement by Irish women characterises New 
Zealand. The contrasts which may be drawn are evidence of the huge range of 
experiences which defy easy categorisation of the experiences of Irish women 
in the diaspora. Whilst these are also present at regional and local scales within 
nations, the larger picture exemplifies the impact of global political and 
economic contexts. Major features of Irish settlement in New Zealand include 
much later settlement than in Newfoundland, mainly after the 1870s. Many 
women arrived after living in other locations, including Australia and Britain.
There is a larger proportion of Protestants than in most other locations in the diaspora, except mainland Canada. Unlike Newfoundland where Irish identities remain very visible, in New Zealand these appear to be subsumed into an overarching ‘British’ identity. Indeed New Zealand has viewed itself overall as ‘a better Britain’. Whereas estimates of the proportion of the present-day population of Newfoundland with a significantly Irish cultural background can be as high as 50 per cent, in New Zealand the ratio is 20 per cent at maximum.

There is a relatively small published historiography specifically relating to Irish women in New Zealand. In 1990 Donald Akenson observed that the hidden histories of Irish women in New Zealand remained ‘the largest single lacuna in the history of the Irish in New Zealand’. Although the proportion of Irish settlers in New Zealand was quite high, at around 20 per cent overall, geographical patterns showed distinct clustering. The major period of settlement on the West Coast was 1864–1915, explored in a case study by Lyndon Fraser. Key features of this settlement, in which Irish women comprised one-third of the female population from 1867 to 1896, included further important differences from Newfoundland. Many women came to New Zealand after a period of family formation in Australia and were older, bringing children with them. Numbers were also self-funded, from more prosperous farming and trade backgrounds. Whereas women travelling to Newfoundland originated from backgrounds in south–east Ireland, especially in and around Waterford, those migrating to New Zealand had roots in more prosperous parts of Ulster and the midland counties of Ireland.

Unlike the Newfoundland Irish women in Willeen Keough’s family whose timeline stretched back over seven generations, migrants to New Zealand had arrived within the living memory of surviving descendants. One consequence of this more recent settlement pattern, and their higher levels of wealth and education, is the existence of private correspondence from which details of everyday experiences and feelings can be gleaned. Angela McCarthy has analysed 253 personal letters, including those of 89 women. Although there were slightly more letters from Protestants than Catholics, she did not find major differences in their concerns and preoccupations. Lyndon Fraser also opens his account of Irish women’s migration to the west coast of the South Island with quotations from a letter written by Ellen Piezzi to her brother-in-law in California, contrasting her difficulties of early widowhood and social isolation with his imagined comforts. Fraser focuses on a few themes, including the role of personal networks, familial mutual support, marriage and religious affiliation ‘to show that Irish women preserved and adapted certain Old World cultural resources in order to survive in a new environment’.

Differences in Irish women’s social, economic and demographic characteristics in the two diasporic locations illustrate the heterogeneity of experiences at different time periods and destinations. Attempts have been made to synthesise global patterns of Irish women’s lives. For example Donald Akenson identified
some key questions relating to Irish women’s places in the diaspora, using selected evidence from a wide range of places and periods. These are also illustrated vividly in the choice of personal stories told in Episode 3, ‘A World Apart’, of the video series The Irish Empire, which traced the lifestories of nine women who settled in Britain, USA, Zimbabwe and South Africa. But there is scope to link as well as place these stories side by side since, as the New Zealand case study showed, Irish women have also been mobile on a global scale and cannot simply be categorised by settlement in a single destination. It raises the issue of return migration to Ireland as well as future moves by returners such as Mary Williams, whose story was examined in detail in the video. She moved to the USA for several years as a young woman in the 1930s, returned to Ireland but found it socially stifling, and moved on to England in the 1950s. In many ways she enjoyed a rich and varied life with far greater freedom and independence than her sisters in Ireland. But she also reflected sadly on the double loss of family – the parents and siblings left in Ireland who no longer fully accepted the ‘returned Yank’ and her own children whom she had lost to ‘Englishness’. Her diasporic identity had cut her off from the mono-ethnic self-representations of those who remained, or became, ‘settled’.

**Parallels with global diasporas:**

**the Irish in Britain and Koreans in Japan**

The issue of ‘Irish exceptionalism’ is sometimes raised critically by academics, usually to question claims that the Irish experience of emigration is unique in its size and impact. It is salutary therefore to find parallels in other parts of the world and in otherwise contrasting cultures. One such case is that of Korean settlement in Japan. Only one publication has explored this similarity, a book by a Japanese scholar not translated into English. As Sonia Ryang points out, Koreans in Japan are a little-known minority in western discourse, reflecting ‘the western domination of the business of constructing minorities’.

The major features of the Korean diaspora in Japan which resonate with those of the Irish in Britain include the following: each was colonised by their larger imperial neighbour, Korea by Japan between 1910 and 1935 and the Irish by Britain over a much longer period. In both cases the colonised populations were despised as backward in comparison with their ‘civilised’ conquerors, despite evidence of highly developed cultures in the past. In an almost exact parallel to the aphorism ‘the Irish can never forget their history, the English can never remember it’ is John Lie’s observation that ‘the Japanese are indifferent to history whereas the Koreans are obsessed with history’.

Migrants from each colony were brought to, or recruited by, the larger centre to provide manual labour, women in domestic service and, in the case of Korea especially, for prostitution, and men for work in the construction industry. In each case the migrant ethnic group was indistinguishable from the majority
society in physical appearance, identified only by name (though often this was changed) and family background. This made it possible to ‘pass’, a strategy adopted by many Koreans to avoid punitive discrimination, but also by unknown numbers of the Irish in Britain. Koreans in Japan were labelled dirty, smelly, lazy, stupid and their children were bullied, again strongly echoing Irish stereotypes in Britain from the nineteenth century. Moreover there is a striking similarity between signs displayed in English rented accommodation saying ‘no blacks, no Irish, no dogs’ and those in Japanese boarding houses declaring ‘Not available for Koreans and Ryukyuan’ or even the almost identical ‘No North Koreans. No blacks. No dogs’. As a consequence in the postwar period of the 1950s–70s Korean identities were largely invisible and people were fearful of identification. This ‘disrecognition’ may have been more extreme in its impact than rejections experienced by the Irish, but specific incidents could be very similar.

However, like the Irish in England and Wales, though to a lesser extent in Scotland, where discrimination appears to have decreased since the Good Friday Agreement, there has even been a positive welcome in certain situations for the respective minority ethnic groups. At the same time members of the two diasporas have felt more confident in claiming their distinctive identities. In Japan more people of Korean descent, known as the zainichi, now feel entitled to claim ‘Korean descent, Japanese livelihood’, benefitting from the decline of the myth of mono-ethnicity. In Britain the inclusion of Irish ethnic tick boxes in the 2001 and 2011 Censuses and a wide range of ethnic monitoring forms signalled a state willingness to recognise this identity. Interestingly both the Irish in Britain and zainichi in Japan are strongly represented in the cultural field. This has long been true of Irish literary figures in Britain, often claimed as British, and more recently television presenters, actors and entertainers. Similarly in Japan zainichi people play positive leads in soap operas and include admired literary figures.

These changes have accompanied both the growing economic strength of each ‘home’ nation, the ‘Celtic Tiger’ in Ireland and IT-led industrial expansion in Korea. They also reflect greater acceptance of multicultural societies, evident in Britain from the 1970s and more recently in Japan from the 1990s. Yet the process of acknowledging difference is uneven. By the early twenty-first century there are still significant barriers in terms of employment, marriage and civic participation for the zainichi although they are no longer seen as a uniformly inferior group. But pockets of extreme poverty, such as the village of Utoro in Kyoto where zainichi people live without running water or sewerage after sixty years, still remain. Lower level, more hidden, discrimination also persists in everyday life. One woman, ‘KY’, with chosen-seki status from the pre-partition Korean peninsula, which continues to identify them with despised North Korea, described her experience in job applications:

After knowing my ‘nationality’, some companies withdrew their expression of interest, saying ‘it’s our policy not to hire foreigners’ … One company made me
panic. It announced the hire of a person who had practical knowledge of foreign-trading and was fluent in Korean. I thought I was the right person, but the company refused to hire me, saying I was disqualified. I was not able to understand why I was disqualified … I was completely dumbfounded.77

Similarly in Britain the issue of anti-Irish discrimination remains an unresolved issue in parts of the West of Scotland and continues to punctuate representations of the Irish in England.76

Another important similarity between the two diasporas is the experiences of the second and third generations in their relationships to both countries of family origin and settlement. The major period of family formation after immigration in both cases was the post-War period of the 1950s and 60s. The changes experienced by the second generation which shifted them closer to the majority society, especially in language and accent but also in clothing, tastes and attitudes, also meant that they were not always accepted as authentic members of their parents’ homelands when they visited as children and later as adults. As one interviewee said: ‘My mother says that it is more unbearable to be discriminated against by Koreans than by Japanese. In Korea we are looked down upon because we live in Japan.’79 There are parallels then in the placings of the zaínichi, who are not accepted either as authentic in Korea or as full Japanese citizens, and the Irish in Britain who can be labelled ‘plastic paddies’ by Irish-born people and may not see themselves as exclusively British.80 This is not a universal experience of ‘second generations’ and points to similarities in the colonial backgrounds of the two ethnic groups which may lead postcolonised societies to refuse inclusion to the children of emigrants. In the case of the Irish in Britain, there is a contradiction between the legal position of full citizenship rights and the everyday experience of these rights being questioned81 or discriminatory comments which pass unchallenged in the majority society.82

The specific positioning and experiences of women in these two diasporas needs further research but there are pointers to ways in which their lives have parallels. In addition to employment in manual labour, especially in the early years after arrival, in both cases women had to deal with unequal treatment within their own ethnic group as well as from the majority society.83 In her study of ethnicity and class amongst zaínichi Koreans, Bumsoo Kim reported interviews with women who complained about gender barriers in Korean-run workplaces in Japan, one asserting that ‘patriarchy is prevalent among the zaínichi Korean community’.84 This echoes the aims of the London Irish Women’s Conferences in the 1980s. In 1984 Sabina Sharkey introduced the first event, entitled Irish Women: Our Experience of Emigration, explaining: ‘Our intention is not just to insist on our existence in English surroundings, but to insist on it within our own Irish community.’85 Women have also been central to educating children about their cultural backgrounds, which took place in the home. Sonia Ryang describes the situation in the 1950s and 60s when ‘colonial memories of the first generation penetrated every nook and cranny of social and family life’.86
This echoes Irish family experiences in many English towns and cities where cultural backgrounds were passed on within families, but often hidden from or ignored by English neighbours. In both cases too, the cultural backgrounds were missing from school curricula.

In other ways women of the Korean diaspora in Japan may have experienced even harsher treatment than Irish women in Britain. For example, the enforced prostitution of Korean women during World War Two has only recently been brought to light and is still unacknowledged officially. The Japanese government has refused to pay compensation or apologise. More widely migrant women have criticised the Japanese feminist movement for their lack of attention to issues of discrimination and prejudice against minority ethnic women. However again this echoes almost exactly concerns of Irish feminists that their issues and interests have been absent from British feminist agendas:

More trenchant and more commonly heard criticisms of the exclusion of Irish women from the broader canvas of British feminist history suggest that a deeper ideological inquiry is necessary. This should involve questioning why feminist historians have followed the broad pattern of socialist historiography by concentrating on the commonality of interests, primarily class-based, and have filtered out difference, such as race, nationality, ethnicity and religion.

Conclusions

Comparative approaches challenge ways of thinking about particular parts of the Irish diaspora which focus exclusively on national arenas and risk losing sight of the ‘bigger picture’. They also bring to the fore relationships between those of Irish cultural background and other ethnicities, which may be lost if the focus is simply on Irish identities. By stressing multi-generational patterns, comparisons also draw attention to hybridisations which begin as soon as the Irish arrive in new destinations, and expand exponentially in each subsequent generation. Placing Irish women within ‘diaspora spaces’, such as England, highlights their roles in wider social processes of class and gender formation, as well as ethnic and racial constructions.

What is clear is that the specific context of settlement, both initially and in subsequent years, is extremely important. Newfoundland is a profoundly different place in which to claim Irish descent than New Zealand. Both are very different from England, although elements of Englishness are central to the construction of Irish identities in each. In Newfoundland there is ongoing tension between groups from Irish and English origins even after seven or eight generations, because of differences in political power within the Empire which have residues today. In New Zealand Irish identities seem to have been submerged within a ‘British’ or perhaps now ‘White European’ identity. But contrasting contexts can also produce parallels as in the case of the Korean
diaspora in Japan, offering new ways to interpret such current issues as the
sometimes uncomfortable fit of English-accented second-generation children in
Irish ‘home’ localities.

These are very broad questions which allow us to make different and imagi-
native uses of existing research to devise projects which explore issues from new
angles. The re-emergence of a large-scale outpouring of emigrants from present-
day Ireland continues to give them contemporary relevance as Irish women shift
their destinations to different locations as well as adding new generations in
established places.

Notes
1 P. O’Sullivan (ed.), Patterns of Migration, Volume 1, The Irish World Wide: History,
2 Preliminary findings from research project supported by British Academy Small
Grant SG101221, ‘Citizenship and genealogy: multi-generational Irish identities in
New Zealand, Newfoundland and England’.
3 M. Bulmer and J. Solomos, ‘Changing research agendas in ethnic and racial studies’,
4 K. Kenny, ‘Diaspora and comparison: the global Irish as a case study’, Journal of
5 Ibid., 135.
6 L. Harte, ‘Introduction: where is Irish Studies bound?’, in L. Harte and Y. Whelan
(eds), Ireland Beyond Boundaries: Mapping Irish Studies in the Twenty-first Century
7 See B. Walter, ‘Whiteness and diasporic Irishness: nation, gender and class’, Journal of
209.
9 For a comparative case study see B. Walter, ‘Irish/Jewish diasporic intersections in the
East End of London: paradoxes and shared locations’, in M. Prum (ed.), La Place de
10 Manchester Jewish Museum, Cheetham Hill, available at www.manchesterjewish-
11 Bill Williams, social historian, personal communication.
12 B. Walter, Outsiders Inside: Whiteness, Place and Irish Women (London: Routledge, 2001),
p. 219.
13 L. 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:
16 J. White, Rothschild Buildings: Life in an East End Tenement Block 1887–1920 (London,
17 Bill Fishman, Oral Archive, V&A Museum of Childhood, available at
www.vam.ac.uk/moc/childrens lives/east end lives/Lifestories/bill
fishman/index.html, accessed 1 April 2012.
18 G. O’Neill, My East End: Memories of Life in Cockney London (London: Penguin,
1999), pp. xxii–iii.
Irish women within and beyond the British Empire

20 Bill Fishman, Oral Archive, V&A Museum of Childhood.
21 Ibid.
22 H. Srebrnik, ‘Class, ethnicity and gender intertwined: Jewish women and the East
24 R. Willmott and M. Young, Family and Kinship in East London (Harmondsworth:  
25 G. Dench, K. Gavron and M. Young, The New East End: Kinship, Race and Conflict  
26 Ibid., p. 15.
27 Ibid., p. 24.
28 See for example G. Wemys, The Invisible Empire: White Discourse, Tolerance and  
29 V. Harman, ‘Experiences of racism and the changing nature of white privilege among
lone white mothers of mixed-parentage children’, Ethnic and Racial Studies, 33  
(2010), 176–94.
30 J. Ifegkunigwe, Scattered Belongings: Cultural Paradoxes of ‘Race’, Nation and Gender  
31 Ibid., p. 171.
32 Ibid., p. 191.
33 F. Twine, ‘A white side of black Britain: the concept of racial literacy’, Ethnic and  
Harte, Y. Whelan and P. Crotty (eds), Ireland: Space, Text, Time (Dublin: Liffey  
35 B. Walter, ‘English/Irish hybridity: second-generation diasporic identities’,  
International Journal of Diversity in Organisations, Communities and Nations, 5 (2005),  
17–24.
38 R. Cohen, ‘Creolization and cultural globalization: the soft sounds of fugitive power’,  
39 See Walter, Outsiders Inside, Chapters 2 and 3.
40 For example, H. Diner, Erin’s Daughters in America (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins  
University Press, 1983); M. Lennon, M. McAdam and J. O’Brien, Across the Water:  
Irish Women’s Lives in Britain (London: Virago, 1988); S. Conway, The Faraway Hills are  
Green: Voices of Irish Women in Canada (Toronto: Women’s Press, 1992); T. McLaughlin  
(ed.), Irish Women in Colonial Australia (St Leonards NSW: Allen and Unwin, 1998);  
L. Fraser ‘No one but black strangers to spake to God help me: Irish women’s  
migration to the west coast, 1864–1915’, in L. Fraser and K. Pickles (eds), Shifting  
Centres: Women and Migration in New Zealand History (Dunedin: University of Otago  
41 This section is based on initial findings of research funded by the British Academy  
Small Grant 2010–12 ‘Citizenship and genealogy: multi-generational Irish identities  
in New Zealand, Newfoundland and England’.
42 G. Handcock, ‘So Long As There Comes Noe Women’: Origins of English Settlement in  
Newfoundland (St Johns: Breakwater Books, 1989).
43 B. Patterson (ed.), The Irish in New Zealand: Historical Contexts and Perspectives  
(Wellington: Stout Research Centre for New Zealand Studies, 2002).
44 ‘New chances in New Zealand’, Irish Times, 1 January 2011.
46 Ibid., p. 32.
48 Ibid., p. 1.
52 Fraser, ‘No one but black strangers’.
55 Ibid., p. 7.
56 Fraser, ‘No one but black strangers’, pp. 45–6.
57 Ibid., p. 46.
59 The Irish Empire (2000), Clarence Pictures for RTE/BBC/SBS.
65 Ibid., p. 2.
67 Lie, Multiethnic Japan, p. 111.
68 Jong-In Kim, ‘In the course of mounting tension between North Korea and Japan: difficulties for zainichi Korean women who live in Japan’, Women’s Asia 21 Voices from Japan, 18 (2007), 44.


72 Walter, ‘English/Irish hybridity’.


77 Kim, ‘Bringing class back in’, 888.


82 Walter, ‘Whiteness and diasporic Irishness’, 1297.


84 Kim, ‘Bringing class back’, 872.


90 Ibid., p. 112.

