
Two
The United Kingdom

Wild Irish: the less civilized Irish; formerly those not subjected to British rule, also called 'mere Irish'.


Overall the Survey suggests that whatever historical and contemporary problems there have been, or are, the British are favourably disposed towards the Irish. They hold positive images of Ireland, and of the characteristics of the Irish. They reject ideas of the Irish born in Britain as foreigners; and instead they see them much as they see one another. There is also a sizeable group of British-born people with Irish connections who claim an Irish dimension to their identity. For all these – and other – reasons, the Irish have much good will to draw on in Britain.

ICM – Bradford University Survey, 1994

The Troubles of the last 30 years, particularly when they have spilled over into English towns and cities, have had a most damaging effect on the Irish community in this country. We have paid a heavy price in police harassment, press and popular prejudice and a series of massive miscarriages of justice. Thankfully, this dismal period is at an end and a new mood has been marked by the now routine visits of Irish Presidents and politicians to Irish communities around Britain.

*Irish Post*, 2 January 1999

'PERSECUTED! PERSECUTED!' A schoolmate of mine heard these words beating through the alcoholic fog shrouding his consciousness one 1950s' morning, and woke up to find that his companion in the bare doss-house room was sitting up in bed, screaming at the heavens, 'Persecuted! Persecuted! I am sick, sore and fed up, shitting on newspapers, rolling it up and throwing it in corners! Persecuted...!' I don't know what became of the persecuted one, but my schoolfriend succumbed to alcoholism in his early thirties. We heard that he had died one night, vainly trying to stagger back to a psychiatric institution from which he had been discharged some time earlier. David was one of those who fell through the yawning cracks in the Anglo-Irish relationship which are accurately illustrated, though not fully depicted, by the quotations given above.

At the time of writing one could say, with some confidence, both that those
cracks are in the process of being filled in, and that the hopeful auguries for the future contained in the last two quotations appear to be on their way to removing from British society the sort of attitudes which gave rise to the first, and to others like it. Certainly, if one proceeds on the principle that the bottle is always better viewed as half-full rather than half-empty, one can find increasing evidence to support this view. Yet one must also acknowledge that the healing process still confronts a considerable task in dealing with the detritus of history and the threat to relationships which a breakdown in the Peace Process would pose. A very striking difference between the Irish community in the UK and that in the US was the extent to which the American Irish were prepared to put their heads over the parapet on the Northern Ireland issue, compared to their counterparts in Great Britain. Writing in *Irish Studies*, in 1985, Steifoin O’Brien accurately defined the position as follows:

For eight hundred years Irish people have taken up arms to rid Ireland of English domination. To the British state these people have been rebels, traitors and latterly criminals . . . the IRA have attacked British soldiers and bombed British cities. This has caused successive waves of hysteria in the media. The average Irish person in the workplace is usually asked an opinion on whatever has taken place. This is a problem. Most Irish people want a united Ireland and a sizeable number support the IRA. However, to say this can have adverse results, imprisonment without trial or deportation under the PTA [Prevention of Terrorism Act]. That apart, the Irish person is aware of English ignorance of Anglo-Irish history and is unlikely to antagonise colleagues or jeopardise promotion prospects by pointing that ignorance out. The result is nothing said, no discussion, no progress and until the question of Ireland is taken out into the open it will remain that way.

Ten years after O’Brien wrote the foregoing, the survey carried out by ICM Research and the Department of Peace Studies at Bradford University in 1994 found that there had been some progress. As many as 82 per cent of Britons expected to find in Ireland a beautiful countryside and 67 per cent expected to meet with friendliness towards British visitors; 83 per cent disregarded ‘Irish jokes’ and regarded the Irish as being just as intelligent as the British themselves. In fact 4 per cent considered them more intelligent! The traits which the British most attributed to the Irish were: a good sense of humour (67 per cent), patriotism (58 per cent), fun-loving (45 per cent), fluency with words (36 per cent).

Perhaps the most important finding of the survey was the implicit impact of the Irish on British society. Of those surveyed, roughly one person in four in Britain had Irish relatives, including in-laws, and three out of five had Irish friends, acquaintances or fellow workers.

Surveys of course are open to the charge that they can prove whatever those who pay for them wish them to prove; and in this case, before commissioning the survey, the Peace Studies Department said, in a statement accompanying the findings’ release, that it ‘suspected that the British are well disposed towards their Irish neighbours’. Moreover, the survey did not include those most vulnerable to anti-Irish prejudices, Irish emigrants themselves. Persons born in Ireland were excluded. In the year that it was published, another poll, carried out under the auspices of the leading Irish community service agencies, found that of those who had approached the agencies in the preceding twelve months: ‘ . . . one in eight clients had experienced racial harassment; adding police harassment and arrests under the PTA, the proportion of clients who experienced racial harassment increased to one in five’.

A ‘key recommendation’ of the survey was ‘a link with community organisations through a network which collates evidence on racial harassment and discrimination and develops a strategy to challenge anti-Irish racism’.

**England**

I was reminded of this one day in London while talking to two of my old friends and colleagues from the *Irish Press* about this book. Both of them had worked in the paper’s London office. Aidan Hennigan, the former London editor, is the doyen of Irish correspondents in London. A Mayo man, with the enviable distinction of owning his own island in a lake, he will not return to Ireland because, even though well past the retirement age for lesser mortals, he refuses to leave ‘the best club in Europe’, the House of Commons. The other is John McEntee, who is now the editor of the *Daily Express* diary column.

There was a certain gradation of emphasis in how they saw the Irish/English relationship from the perspective of their respective ages, Hennigan being almost thirty years older than McEntee. However, while citing certain undeniable difficulties encountered by the Irish in England, both men were at pains to stress the level of friendship they had themselves encountered. Hennigan recalled an incident while he was studying law at Gray’s Inn, as a mature student. Some of the most High Tory of his fellow would-be lawyers came up to him after particularly bad bombing atrocities in London, those of Hyde Park and Regent’s Park, and insisted on taking him out to dinner that evening to cheer him up. Here I might add that my own experience in England amongst professional colleagues has been one of unfalling courtesy and friendliness.

However, this widespread friendly attitude did not prevent the Hyde Park atrocity forming the basis for one of the worst miscarriages of justice cases of the entire Troubles, that of Danny McNamee. Just before Christmas of 1998, the Appeals Court conceded that the verdict of the original jury was unsafe and he was released after being in prison since 1987. Some of McNamee’s pleasure at this finding was dissipated, however, by an accompanying statement which most Irish people would regard as typical British judicial anti-Irish prejudice, put in purely to damage McNamee’s chances of com-
pensation. The court said that the fact that the original verdict was unsafe did not mean that he was innocent, or that he had spent years in jail for a crime that he did not commit. Yet, during the appeal it emerged that, as in the Guildford Four case, there were several factors which would have proved his innocence at the time, had the evidence not been deliberately disregarded.

The relationship works on two levels. There is the official world of courts, police and Crown Prosecution Service, all weighted in time-honoured (or dishonoured) fashion so as to convict an Irish person, any Irish person, in the wake of an atrocity. Then there is the ordinary human friendliness of the people.

John McEntee described how the official approach affected his work psychologically. After a bombing incident, he attended a press conference given by the police chief Sir Robert Mark, and found that he had to nerve himself to ask questions in the prevailing atmosphere. Sir Robert, all steely charm and joviality, greeted his question with: 'Ah! Do I detect a hint of an Irish accent?' And when McEntee pursued his questioning, Sir Robert counterpunched with: 'You'd know more than I about these things...'

Encountering that sort of approach at a top-level police press conference might be regarded as a legitimate professional hazard for a journalist, but attitudes within the police force also have a bearing on the fact that in the 1990s four separate reports concluded that the Irish had the highest percentage of incidents of 'stop and search' by police, and that the Irish were disproportionately represented in statistics for the victims of crime. In the borough of Islington, Irishwomen were 80 per cent more likely to be the victims of crime than other ethnic groups. Overall, whereas the Irish comprised 14 per cent of the population of North London, they experienced 19.3 per cent of the crime.

These facts are the product of long-term difficulties stemming from the historical relationship between Ireland and England, complicated in recent decades by the ugly manifestations of the failure to find a solution to the last festering sore left by this relationship, Northern Ireland. Both my journalist friends stressed the effects of bombing on ordinary day-to-day relationships. McEntee instanced the case of the office phone cleaner, an Irishwoman, who had been working in London for decades, doing her daily rounds of offices. After a bombing, one customer with whom she had been dealing for twenty years, turned his back on her.

He also found that his own hackles rose at some of the jokes occasioned by the Troubles. For example, he told one English colleague that he found such a joke 'both upsetting and offensive'. His colleague had asked him if he had heard that the IRA man Frank Stagg, who had died on hunger strike, had been awarded 'the slimmer of the year' award. Given the Irish sense of humour, I am quite certain that McEntee would have heard similar tasteless jokes in the Irish Press newsroom in Dublin. The raps came however from hearing them told in an English accent in London.

The Prevention of Terrorism Act was identified by both journalists as a prime source of the problems faced by the Irish community. McEntee cited a story involving a son of the former Nationalist political leader in Derry, Eddie McAteer, who was pursuing a career in the London art world and had no contact with politics of any kind. McEntee had arranged to visit Shane Paul O'Doherty, also from Derry, in jail. (O'Doherty, a former IRA bomber, subsequently renounced violence and became a peace campaigner after his release and return to Ireland). McEntee's principal reason for visiting him was the fact that a colleague on the newsdesk had known O'Doherty as a boy in Derry, and asked John to call on him during his London stint. He brought McAteer along on the visit, because he too was from Derry. Duty discharged, McEntee thought no more of the visit and returned to Dublin shortly afterwards. However, the roof fell in on McAteer. He was held for five days under the PTA [Prevention of Terrorism Act], and questioned as to 'why he had taken a journalist along with him to visit O'Doherty?' He became an object of suspicion at his work, lost his accommodation and, finding English life increasingly threatening, gave up his career and returned to Derry.

Hennigan's career in journalism at every level of Irish and English society had provided him with unrivalled insights into the attitudes that form some English decision-taking. He recalled meeting Margaret Thatcher at a Newspaper Society Conference which he attended with Conor O'Clery of the Irish Times. She came up to the two Irish journalists and, linking arms with them in the friendliest way possible, asked them for their views on Irish opinion, North and South, concerning both British policy and the IRA. Having listened long, and apparently attentively, she paused for a moment after the two journalists had given their opinions, and then asked in a puzzled way: 'But why don't you get these people to inform?'

Thatcher apart, Hennigan listed a number of factors which he felt contributed to difficulties in Anglo-Irish relationships:

You've got this yeomanry tradition, the Tory backbenchers, the old ladies who put on the hats and their best clothes, and sit in front of the television, waving the Union Jack for the Queen's Christmas address. People mock these things and try to say they don't exist, but then look at the Falklands. Where did that spirit come from? Then of course you've got to allow for the effect of the bombings, Deal, Birmingham, Guildford, Mountbatten, Brighton and Airey Neave. Those two were aimed straight at Maggie. That's where you get the blue lights flashing outside the Irish digs, and the kid losing his job in the wrong. I was in the House of Commons when Woy (Roy Jenkins) introduced the PTA. The atmosphere was terrible here sometimes. That's how you got your Birmingham Sixes and Guildford Fours. The Judith Ward case was the worst of all. She was a hundred miles away from the crime they sent her down for.

Both journalists stressed that there was a marked improvement in attitudes towards the Irish since the coming of the Peace Process and the departure of the Tories. McEntee joked, 'Nowadays if they hear you're Irish, people want to rub up against you.' Apart from the Peace Process, they attributed the improving attitude to the general buzz about Ireland being the "in" place to
spend a holiday, the growth of the Irish economy and the type of emigrant it was turning out. Henning’s summing up was:

The broad mass of the British people are a decent, tolerant lot. You get the odd exception, the backbencher, or the old boy drooling away in the House of Lords, and sometimes the occasional docker type talking about ‘those Orish coming over here to take our jobs’. But overall the thing is improving. Of course, if the Peace Process breaks down and the bombs start going off, people have little or no grasp of the historical background and we’ll all be back to square one . . .

Taken together, the foregoing and the contrasting findings of the two surveys indicate both the existence of a large corpus of British goodwill towards the Irish and some strong countervailing attitudes which help to explain both the feelings of superiority contained in the dictionary definition, and how intelligent, educated Irish persons could find themselves so alienated as to end up in the conditions indicated by the ‘shitting in newspapers’ anecdote. All the foregoing have their place in the mosaic of the Irish experience in England. There is friendliness, there is tolerance, there is prejudice and there is alienation and exploitation, sometimes visited upon their own by the Irish themselves.

The early Anglo-Irish relationship

Before going into individual cases, it is important to remind ourselves that these misfunctions of justice did not occur overnight. They are part of the detritus of the long and troubled history of the Anglo-Irish relationship. During the so-called ‘Dark Ages’ following the fall of Rome, there were strong Irish connections with both the north and west of Britain. The northern Irish tribe the Scotti, brought their name and Gaelic culture from Ulster to what is now Scotland, and there was an Irish kingdom in Wales for hundreds of years before Norman times. Irish pirates commonly raided the British coast and were in fact apparently responsible for kidnapping Patrick, the Irish patron saint, from his affluent Roman family. Ironically, the first Irish emigrants to Britain were Irish people uprooted from Ireland by the Norman invasions. By 1243 they had become so numerous that a statute was passed aimed at driving the Irish beggars out of England. It was to be the precursor of many such ukases. In 1413, for example, another law ordered that: ‘All Irishmen and Irish clerks, beggars, called chamber dekyns, be voided out of the realm.’ One effect of this type of law was that, instead of driving the Irish out of ‘the realm’, it helped to create the tradition of Irish recruitment into Britain’s armies. The numbers of Irish joining the British Army and Navy again shot up subsequently, because of the dispossessions caused by the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century invasions of Ireland. By the early nineteenth century the Irish probably formed as much as 40 per cent of the membership of the army alone.

Generally speaking, the early Irish pirates and the contemporary Republican incursions notwithstanding, the Irish did not invade Britain, except in the service of an English ruler, or would-be ruler. For example, Lambert Simnel was crowned King of England in Dublin and, after the last battle of the Wars of the Roses (Stoke in 1487), fetched up not on the throne of England but working in the kitchens of King Henry VII. Bonnie Prince Charlie was another unsuccessful aspirant to the English throne whose cause was supported by Irish regiments. Mainly, however, it was the British who invaded Ireland, to further imperial objectives. From the time of Henry II in the twelfth century a succession of British monarchs found themselves engaged in ‘putting down rebellions in Ireland’.

An Irish apologist might argue that these ‘rebellions’ were merely Irish attempts to take back their own property, which the English rulers systematically confiscated from the native Catholics and parcelled out to ‘loyal’ Protestant planters, from whom, for example, the present North of Ireland Unionists derive. However, as we have seen in the European chapter, the existence of this font of rebellion on its western flank meant that the decision-takers of England frequently faced the spectre of domestic invasion by continental Catholic powers using Ireland as a stepping stone. Imperial ambition, fear of the continental threat and anti-Catholicism combined to generate policies for dealing with the Irish, particularly on the part of the Elizabethans and Cromwell, indicated by this description of the methods of the Elizabethan Governor of Munster, Sir Humphrey Gilbert:

. . . that the heads of all those (of what sort soever they were) which were killed in the day, should be cut off from their bodies and brought to the place where he encamped at night, and should there be laid on the ground each side of the way leading out into his own tent so that none could come into his tent for any cause but commonly he must pass through a lane of heads which he used ad terrorem, the dead feeling nothing the more pain thereby; and yet it did being a great terror to the people when they saw the heads of their dead fathers, brothers, children, kinsfolk and friends, lie on the ground before their faces, as they came to speak with the same colonel.6

Early Irish settlements were recorded in Bristol around the eleventh century, and by the fourteenth century, there were settlements in Liverpool, London, Norwich and York, but for the purposes of this book, the term ‘the Irish in Britain’ may be taken as relating to three principal waves of emigration. The first occurred in the 1840s as a result of the Great Famine, when the failure of the potato crop was allowed to develop from a crisis into a catastrophe.

The Great Famine

In round numbers the Great Famine cut the Irish population from some 8 to 6 million. Perhaps a million people died in Ireland itself, and another million
emigrated, thereby initiating a period of population decline that continued almost to the time of writing. In fact only one crop failed, the potato, and the British Government allowed food to be exported from Ireland all through the crisis of the mid-1840s which culminated in 'Black '47. During this period, apart from huge quantities of food such as meat and butter, or crops like millable wheat, more cattle than people were shipped out of the country. The dimensions of the Famine were such that it may be that, even if this food had been kept in the country, it would not have been sufficient to feed all the starving anyway. Most of the victims, like those of Africa today, were used to a specific type of food, in this case, the potato, but in the circumstances, even the sight of a sandwich passing under armed guard before people dying from hunger would have been a revolutionary symbol.

The Famine was no more the only source of Irish emigration than it was the only famine. In fact, the nineteenth century saw some dozen famines in different parts of the country before what is known as the Great Famine occurred, from 1845 onward. However, the Great Famine both epitomises the symptoms and the causes of misrule in Ireland.

By the 1830s, more than two million people lived on the edge of starvation for two-thirds of the year, receiving enough to eat only in the four months after harvest. Countless thousands of people had become dependent on a piece of land just about big enough to hold a hoe and a garden of potatoes. Those lucky enough to have a job from a landowner were probably given no pay, save what they could grow or perhaps rea in the form of a pig.

A commission on 'The state of the poor in Ireland' recorded a number of reasons for the disastrous state of the huge Irish underclass: religious differences; political extremism, absentee landlords, lack of investment, the prevalence of alcoholism, the 1800 Act of Union. The novelist, Canon Sheehan, famously blamed: '. . . the whole ghastly genealogy of Irish history, and particularly the Act of Union . . . the Union begat outlawry, and outlawry begat Whiteboyism; and the Whiteboyism begat informers and judicial murders, and judicial murders begat revenge'.

Canon Sheehan rightly indict the Act of Union for exercising a baneful influence, but what he does not state is how the Act deprived Ireland of what I may call 'The Initiative Factor', the power of creating any system of helping itself. The Act suppressed the Irish Parliament and the seat of government to Westminster. The professional classes, the artisans, the publishers, the people with the ambition and the means to achieve successful careers, and in so doing generate prosperity for others, left for London in droves. At Westminster itself, the Irish representatives were powerless to affect the course of events in Ireland. With some 100 members in an assembly of over 650, they were easily outnumbered throughout the nineteenth century, if they chose to object to an imperial measure. At the time of the Famine most of them would never have wished to see that section of the Irish population which upheld the empire: the Protestant Ascendency class. When the Great Famine struck, the situation might be likened to that which occurred after the Titanic had hit the iceberg. Certainly the collision created great damage, but what created the loss of life, the impact or the scarcity of lifeboats?

One incident serves to illustrate the vulnerability of the Irish in dealing with the crisis through having no government or effective decision-taking machinery of their own. In November 1845, when the dimensions of the looming catastrophe were becoming clear, Daniel O'Connell and a large deputation, which included figures like the Duke of Leinster, called on the Lord Lieutenant, Lord Heytesbury, to urge on him a relief plan, drawn up by O'Connell. Had it been adopted it would have greatly alleviated the Famine's effects. It proposed not only stopping the export of food from Ireland, but advocating the importation of food from abroad for free distribution. The deputation also proposed that relief work be provided out of the public purse, that loans for famine relief be raised and that the whole scheme, which had been drawn up by O'Connell, be paid for by increasing taxes on landlords, particularly absentee landlords.

As most of the men backing O'Connell in urging these courses were themselves landlords, neither their practicality nor their sincerity can be doubted. However, the Lord Lieutenant received the proposals 'very coldly', read a prepared reply which in effect rejected the proposals, and ushered the delegation out immediately he had finished reading. O'Connell's subsequent pleas in the House of Commons fell on deaf ears, and he died in Genoa in 1847, a broken man, as the Famine reached its peak.

The English liberal, Sydney Smith, once declared:

The moment the very name of Ireland is mentioned, the English seem to bid adieu to common feeling, common prudence and common sense, and to act with the barbarity of tyrants and the frenzy of idiots.

Few fair-minded people familiar with the course of Irish history could disagree with his verdict. However, I feel that here one should enter, not so much a caveat, as an extra dimension to the tragedy - Church teaching and the human frailty factor. The teaching issue raises the questions: to what extent was the death toll exacerbated by the Catholic Church's teaching on birth control? And: to what extent does Irish fertility differ from other nations, because of factors other than Church teaching? Pure wretchedness for example indicates that sex may have been one of the only pleasures available to the poor, but the Irish have displayed higher fertility levels than other races. Cecil Woodham-Smith, for example, quotes statistics for the Famine era which suggest that:

in the Irish quarter of Boston ... one birth a year occurred for every 15 persons of population, whereas in England the rate was 1 to 31, in France 1 to 35, and in some non-Irish parts of Boston, 1 to 50.
There is a very old Irish toast which helps to explain Cecil Woodham-Smith’s observations about Irish birth rates: ‘Slainte go saol agat, paiste gcéili an agat, agus las in Eirinn.’ It means: Health and life to you, a child every year to you, and death in Ireland. ‘Health’ and ‘life’ need no explanation; a child every year was insurance in sickness and old age; and death in Ireland meant one did not have to emigrate involuntarily. Though when famine, or pestilence or slaughter struck the result was both emigration and death, the Irish toast explains the fight-back from near extirpation at several points in the history of the race. Yet fertility reached the peak it did in Ireland at the onset of the Great Famine, and continued amongst the Irish outside the country after it.

The ‘pleasure factor’ is not one which surfaces much in discussions of the Famine amongst Irish people, and nor, as with other awful topics – the Holocaust or slavery, for example – do certain other complicating side issues. Just as some Jews collaborated with the Nazis, and slavery could not not exist because it would not rule the African chiefs who sold their people into bondage, so did some Catholic Irish profit from the Famine. Unwillingly, but none the less efficiently, Irish Catholic soldiers escorted the consignments of food which passed through the ranks of the starving to be exported. Irish Catholic members of the Irish Constabulary kept themselves and their families from joining these ranks by assisting in the wholesale evictions which accompanied the Famine. Irish Catholic farmers rented the land from which the starving were driven. Many a contemporary Irish Catholic ‘strong’ farming family owes its prosperity to land acquired because of the misery of their co-religionists in those terrible times. Such factors – apart from the overriding one of not wishing to give aid and comfort to the IRA’s historically anti-British ideological underpinning – help to explain the unease with which the Irish Government commemorated the Famine in the 150th Anniversary period of 1995–8.

Overriding all the foregoing, a major contributory factor to the disaster was the cold inhumanity of Malthusian-minded, laissez-faire preaching, English politicians like the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Charles Wood, and administrators like Charles Trevelyan, the Assistant Secretary at the Treasury, effectively the man most responsible for dealing with the Famine. He, and others like him, appear to have treated the Famine as an opportunity to engage in social engineering. Sir Robert Peel, the British Conservative Prime Minister, had arranged for cargoes of grain to be shipped to Ireland and distributed surreptitiously, so as not to arouse Tory wrath at breaches of the Corn Laws. At the time these laws were the subject of the most acrimonious debate to convulse the Conservative Party until the European issue in our day, and the results were calamitous for Ireland.

Peel wanted to lower the tariffs on corn, not merely to feed the starving Irish, but in order to provide cheap food for the new proletarian populations then flooding into the cities of industrial England. The Conservatives, however, were riven on the issue because of the opposition of powerful Tory landlords who were using the protectionist laws to profit by growing high-cost corn. Peel ultimately fell in June 1846, ironically over a trumped-up Irish issue. A successful parliamentary ambush over an Irish coercion measure had been prepared by Disraeli with the aid of disdient Tories, and the unsuspecting Peel did not have his votes marshalled when a sudden division was called.

Lord John Russell succeeded him and he appointed Wood who gave Trevelyan his head over Ireland. Trevelyan slashed relief spending on the starving, one of his first acts on Peel’s departure being to cancel the grain shipments. Trevelyan’s approach greatly worsened the shambolic situation then prevailing in Ireland. Years of neglect, brutal repression, and hence maddened responses in the form of agrarian outrage, had created a land-holding system of inefficient, mind-boggling complexity.

For example, Lord Monteagle, a landlord whom we will again encounter in an Australian context (see page 451), wrote to a friend in 1846, detailing a typical situation on his estate. In 1781, 125 acres had been leased to a farmer at an annual rent of £10. Sixty-five years later, the lease was still in force, but now there were 236 people living in thirty-five homes on that holding. ‘Even if the farm were given to them,’ Monteagle said, ‘it would not help their situation,’ and he reasoned that evicting some of them would bring ‘untold trouble’. His solution was to help those willing to emigrate to do so, and a number of Monteagle’s tenants subsequently found themselves beginning a new life in Australia as a result. However, the tenants of other landlords frequently found themselves on the side of the roads, a prey to starvation. There were wholesale evictions aimed at creating larger, more profitable holdings, and the scenes which accompanied the Famine are branded into the Irish folk memory:

Needless to say, such action begat reaction, and the various agrarian societies struck back. Known by different names such as Captain Rocks and Whiteboys, they used the common weapons of darkness and terror. Livestock were crippled, houses burnt, intimidation and murder were commonplace, and the Irish countryside was in a state of semi-insurrection which caused a Lord Lieutenant under Wellington, Lord Anglesey, to write: ‘There exists to the most frightful extent a mutual and violent hatred between the proprietors and the peasantry.’

Not only were the Catholic peasantry fighting evictions and the exactons
of landlords, they were also resisting the payment of tithes to the Protestant Church. The tithes system, whereby the Catholic Irish laity were levied to pay for the support of the Protestant clergy, led to fierce pitched battles all over the country. Frequently lives were lost when police attempted to enforce the collections.

All these antipathies of course also helped to provide a stimulus to emigration for small farmers and tradespeople who could afford to get away from the hatreds. The bulk of these were Protestants who, as we shall see, mainly emigrated to Canada (see Chapter Four).

To add to the woes of the population, a cholera epidemic broke out. Life was literally nasty, brutish and short; a quarter of the population died without reaching the age of forty. Diary entries from the period, like those of Humphrey O’Sullivan, a schoolmaster, shopkeeper and botanist who lived in Callan, County Kilkenny, give an indication of the quality of life:

Livid famine is all over the countryside... poor people without any kind of work to buy any kind of food. There are not even alms for the paupers... We saw a pretty girl kneeling peat. Her foot was slender, her calves and knees as white as bog cotton, her thighs round and beautiful, naked almost to her stout buttocks. She was the daughter of a farmer once rich; but the struggle of life went against him. He became bankrupt, the landlord took his crops, the minister his corn and horses, and the church tithe collector took his table, pot and blankets. Between them they pushed him down in life, along with his wife and handsome children. These are the circumstances that drove him to a small hovel beside the mountain and set his beautiful daughter to kneading peat.15

July 10th:

The devilish peelers beat a lot of innocent people. They beat up two merchants in their own houses. They can’t be tolerated.

Obviously the overall situation could not be ‘tolerated’ either. The British decided to extend the Poor Law to Ireland, not to alleviate the situation there, but to stem the tide of starving destitute Irish flowing into British cities where the Poor Laws were already in force. As if to validate Sydney Smith’s judgement on English attitudes to Ireland, the laws were so framed as to make a miserable situation worse still. Relief could only be offered to those who went to workhouses, but in order to prevent the workhouses being overrun by paupers, the regime in these institutions was made deliberately harsh. Consequently, many preferred to commit minor crimes so that they could be sent to prison instead.

As the landlords had to pay for the workhouses, via the rates, the increasing cost of the Poor Law scheme made them look to emigration as a means both of dealing with the congestion of the land and the soaring cost of Poor Law relief. If anything, this measure served to increase the pressure on the English cities and, as we shall see later – particularly in the cases of Australia, America, and Canada – it quickened the tide of human misery that poured out of Ireland across the oceans of the world.

The Second and Third Waves of Emigration

When one considers that the population of Ireland fell by some 25 per cent, two million people between 1841 and 1861, one gets some indication of the dislocation, deprivation, and sheer loss of energy suffered by Irish society. One result of course was to make the Irish heavily dependent on the United Kingdom as a source of employment. Another was to greatly increase the strength of the Roman Catholic Church in Great Britain. John Henry Newman acknowledged this fact in 1852, saying: ‘The English Church was not, and the English Church is once again... it is the coming of the Second Spring.’

By 1861, 7 per cent of Scotland’s population, and 3 per cent of England’s was of Irish origin. Wars and depressions had encouraged a second major flow of the Irish to England in the first half of the nineteenth century, and emigration to the UK increased again after America imposed immigration restrictions in the early twentieth century. The Second World War provided a further catalyst which continued throughout the fifties. Britain badly needed Irish man- and womanpower. Without the huge amount of Irish male and female labour which poured into England during the war years, Great Britain would have found it difficult to maintain the war effort.

A third wave of emigrants broke on Britain’s shores during the 1980s. The Action Group for Irish Youth estimates that in the decade between 1981 and 1991, roughly half a million people, most of them single and under twenty-five, settled in the south of England.16 The majority settled in the South East, some 32 per cent of them in the Greater London area. The 1991 census showed that 850,000 Irish-born people lived in England, and observers of the Irish community place the number who can claim Irish descent at something approaching two million. Thus, at roughly 1.5 per cent of the British population, the Irish are the largest ethnic group in England.

Obviously, with such a large group involved, in a situation in which at times bombs go off, and coffins travel back and forth across the Irish Sea, unpleasant side effects will develop in the host community. One of the survivors of the IRA bombing campaign which marked the outbreak of the Second World War resigned from the IRA when he learned: ‘That they were going to put bombs in public toilets and post-boxes, and also pollute reservoirs. It did not occur to them that members of the Irish population in England posted letters, used toilets and drank water.’17

The Anglo-Irish Relationship in More Recent Times

The IRA apart, the Irish in Britain also suffered from a lack of leadership. In his book, The Irish in Britain, Kevin O’Connor has described the Irish workers in Britain in the thirties as suffering from:
WHEREVER GREEN IS WORN

a profound absence of social leadership, rendering them as mere factory and building-site fodder, totally at the whim of economic forces. Only in the traditional immigrant areas of Scotland and the North-East was there in existence the semblance of a receiving community structure into which they could absorb with confidence, being the continuum of previous generations' activity in community and trade union affairs.18

For reasons which will be more fully examined later, this situation was not to be seriously addressed for some fifty years. The sector which might have provided a community leadership, the Irish professionals, tended to hive itself off into a ghetto of its own. Following the 1916 Rising, and the Black and Tan War, some Irish professionals coming to London were received with hostility in the average London clubs, so they formed a club of their own, the National University of Ireland Club, near Westminster Cathedral. Members of this establishment neither had, nor sought, contact with their less affluent compatriots in places like Camden Town's Rowton House. Here the Irish were more tolerated than accepted. Individual priests did what they could to help the less fortunate Irish, and the socialist Connolly Association, which took its name and policies from the executed 1916 leader James Connolly, tried to raise the political consciousness of the Irish workers, but with very little effect.

The consciousness of the British public was only too well raised by the IRA bombing campaign of 1938, with serious consequences for the popularity of the Irish in Britain. The influx of Irish workers during the war, while valuable to the war effort, also aroused some animosities amongst those who had relations fighting abroad: 'Our lads are fighting and you Irish are coming over here to take our jobs,' was a frequent taunt encountered by Irish workers and their children in London's East End, for example. However, the war's end helped to bring about an improvement as friendships forged during the fighting spilled over into business and professional relationships.

The 1944 Education Acts benefited the building of Catholic schools, and the spread of education, growth of the welfare state, and the post-war building boom all helped to create a feel-good factor amongst the Irish. One prominent Irishman who did not share this feeling, however, was George Bernard Shaw. When the Irish Club was founded in Eaton Square, London, in 1948, he was invited to join, but wrote back as follows:

I can imagine nothing less desirable than an Irish Club. Irish people in England should join English clubs, and avoid each other like the plague. If they flock together like geese, they might as well have never left Ireland. They don't admire, nor even like one another. In English clubs they are always welcome. More fools the English perhaps; but the two are so foreign that they have much to learn from their association and co-operation.19

At the time of writing, the Irish Club has lost cachet amongst the burgeoning Irish emigrant middle class, but for several decades after its founding, it was an important focal point in Irish social life in Britain. Other

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focal points of a different kind were provided by the Behan brothers, Brendan, Brian and Dominic. Brendan brought the London stage to life with plays like The Quare Fellow and The Hostage; Brian, also a playwright, brought the building of London's South Bank complex to a halt with a strike in 1958; and Dominic wrote a famous song containing the lines:

The Sea oh the Sea
It's grand goal, no croïde20
Long may it roll between
England and me.

Between the three of them the Behans served to keep alive the tradition of the Irish as literati, drinkers and trade union activists. As well as trade union involvement along Brian Behan lines, the Irish increasingly became involved in Labour Party politics. Of 363 Labour MPs in the 1966–70 Parliament, thirty-five were of Irish descent. In the 1970 General Election, an Irish Post survey calculated that 84 per cent of the Irish vote went to the Labour Party. Harold Wilson's administration concluded an Anglo-Irish Free Trade agreement with Dublin and returned the remains of Roger Casement, executed in 1916, to his native country. In a by-election held in 1969, Michael O'Halloran, an Irish emigrant, was elected to Westminster for Islington. It appeared that at last Anglo-Irish relationships were on a good footing both in England itself and between the two islands. Even in the ranks of the Conservatives, the hand of friendship was extended to the Irish, or rather to the Irish vote, with the formation of the Irish Conservative Association by an Irish Tory, Paul Dwyer. Alas, the shadow of Northern Ireland was to have a blighting effect, for the Conservatives were allied to the Ulster Unionist Party.

Although much of Jim Callaghan's policy in Ireland had been to talk Green and act Orange, Labour nationalists had relined in both the army and the Unionists in their efforts to curb the growingly unstable situation in the Six Counties. However, within a few days of winning the 20 June General Election, (on 3–5 July 1970) the Tories unwittingly launched a recruiting drive for the Provisional IRA. A section of the Lower Falls Road in Belfast was cordoned off and the area was ransacked for arms. Several deaths were caused both by army vehicles and in savage hand-to-hand fighting, carried out amidst choking clouds of CS gas. No searches at all took place on the Loyalist side, even though by then the Loyalists had caused several deaths and explosions, and the Nationalists had still to kill anyone.

The first British soldier did not die until February 1971, and, according to Hansard at the time, the Loyalists had 112,000 licensed weapons. (Unionist-appointed Justices of the Peace gave out licences with such gay abandon that one gentleman was empowered to purchase two machine-guns which, according to his application form, he required 'to kill others' – a prohibited species.) Internment followed, directed solely at Catholics, and Nationalist feelings of injustice were expressed through the mushrooming ranks of the
IRA. They were also expressed on the British mainland. A canister of CS gas was hurled into the House of Commons in July 1970, and tons of masonry on to the streets of London in October 1971 when the Post Office Tower was bombed. The IRA bombing campaign was under way and ancient anti-Irish prejudices in England were about to be both rekindled and grievously added to during the ensuing twenty-five years of the ‘Troubles’.

The Irish became the targets of hostility, derived not merely from the fall-out of individual contemporary atrocities, but from historical animosities, myths and prejudices. The Commission for Racial Equality reported in 1997: ‘The main features of this hostility were: its virulence; lack of connection with any understanding of the political background; blanket application to all Irish people; triggered solely by hearing Irish accents.’

The report went on to give a number of specific cases of people who had suffered, particularly from the fall-out of the Birmingham pub bombings. The effects of such cases will be dealt with later. However, at this stage, I think I can say with some confidence that during my researches I witnessed some important turning points for the better in rectifying the situation highlighted by the CRE report. The most obvious one occurred at the General Election of 1 May 1997. Britain voted for change and Ireland was part of that change in two intertwined ways, one involving a personality, the other the political process. Politically, prior to the election, the Federation of Irish Societies—a very broad-based, and representative grouping—and the *Irish Post* newspaper had targeted forty constituencies in which the Irish population outweighed the Conservative majority. Whether they responded directly to the Irish organisations’ call or simply reacted out of distaste for a sleazy and faltering Government, the Irish certainly voted against the Tories.

The personality point came home to me forcibly at an election party given by Helena Kennedy, QC, the daughter of a Donegal emigrant to Glasgow. When the news of Michael Portillo’s defeat was announced, an animal passion of delight suffused the hitherto restrained gathering which included people like Salman Rushdie, Jonathan Miller, Claire Raymer and Gail Rebuff. Not only were the glitterati cheering the fall of the Tory icon, they were also, though most of them would not have realised it at the time, signifying the fact that it was the son of another Donegal emigrant who had just taken a significant step towards power—Tony Blair.

Irish roots apart—although these are clearly of importance to him, unlike Margaret Thatcher, who is not known for references to her Kerry ancestry—Blair’s huge majority made him independent of the Ulster Unionists. Hitherto, they had been able to hold up the Peace Process because, due to the divisions in the Conservatives over Europe, the Tory leader, John Major, had depended on their support to remain in power. One of Blair’s first steps on being elected was to brief Dublin on New Labour’s new and constructive approach to the Northern Ireland problem, and the Irish reaction to the initiative was summed up for me privately by an Irish Government spokesman who commented that: ‘If they deliver on what they say they’re going to deliver, the results will be historic.’

The final outcome of the Irish Peace Process is unclear, dangerously so, at the time of writing, but it has to be said that the early performance of the New Labour team, led by Blair himself and in particular Mo Mowlam, bore out the spokesman’s assessment (although the influence of Peter Mandelson, who succeeded Mowlam, was less well thought of in Dublin). Blair bluntly told the Unionists’ leader, David Trimble, that the British taxpayers expected people who, in Northern Ireland, claimed to be British, to behave like British citizens when it came to living with their neighbours. The result was the Good Friday Agreement of April, 1998. Later that year, on 26 November, Blair again made history, this time in Dublin, by becoming the first British Prime Minister ever to address the joint Houses of the Oireachtas (Parliament). He said:

Ireland, as you may know, is in my blood. My mother was born in the flat above her grandmother’s hardware shop in the main street of Ballyshannon in Donegal. She lived there as a child, started school there and only moved when her father died, her mother remarried and they crossed the water to Glasgow. We spent virtually every childhood summer holiday up to when the Troubles really took hold in Ireland... it was in the sea off the Irish coast that I learned to swim, that my father took me to my first pub... for a Guinness, a taste I’ve never forgotten... Even now in my constituency of Sedgefield which at one time had 30 pubs... virtually every community remembers that its roots lie in Irish migration to the mines of Britain... we, the British and the Irish are irredeemably linked.

They are indeed. Another less public indication of changing Anglo-Irish attitudes, this time in London, came at the banquet which marked the ending of the annual general meeting of the Federation of Irish Societies which was also held around the time of the election. The banquet was addressed by the popular Irish Ambassador, Ted Barrington. In a pithy phrase he told his audience, drawn from all parts of the UK: ‘Integrate, but don’t assimilate.’ He advised his hearers to work with their host community as good citizens should, but to stand up for their entitlements, to be conscious of their Irish background and culture; and to maintain and develop their Irish identity as a contribution both to British society and to other minority cultures. On the one hand, the Irish were being given a clear incentive to come out of the closet and put their heads over the parapet. On the other, the Ambassador was simply acknowledging the reality of the fact that the ‘RyanAir generation’, named after the low-cost airline on which so many young Irish emigrants came to Britain in the eighties and nineties, were, on average, far better educated than their predecessors and hence more confident and less inclined to suppress their own culture in order to avoid drawing attention to themselves. In the same week that the ambassador spoke, Donal Mooney, the then editor of the *Irish Post* had observed to me that the proper concept for the contemporary Irish emigrant was that of expatriate. The word ‘emigrant’ should be banished.

Here, at the risk of digression, I might observe that some of the complexities involved in the process of reassessment involved in coming over to England—or perhaps more accurately, coming out in England—were underlined later in
the evening of the banquet. The speeches were followed by a dance, during which my partner was a psychotherapist, an extremely good-looking, intelligent, blonde: Sister Theresa of the Loreto Order. After we returned to our table following a particularly energetic Irish dance, The Siege of Ennis, which involves swinging people about in a manner never envisaged by the inventor of the law of gravity, someone remarked that at a meeting earlier Irish gay and lesbian representatives had been affiliated to the FIS. It then emerged that a man in his fifties sitting beside me, wearing a collar and tie, was a priest and b) that two of the four people he had just been doing the ‘spin’ with (two men link hands to swing the two women off their feet) were gay and lesbian representatives. Startled, the priest reacted instinctively: ‘God, if I’d known that, I wouldn’t have asked them to dance!’ A devoted worker for the Irish community, he was in no way homophobic, but for someone of his generation, for whom participation in a dance was already something of an adventure, gays and lesbians were a bridge too far.

Heads above the parapet

There are sections of the Irish community who on first sight would appear never to have their heads under any parapet, and indeed some of them will tell you that there is no parapet. To an extent they are correct. For them there is none. Yet another survey (I promise readers that after this I will not inflict further surveys on them for some time), carried out at around the same time as the FIS AGM, showed that, compared to one in nine amongst the host community, one in six of the Irish community earn over £30,000 a year. (In evaluating this statistic it should be borne in mind that a head teacher, for example, earns around £25,000.) Certainly, if one attended a paean to Irish yuppies in which the Irish Wild Geese Ball at the Hilton Hotel, one would be conscious of bank accounts, not parapets. Deprivation, prejudice or the shadow of the Prevention of Terrorism Act do not touch the lives of most of those who attend. Of the roughly two and half million either Irish-born or second generation Irish, quite clearly some have achieved enormous success and made an equally enormous contribution in several fields. That of heroism in the ranks of ‘the old enemy’s’ armed services may be gauged from the book by Richard Doherty and David Truesdale, Irish Winners of the Victoria Cross (published in Ireland by Four Courts Press in 2000), which indicates both the extent of Irish courage and the tangled relationship between the two islands. Since the VC was inaugurated in 1856 more than 200 Irishmen have been awarded the decoration. These included three members of Wanderers Rugby Club, Dublin, two Black and Tans, two B-Specials and a member of the IRA who fought against the Black and Tans. The Irish of course also literally made a contribution on the sporting fields and in the construction industry, but also in the arts, medicine including nursing, teaching, the armed services, the caring professions and the financial sector. Their presence in this last area is so marked that the distinguished American journalist, Dick Rapatter, of

Forbes Magazine, remarked to me as this was being written: ‘If you took the Irish out of the City of London, the financial services world would collapse.’

Charles Lamb once said that there were two races of men: those who borrow and those who lend. What strikes one forcibly, looking at the Irish community in England, is that there are two markedly contrasting groups of Irish: those indicated by the ‘shifting in the newspaper’ anecdote and those who do well, extremely well. In 1997, the Irish Post began producing an annual magazine profiling some of the latter. As the then Chief Executive of the Post, Douglas Baxter, wrote, it was ‘a near impossible task to produce a definitive list’. Nevertheless, the journal, Business 97, The influential Irish in Britain, ran to eighty-eight pages which in terms of gloss, gush and colour photography, rivalled Hello magazine. But it contained a well-documented story of Irish success. Movers and shakers from the Irish community occupied the driving seats in every sector one could think of.

The Post’s listings apart, the average Englishman or woman in the street would, depending on their age bracket, immediately recognise figures such as, in entertainment, the late Eamonn Andrews, or Terry Wogan, Des Lynam, Frank Delaney and the great TV racing commentator, Peter O’Sullevan, now retired. In sport, soccer legends like Pat Jennings, Roy Keane, Dave O’Leary, Martin O’Neill, Denis Irwin and Joe Kinney would be household names. In politics, Kevin McNamara and Clare Short, or in rock ‘n’ roll, which some might see as a branch of politics, Shane McGowan of the Pogues or Liam and Noel Gallagher of Oasis. In fact, the really extraordinary thing about the Post’s thick, well-researched pantheon is that the paper had so many names to choose from in the world of business alone that none of the foregoing personalities is included (except Lynam, in an advertisement for Jameson whiskey. The caption reads: ‘the ultimate smoothy’).

Nor was the publication a once-off. By the year 2000, its successor was using smaller type but had increased to 200 pages. Those pictured included Brendan O’Neill, Chief Executive of ICI, Peter Sutherland, Chairman of Goldman Sachs International, who grew up two doors from where I was born, Gerry Robinson, Chairman of Granada, Baroness O’Cathain of the Barbican, President of the Chartered Institute of Marketing, and Matthew Barrett, Chief Executive of Barclays Bank, who as we shall see (Chapter 4) already had a spectacular career in Canada behind him before being head-hunted by Barclays. One of the success stories profiled was that of Hugh Murphy, Chairman of the Charles Street Group. Speaking of his South Armagh ancestry he said: ‘I do believe that, to understand where we are, we must acknowledge where we came from.’

Any Londoner going to work, on any given day, can expect to see evidence of Irish industry as they pass by construction sites or observe cranes dotting the London skyline. Names like Brophy, Clancy, Durkan, Gallagher, McKenna, McNicholas, Murphy, O’Halloran, O’Brien, O’Rourke, are all major players in the British construction industry. Some, like Tommy McNicholas or the Clancys, Kevin, Dermot and Mary, work in firms which
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grew big under their fathers, and then, under them, grew bigger still. Others, like John Murphy, did it the hard way, emigrating from unemployment-ravaged Kerry as a young man and building up one of the most visible companies in all England. Who has not seen one of Murphy’s green trucks at one end of the country or the other? Murphy not only built the mile-long railway tunnel at London’s Stansted Airport in 1991, he also built a financial portfolio which includes interests in hotels, property and shipping. Today John Murphy, once a penniless emigrant from County Kerry, is a fixture in the Sunday Times annual list of Britain’s richest 500.

One doesn’t need the Sunday Times to know that one of Britain’s richest corporations is Unilever. This corporate giant was valued at £35 billion at the time of writing – thirteen billion more than the combined worth of Ireland’s total exports to the EU, including England. The chairman of this Anglo-Dutch colossus is Niall Fitzgerald, who began his accountancy career in a Dublin animal feeds company. From the time, 1974, that he turned his back on his native Sligo to join Unilever, Fitzgerald’s career moved in only one direction – upwards. Unilever is a quintessential international conglomerate. The world is its market place, but while Fitzgerald has shown himself supremely well able to perform in that market place, he has maintained a sense of where he came from: ‘I have a strong sense of Irishness, even though I probably won’t live in Ireland again. That does not mean that I’m not very committed to it, and everything I think about has an Irish sense to it.’

Fitzgerald has demonstrated this sense of commitment by adding to his hectic schedule the responsibility of joining committees set up by the Irish Government when called upon to do so. He thinks that it is his sense of Irishness which makes him more direct in his approach than is the British norm, and this has been a particular advantage to him in dealing with the Dutch: ‘I’ve never been afraid to express my views, even if they’re wrong, and that tends to get you heard.’ It does indeed.

If one seeks the flamboyant, there is Eddie Jordan, the Formula One racing mogul, who founded Jordan Racing, and who lives by the belief that: ‘If you get it right, you get a fortune. If you get it wrong, you go bankrupt.’ Jordan, who was instrumental in giving Ayrton Senna his first drive, and in bringing fellow Irishman Eddie Irvine on to the world stage, owes his position in Formula One racing to a bank strike in 1970. Thrown out of work, he fetched up in Jersey, and discovered the delights of 100cc kart-racing. When the strike ended, he resumed his job while at the same time continuing as a kart-racer. He had several successes at the sport and took a sabbatical from the bank to give himself time to decide whether or not to put the kart before his career. The kart won. Jordan then moved from karts to motor racing. In 1980, in a lock-up garage in Silverstone, he founded Jordan Racing with the aid of his wife Marie, who helped with the finances by taking a £40-a-week job as a packer in a local factory. Jordan again changed gear, moving upwards from Formula Three to Formula One in 1991, and again Marie helped with the financing, this time by acquiescing in the mortgaging of their home to raise funds. A subsequent comment of hers conveys something both of her own dedication and that of her (literally) driven husband:

I never really thought I was the nervous type, but my hands broke out in a rash, you know, thinking about selling the house, where to school the kids, things like that. But that was what Eddie really wanted to do. It was driving him on. I knew there was no way it would be anything other than this.

At the time of writing, Jordan has successfully fought his way through the Formula One world’s unique blend of mega money, champagne, angst, nerve, skill and vitriol, to rank amongst the world’s top three or four teams, winning his first Grand Prix in Belgium in 1998. He employs the shamrock logo in most of his merchandising, his teams are dressed in green outfits and he makes a point of employing several Irish people – not, he says, simply because they are Irish, but because they are good at what they do.

Irish people have made a particular impact on the media. As Avril MacRory, from County Waterford, both epitomises and points out, there has been a growing Irish media presence in England in recent decades. One tends to meet the Irish, and particularly Irish women, at every level of journalism, television and the Internet. The Managing Director of Yahoo! UK and Ireland is Martina King; and Caroline Marland may have the looks of a top model, but she is Managing Director of Guardian News Ltd. MacRory herself was head of music programmes for BBC television until she took over as head of the Millennium project. Her finding is that her countrymen and women have a particular feeling for the media world, and that they are able to realise their talents in the media sphere because of the Irish educational system: ‘They don’t have that inferiority complex, they know they are as good as anyone else... It is a tribute to what has happened in Ireland over the last thirty years.’

This really is the central point of modern awareness of Ireland and the Irish, be it in England or anywhere else. Appreciation of Irish qualities has gone up in direct ratio to the manner in which the Irish themselves have improved their own society and enabled more and more of their own people to realise their potential, both at home and abroad.

Irishwomen in particular have become increasingly well aware of their potential. In April 1999, a group of influential Irishwomen got together to launch Women’s Irish Network (WIN) to enable businesswomen in England to develop business relationships and professional contacts and to raise funds for worthy Irish causes. Its founders included Polly Devlin, the novelist, Mary Clancy, Hazel Hutchinson, a banker, and Norah Casey, the editor-in-chief of the Irish Post. WIN was an instant success. Its regular attendees include Cherie Blair and the partner of the Irish Taoiseach, Celia Larkin.

However, that X-factor of Irish talent, the original who makes it without a background in formal education, is to be plentifully met with in England also. For example, Vince Power, the owner of the Mean Fiddler organisation, has become – as was said of the archetypical Kerry farmer – outstanding in his...
own field. That is to say, he runs most of Britain's major outdoor festivals. Apart from his famous Mean Fiddler establishment itself, Power, who came to London from Waterford at the age of sixteen, runs several other musical venues in London and elsewhere, and has trained up his children to help him manage his multi-million-pound empire by beginning the same way he did, picking up empty beer glasses in the Mean Fiddler.

Power is one of that rare breed who proved himself both a jack of all trades and a master of them. While he worked in the demolition business in the mid-sixties, he spent his spare time restoring and dealing in second-hand furniture, and ended up with ten furniture shops. Furniture and demolition would not at first sight appear to go hand in hand as business ventures, but Power discovered that the people who moved out of the houses he was demolishing tended to leave old furniture behind them. From repairing and selling this, he traded up to running a string of outlets for the sale of new furniture. Then, in 1980, his interest in country music led him to open the Mean Fiddler. From country he branched out to putting on Irish acts like Christy Moore, Moving Hearts, and the Pogues, and country rock acts like Jason and the Scorchers and Los Lobos. He became involved in the Reading Festival, and, indeed, all his other outdoor venues, because of his philosophy of 'keeping on, pushing out, and taking a risk'. In January 2001 Power launched a reverse takeover bid of his parent company which reportedly earned him £26 million. Power describes himself as single-minded, stubborn and disciplined, and even though he has reared his family in England and lived there for thirty-three years, he still regards Ireland as his home and among other acquisitions has bought Tramore racecourse. However, he acknowledges that it's not realistic for him to go back, given his British-based business interests.

Such indications of achievement by the Irish in England tend to make the idea that the Irish community could also suffer from serious discrimination seem far-fetched. Yet, if one decodes the conversation of one of the achievers, the outlines of difficulties soon appear. For example, Mary Clancy is one of the most prominent women in the Irish community. A director of the family building firm that now employs 1,400 people, she is stylish and also one of the wealthiest, and the most involved in helping out with the 'problem business'. Her father was in his twenties when he came over during the 1950s and got a job in British Oxygen. He took sub-contracting work after his day job was over, and finally expanded so that he could give up British Oxygen. Says Clancy:

He was a man of great zest, 'very into the Irish music'. He played golf and was interested in everything. I remember a lot of Irish resented that sort of thing. In fact I wasn't that involved with the Irish or their charities, or their problems. But one day a neighbour of my mother's, in Lahinch, County Clare, where we have a house, rang me up and started talking about the problems of young kids over here, drugs, prostitution, etc. He asked me to go to dinner that night in Paul McGuinness's house.21

Mary didn't know who Paul McGuinness was, and her caller, Des Fitzgerald, had to tell her that he was the manager of U2. Fitzgerald had been to a dinner in Dublin a little earlier, at which the prominent Dublin socialite and charitable fund-raiser Norma Smurfit had lectured him on what was befalling young Irish people in London. Like a snooker ball impacting on the other balls on the table, the energy of the Smurfit lecture began to take effect and McGuinness had drawn a selection of the beautiful people to his Notting Hill Gate home. For most of the evening, Mary wondered what she was doing in such company. Speaking of the evening, and of another similar occasion, she made a very significant point which goes to the root of Irish insecurities in Britain.

Mary had also had an invitation from Tony O'Reilly, the world's best known Irish businessman, to a fund-raising dinner at the Dorchester Hotel for his Ireland Fund. A former Irish rugby international, and a British and Irish Lion, O'Reilly admires Britain and the British, describing them to me once as 'the soundest people on earth'. His advice to those who would emulate his success is 'dress British, talk Irish – and think Jewish.' His meteoric rise to the very top of corporate America, and his subsequent development of private worldwide business interests, began when, as General Manager of the Irish Dairy Board, his London reputation caused him to be head-hunted by the Heinz Corporation of America. He both made a success of the post and built up a personal media empire. O'Reilly's company owns newspapers, Internet, broadcasting, magazine, telephony, multi-channel TV, and commercial printing interests, as well as newspapers and magazines in a variety of countries: Australia, the United Kingdom, Ireland, New Zealand, South Africa, Portugal and Mexico. In London, he controls the Independent Newspaper, in New Zealand, the Wilson Hartnell Group, and in South Africa, the Argus papers. In Australia he controls the APN. His group has assets of £3.5 billion and a turnover of £5,990,000 million. O'Reilly is viewed with a degree of reserve by Irish Nationalists and by people involved in the Peace Process, because of his ownership of the Sunday Independent, which has constantly denigrated the Nationalist position, and has consistently attacked architects of the Peace Process like John Hume (to a degree that as a result of Irish/American pressures, O'Reilly finally oversaw the holding of a lunch in the Independent offices to which Hume was invited, and a truce declared). Moreover, he has been criticised for not taking a more upfront position in the Irish/American lobby, which finally helped to broker the Peace Process, as Irish American tycoons like Chuck Feeney or Bill Flynn have done. His Ireland Funds have been scornfully described as nothing more than gigantic worldwide PR operations for O'Reilly. On the credit side, however, it must be recognised that O'Reilly's activities, both through his personal success and his fund-raising, have raised the profile of the Irish throughout the world. I have encountered young businessmen from Dublin to Sydney and Sydney to San Francisco who look to him for inspiration when founding their various charities and dining clubs.
However, despite this clear evidence of Anglophile inclination on O'Reilly’s part, Mary Clancy was extremely ‘iffy’ about his Ireland Fund Project. As she told me, she is on record as saying at that stage:

and it has always been thus, England has always been viewed as the enemy. You can go out to America and fund-raise. Everyone there wants to be Irish for a day. Over here, people are making their living getting by on a day-to-day basis, to a certain extent only with the full consent of the British public. You don’t actually go around videog the hand that feeds you, which was always the problem about setting up something as “shouting about yourself” as the Ireland Fund.

I was very unsure about getting involved, about the political ramifications, where the money was going to go. But five years on, I have grown up to the fact that what Tony O’Reilly has done is raise the profile of the Irish abroad, whether it be in England or America. And it’s not the stage Irish, it’s the committed, intelligent, bright Irish, the educated Irish, the Irish people didn’t know about. It also happened on a historical basis—suddenly it’s good to be Irish and it’s fashionable to be young and Irish. So, in one way you can look at £150.00 a head and say ‘they’d be better off staying at home and giving the money away’, but the reality is it’s about profile. At that dinner, there were a lot of people who were not Irish, and Tony had been attempting to network with those people so that they have a perception of the Irish as not holding meetings in pubs, but meeting people of other nations at the same level, moving across barriers.28

And that is the significant point Mary made about Irish insecurity. Those comments speak volumes for the difference in the attitudes between the Irish in Britain and in America. No Irishwoman in America at Mary Clancy’s level would think of the American public as ‘allowing them to get by on a daily basis’. This approach is buried with the memory of American nativist hostility to the Irish. In America, being Irish is now something to be unambiguously proud of.

In England Mary Clancy has achieved the supreme accolade amongst the Irish. People tell you that ‘Mary is sound.’ To be deemed a ‘sound’ man or woman is the ultimate Irish character reference. She has presence; classical wide-cheekboned Irish features, topped by red hair, create a Maureen O’Hara-style image. Moreover, as indicated, she is the epitome of the modern successful Irish businesswoman. However, if her experience of British society led her to the kind of reservations indicated about getting involved publicly in Irish affairs, even with someone of Tony O’Reilly’s impeccable Anglophile credentials (he received a knighthood in 2001), the pressures to keep one’s head under the parapet on a building site or factory floor, where one’s British co-workers take their opinions from the Mirror and the Sun, can well be imagined.

Mary overcame her reservations and went on to invest her fund-raising activities with an energy and professionalism modelled on Jewish lines. She became Chair of the Irish Youth Foundation, and has helped to raise badly needed money for Irish charities such as Safe Start, the Irish Chaplaincy, the Piccadilly Advice Centre and other meritorious groups. The Irish Youth Foundation has become almost as important as the official Government welfare organisation DION, and routinely runs enormously successful gala fund-raising occasions, at which individual donors, like Michael Smurfit, have given sums of £250,000.

Nevertheless, unlike in America, an attitude towards Irish emigrants in the UK persists whereby they are regarded as being in Britain only on sufferance and they are lucky to be allowed to have jobs. This patronising attitude overlooks the fact that Irish workers, be it at pick and shovel or professional level, have made an invaluable contributions to the British economy, not because of kind-heartedness on the part of the great British public, but because they either did what the British did not want to do, or performed necessary tasks better than their competitors.

On the other hand, their own leaders often told them that they should not organise, except in the service of Mother Church. To do so for other purposes could, and probably would, be displeasing to Mother England. Indeed, as late as the early stages of the compilation of this book, it was official Irish governmental policy that the Irish in Britain should not be encouraged to organise a lobby on Northern Ireland, on the grounds that it would make bipartisanship impossible in the House of Commons.

This of course is nonsense. A powerful Irish lobby, as American experience has shown, attracts bipartisan respect. Both Democrats and Republicans—even Republicans as ardently pro-Thatcher as Ronald Reagan—have shown themselves mindful of Irish American wishes. However, as we shall see, by the end of the century there were significant developments amongst the Irish community, both at parliamentary and grass-roots level, aimed at tackling some of the disabilities the Irish suffer from. One involved MPs who set up the All-Party Irish in Britain Parliamentary Group at Westminster. Another was the holding of the Community Futures Conference in London, which, for the first time ever, brought together representatives of black, Irish and minority ethnic communities in Britain to tackle inequality on a national basis. A third was the emergence, on the initiative of a dynamic young Irishwoman, Norah Casey of the Irish Post, of the Irish faction in the London Mayoral Election of May 2000 (see below).

Another significant Irish influence in Britain, as readers will have deduced from the frequent references to the publication in these pages, is the Irish Post newspaper, founded in February, 1970 by Brendan MacLue. The paper was one of the Irish community’s portals to empowerment. It played a vital role in giving the Irish not alone a voice but a centre to group around in the bad years which followed the Tories coming to power. The Clare-born MacLue who, like most of the best Irish journalists of the era, once wrote for the Irish Press group, when dealing with the Irish community in Britain, spoke with a compassion, knowledge, and a passion, which made him one of the best after-dinner speakers I have ever heard. Once, at a dinner organised by some friends in his honour in Dublin, I heard him lecture a fashionable audience on the significance of the fact that that year’s top Irish dancing competition in Dublin had been won by a black girl of Irish ancestry from London.
WHEREVER GREEN IS WORN

In those pre-Riverdance days most of those present would have considered it almost as unfashionable to be associated with Irish dancing as with the IRA, but MacLua held them in thrall as he developed his theme of the reservoir of Irish talent and accomplishment, deserving of respect, but lying unsuccoured and unreconised across the Irish Sea. He dismissed his, and the paper’s role, with a self-deprecating understatement: ‘We lived with the issues.’ But the Irish tycoon Michael Smurfit, son of an English father and an Irish mother, paid the Post the supreme accolade by taking it over, as he did also its sister publication in New York, Niall O’Dowd’s Irish Voice. In both cases, while retaining a healthy interest in the bottom line, Smurfit guaranteed the publications’ continued success by recognising that, as with a motor car, certain competing elements are essential. Commercial and editorial inputs, like oil and water, are both needed, but have to be kept separate.

The Chief Executive of Smurfit Media UK, whose activity in the London Mayoral Election has been mentioned above, and Editor-in-Chief of the Irish Post, is Norah Casey, a 40-year-old, former nurse who emigrated from Ireland when she was seventeen. She left nursing for a career first in the nurses union, then in medical journalism with the Nursing Standard, moving on through both executive and broadcasting activities to become one of the best known figures in the London Irish Community before being headhunted by the Smurfit organisation. She built on the paper’s existing readership by a highly successful re-vamp, in March 2000, aimed at a younger audience which nowadays is apt to be as concerned with opportunities for buying property in Dublin as with GAA or Irish dancing results. Casey brought both journalistic and political clout together during the London mayoral election campaign won by Ken Livingstone. On its front page the paper’s headline proclaimed ‘The Irish can decide mayoral election’. But, in addition, in a ground-breaking, Irish-American style, demonstration of heads above the parapet, she chaired a meeting between representatives of the Irish community and the candidates in the Camden Irish Centre to assess their commitment to Irish issues across a broad range, health, education, housing, the encouragement of Irish culture, as well as problems stemming from Northern Ireland. Predictably Livingstone’s mastery of detail in all these made him the star of the night. Some of the other candidates did not even know what the stop-and-search issue involved, for example.

To the Irish community, Livingstone’s differences with Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair, are almost an irrelevancy. He stands in that line of Labour representatives – Bernie Grant, the MP who died not long before Livingstone was elected, was another – who went far beyond the line of duty in aiding their Irish constituents. Brendan MacLua assessed Livingstone’s contribution to me as follows:

Ken Livingstone (between 1981 and 86) did more for the Irish in London, including giving dignity and financial aid, than did all Dublin governments combined for the Irish worldwide during sixty five years (The reference is to the years between the founding of the Irish State and Mrs Thatcher’s destruction of the Greater London Council in 1986, author).

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He cared more than did any Taoiseach for the Irish abroad and he was ahead of all in the Peace Process. Thatcher downed him because of Ireland and like the Phoenix he has risen again.

Livingstone’s critics would dismiss that tribute as hyperbole. But, as should by now have emerged from these pages, the ‘catalogue of neglect’ of Irish emigrants by their own country and the amazing swing in the fortunes of the Irish both at home and abroad in a period of some fifteen years, are symbolised by the need for Livingstone’s contribution, the impact it made, and the fact that today’s London Irish have become powerful enough to invite him, and his rival candidates, to a pre-election meeting to give an account of himself.

THE IRISH CHAPLAINCY GROUP IN LONDON

I have been visiting the United Kingdom and writing about Anglo-Irish affairs for over forty years. Most of my books have been published by London publishers, including one that reviewers have been kind enough to describe as ‘the definitive work on the IRA’, which I dedicated to an Englishman! However, the only thing that my visits and researches have taught me with certainty is that the more one learns the more there is still to learn. Taking a broad canvas like ‘the Irish in Britain’, one must be aware a) just how broad it is, and b) how many shades of light and darkness, how many brushstrokes one will encounter: for every view there is a counter-view, for every failure a success, for every heartbreak a triumph. All make up something of the mosaic. All are authentic. Individually, all of them can be misleading.

No writer can hope to escape entirely from the charge of giving either a selective or an unrepresentative view. For the purposes of this book, however, I was fortunate to have the benefit of speaking not only to a great variety of individuals, but to a number of groups representative of age, gender, and class, brought together in what the market researchers rather grandly term ‘focus groups’ by organisations such as the Irish Chaplaincy in London. The existence of the Chaplaincy, incidentally, relates to a major difficulty once encountered by the Irish: the culture clash between English-born and ordained priests, and first-generation Irish emigrants. The tensions between the two led to the Irish hierarchy setting up the Chaplaincy which has flourished in the UK, and elsewhere in the world, since the 1950s. It is one of the better manifestations of the Irish Church, and a real contribution to the diaspora.

The London Chaplaincy group included two teachers, one of them a former business executive; a woman who ran a big haulage operation, and whose sons were Oxford graduates; a man who worked with the mentally handicapped; a father and son who ran a big construction business; a number of women who had become active in the caring field after rearing families; a psychotherapist; a chaplain who dealt with Irish prisoners; a woman professional photographer; a young man who had fallen victim to the Prevention of Terrorism
Act; and a senior activist with the Federation of Irish Societies. A property developer and a consultant surgeon sat in on the second session.

I subsequently found that, like the observations of the two journalists, McIntee and Hennigan, the points they made were very largely applicable to the country as a whole. Such differences as I encountered were, generally speaking, those of degree rather than kind. One point which struck me forcibly, albeit in the manner of the Sherlock Holmes story wherein the point was that the dog did not bark, was how infrequently the Church was mentioned, save as something whose influence had to be shaken off. I found this particularly intriguing because our discussions took place on Church property in the presence of clerics and nuns who were obviously popular and well respected. The regard, however, had been earned on an individual basis. I came across this phenomenon several times subsequently. Individual priests and nuns — like the legendary Father Bobby Gilmore, whose work for emigrants I also encountered in New York and in Jamaica; or Sister Sarah who was once stigmatised by the Home Office as a 'subversive' because of her work for Irish prisoners — were mentioned spontaneously and with great affection, but awe towards Mother Church had ebbed at almost the same rate as for the other colonial power which once shaped Irish experience, Mother England.

What follows is a cross-section of the Chaplaincy groups' observations and experiences.

Brendan, who had done well in the building industry, had left a small town, Balla in County Mayo in the west of Ireland, with his mother, in 1954 at the age of sixteen: 'It was the last resort, coming to the land of the enemy.' They were initially the only two passengers aboard the train, but by the time it had crossed the county boundary it was packed. It was Brendan's first train journey, and the first time that he had seen the sea, or been on a boat. He remembered that everyone was sick and that his mother looked 'years older' when they arrived from Holyhead at Euston, which he found 'the biggest anti-climax of my life'. The station appeared broken down, the people shabby and ghostly. Emissaries from the Legion of Mary were meeting the train to save the girls from pimps. Brendan was lucky: he had a sister in London who gave him his first English breakfast, a fried egg on toast, and brought him to an apprenticeship with an electrician. That was when one saw signs everywhere reading either 'No Irish need apply' or 'No dogs, Irish or blacks', but Brendan remembered the early days with some affection. He had left a thatched house with no sanitation, but 'the malign English landlady shared her bathroom, let you watch telly and gave you a good Sunday dinner. It was better than many an Irish landlord.' Brendan was to do well in the building industry.

After he had spoken, a general discussion took place which reminded me of peeling onion skins. As fresh layers were revealed, these were sometimes accompanied by tears. Loneliness was cited as a big factor amongst the older generation. Everyone agreed with the woman who remarked: 'The only place to go was the pub. I don't know how people came through what they did. The squalor, the drinking.'

The other place to go, particularly for women, was the Church. One woman told how she landed in London late one evening in 1952 to begin training as a nurse. She had no idea where the hospital was located, so she made for a church. It was locked and there was a thick fog. She could see nothing and she sat on the steps, weeping from tiredness and uncertainty. A man loomed up out of the fog and offered to help: 'I told him to hop off. But he said, "No dear - I'm blind", and he did help me.'

The men were inclined to talk about the advantages which 'the building' offered, especially to young unskilled men. It gave them a start, kept them on the straight and narrow. However, very marked differences in perceptions began to appear, particularly as between men and women. A Mayo woman began talking about her early days in London: she had run away from home, initially with her boyfriend, but after a year came home with him to family forgiveness and a big wedding in her native Claremorris. Back in England, and seven children later, she faced the fact that her husband was alcoholic, and put the children in a convent. The shock therapy worked for a time: her husband gave up drink and an eighth child arrived. She worked as a cleaner to support the children, and her husband reverted to drink. She joined Al-Anon and worked at a variety of jobs, during which a ninth child arrived. Her husband died at the age of fifty-one. Though she is married now and is seemingly happy, her experiences left her with a feeling of deprivation. 'Al-Anon helped me to cope, to put up with things like people mimicking my accent, but I never had a chance of immersing myself in my own culture. I love Ireland, but I have lost something.'

The women agreed that, apart from the honed down nature of an existence devoted to supporting children with either a dysfunctional husband or no partner at all, another shared difficulty was the necessity they found to drop their Irish identity. 'When we came over, it was "No Irish, No Blacks. No dogs."

Mention of drink also provided a trigger. We talked about characters who drank themselves into the gutter. 'They used to earn £600 a week as labourers during the Thatcher boom years. There was a great deal of drinking and domestic violence. A lot of marriages broke up. Fellows ended up on their own with nothing.' The psychotherapist remarked on the high incidence of repressed sexuality she encountered amongst her Irish patients. This characteristic, as we shall see, had a horrific impact on the AIDS issue.

Practices in the building industry contributed to both the drinking and the ending up with nothing. One of the women observed: 'In the fifties and the early sixties, there weren't that many Irish pubs, but now most of the landlords are Irish. They keep the young fellows up until two or three in the morning drinking. Then they can't get up for their work and they lose their jobs, and start going on the skids. The Irish landlords sometimes won't cash their cheques until late at night, when the young fellows will have rung up a